



Helping Students Know How to Do the Right Thing

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Helping Students Know How to Do the Right Thing

The formula is the same every time. Some adolescent commits a horrible crime, and observers wring their hands. They condemn the parents—or parent—and the influence of television, video games, gangs, or drugs. And they call for better character education or values education in the public schools. Almost immediately someone asks, “Whose values will we teach?” And there’s much discussion about the separation of church and state, how little free time there is in the curriculum, how we’re going to have to raise people’s taxes if they really want this to happen, and how the teachers’ unions are standing in the way.¹ And then it settles down for a while, until another 14-year-old kills his parents and his sister and the pizza-delivery boy on a Saturday night in the city. And we go through the cycle again.

I’m not as cynical as I sound. I raise the issue not to encourage despair or frustration but rather to suggest a way through.

The Advantage of Christian Education

There is a way. It’s unlikely to involve the public schools, for any number of reasons. (And yes, the First Amendment and the teachers’ unions and many other factors do play roles.) In fact, Christian educators, both in traditional classrooms and in the home, are perfectly positioned to play a key role in reversing the tide of amorality that our culture exhibits.

We’re perfectly positioned for four reasons. First, as nonpublic educational entities, we face no limitations, real or imagined, from the First Amendment.² Our public schools have moved a long way from the McGuffey’s Readers. We, on the other hand, can teach without limits, as religiously as we want. Second, like the Bible itself, we are committed not to imposing an external system on our students but to seeing them changed from the inside out, living out an ethical system that is inherent. As one secular observer commented, “I don’t simply want well-

managed students. I want to ensure that students know—and live out—the weighty arguments of fairness, life, and equality.”³ One Christian author writes,

It is no use giving us rules about how to behave; we cannot keep them. However much God might say, “You shall not,” we shall—right to the end of time. A lecture will not solve our problem; we need a Savior. The education of the mind is not enough without a change of heart.⁴

Third, unlike the secularist, we have outside help. If we are to succeed in instilling an ethical sense in a generation bombarded constantly by messages of amorality from television, music, and the internet, we’re going to need the aid of supernatural power. Mere tactics will not get us there nor will mere human habit.⁵ Our biggest problem is not that students don’t have enough information about good and bad; our problem is that they—and we—want to do the bad and not the good; as one observer put it, “Most of the time—really, nearly all of the time—we know what we ought to do. We’re just having trouble doing it.”⁶ And finally, as biblicists, we have authority and certainty when we speak to morals;⁷ we have the solid foundation of a coherent, consistent moral system that need not change to fit the mores of the constantly shifting sands of culture.⁸

³ Annette Sisco, “Why Schools Must Teach Morality,” January 31, 2009. http://blog.nola.com/guesteditorials/2009/01/why_schools_must_teach_moralit.html. Oddly, the byline is Sisco’s but the bio at the bottom of the editorial is for Andre M. Perry, Associate Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of New Orleans.

⁴ John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 94.

⁵ Developing habits of moral choice is the strategy many moral educators embrace. See, for example, Steve Johnson, “An Education in Ethics,” Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University. <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v10n1/education.html>.

⁶ Ibid. Johnson seems to believe that a sort of Pavlovian training of youth will increase the likelihood that they will respond ethically in moments of choice.

⁷ Schied concludes, “I cannot answer the morality question.” “Morality Question.”

⁸ Media will regularly report on surveys that indicate the low-moral thinking and practices of today’s youth. One often cited is the biennial survey conducted by the Josephson

¹ One example is Paul Schied, “The Morality Question: Josh Matthews Revisited,” *Harvard Political Review*, February 23, 2011. <http://hpronline.org/hprgument/the-morality-question-josh-matthews-revisited/>.

² Schied writes, “The inextricable relationship between religion and morality is indeed what makes public schools shy away from moral education.” Ibid.

A Well-Founded Ethical System

What is that solid foundation? It is the words of Jesus, who clearly identified the basis of all morals. The two great commandments, He said, were to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,” and to “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matt. 22:37–39). He went on to say, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (v. 40). These are profound words. The entire revelation of God to us about our ethic and our behavior is summarized in those two simple ideas. Let’s see how that might work.

Love God

How might our love for God determine our sense of right and wrong in various situations? A foundational principle has to be that He has made us in His own image (Gen. 1:26–27). That principle yields two more: First, since He has made us, He is our Lord; He decides who we are and how we live; and second, we should love the image of God that characterizes each of us.

If God is our Lord, a number of ethical absolutes follow.⁹ We could mention, as just the most obvious, humility because Someone is far greater than we are; teachability because Someone is wiser than we are; discipline because someone is stronger than we are; and purposefulness because our Lord has created us for a reason: to serve Him. This logic places us in direct opposition to a number of the world’s bywords: it is not, in fact, your life; you cannot do anything you can imagine; you are not the greatest; and you do not know what you are doing.

If we are to celebrate His image in us, that too introduces us to further ethical principles. First, we are to nurture, to develop the image of God in ourselves; we are to find out what God is like and to cultivate those characteristics in our own thinking, decision making, and behavior. Of course, we

Institute’s Center for Youth Ethics. See the latest report at <http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/index.html>.

⁹This was the failure of the attempts at “values clarification” in public schools in recent decades. If the student is left to simply clarify his own values without reference to any external authority point, what will prevent him from arriving in the fond embrace of egoism?—especially when “high self-esteem” is regularly presented to him as an unmitigated virtue? Johnson notes, “We realized that there were choices we simply didn’t want kids to feel good about, and no increase in clarity would make the unacceptable acceptable.” “An Education in Ethics.”

can’t imitate some of God’s attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternity¹⁰ are beyond not only our grasp but also our comprehension. But having said that, we can exhibit these attributes in limited form:¹¹ we can be knowledgeable, strong, attentive, and faithful.¹² And there is a long list of divine attributes that we do and should share:¹³ love (and the related concept of relationality¹⁴), compassion, self-control, honesty, patience,¹⁵ love of beauty, and many more.¹⁶

Love Your Neighbor

Second, we are to value the image of God in all humans—as Jesus put it, our neighbors. So the second commandment derives directly from the first, which is thus indeed the greatest. We love our neighbor because we love God, and God has made our neighbors little images of Himself. An American would never treat a bust of George Washington disrespectfully, as a Briton would not similarly abuse a bust of the Queen. It’s only an image, but it is an image; and as an image, it reflects the original and should be treated with some degree of the respect accorded to the original.

God forbade our making images of Him (Ex. 20:4–5) because to render God as a visible representation is to limit Him and thus to misrepresent, or blaspheme, Him. But God did choose to make images

¹⁰Theologians call these God’s incommunicable attributes.

¹¹Some would object that to limit these attributes is to deny them. But Charles Ryrie notes that to some degree we have illegitimately restricted our obligations by the way we have chosen to nominate them. *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 40–41.

¹²The Old Testament has much to say about God’s faithfulness as an outgrowth of His immutability and eternity. The Hebrew word, *emunah*, is the root of our word *Amen*, which means, “May it be so.”

¹³Not surprisingly, these are termed the communicable attributes.

¹⁴Have you ever noticed how many times a mass murderer is described by his neighbors as “a quiet guy, kept to himself, never caused any trouble”? It is truly not good for humans to be alone; we are social creatures, and we benefit from relationships. Just as it is unthinkable for God to be alone, it is unthinkable for us to be entirely free of relationships.

¹⁵This includes both enduring unpleasant circumstances (cf. Heb. 12:2–3) and embracing the long view, preferring delayed gratification to immediate gratification.

¹⁶It’s a very helpful exercise to read your Bible with these thoughts in mind: “What does this passage teach me about God? how can I implement that attribute in my own thinking and behavior?” The list is practically endless.

of Himself—not for worship, certainly; He condemns those who worship the creature more than the Creator (Rom. 1:25)—but for many other of His own purposes. And if those images exist by His will, His other creatures must respect those images. God has placed the fear of man in every creature in the animal kingdom (Gen. 1:28), including those who are so large that they could crush a man in an instant. He expects animals to respect the image of God in man, and he expects us to do the same. So we love our neighbor.

This love for the image of God in our neighbor also has far-reaching ethical consequences. The basic human rights expressed in the U.S. Declaration of Independence—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—actually find their basis not in Jefferson’s “natural law” but rather in the image of God in man. God is the very definition of life; He is free; and He is joyful and the source of joy. We, like Him, find these attributes at the very core of our being.

How about our treatment of others? How should we treat images of God? Dignity, respect, and justice obviously follow. A little further thought leads us to celebrate the diversity with which God has manifested His image in us. And these things necessarily lead to action:¹⁷ altruism, courtesy, punctuality, tactfulness, respect for privacy, and humaneness. Even personal hygiene is a demonstration of respect for others.

These concepts are scalable; they of necessity extend to large-scale communities as well as to individual relationships. We encourage parents to care for their children; we promote education—and special education—everywhere we can; we fight for freedom in every culture. There are civic as well as personal ethics.

So biblicists, unlike humanists, have a coherent, rational, and consistent foundation for their ethical system. It goes deeper than Sam Harris’s simplistic basis in relief of suffering¹⁸ (doesn’t that discriminate against sado-masochists?). It’s a better foundation than the mirage of “universal moral values.”¹⁹ It’s far superior to the even less satisfying,

amorphous concept of the “greater good” (what is “good”? what is “greater”?). Without a solid moral-sure foundation, every society eventually devolves into the time of the judges, “when every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). You have chaos as the more creative among us (creativity is part of the image of God, too) come up with bizarre logical constructions to support the most egregious violations of the image of God.

Sounds Like Do’s and Don’ts . . .

We should address a possible theological objection: The Christian life is not about “do’s and don’ts”; it’s “gospel-centered,” not “performance-centered.” I would agree completely with the second statement but not at all with the first. It is true, of course, that salvation is not by works (Eph. 2:8–9). It’s true that God’s love for us is based not on our own righteousness (Rom. 3) but on the perfect righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us (2 Cor. 5:21). To lose that in our educational efforts would be the utmost tragedy. The swinging of the pendulum of Christian culture toward the free grace of the gospel and away from the mindless memorization of lists of rules is a good thing.

But let’s not forget Mr. Foucault. Pendulums always swing beyond equilibrium; to put it in cultural terms, cultural swings always go too far. To say that we are not saved by works (Eph. 2:8–9) is not to say that we are not saved *for the purpose of* good works (v. 10); to say that *salvation* is not about do’s and don’ts is not to say that *the Christian life* has no do’s and don’ts. To say that the gospel is more about indicatives than imperatives²⁰ is not to say that the Bible—even the New Testament—has no imperatives. In fact, Paul is particularly noted for organizing his epistles²¹ with doctrine first, followed by application: “This is true, so live this way.” To put it differently, he tells us why we do what we do before he tells us what we do, but he does tell us what we

innerself.com/Parenting/morality.htm.

²⁰I do not mean to imply that this sort of antinomianism is extensive in Christianity. Responsible spokesmen routinely emphasize both the indicative, which empowers the imperative, and the imperative, which necessarily follows conversion. See, for example, Kevin DeYoung, “Holiness Is Indicative and Imperative,” The Gospel Coalition, June 22, 2011. <http://thegospel-coalition.org/blogs/kevinyoung/2011/06/22/holiness-in-indicatives-and-imperatives/>.

²¹This structure is particularly apparent in Galatians, Romans, and Ephesians. It appears in Hebrews as well, whether or not Paul wrote it.

¹⁷Ephesians 4:25–29 is a biblical example of turning our recognition of the image of God in others into specific behaviors toward them.

¹⁸*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 170–71.

¹⁹See one example in Jerral Hicks, “Morality in Public Schools: What to Teach and Not to Teach,” <http://www>.

do. So it shouldn't be controversial or "legalistic" in the church to say that some things are right and some things are wrong.

It is true, of course, that we can't live the Christian life in our own strength; we require the empowering of the Holy Spirit, whose "fruit" in our life consists of these ethical patterns (Gal. 5:22–25). But as He empowers us, we will exhibit these thought patterns and, yes, behaviors. This is not to minimize the gospel; it is at the very core of the gospel.

Conclusion

Education is not the answer to all of our problems; sometimes it produces "a more clever devil."²² And the founder of Bob Jones University observed that a man couldn't become a forger until he had learned how to write. So part of our education—our

discipleship—of our students has to be character formation, conforming them to the image of Christ. As we teach the standard academic skills—readin', writin', and 'rithmetic—and subjects—language, math, science, history—we need to drive it all forward with the ethical basis for a life well lived and a race well run. In the end, that will matter more than anything else.

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²²This phrase is widely cited as from C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, but my edition (New York: Macmillan, 1953) does not contain it. A similar line is credited to "Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington"; but there have been eight Dukes of Wellington, five of them named Arthur Wellesley, and all of them chronologically capable of having delivered the line before Lewis. One wonders whether anyone ever said it at all.