

Knowing Right from Wrong Exodus 20:1-17

Knowing Right from Wrong Introduction

- Is there really such a thing as objective morality?
- Are the ideas of good and evil real?
- If so, where do they come from?

- Many of us have been taught that we have to decide what is right and wrong for ourselves.
- How far can we really take that idea?

- Peter Lanza, father of Sandy Hook killer Adam Lanza, in the current issue of the *New Yorker*:
 - *"You can't get any more evil ... How much do I beat up on myself about the fact that he's my son? A lot ... It's gut-wrenching ... A victim's family member told me that they forgave Adam after we spent three hours talking. I didn't even know how to respond."*

- This is from the website of ABC 4 Utah:
 - *"The parents call Victor Rax an 'evil' man [who] has destroyed lives. Rax was charged Monday with multiple counts connected to human trafficking, sex abuse and drugs.*
 - *"His victims, according to the Utah Attorney General, were young teens.."*

- From the news service AFP:
 - *"US Secretary of State John Kerry on Wednesday called for global attention on North Korea, denouncing the isolated Asian nation as 'an evil, evil place...'*
 - *'North Korea is one of the most closed and cruel places on earth. There's no question about it. There's evil that is taking place there that all of us ought to be deeply and are deeply concerned about.'"*

- Evil exists. Good must be its opposite.
- In other words, without much help from others, we know that certain things are just right or wrong.
- Like all other senses or natural abilities, our moral sense needs to be refined or developed.

- Musicians must train their ears to hear more accurately.
- Athletes must constantly work out and practice to develop their physical skills.
- Visual artists can develop their abilities to see things better than the rest of us.
- Likewise, our God-given moral sense can be developed through proper instruction and training.

- We might say that mass murderers, slave traders, sex offenders and cruel dictators are moral idiots. The rest of us may not be that far gone, but we could still use some moral fine tuning, some added instruction.

- The word *Torah* means both "law" and "instruction." Some of God's most basic moral instruction is given in the Ten Commandments. Read Exodus 20:1-17

The First Commandment 20:1-3

- In a godless world, morality might exist, but it would have no power to hold us to its standards.
- Let's assume our moral sense is an instinct produced solely by evolution.
- This would explain why we feel some things are good or evil, but it would not make them truly so.
- It would not explain absolute right and wrong.

- A commandment to love our neighbor must be connected to a similar command to love God first.
- Put God first, in all his truth and holiness, and a real value for good and evil naturally follows.
- But this God must be the real God, the living God, not simply one we make up.

The Second Commandment 20:4-6

- Speaking of gods we make up –
- We cannot make our maker.
- An image ought not to be worshiped.
- If we think of an image as a false god, almost all sin can be reduced to idolatry.

- How much we can know about God through natural means is a topic for long discussion.
- At the most basic level, we must know that we should not worship something that we make.
- That is too close to worshiping ourselves, our own abilities or our own possessions.

The Third Commandment 20:7

- When people use the words "God" or "Jesus Christ" in a light or flippant manner, they are expressing a lack of reverence for either the Father or the Son – or both.
- Using God's name in anger, as an expression of surprise (OMG!), or to add credibility to what we say ("I swear to God", "God told me", etc.) can all fall into this category.

- We all like our names to be respected.
- How much more should we respect the name of God?

The Fourth Commandment 20:8-11

- The root of the word "Sabbath" means "to stop," or "cease from our labors."
- It is ceremonial as far as it coincides with the seventh day.
- In that sense it is not binding for Christians.
- It is moral in the sense that we ought to set aside time for the worship or service of God.
- And to do this we have to regularly stop thinking of our own responsibilities.
- We have to put God first.

The Fifth Commandment 20:12

- We all know deep down that parents deserve a level of respect simply for being our parents.
- This does not mean we always agree with them or that they are always right.
- It means we should hold them in high regard, even when they are wrong, and even as we become adults.
- Is there a culture that does not acknowledge this? I can't think of one.

The Sixth Commandment 20:13

- Hebrew makes a distinction between "murder" and "killing" just as English does.
- Everyone knows that murder is wrong.

- One way this natural knowledge shows up clearly is in the abortion industry.
- One has to dehumanize the baby to justify the deed.

- This is much like the Nazis who dehumanized the Jews.
- Or the Hutus in Rwanda who attempted to eliminate the "Tutsi cockroach".
- The high level of emotion attached to abortion debates reveals that we all know something important is at stake.

The Seventh Commandment 20:14

- People often speak as if sex is not a moral issue.
- Many of us have been taught exactly that.
- Thus, we no longer admit the sanctity of the relationship.
- Nonetheless, everyone believes that sex under certain conditions can be wrong.

- Ask anyone molested as a child, raped, or who has just discovered that their spouse has been having an affair.
- The pain will come quickly to the surface.
- That's because sex is a moral issue. It hurts to be treated badly.

The Eighth Commandment 20:15

- Cultures or societies differ in their definitions of property.
- Nonetheless, all cultures have a concept of property.
- Some things are owned by the individual, the family, the community, the government or the nation as a whole.
- Once we accept that, we know that it's wrong for someone take something that is not theirs without permission.
- Whether someone picks your pocket, charges something to your credit card or Russia takes Crimea, all will recognize that stealing is wrong at some level.

The Ninth Commandment 20:16

- This commandment is based on a demand for truthfulness in all our dealings.
- Truth itself is presently a debated topic.
- Still, if you were to be accused falsely in court, you would immediately recognize that some things are true and some things are false.
- Likewise, if you knew I took your money, then I lied and said I did not, you would consider me a liar and a thief.

The Tenth Commandment 20:17

- This commandment admits something else we all know – that sin is already committed in the heart at a point before we carry out the act.
- If I want what you have, I have to focus on it, contemplate it, and decide to take it before I actually do so.

- If my attempt to take what you have is unsuccessful, I have still sinned in my heart and in the eyes of God.
- I know what I wanted and fully intended to do.

- We can remove this from coveting entirely:
 - I accidentally drop a hammer off a scaffold onto someone's head and injure them.
 - We all agree that I am stupid.
 - I should take responsibility since the accident is my fault.
 - It's not clear that this responsibility involves actual guilt.

- We can remove this from coveting entirely:
 - Now, I come up behind you and intentionally try to hit you in the head with the hammer.
 - I am certainly guilty of something even if I miss.
 - Sin in the heart comes first.

Knowing Right from Wrong Conclusions

- Again, *Torah* means "law" or "instruction."
- Mathematical concepts exist whether or not we know them.
- Moral truth exists with or without our agreement or understanding.
- The Ten Commandments help bring the truth out.
- More so than mathematics, the commandments teach us what we already know.

- Too often, however, the problem is not our understanding, but our will.
- We don't want to admit that our sinful desires or sinful behaviors are wrong.
- The result is that by our unrighteousness we "suppress the truth." (Romans 1:18)

- Nonetheless, it's hard to argue with these commandments, because we more or less want others to live by them.
- We want others to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.
- We want others to embrace what is good and avoid evil.
- We naturally believe that there are such things as genuine good and evil.

- Is there really such a thing as objective morality?
 - Yes, and we know it deep down.
- Are the ideas of good and evil real?
 - Yes, and we know this is true instinctively.

- So where do good and evil come from?
 - The good is that which is consistent with the nature of God – it agrees with who he is.
 - Evil is that which opposes his nature.

- We all grasp these ideas because we are all made in God's image.
- We all resist the same ideas because we have all been corrupted by sin.
- We were made to be good but have all succumbed to evil.
- The law shows us our need for Jesus.