



Knowing, Choosing, and Doing: *The Inseparable Moral Trilogy*¹

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The gap between knowing and doing is a familiar problem. Most people “know better” than to do many of the things they do. Moral character is more than knowing the difference between right and wrong.

Knowing the Right

For a Christian, the difference between right and wrong is well established. The specific moral guidance revealed by God in his Word provides the authoritative basis for life’s moral choices. Of all people, Christians are the least able to claim moral ignorance. Considering the precepts and examples provided in the Bible, there is no excuse. Though life gives us problems and dilemmas which are hard answer without prayerful reflection, the moral basis is available; we cannot say, “I just didn’t know.”

Any attempt to provide education in moral values—whether at home, in school, or in the church—must be based on the responsible source of moral truth. What is right and honorable cannot simply be determined from moment to moment through group discussions. God provides eternal principles; properly these principles are to be continuously re-discovered in order to shed light on newly emerging moral dilemmas of contemporary life. At the bottom line, moral truth exists and it does not change. The very nature of God is the witness of moral continuity.

But since all truth is God’s truth we must respectfully grant that many people, not just Christians, are able to discern right and wrong. The godly foundation of the whole moral universe is made clear in the Bible. One wonders why searchers for truth go the long way around in order to discover what is there to be plainly seen, but such is the stubbornness of humankind’s tendency to trust in self more than in God.

Knowing the right is basic to moral character, but choosing to act on what is right is a more obvious problem. If all people really wanted to put their knowledge of right and wrong into practice it would make for a better world.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. (James 2:14-18)

Choosing to do the Right

One of the best evidences that human nature is under the curse of sin is the fact that few if any of us actually prefer, consistently, to do the right thing on any and all occasions. At one time or another, the right and honorable choice gets second place. Instead, pride or jealousy becomes the basis for a choice of action. Whether it is motivated by materialism, by anxiety, by impure lust, it takes a person

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away from what is pure and godly. The choice is made in the direction of some sort of self-interest in violation of God's law for human life. The problem is one of choice and rational decision-making many times. One simply chooses not to act on the best that one knows. "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (James 4:17).

In the last decade much new research has been reported on the matter of how moral choices are made. One key shortcoming of this research is its almost exclusive concern for the process of moral reasoning. We now know, for example, that there are three major grounds of moral decision-making: 1) looking out for self-interest, 2) concern for the patterns of choice established by others who are important to us, and 3) commitment to life principles which one sees as the over-riding basis of honor and justice. We understand, for example, that everyone goes through the first of these levels of reasoning while making the first moral choices in childhood. We also have learned that some people never get beyond this level of moral conscience, while others proceed into the second and third levels as they "grow up" morally.

All of this is helpful, especially to parents and educators whose understanding of development is important to their effectiveness; but it tells us more about the river than about its source or its end. What values are important? How do we help people toward moral and spiritual maturity?

Yes, choice of moral values is important—and it is altogether possible for people to make God-honoring moral choices even in grievous social depravity. But how does a person get beyond the level of self-interest into the second level: concern for established truth and virtue? And how does one choose the *right* moral models and "significant others" who will shape this second level of moral reasoning in the direction of God's truth? So far, the research doesn't help much with these questions. Christians are biased on these matters—and so they should be.

Doing the Right

Even when we know the right and choose to do the right, things can go wrong. In addition to the matters of knowledge and information, and the matters of moral reasoning and choice, there is the mysterious third factor: what causes a person not to do what he or she *knows* and *chooses*?

The Apostle Paul put his finger on this problem in one of the most significant confessions a Christian ever offered: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). Here is ample evidence that it isn't enough to know God's righteous way and to desire to walk in it. If such a saintly man as Paul found himself in such frustration, what does this suggest about the rest of us? The puzzle has never been thoroughly solved. Why isn't it enough to be informed on the basis of the Word and to have a regenerated will of the sort Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 15?

Does not God the Father inform us of his perfect will and does Christ not transform our will so that we can desire the things of God? Is this not enough? According to Paul's confession there is more to it. Moral behavior—acting on the values of the kingdom of heaven can be thwarted on occasion by this elusive third factor of the moral trilogy.

Doing the right is a matter of *strength*. One can know to do the right, want to do the right, and still be so weak that even some momentary lapse or distraction will cause the hurtful words or harmful acts to pop out. It takes perseverance, watchful vigilance, courage and no little amount of what commonly is called "guts" to stay on the side angels in one's walk as a Christian.

It can be done. Many are doing it. Today as never before in this society you can identify truly Christian behavior; as the little song says, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Acted-upon love is an important evidence of Christian transformation: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (James 2:8).

It takes supernatural strength. Perhaps here is the “mystery factor”: supernatural strength. The idea appears frequently in Scripture; it is particularly associated with the work of the Holy Spirit living within the person—the very presence of God in one’s life. Through the daily in-filling of the Spirit of God and through the ministries of witness and encouragement that come by way of the devotional reading of his Word, through prayer, and through the fellowship of those who share our salvation we are strengthened. Thus the informed and intentional moral life becomes possible.

The Three Part Bridge From Truth to Action

Closing the gap between moral truth and moral action can be seen as a three-part bridge. Arching across this gap the interdependence of the parts is clear; no one or two will do the job without the others.

Knowing moral truth is the first of the three stones in the arch. The moral life begins with knowing the truth. Discernment between right and wrong is a matter of informed judgment. “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes” (Psalm 119: 11, 12).

Choosing right over wrong is a matter of moral commitment and is the second stone. It is less a matter of *learning* to want to do God’s will than of being transformed to a disposition in which one’s will is conformed to the will of God through faith in Jesus Christ. “. . . be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

The strength to put one’s commitment into action is the third of the stones in the arch. It represents the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which provides the much-needed antidote For human frailty.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. (Romans 8)

Live by the Spirit; demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5)