

Moral and Non-Moral Issues

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper
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We are called by Jesus to adhere to the greatest commandment, to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37-38). If we seek to love the Lord, we will seek to obey Him (John 14:21). What is left is to understand what God is requiring for us to obey.

How we approach understanding what God requires from us is critical to the Christian life. In this paper, we will use the term “moral issue” to describe what God demands all people obey and “non-moral issue” to describe what God allows a person the freedom to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). A moral issue is *any activity or attitude that the New Testament that necessarily violates what the New Testament explicitly describes as sinful*. A non-moral issue is *any activity or attitude that, in itself, does not necessarily result in sin*.

Importantly, all actions may be sin but only some actions are necessarily sin. Even actions that are religious in nature can be sinful, depending on the motivations of the heart. A few examples of sinful religious actions from the Scripture include quoting Scripture (Matthew 4:1-9), giving (Matthew 6:2; Acts 5:1-11) and praying (Matthew 6:5; Luke 18:9-14). While these actions may be sinful due to the motives of the heart, we must be careful to discern when an action must be sinful from when it may not be sinful.

It is essential to distinguish between moral and non-moral issues

When we see our brother or sister in Christ sinning, we have a responsibility for them. We are called to admonish and rebuke when necessary (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Timothy 4:2). In order to function in the way God desires for us in helping one another, we must first clearly understand what actions call for correction.

In fact, the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 5 was written to admonish the Corinthians for their failure to remove an evil person who is a professing Christian from among their fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:13). It is essential that we understand what actions are sinful in order to serve people well.

On the other hand, the entire chapter of Romans 14 was written to admonish the Romans to not pass judgment on the non-sinful practices of others. In order to apply the command to not judge these things (Romans 14:13), we must know what actions people have the moral freedom to follow their own convictions.

It also should be observed that Paul is not describing all practices as being equally good in Romans 14. In fact, those who limit their freedoms (in terms of days or food) are described in Romans 14:1-2 as being weak. This evaluation is not passing judgment because the person is not considered sinful, but only

immature. This allowed Paul to better serve those who were weak by ministering truth in order to bring them to maturity.

If we fail to accurately discern between what must be morally wrong and what may not be morally wrong, we will either unrighteously pass judgment on the freedoms of others or we will fall short of God's calling by approving of sin. This was one of the primary failures of the Pharisees (Matthew 15:1-20; Matthew 23:13-36). When we fall into the sin of judging others in matters of freedom, we become as the Pharisees and are guilty of the purest form of legalism, "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matthew 15:9). It is truly essential to learn to distinguish between moral and non-moral issues.

In order to distinguish between moral and non-moral issues there are areas that commonly cause confusion:

We must distinguish between actual sin and potential sin

Many actions that may expose people to falling into sin are not expressly forbidden in God's Word. The possibility of falling into sin may cause some people to develop a conviction for themselves to refrain from a certain choice. It is appropriate at times to choose to limit our behavior in order to reduce the possibility of sin (cf. Proverbs 10:19).

However, the possibility of sin is not the same as sin itself. It is wrong to judge a person of sin if they have not sinned. We must allow people to exercise their freedom in non-moral areas without judgment from us (Romans 14:1-4). While we may regard some choices as wiser and we may seek to help in advising people accordingly, we cannot sin against them if they do not follow our advice.

Those who have experienced falling into sin themselves or have seen sin in the life of others will sometimes see a cause and effect relationship between certain choices and their potential results. They may then consider the decisions that led to the sin as being sinful as well. Examples of wrongly viewing potential sin as actual sin are many, such as forbidding drinking wine in order to avoid the sin of drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18; cf. 1 Timothy 5:23), forbidding incurring debt in order to avoid defaulting on a loan (Romans 13:8) and forbidding a person to quit their job in order to avoid failing to support his family (1 Timothy 5:8). These examples forbid practices that may result in sin, but do not *necessarily* result in sin and therefore they cannot be considered morally wrong.

We see this failure to distinguish between actual sin and potential sin with the teaching of the Pharisees. For example, in order to follow the command to keep the Sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8), they declared any type of work, even doing good deeds, to be unlawful (Matthew 12:1-14).

We must distinguish between what is always wrong and what is wrong in certain circumstances

Some behavior is always wrong in all cases and some behavior is wrong only in cases where it produces a sinful result. In other words, some actions are wrong regardless of their impact on others and other actions are wrong *because* of their impact on others.

We must recognize that God commands extend beyond us to how our behavior affects others (Ephesians 4:29). Obedience requires us to consider what our behavior produces.

This is particularly relevant in cross-cultural ministry. When we involve ourselves in a new culture there will be norms that must be understood or offense will be given (1 Corinthians 10:32). Likewise, there will be actions that our native culture would consider offensive and that the new culture will not understand in the same way.

Even with people of the same culture we see differences in perspectives on what constitutes offensive behavior. One example is how different people view being late as being rude. There is no universal standard for punctuality and so “late” is solely defined by the mutual understanding of the people involved. An outside observer may consider a person to be rude, but if no offense is given to the people involved in the situation then the person was not acting offensively. This is a case where sin exists only in certain circumstances.

In the same way, many actions are not in themselves morally wrong but become morally wrong when a negative perception is given and offense is taken. Of course when offense is taken at God’s Word we are not guilty (Mark 6:3). We must take care to avoid transferring our perception to others and wrongly concluding that all people will be sinned against in the same way as we would be.

We must distinguish between practicing evil and associating with evil

One of the charges that the Pharisees made against Jesus was that He associated Himself with sinners (Mark 2:16). They failed to discern that participating in a non-sinful act, such as eating in Mark 2:16, does not cause a person to sin. In fact, Paul even noted that he sought to identify himself with sinners for the sake of reaching them for Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Examples today of viewing associating with evil to be equal to practicing evil include going into a bar where a person is drunk or trick-or-treating on a day when some people practice idolatry. Being with sinful people or going around the neighborhood collecting candy are not sinful practices.

Some will use the King James Version of 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from all appearance of evil” to say that we must avoid doing what others may consider to be evil. However, a better translation found in the New King James Version, “abstain from every form of evil.” This is supported by other popular modern translations. Some behaviors may appear evil to people, such as the Pharisees, but what we are called to abstain from in 1 Thessalonians 5:22 is evil itself, not just what some people may wrongly consider to be evil.

Rather than avoiding association with non-Christians who practicing evil, we should seek to relate to them for the sake of the gospel, the forgiveness of sins. This was the teaching of Paul (1 Corinthians 5:10; 9:19-23) and it was also the practice of Jesus (Mark 2:15-16; Luke 15:2).

We must distinguish between what is prescribed and what is described

Many Christians will look to the stories of the Bible and conclude that the actions of righteous people are examples that we ought to follow. Indeed, Christ says His actions are an example to us (John 13:15) and Peter confirms this (1 Peter 2:21). Paul also tells us to follow his example (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 4:9). Yet the example that should be followed is with regard to righteousness not necessarily in areas of choices that are determined by special circumstances. For example, the apostles did not use the same method of choosing the replacement for Judas (Acts 1) as Jesus did in choosing the Twelve.

Some people will base their reasons for why a practice is right or wrong based *exclusively* on the practices of Christ and/or the apostles. Often people will base their premise upon statements such as “Jesus never did...” or “the apostles did...” This support is legitimate only to illustrate the teaching from another passage. For example, Jesus never drove a car but this does not mean we are forbidden to do so. This is done in many areas such as how to send people for missionary work, how to confront church leaders, why alleged miraculous gifts are valid and how to know God’s will.

The axiom that should be adhered to is “we should experience the teaching of the apostles, not teach the experience of the apostles.” Failing to distinguish between what is described for us in the narrative stories and what is explicitly taught will cause us to view areas of freedom with a moral lens.

We must distinguish between New Testament and Old Testament commands

One of the principles of biblical interpretation is “All Scripture is for me (all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable) but not all Scripture is to me (many of the commands and promises are not addressed to me).” It is essential to remember that God gave the Old Testament to the nation of Israel and God gave the New Testament to the church.

While the entire Old Testament is inspired by God and useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16) and many of its commands reflect the moral code that is repeated in the New Testament, it was not given specifically to govern the church. The usefulness of the Old Testament Law today is to learn from the example of God’s relationship to His people Israel (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6-11).

One example of failing to observe the difference between the application of the Old and New Testaments is when people demand a tithe (10%) be given to the church rather than teaching New Testament giving principles (cf. 1 Corinthians 9). Another example is when people demand the Sabbath day (Saturday) or the Lord’s day (Sunday) be kept holy rather than teaching our freedom to hold every day alike (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16-17).

We are not under the Law of Moses (Romans 6:14; 7:1-6) for Christ is the end of the Law for those who believe (Romans 10:4). We must not put a yoke upon disciples that no one is able to bear (Acts 15:10) by failing to understand this and demanding that Christians adhere to the Old Testament Law.

We must distinguish between what is wrong for us and what is wrong for others

The vast majority of commands in the New Testament are subjective rather than objective, focusing on the heart rather than the behavior resulting from the heart. While it is essential to consider how these commands that are heart related or in other ways non-measurable apply in specific ways to our life, it is impossible to pass judgment on the applicational choices of others unless their behavior touches an area of direct sin.

Many examples exist whether there is an underlying command that supports many personal applications and as well as certain definite prohibitions. The command of husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25) will have many potential personal applications but it must have the application of not divorcing her (except in instances of adultery or desertion). The principle of honoring all men and specifically our leaders is imperative (2 Peter 2:13-17) but honor must be expressed by submission to our leaders (except in instances when they order us to sin). Likewise, there are many ways to flee youthful lusts (2 Timothy 2:22) but one way it must be done is to not commit immorality (1 Corinthians 6:9-13).

In addition, most New Testament commands are positive in nature and not measurable. Loving, serving, giving, praying, exhorting, teaching, etc. are all commanded. Everyone person commits sins of omission by failing to do each of these commands faithfully (James 4:17).

However, it is impossible to judge when sin of omission has occurred for other people, since their abilities are not ours and their circumstances are not ours. Yet we all must seek to apply the positive commands to our lives with all diligence.

In these areas of responsibility that are subjective, the teaching of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:7 regarding giving should guide us, "let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." We should not judge what each one has purposed in their heart regarding the amount of giving, praying, serving, teaching, etc. but we should let each one do what they have purposed in their heart.

We must distinguish when there is a leadership responsibility

Many Christians will at some point in their lives be in a leadership position, whether it is in a family, a church, a business or the government. When people have a responsibility for overseeing more than their own actions, they have an essential role in making decisions that affect others. In these cases where leadership is being exercised, decisions may rightly be made that limit the freedom of others.

There is a big difference between demanding that people follow our will when we have a God-given leadership role with responsibility for others and when we do not. If we do not observe this distinction, we may wrongly accuse people of sin who are calling us to limit our freedom on the basis of their leadership responsibility.

We must distinguish when what is not explicitly stated as sin is sin

There are two special instances where a moral issue exists though not specifically stated as such in God's Word. The first area deals with the conscience and the second deals with the result of an action. The first is based on the perspective of a person toward a behavior. If an action or attitude is not morally wrong but is wrongly considered such by a person, then the person must not sin against his conscience (cf. Romans 14). The limitation to this is where a person's conscience leads him to sin; in this case he should not adhere to what he perceives as moral and must submit his view and himself to the Word of God.

The second instance occurs when a certain action *necessarily* leads to sin in *all* cases. An example of this is abortion. Abortion is not specifically condemned in Scripture, but since it is by definition the intentional taking of an innocent life, it is the moral equivalent of sin. If an action must result in a sinful outcome, then that action itself is also morally wrong.

Conclusion

It is imperative that we learn to distinguish between matters of moral command and matters of freedom. On matters of freedom, we should allow each other to develop our own convictions. This does not mean that God sees all choices as equally wise, but it does mean that we must allow each other to exercise wisdom in these matters without fearing judgment from us.

What must be avoided is passing judgment on the matters that the New Testament has not described as sin. This type of legalism is contagious (Matthew 16:11-12) and must be guarded against lest we follow in the footsteps of the Pharisees rather than the footsteps of Jesus.