

ADRIFT IN BUSINESS WITH RUDDERLESS ETHICS

By Rick Boxx

An article in the respected business periodical, *Wall Street Journal*, was titled, "Does an 'A' in Ethics Have Any Value?" The article discussed attempts by leading business schools to stem the rising tide of fraud in the business and professional world. According to the piece in the *Journal*, many different approaches to ethics training had been discussed.

The article primarily focused on "how" to teach ethics, debating issues such as whether a specific ethics curriculum is better than integrating some degree of ethics training into all courses. In other words, what would be the most effective methodology? I found the article very interesting, but what struck me as most noteworthy was what had not been addressed. Lacking was any discussion on "which" moral imperatives should be taught. In other words, what source for ethical standards and practices should be used as the basis for ethical instruction?

Years ago the late Charles Colson, who overcame ethical breaches in politics to become a follower of Jesus Christ and strong proponent of applying biblical principles in every area of life, cited the dilemma of trying to teach ethics. He recalled a benefactor offering \$2 million to establish an ethics chair at a leading U.S. university's business school. Faculty at the university, however, determined since they did not believe in moral absolutes, how could they possibly teach ethics? As a result, the esteemed business school declined the generous grant and chose instead not to teach ethics.

With even leading educational institutions unable to reach consensus on right and wrong, even in schools of business, is it surprising business and professional leaders today often act like ships without rudders?

My experience, both as a businessman and consultant to business, entrepreneurs and leaders, has shown this need not be a problem. Many of the people I work with regard the Bible as a storehouse of wisdom and guidance for conducting business in a straightforward ethical manner. We believe God has established absolutes for life and work, and when they are heeded, everyone benefits.

This has been the case for thousands of years. Moses, appointed by God to serve as leader for the Israelites, introduced the first code of ethics. In Deuteronomy 5 we read, "*Moses summoned all Israel and said: 'Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.'*"

These laws and decrees were not given to become restrictive, but rather to ensure and encourage fair, others-oriented practices that promote the best interests of all involved. In reality, however, even God's chosen people – Israel – did not follow His standards consistently. As a result, as we read in Judges 21:25, "*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" Does this sound like the workplace today?

We cannot hope to fully eliminate greed and corruption. There always will be those seeking to advance their own interests at the expense of others. But this does not diminish the need or importance of providing sound ethics training for people entering and currently working in today's business and professional world. I suggest it needs to be anchored in teaching God's law, as given in the Bible.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. In your experience, how ethical is the workplace today? Give some examples.
2. Do you think it is possible to promote business ethics without agreement on the basis for ethical standards and principles? Explain your answer.
3. What is your reaction to the suggestion of using the Bible as the foundation for ethics in today's business and professional world?
4. If it were up to you, how would you go about establishing an environment where sound, consistent ethical behavior is strongly encouraged in the workplace? Would you consider using biblical principles as a framework? And if so, how would you do it?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 10:9, 11:3, 16:11, 17:23, 20:17, 21:6, 29:4; Matthew 7:9-12; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 6:31