

How Do I Know What Is Right?

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:37-40

Using Biblical Guidance to Make Ethical Decisions

Dr. Harry Winsheimer

Sunday, August 19, 2001

Situation: You are driving 40 miles an hour. You approach a traffic light. It changes to yellow. You might make it through. You might not. What do you do? What is right? How do you know?

Sometimes a little voice in me shouts, "Beat it!" Rummmm! Other times, the little voice says, "What do I do? If I slam on my brakes, I may be rear ended or stop in the middle." Other times, the little voice says, "Stop!" What is right and how do you know?

Let us pray. O Lord, we have so many choices to make. Sometimes we are confused. We want to do what is right, but can't see clearly or come to a clean decision. Help us in our thinking. Guide us in our choices, that we may do your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Situation: Mary, a woman with whom you are friendly could be your mother tells you her story and asks for your advice. Her story goes this way.

As you know my husband, Bill, is in the dementia unit of the nursing home. About twelve years ago, he started to forget. We have not had a normal conversation for a decade. He kept getting worse and worse, until seven years ago I had to put him into the home. He has not known me in four years. I used to go visit him three, four times a week. Now, I go once a week. I make sure Bill receives the best care. He just sits or lies there. I cry a lot. I have cried rivers! Very sad! Very lonely! A couple of years ago, I met this wonderful man, George. He was visiting his wife in the room next door. She died well over a year ago. I wasn't looking for anyone. It just happened. We started talking commiserating really and then going out for dinner. I feel so guilty that I am being unfaithful emotionally to Bill. But, George and I are so good for each other. When we are together, I feel so warm, loved and even hopeful. My son says that I should divorce Bill and marry George. He says that his Dad died emotionally years ago, and that I am dying, too. He tells me to get a new life. I am torn apart over this. What should I do? What is right?

What would you say to this woman? And why? What would you say if she were your mother, or your sister? What is right?

I served on a sexual misconduct ethics committee of a presbytery. I served on the ethics committee of Presbyterian Homes of Western New York. How many of you have served on, or serve on, an ethics committee? [Show of hands, please.]

How many of you attend a school or work where there is a code of ethics? [Show of hands, please.]

How many of you make ethical decisions? [Show of hands, please.] We all make ethical choices.

When making ethical decisions, we often need more than one guidance. It is like this. Have you have bought a car? When you looked at the car, did you stand in front of the car in the showroom and say to yourself, "Humm. It has a windshield, a bumper, headlights. It has a front. It must be okay. I'll take it."? When we buy a car, we look at the front, then look at the driver's side, then look at the back, then look at the passenger's side, and then get into the driver's seat and look at it from inside. We look at it from different viewpoints. We ask many questions. Likewise, in this business of ethics, one viewpoint, one guideline, one question, may not give sufficient clarity. A cluster of viewpoints, guidelines, and questions may be more helpful.

One essential belief of Christians is that God loves us and out of concern for our well being has given us ethical commands and teachings in The Holy Scriptures. Like a loving parent, God teaches and guides us. That is the foundation upon which all Christian ethical thought is erected.

What does God teach us in Holy Scripture about ethical living?

1. Pray and obey the revealed commands of God for living in family and community.

The Ten Commandments have been the starting point for ethical deliberation throughout Judeo Christian history. We have regarded them as commands. When we make ethical choices in vague areas, we use them as standards and deduce what is appropriate. They provide God's vision of what will make for the safest, happiest lives. Envisioned in the Ten Commandments is a community in which God is revered, we respect each other, we are not afraid for our lives or our property, and the truth is told in court.

"Honor your father and mother," illustrates the ethic. Why honor our parents? So that they may live to 100? No, so that we may live long lives. Not that our parents may live long, but that we may. Think about God's point. If I mistreat my parents, what have I modeled for my children and grandchildren? It is okay for them to mistreat me, or ignore me, when I become old and dependent; therefore, with less emotional and physical nurture, I may suffer greatly and die younger.

The Ten Commandments have us asking: What does God command that we do for building up and caring for the family and community?

2. God teaches that we are not created to be loners. We are to live with God in a variety of communities. Our attitudes and behaviors affect someone, because we live in communities<family, church, neighborhood, city, state, nation, ethnic, racial, occupational, social. The biblical assumption is that we need ethics because we always are interacting in community. We use the expression in American culture, "private morality." When President Clinton and the country were moving through the Monica Lewinski situation, I frequently heard the expression "private morality." As they discovered, even what we tend to think of as private may not be. God never uses that expression. Biblically, the idea does not exist. Look at the Ten Commandments and at the summation of the law by Jesus that we just read. Every command has to do with relationships, with how we interact.

3. Also, pray and take a long-term view. God's concern is for the community, long-term. That is important! For example, a person of the opposite sex may really turn me on, get me very sexually excited (Charlotte, don't listen!). If I commit adultery, I may enjoy it tremendously. The attention, the thrill of sneaking around, and the sex may invigorate me, making me feel more alive. But, how does my adultery impact Charlotte -- the spouse to whom I made a commitment -- our children, our grandchildren, God, and my own sense of well-being? And would you be indifferent when you heard of my adultery? There would be a thunderous explosion in this church! In the year 2003, will I look back and say that the adulterous affair was a blessing, when everyone is considered? Command Community. Long-term.

4. Pray and do what is loving. According to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, Christian love is the ultimate criterion in deciding what to do. Love is the highest good, the greatest gift.

Jesus lived by this code. In Jesus' culture, on the Sabbath (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), people were expected to do nothing but worship<no grocery shopping, no Super Bowl. Doing any kind of work was taboo -- even most health care. They wore a straightjacket on the Sabbath. They had taken the command to keep the Sabbath holy to a ridiculously repressive extreme. (This is a neat illustration of needing more than one guideline to make an ethical decision.) The authorities took a commandment and abused people with it. Mark wrote:

Jesus went back to the synagogue where there was a man who had a paralyzed hand. Jesus said to the man, "Come up here to the front." Then he asked the people, "What does our Law allow us to do on the Sabbath? To help or to harm? To save a man's life or to destroy it?" But they did not say a thing. Jesus was angry as he looked around at them, but at the same time he felt sorry for them, because they were so stubborn and wrong. Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it became well again." Mark 3:1-6

The well-being of people is the ultimate test. Christians ask, "What is the loving thing to do?"

5. Pray and treat all people justly.

A fifth question to ask is: What does this do to the least of people? Justice.

Note: God does not urge us to ask what we will get out of it. Isn't that interesting? Would I be correct that most of the time Americans will ask: What is in it for me? How is this going to affect me? That is what I instinctively ask in my conversation with myself. God knew that most of us would ride the sports-car of self-interest, go too fast and crash, hurting ourselves and injuring others. We need no encouragement to promote our self-interest. Instead, we need guidelines to prompt us to think and behave justly, taking into consideration the legitimate needs of others.

Therefore, God champions the poor, the alien, the dependent in society. God expects anyone who would be a Christian to be concerned about justice for all.

In the well-known and often quoted parable of the Final Judgement in Matthew 25, Jesus told about a king separating people into two groups on judgment day. One group, the king welcomed and awarded a kingdom, while the other group was left out because they did not feed the hungry, offer drink to the thirsty, give clothes to the naked, or visit the sick and imprisoned.

Those left out did not get the point. The king explained, "I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me."

God has a compassion for people on the margins. God has a passion for justice. God cares about those who don't have the power to force their way. Therefore, an appropriate question for us to ask is: Does my behavior provide for the well being of all persons? Justice.

6. The last guidance that I will mention, and that briefly, is pray and practice the Golden Rule.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," Jesus taught. (Matthew 7:12) That is a straightforward idea. You try to put yourself into the other person's shoes. Would I want to be lied to? Would I want to be raped? Would I want to be cheated? Would I want my spouse committing adultery? If I were suffering, would I want a feeding tube inserted if I had no hope of recovery? Sometimes it helps to flip the subject and object, and make oneself the recipient: Would I want this done to me?

Six questions to ask in making ethical decisions: 1. Has God revealed any commands that fit this situation? 2. What will be the impact upon my family and communities? 3. What will be the long-term consequences? 4. What is the loving thing to do? 5. What is the just thing to do? 6. How would I want to be treated?

Back to the traffic light question with which I began. How might we apply these guidelines and questions? Unless I missed it, neither the Ten Commandments nor the teaching of Jesus says anything about traffic lights. There is no, "Thou shalt not run red lights." However, the Apostle Paul said to obey the civil authorities (Romans 13:1-3; Titus 3:3). What about doing what is loving? That applies. What about doing justly? That fits. What about the Golden Rule? Useful.

What would you say to the woman whose husband is demented in the nursing home, who has fallen in love with George, and whose son urges her to divorce his father and marry George?

This is tougher. Her situation is hypothetical only in the details. I have worked with several men and women long-time Christians, active church volunteers, conscientious people who wanted to do God's will who were in this predicament.

Eavesdrop on a family conversation over dinner after worship.

Son says, "Dad is not going to get better. He could live years. Take care of Dad, and marry George. Go to your attorney and see that all of us are taken care of, including Dad. You deserve happiness, and George is

a good man. He will do what is right by you and Dad."

Sister is firm and clear, asserting: "You married Bill for better or worse, for sickness or health. You can't divorce him now, no matter what it costs. It would not be right!"

Daughter says, "Mother, this is the 21st century! Avoid all this tension! Just live with George! People of your age are living together all the time to keep pensions and Social Security. Half of my friends are living with their boyfriends. Take care of Daddy, but live with George. Enjoy your life."

What would you say? What would you say if it were you, your mother, your sister?

I am not going to give my thoughts. Instead, I want you to talk about this on the way home in the car and over lunch, remembering the six biblical questions.

This I will proclaim: start with prayer and scripture. Consult Christians who have walked the road already. Never quit praying. Then, held in the arms of loving God, decide and follow through. Also, know in the depth of your soul that God is merciful. If you make a mistake, God will redeem you. God always works to redeem any situation. Should a decision need to be modified or reversed, God and you together can work through it. Ethics requires the courage to decide prayerfully and thoughtfully, and to move ahead.

God will work with us to create long-term blessings for individuals and communities.