



The Bible and Moral Values¹

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Teachers, pastors, and parents are showing a sudden rush of interest in moral education. Why? Perhaps it was triggered by Watergate, or maybe it is a more general concern for the moral collapse of American life. No matter what the cause, there has rarely been such a high level of activity in the field of moral and ethical education. What had for generations become “somebody else’s business” is now becoming everybody’s business.

Research in moral development is providing some clearer understandings of what sorts of learning experiences are likely to be effective. It will begin with understanding ourselves better, then building the sorts of relationships that allow people to develop their own value structures. It is clear now that values are not handed over to people ready-made.

For the Christian there are two important questions that demand clear answers: (1) Where do moral values come from? (2) How can we help a person develop moral values? Unlike the secular society whose answers to the first question are always relativistic (“It depends on the situation or upon the particular society’s norms”), the Christian answers that God has revealed himself in his creation and his Word. God is the source. But as the Apostle Paul reminds us again and again, God’s basic revelation of moral order is at the level of principle; laws and rules, even the good models of behavior that Christians try to set for one another, are only a means to an end. The ultimate source and criterion of righteousness is God’s justice, and the motivation to act justly is God’s love. This should be understood in its Biblical perspective: not every good act or every correct moral judgment is made by a Christian. Surely many morally good judgments and behaviors exist outside the family of God’s redeemed community. The good things of the creation “fall on the just and the unjust,” including the knowing of right and wrong. In Romans 1: 20 we read that “since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what was made”. And in the next chapter Paul amplifies this truth: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending themselves” (2:14,15).

Our historical preoccupation with the evil in humanity may have blinded us to the marvelous insights which these texts can bring. What is this doing good “instinctively,” or as in some other translators’ view, doing “by nature”? Does natural humanity have any tendency at all to know and do righteousness? Should it really surprise us to learn that the research in moral judgment finds that all people seem to be capable of developing to levels of judgment that reflect justice and love, whether or not they are “born again”? Have we so easily forgotten that the issue of righteousness of the person in God’s sight is much more than whether or not the person has done moral good? In theological perspective, the criterion of standing before God is in the washing of regeneration—the miracle of

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new birth, redeeming the nature that is dead in sin. It goes far beyond the matter of having a moral conscience; Paul says that even those who have never heard God's law have that. It goes far beyond the matter of behaving consistently with one's moral judgment; none of us would stand righteous before God if that were the criterion! So we need to make a basic distinction between the sort of moral judgment and moral action that is visible in the human (horizontal) plane and can be shared by all people because of God's grace; and that brings a person into a walking, talking fellowship with God (the vertical plane). For this latter we see the absolute necessity of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection; but for the former we see that God the creator has left his fingerprints of good on the very nature of men and women.

One way to read the new evidence from the research on moral development sees it remarkably parallel to Biblical understandings. For example, researchers make a clear distinction between moral judgment and moral action. Moral judgment is the making of a decision on the basis of one's understanding of right and wrong. Moral action is the doing of something, carrying out an action that is right or wrong. ("Moral action" is a general term used to describe any action that has a moral content whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral.) Jesus drew attention to this same distinction between moral judgment and moral action. In the parable of the man's two Sons (Matthew 21:28-31), the first son shows sound moral judgment and the willingness to agree to his father's request. The second son shows a rebellious spirit, reacting negatively to his father; but later, realizing the wrongness of his response, he acts on his moral judgment and goes into the vineyard to carry out the request of his father. Jesus poses over this story a question suggesting that God is concerned about more than moral judgment; he is concerned about moral action!

But we should never forget that God takes no great satisfaction in actions that have no moral judgment underneath them. Humans were created to share God's image and, in certain key points, to share God's nature. And God shared with humankind this crucial capacity to make moral choices. He put Adam into a marvelous situation and burdened him with but one vital responsibility: to obey God in one particular. Could God have done any less and still made Adam free? The tracing of humanity's sin to Adam's failure (on the one vital point of obedience) is a fundamental point of historical Christian theology. But in this very point is the implication that God sees choice, call it judgment or decision-making, as being a basic responsibility of being human.

How moral judgment and moral action fit together is important. When a person does not act on what he knows to be right, there is a gap between his or her moral judgment and his or her moral action. This gap represents one of the ways the Bible defines sin. "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (James 4:17).

It is clear, then, that moral judgment is important, moral action is important, and closing the gap between judgment and action is also important. But what exactly is moral judgment? Is it simply a matter of knowing all the right things to do? Those who study this question today make a useful distinction between two aspects of a moral judgment: its content and its structure. The *content* of a moral judgment is the particular "do" or "don't"; it is the *what* of the moral choice—what one sees as the right. The *structure* of a moral judgment is its *why*: why I do or why I don't value that particular choice. For example, "It is wrong to steal" is a statement of moral content. "I don't steal because I don't want to get into trouble" tells you much more—it reveals a strong clue about the structure of my moral judgment; apparently my value content (it's wrong to steal) is held in place *structurally* by a fear of getting into trouble. The fear of punishment is representative of a structural level of moral judgment quite normal among small children but somewhat sad among adults!

The recent research of Lawrence Kohlberg of Harvard University has significantly advanced the scientific and academic study of values education. Kohlberg's key discovery is that there are three different levels of *structure* of value development through which humans pass. These levels are entered one by one, in the same sequence for everyone. But Kohlberg finds that some people never get beyond the first level; in fact, relatively few develop into the third level. The major characteristic of level I is that the person sees all the rights and wrongs as determined by rewards and punishments. In other words, one's own ego determines morality, and the rightness or wrongness of a particular judgment develops inside oneself through a growing awareness of the consequences for oneself of the moral action. We all have been in this structural level as children—it is the first great dawning of moral accountability.

As children's perspective develop they become capable of getting "outside themselves" to see other viewpoints. Thus level II begins as the person comes to determine right and wrong on the basis of moral standards from "out there." In the early stage of level II the behavior that pleases mother and daddy becomes important. Models or examples of "good" behavior are recognized and copied. No longer is it just a matter of "what I want to do." The person is responsive to an outside frame of moral reference. This stage of level II matures into a higher stage in which one's structural reference, still "out there," is seen in willing and eager responsiveness to orderliness created by law and rule-oriented social situations.

Kohlberg has found yet a higher level. After passing through Level II, a relatively small percentage of people move into a structural level Kohlberg calls "principled moral reasoning." For them the issue is not the rules and laws in themselves, nor the particulars of good moral examples, but the principles that underlie the examples, rules, and laws. How similar this sounds to Jesus' teaching that the Pharisees, with their emphasis on law, law, law, were missing the basic point of God's mercy and justice: "Go and learn what this means, I desire compassion and not sacrifice . . ." (Matthew 9:13 Jesus, citing Hosea 6:6).

Surely Jesus' ministry highlights the principled level underlying God's law. "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Throughout the Sermon on the Mount he systematically states and puts himself on record supporting one after another of the commandments, and for each he adds a principled statement that broadens the meaning and holds before us the two basic principles that later he identifies as the Great Commandments: the principle of humanity's relationship to God in love and obedient devotion and the principle of humanity's involvement with others in love. "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40).

The research of Jean Piaget (Swiss developmental psychologist) gives us the clearest insight into how a person moves from level to level as mental processes develop. Piaget concludes that development *develops*; it is not dependent on somebody's *causing* it. Applied to moral development education, this means that we must look for what it is that causes some people not to develop; Piaget's studies strongly suggest that the big issue in the moral development of the child is the environmental forces that would keep structural development from occurring. (This really isn't such a strange conclusion: if moral development is akin to cognitive development, and Piaget, Kohlberg and others agree that it is; and if cognitive development is akin to physical development, and Piaget, Bruner, Gesell and others agree that it is, we can consider that there is not much role for human willfulness in the general development process. Will hair not grow if you forget to water it? Will the child's baby teeth not be replaced by "permanent teeth" if you fail to exhort the child?) Kohlberg has observed that the quality

of justice in a person's environment has a strong bearing on his continued development. Apparently, injustice is one of the factors that retards or stalls moral development.

From Piaget we also learn that the major developmental transitions in life are typically preceded by upheaval in one's outlook. He calls it "disequilibrium," referring to the getting out of balance when suddenly we come to realize that the way we have been looking at things no longer seems adequate for the new problems and concerns of which we have become aware. At such times, a person's whole framework of ideas undergoes a re-organization and after a more or less difficult time of adjustment becomes "re-equilibrated" at the new developmental level. In careful studies of many people over long periods of time, backing up has never been reported. The direction of development is forward! (Please remember: we are talking here of the development of moral *judgment*. There is plenty of room for plain old-fashioned backsliding in what is observed in moral action!)

What does the research suggest about what should be done to facilitate moral development? The major implications for teachers and parents are these:

1. Provide a learning and growing environment in which justice is central and the participation of everyone in the striving for justice is encouraged.
2. Accept the reality of the levels of moral development. Children are not miniature adults. At first they will need the nurture of rewards and punishments, handled in a just manner. Then they will begin to respond to examples; provide consistent and sound models and keep your own behavior constant with the moral messages you want the child to receive. Develop with children an orderly use of rules, not as a basis for punishment but to enhance confidence and communication by clarifying the expectations and demands of a just and secure environment.
3. Develop a relationship with your children and your students in which open dialogue and rich experiences are continually shared. Thus you will be ready to be the needed comfort and encouragement when a youngster reaches a time of disequilibrium. What is most needed then is one who can "come alongside" for encouragement and support; one who will accept the anxieties and doubts of the transitions in moral judgment without panic and without criticism. (This recommendation will ring bells for those who have studied the roles of God the Holy Spirit!)

Christians tend to be confident in the source and the content of their moral judgments. To trust God is to accept what he has said and done. But there is more to values development than *content*! Most of our problems as parents and educators relate to the need to better understand the *structure* of moral judgment. We need to continue an emphasis on sound content, but it must be put in a framework of structure that learners can handle. The Bible is our crucial source book on what God has said. Science, rightly understood, is our source book on what God has made. We need both.