

Navigation Principals

Matthew 4:1-17

October 11, 2009

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PBS has a new reality show worth watching entitled "Justice: What's the right thing to do." Because Harvard University allowed PBS to put cameras in the class of Michael Sandel, an immensely popular professor of philosophy and ethics, the viewer gets to watch Sandel pose questions concerning right and wrong behavior to his class members and hear how they respond.

Last week, he said to his students: "Suppose you are driving a trolley and the brakes quit functioning. Ahead on the track you see five workers who cannot be warned of their impending doom. If you hit them, they will all die. Immediately before you collide with the five workers, however, you come to an intersection which will allow you to switch to another track where there is only one worker in harm's way. You have control of the steering wheel. Do you turn the trolley to kill the one worker or let it stay the course and take the lives of the five?"

The vast majority of students said they believed the right thing to do was to turn the trolley and spare the five people even though the decision meant one man would die. In response, Dr. Sandel said, "so taking the life of one person is justified if it saves the lives of five others?" "Yes," the overwhelming majority of students agreed.

"How about this then?" Sandel continued. "Suppose there are five people in a hospital and each of them needs one organ to survive. One needs a heart, the other needs a liver, the third a kidney, the fourth a lung and the fifth, a pancreas. While these five people wait for a miracle, a perfectly healthy man walks into the doctor's office for a check-up. All five of his organs are operating at peak performance. Is it right to take his life to save the five?"

This time, the vast majority of students voted no. The professor said, "I thought taking the life of one person is justified if it saves the lives of five others." The confused class could only answer that something seemed different about the second scenario. Although they couldn't exactly say why, one action seemed right and the other seemed wrong, even though the outcome was basically the same.

Matthew tells us in today's passage, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." This verse gets at the difference between being tested and tempted. Evidently the Spirit knew Jesus had to be tested in order for Christ to clarify his own understanding of right and wrong, so the Spirit put Jesus into the wilderness or, as The Message, says, "Jesus was taken into the wild."

Sometimes our greatest tests come in the wilderness of life when we feel lost, depressed, adrift, far from home. On other occasions, our spiritual tests come while we are in the wild, the place of bright lights, dazzling distractions and seductive situations.

Tests are simply environments in which good or bad can be chosen. College presents a field of constant testing. For without the presence of parents and guardians, one has ample opportunity to choose to do right or wrong.

Job promotions can also create new tests to our morality. When we move from a position in which we are under constant scrutiny by supervisors to a place where we control our own time, handle large sums money or have access to company records, we have to learn how to deal with new choices of right and wrong.

New relationships can also provide a testing ground for our lives. An attractive co-worker, neighbor or employee who finds us fascinating, presents new situations in which we can make the right or wrong choice.

Temptation, however is much more than an environment in which good or bad can be chosen. Temptation is a power or influence that attempts to persuade us to do the wrong thing. College is the test, a friend trying to talk us into buying the answers to an exam is the temptation. The promotion provides the test, the inner voice that says, stuff a fifty in your pocket, they'll never miss it, is the temptation. The attractive co-worker is the test, his invitation to join him for drink after work, is the temptation.

God tests us to build us up, the evil one tempts to tear us down. In our times of testing, we need help to know right from wrong. On some matters, Jesus clearly said one perspective was right and one was wrong. For instance, Jesus' followers believed that if someone harmed them, they were justified in injuring the perpetrator to the same degree. An "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was the ethic they felt God ordained. Jesus said they were wrong, however, and directed them to turn the other cheek.

Other questions of right and wrong are a little more difficult to decide because Jesus did not speak directly to them. Many moral quandaries that we face, were not even possible in the time of Christ, so where do we find guidance to know right from wrong?

This exchange between Jesus and the tempter teaches us that Scripture can help us know right from wrong. At the end of forty days of fasting, when Jesus was famished, the tempter tried to persuade Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus replied to the temptation by quoting from Deuteronomy "we are not to live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

We might conclude therefore, that if we know how to quote the Bible, we'll always know right from wrong, however, I'm afraid it is not quite that easy. Why did Jesus quote from Deuteronomy rather than from Ecclesiastes 9:7 "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved of what you do." You see, if I'm really hungry and Satan comes along and entices me to turn stones into bread, I'm the kind of guy that looks for some Biblical rationalization of my behavior and Ecclesiastes has it. "Thank God" I might say, "The Bible tells me to eat my bread with enjoyment for God has already approved of my decision," then I'd start turning boulders into taco salads.

Presumably, Jesus knew Ecclesiastes 9:7 but he also knew that was not the voice of God for this situation. Knowing right from wrong demands more of us than the ability to quote Scripture and reference passages from the Bible.

To further make this point, I'd like you to turn with me to Leviticus 11:4. The Lord is giving Moses and Aaron direction on the right and wrong foods to eat. He says, "But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel." (I'm thinking, amen to that, eating camel has to be wrong.) "The rock badger," (I'm with you Lord eating rock badgers has to be a sin.) "The hare" (Well now hold on their Lord, I've eaten a few Thumpers in my time and I'm not sure that was wrong.) "The pig" (whoa, whoa, whoa, Lord, you can't be against bacon, ham and grits and barbeque sandwiches.)

I hate to tell you but the Lord didn't stop there. Drop down to verse 9. The passage says we can eat everything that swims in the water that has fins and scales but if the creatures do not have fins and scales, we can't touch them. Maryland Blue Crab – verboten. Oysters Rockefeller – a no no. Steamed muscles--shut your mouth.

The guidance gets a little stranger in verse 20. "All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you." (Say no more Lord, I will obey.) You may eat, however, "the locust, the bald locust, the cricket and the grasshopper."

According to this passage of Scripture, everyone of us who ate here last Wednesday, did the wrong thing in the sight of God because we had pork roast. We should have had grasshoppers and locusts. That's a little hard to take.

For Scripture to guide us in right and wrong behavior, we have to be able to do more than quote it, we need to interpret it and apply it by the leadership of the Spirit. Jesus started studying the Scripture in earnest at the age of twelve. After years of training, he was baptized and went into the wilderness where he fasted and prayed for forty days before the

temptations began. He didn't just fumble through a scroll until he found a verse that seemed to fit. He immersed himself in the study of Scripture under the power of the Holy Spirit until he could hear the voice of God for each situation he faced.

Let's go back to the dietary laws. Could it be, that in the days before refrigeration, some meats had to be banned that are safe today? If so, the question is not what meats were prohibited four thousand years ago, but which meats and other foods, available today, are destructive to human health and therefore to be avoided.

I have a feeling if Leviticus were written today the Lord might say, "You may eat of any fish that comes from the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry to Great Falls, but you shall not eat of a fish drawn from the Potomac between Great Falls and the Wilson Bridge." Such advice would prevent us from getting sick from the toxins of our local river.

To receive the help Christ has for us in the account of the testing in his life, we have to look beyond the specifics of the teaching to the principles behind it. I've lived fifty-three years and so far, not once have I been tempted to turn stones into bread. I've also never been tempted to leap off the pinnacle of the temple or bow down to the devil. By focusing on the specific temptations, we might conclude that there is no help in this text for our moral quandaries today because we don't face the same temptations Jesus confronted. If we look at the principles behind the temptations, however, we will find some help in navigating through the moral dilemmas of our lives.

The principle behind this first temptation can be stated like this: The gratification of my most powerful desires does not justify wrong behavior. Jesus had to choose whether to give into temptation and feed his hunger or to stay focused on the higher ethic of serving God with his entire life.

The principle can help us navigate the moral tests before us. If I really, really need money, is it okay to steal? If I'm really, really lonely, is it okay to sleep with a stranger to get a little human warmth? If I'm really, really depressed, is it okay to get drunk so I won't have to think about my miserable life? If I really, really need to pass a test, is it okay to cheat? Jesus teaches us a principle to help us say no to such temptations. The gratification of my most powerful desires doesn't justify wrong behavior.

What's the principle behind the second temptation? In this case, the tempter even quotes the Bible. Referring to Psalm 91 Satan tries to get Jesus to throw himself off the apex of the temple to force God to do a miracle rescue.

Jesus turned the temptation down by quoting a different verse, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." The principle behind the temptation could be worded, "The opportunity for sensational success does not justify wrong behavior."

If Jesus had given in to Satan's temptation, he would have achieved overnight stardom. Everyone in and around Jerusalem would have been chattering about the spectacular scene witnessed as winged angels caught Jesus right before he stubbed his toe and cradled him to safety. The truth Jesus understood was that even sensational success does not justify wrong behavior.

Allen Stanford is a Southern Baptist layman who was arrested and jailed on June 13th for running up over \$250,000 in gambling debts in Las Vegas and operating an 8 billion dollar Ponzi scheme on over 50,000 investors. Stanford and his associates started each day with prayer and often asked employees how they could better pray for them. Stanford placed a Bible verse across each email that he sent to investors. The verse was Proverbs 3:11, "Wealth from get-rich-quick schemes quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows."

How could a man quote Scripture, pray, be active in his church and perpetrate massive fraud on over 50,000 people? Somewhere along the way he decided that the opportunity for sensational success justified wrong behavior.

What would you be willing to do to see your most intense dream come true? Take growth-enhancing hormones so you could hit a baseball farther than anyone else? Hide detrimental side effects of your product so you could make buckets of money? Lie to your constituents so you could be re-elected? Falsify research for academic stardom? Jesus teaches us a principle to help us say no to such temptations: The opportunity of sensational success does not justify wrong behavior.

The last temptation offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if he would bow down to Satan. Surely Jesus knew Daniel 7:14, "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him." He must have known that one day the kingdoms of this world were to become the kingdoms of our Lord so he could have told himself, "here is a short-cut to accomplish the great goal of God. Bowing down to Satan is a lot easier than dying on a cross and it accomplishes the same goal, it gives me power over all the kingdoms of this world."

Jesus did not fall for the temptation, though. Instead, he relied upon the wisdom of Deuteronomy 6:13 and said to the evil one, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." The principle can be stated, "The achievement of a worthy goal does not justify wrong behavior."

"I want to live in a safe country" (That is surely a worthy goal) "if I'm told my country will have to kill many innocent people to gain that security, should I support such actions?" "I want my son to attend MIT" (worthy goal) "Should I help him lie on some parts of his application to enhance his chances?" "I want to date a very nice guy I met in my chemistry class" (Worthy goal) "Should I start a rumor about the girl he seems to like so he'll forget her and notice me?" On all accounts, Jesus would teach us to say no, because of the principle that the achievement of a worthy goal does not justify wrong behavior.

Of course knowing the right thing to do and then doing it are two different things. I suspect that most of time we know right from wrong, we simply choose to do the wrong thing for any number of reasons. In that case, we need another teaching from Jesus. The one that says there is more joy in heaven over one who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance. The one that says the man who beat his chest and cried unto God, "Lord be merciful upon me, a sinner" went home justified. The one that says about the prodigal son, "let us eat and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost but now he is found."

Thank God that Jesus taught us both how to discern right from wrong and what to do when we go ahead and do the wrong thing anyway. Let us live by the full teachings of God. Amen.