



Learning Right from Wrong: *A Family Life Today Interview With Dr. Ted Ward*¹

Helping Children Develop Moral Values . . .

FLT: *In a society where even the most basic values are questioned and rejected, how can Christian parents best help their children develop sound moral judgment?*

Ward: When we talk about morals and the development of moral judgment, we are not just talking about taking on a list of behaviors that are either good or bad. We are talking about the competency to reason, the competency to think through the rightness or wrongness, the fairness or unfairness of a situation. It is a decision-making process. It's not simply holding on to a list of goods and bads. One of the things that we know from the research in moral development is that the quality of justice in the environment—whether that be home, church, or school—is the most significant predictor of whether or not a person is going to continue to develop into the higher stages of moral judgment.

FLT: *What do you mean by the “quality of justice” in the home?*

Ward: It is a quest for making the family a more fair, a more honest place to be. For example, to emphasize a whole agenda of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” without involving family members in the dialogue and discussions of the “why’s” and the reasons behind the “why’s” is to ask family members to simply conform to a system without giving any input to the quality of that system. Quite often this right is denied to people in the family because the father decides that such will be the case and that settles it. Or, the rationale is that because the parents are older they, therefore, know better and have all the answers. As a result, the child has no room to explore and discuss. There, the quality of justice is relatively low.

FLT: *But how far should parents go in involving children in decision-making?*

Ward: To the limit of each child’s capacity. They should constantly be nurturing that capacity so that it can become larger. You see, the human being develops judgment potentiality by using it. If children are simply put into situations where everything is imposed on them and all decisions are made outside themselves, their judgment potential tends not to develop.

FLT: *Is it especially difficult for Christian parents, who know the Truth, to give their children room to make decisions on their own?*

Ward: Yes. Because, as Christians, we do have access to God’s Word and certainly have the principles that underlie all of morality itself; it becomes very easy for us to take a shortcut and simply hold out facts and assume the moral education for our children. But, you see, there are two dimensions to moral judgment: *what* you believe to be right or wrong, and *why* you believe something is right or wrong. For instance, children in Christian families start off in life with

¹ Ted Ward. Learning Right from Wrong. *Family Life Today*. September 1980: 22-32. Gospel Light Publications.

the precept that honesty is right and dishonesty is wrong. It is possible for a very young child to comprehend that telling a lie is a bad thing. And he will probably hold that value through life. But there is a strong possibility that he will change in his understanding of *why* it is important to be honest.

FLT: *What stages do children go through in their understanding of the “why’s” behind values they hold?*

Ward: First of all, a child will discover that when she violates the value, unpleasant things happen to her. So honesty, or rightness, is wrapped up in the knowledge that good things happen when she is honest and bad things happen when she is dishonest. At this period of life, the most effective way to communicate is to use rewards and punishments. Now, when the child begins to be conscious of the fact that it is a good thing to be honest and gets a lot of satisfaction out of pleasing mother or father—not because of a reward, that child is moving into the second stage. Here, the child realizes that the source of right and wrong is external, that there are those out there who determine the rights and wrongs.

FLT: *How long does this phase last?*

Ward: Often right on through the school years, including much of high school. Then the third stage begins when moral truth gets built into your own system. At this point, you adopt values and principles as your own, you internalize principles.

FLT: *What can parents do to foster the kind of moral development in their children that will find its completion in the internalization of Christian values?*

Ward: They can begin by recognizing that their first great contribution to the child is consistency in encouraging and discouraging behavior. And while they are doing that, even when the child is young, they should be laying the groundwork for the next two phases. During the first stage, the most powerful moral influences are rewards and punishment. But in the second phase, example becomes the most powerful. It is never too early to begin being concerned about the kind of example we set as parents. And then, of course, parents very early should begin laying the foundation for the third phase of development which often doesn’t begin until late adolescence or even into the 20s. During this phase, the most important mode of moral influence is dialogue—conversation, sharing experience. You talk with an adult who is a parent of an adult child and you will find that that parent is no longer able to effectively use rewards and punishment. In fact, even the example that the parent has set isn’t all that important. But the dialogue, the sharing and talking through of issues, has a powerful moral effect.

FLT: *Why, then, is it that many young people raised in conservative Christian homes fail to internalize the Biblical values of their parents?*

Ward: I think that in many Christian circles there hasn’t been room for mature dialogue, and there hasn’t been the groundwork laid in terms of justice in the family that I mentioned earlier. When a church or home situation is such that it presupposes that all questions have already been answered and that a child’s only responsibility is to quietly wait to hear the answers, it

limits the learning environment at level two. It becomes a pressure-cooker environment. Either the person will stay with that legalistic approach or leave.

FLT: *But what should parents do about children who seem to be adopting values that are contrary to Scripture?*

Ward: The most important thing we have to learn as parents is that, in the final analysis, we are not ultimately held responsible for the decisions that are made by our children. Now, the parent has a responsibility for providing that kind of nurture and environment in which a child can grow in the ways he should, but we are all on our own feet before God. One of the surest ways to lose your effectiveness and influence on your child is to overstep the boundary of the child's right to make decisions. At some point, what we as parents do, has to be done within the limitations of the will of the child. That becomes very, very difficult.

FLT: *But doesn't the parent have a responsibility to protect the child from making decisions that are ultimately harmful?*

Ward: To some extent. In the early years of life, obviously the parent makes sure that the safety of the child is preserved at all costs. For instance, we don't let our children walk in front of trucks. But after a child gets to be 18, if he still walks in front of trucks, there is hardly anything you can do about it. In fact, children at 18 quite often will walk in front of moral "trucks" and it hurts a parent to see it happen. But it is not possible for the parent to prevent it. Even the best raising of a child is not assurance that a child will not engage in experimentation of some sort. This is especially so when a child is going through the transition from the second stage to the third. We know that this is the most tumultuous period of life because a person loses confidence in the external values and begins to look for an alternative. That transition is often a very difficult period as a person explores and hunts—sometimes desperately searching—for principles to internalize.

FLT: *What specific things do you suggest that parents do to prepare their children for this difficult time of internalizing values?*

Ward: One thing that parents can do is to spend more time, from the very early years, with their children. Get involved in thinking and talking together about the moral actions you take. Look specifically at a situation and ask, "How would you handle this?" or "How would you handle that?" Look beyond the moralisms of "Jesus wants you to be such and such a person" to the actual experiences of life. Take stands on moral issues in society. Moral values do not stop short of moral action. As Christians, we are to stand for something; become involved and active. That is what will make a difference in the quality of life in our homes and our communities.