

Set Free to Choose Right

by
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Introduction

More than anything else what do we want for our children? As they grow and learn what do we hope for them?

Don't we want most that our kids will live happy, joy-filled lives by making the right moral choices in life? We want them to be protected from the consequences of wrong choices. We want them to be able to discern what is right and what is wrong—and choose the right. Isn't that what we want for our families? We want our kids to be set free to choose right.

To do so, our parents need to be equipped to help our kids overcome some misconceptions about what actually determines right and wrong. As we do we can become a motivating and empowering agent to help set them free to live godly lives.

I. Set Free *from* a Distorted View of Truth

In those days Israel had no King; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

We all want our kids to resist temptation and make right choices. We try to give them wise counsel, teach them what is morally right and wrong, and hope they follow through and do the right thing. Yet it has become increasingly more difficult to instill biblical morality within young people today. It's not that parents and grandparents aren't desperately trying. Today more than ever, we all are running scared that our increasingly ungodly culture is drawing our kids away from biblical moral truth.

No doubt you have felt that fear. There is no denying that we face an uphill battle, but it is a battle that we can definitely win. In spite of formidable competition from our pervasive culture, it is still possible to instill biblical morality within your kids that will govern their choices.

But there is an entire generation of young people who believe that right and wrong are determined by the individual and not by any absolute standard. They believe they have the right to decide for themselves what is right and to act accordingly. The problem is, the belief that one can choose his own morality without suffering consequences or hurting anyone is erroneous.

Scripture warns us over and over of the consequences of becoming our own arbiter of truth. This view that truth is relative and individually determined arose in the Garden of Eden and caused the downfall of our primeval parents. It was the prevalent cause of Israel's seesaw history and ultimate collapse. The entire book of Judges provides us with a quintessential example of what happens when a society determines its own morality. It chronicles the devastating results of moral relativism upon a nation. When the people of Israel judged for themselves what was right and wrong, they began to experience severe social dysfunction. Families suffered moral breakdown. Civility was soon abandoned. Theft, violence, and lawlessness became pervasive. The last verse of the final chapter of Judges sums up the cause of the whole problem: "In those days Israel had no King; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). In other words, moral relativism became the rule of the day, and the cohesiveness of the nation fragmented into rampant individualism.

It is moral relativism that sets the human conscience adrift. It allows the heart and mind to excuse attitudes and behavior that are wrong and harmful to oneself and others. It's not just our teens who believe this. Think of the people you work with and the neighborhood in which you live. Do these people believe there's a universal moral code to follow, or do they think right and wrong are relative—to be determined by the individual?

While studies show that 80 percent of Americans express concern about the nation's moral condition, 57 percent of your neighbors and coworkers believe truth is relative and that right and wrong is subjectively determined by the individual.¹ And if your neighbors are Millennials (those born between 1984 and 2002), 74 percent of them believe morality is "whatever seems right in their own eyes."² These polls express a strange paradox: While Americans are acutely aware that the morality of the nation is declining, they are oblivious to the fact that the slide is caused by their own moral relativism.

As bleak as that may sound there is something we can do about it.

II. Set Free to Choose Right over Wrong

Your kids do have the responsibility to choose right over wrong. And you begin to teach them that, when you help them understand what they have the right to choose and what they don't have the right to choose. They *do not* have the right to choose *what* makes morality right and wrong.

Take, for example, the issue of Internet pornography. Many of our kids have arbitrarily determined that Internet porn isn't that bad. A new study reveals that only one out of three teens

and young adults consider viewing pornographic images as wrong. In fact, our young people consider not recycling to be more offensive morally than viewing porn. While 56 percent cited not recycling as morally wrong, only 32 percent cited viewing pornography as morally wrong for them.³ Additionally, our young people have a cavalier attitude towards viewing Internet pornography. When discussing porn with their friends, 90 percent of teens and 96 percent of young adults say they do so in a neutral, accepting, or encouraging manner.⁴ Given the fact that pornography embodies characteristics Christians have historically known to be wrong—the objectification of women, lust, the condoning of immorality, and the pull toward addictive behavior—it is imperative that we ask why the majority of our kids now consider viewing Internet pornography to be morally acceptable?

The answer, in part, is that strong cultural forces have pulled many of our kids away from the moral teaching of their Christian parents. The dominant thinking of today’s culture has led them to believe that the determination of right or wrong is basically a personal decision. They feel that a person has no right to judge what another does on the privacy of his or her own electronic devices. They no longer believe there is a universal standard for sexual morality beyond a person’s own view as to what is right or wrong for him personally. An astounding 70 percent of American young people today fail to embrace the concept that there is a universal standard for what’s right or wrong. They have subscribed to the morality of the dominant culture. This is clearly demonstrated in the fact that 65 percent of all Americans of all age groups do not believe there is a universal standard for truth.⁵

These findings show that the majority of Americans see overarching, universal moral standards as meaningless, especially when applied to sexual issues. The only valid sexual moral standard widely endorsed today is the one you personally decide works best for yourself. That perspective is reflected in offhand remarks like: “No one has the right to impose his or her moral views on me; I decide that for myself.” “How you choose to live your life is up to you, no one has the right to judge you.” “That may be wrong for you, but it’s not necessarily wrong for me.”

It’s easy to see why deciding what is morally right for yourself would catch on and become so widespread. It puts *you* in the driver’s seat. It feels good to make your own choices without having the moral police looking over your shoulder. No one wants their views to be under constant scrutiny and judgment. Shouldn’t we have the right to make up our own minds about what is right for us personally? Didn’t God himself give us that freedom in the Garden of Eden?

There is a germ of truth in that viewpoint. God did give humans the right to choose their own way. And once that choice was made, God allowed it to stand. But this fundamental truth has been distorted and applied in a way it was never intended—as people tend to do to justify choices that are at odds with God. Yes, we have the freedom to choose whether to follow right or wrong, but we do not have the freedom to choose the *content* of right and wrong. And choosing wrong, even if we convince ourselves that it is right, does not exempt us from the inevitable consequences of our choice. This is where most of our young people and many others suffer from deep-seated confusion. That confusion revolves around the difference between the concepts of *truth* and *beliefs*. There is a vast difference between what one may believe *personally* and what is true *universally*.

Clearly, we are each entitled to hold our own beliefs, but that doesn't mean that we are each entitled to create our own respective truths. Truth must conform to reality, which means by its very nature it is independent of our beliefs. Beliefs, on the other hand, are essentially personal, and they may or may not conform to reality. One may hold a belief based on erroneous data that later information proves to be false. Or, there are neutral areas of thought and action where universal truth need not intrude, and in these areas making decisions based on opinion and personal belief is appropriate. But in areas where truth is defined by God, it makes no sense to say that something is true for you and not for me. Either that "something" conforms to God's universal standard for truth or it does not, and if it does not, then no amount of believing it to be true will make it so.

For example, imagine that you and I see a green apple lying on a table. You believe its insides are rotten and full of worms. But I, on the other hand, believe it to be crisp and worm-free. Can our opposing beliefs about the apple create two distinct realities that are contradictory yet equally true? No. The two of us can subjectively believe what we want, but there is only one objective truth about the inside of the apple. The only way to determine that truth is to slice open the apple and observe the reality of its inner condition. Then we will discover the real truth about the apple—whether or not it has worms. The instant the apple is sliced, the objective truth will be revealed and the false belief will be exposed. The truth about the apple exists independently of the beliefs of either you or me.

Just as the truth about the apple exists independent of one's beliefs about it, the truth about right and wrong exists independent of anyone's beliefs about it. There are very specific and particular truths that exist independent of our kids, and all of us. But while one can easily determine the truth about a concrete object such as an apple, the truth about an intangible moral principle such as sexual morality may not be so immediately obvious, especially to a generation bombarded continually by sexual stimulation from entertainment, advertising, education, and the media. So how can our kids not only accept certain things are universally wrong, but also be motivated to do what is right?

III. Set Free *by* God and the Help of Grace-Filled People

First, there is a reason certain things are universally right or wrong. Some might say certain moral choices are wrong because the Bible speaks out against them. Yet biblical teaching is not ultimately why we know certain attitudes and behaviors are right or wrong.

It is the nature and character of God that defines truth and thus enables us to determine what is right and what is wrong. It is the person of God that reveals what is right for all people, for all times, in all places. That is why we can assert with confidence that there is a universal truth, and that whatever deviates from that truth is wrong. Because the basis of everything we call moral—the source of every good thing—is the eternal God who is outside us, above us, and beyond us.

Scripture says, “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father...” (James 1:17).

Many parents, and even pastors, think that certain things are wrong simply because the Bible speaks against them. Internet pornography is wrong because the Bible speaks against lust. Some may argue from a socially construed perspective that porn is not wrong because it is a private activity that harms no one. Yet the bottom line is that Internet porn and all sexual immorality is wrong because it is an offense against a loving God. He is hurt whenever we sin. It breaks his heart. The reason some things are right and some things are wrong is because there exists a Creator God who is not only righteous and holy, but is brokenhearted when we fail to trust in him and follow in his ways.

The reason some things are “fair” and others “unfair” is because our Maker is a *just* God.

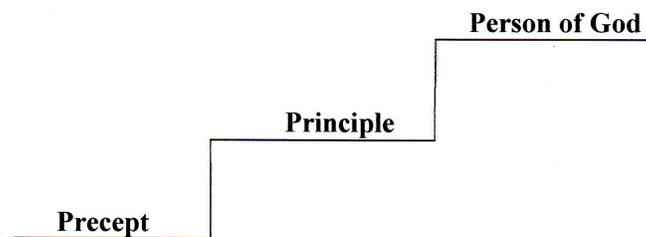
The reason love is a virtue and hatred a vice is because the God who formed us is a God of *love*.

The reason honesty is right and deceit is wrong is because God is *true*.

The reason chastity is moral and promiscuity is immoral is because God is *pure* and *faithful*.

The reason so many of our kids can’t distinguish between truth and error, between what’s moral and what’s immoral, is because they are not glimpsing the loving heart and character of God. He is the original, the standard for what is right and wrong, and thus the standard for all of our behavior in every area of life.

Every law in Scripture finds its origin in the person of a loving God. The precepts give us the commands, and the principles give us the “why” behind the commands. But every biblical precept that leads to a broader principle directs us ultimately to the loving person of God for the purpose of relationship. That is the reason for the precepts in the first place—to lead us to a relationship with the person of God.



When we teach our kids that murder or lying or sexual immorality are wrong by pointing them to the relational God from which those prohibitions come, we do more than just lay down arbitrary rules; we teach them to know the One true God. As I mentioned above, lying and dishonesty are wrong because the righteous God is true. Justice is right because a fair God is just. Hatred is wrong because a compassionate God is love. Forgiveness is right because a tenderhearted God is

mercy. Sexual immorality is wrong because a holy God is faithful and pure. These things are right or wrong, not because a culture or the church teaches them, not even because the Bible proclaims them. These things are right or wrong because they are either contrary to or consistent with the nature of a relational God who is full of grace. And it is this grace that motivates us to choose right.

Scripture announced that “The Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV). The grace and truth that fills Jesus is clear: When we violate God’s commands and his ways, we are guilty of sin. And when we keep our sin hidden away, it festers into an unhealthy shame. But rather than continuing to shame us with condemnation, Jesus smothers us with his grace.

Jesus said, “God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Jesus didn’t come to condemn us; our sins have already done that. He came with an offer of grace to free us from sin. Jesus announced that, “Everyone who sins is a slave of sin” (John 8:34). And he said that God “has sent me to proclaim the captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free” (Luke 4:18).

The apostle Paul grasped the redemptive purpose of grace and put it like this: “As people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them death, now God’s wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God” (Romans 5:20-21). Christ offers grace to shame-filled people for a very clear purpose—to lead them out of an enslaved life of sin and into a life of freedom and purity in relationship with him.

God’s grace has the power to accept us regardless of what we have or have not done. His acceptance comes with no conditions attached. Remember, we can’t earn grace; it is unmerited favor. Yet it is freely offered to us for the purpose of redemption—to reclaim us from the enslavement to sin. We rightfully belong to God. Grace makes our right of belonging a reality when we accept Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for our sin. “So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death” (Romans 8:1-2). That’s what Jesus’ grace does—it allows God to forgive us of sin because of his sacrificial death. This dispels our shame, and frees us from sin and death.

Jesus: Our Model of Grace in Action

Jesus once met a man named Zacchaeus. Although Zacchaeus was a Jew, his fellow Jews held him in utter contempt because he was a tax collector for the despised Roman government. These outcasts not only collected Roman taxes, they added a “surcharge” on top of it, from which they profited handsomely. Naturally, the Jews considered tax collectors to be deceitful traitors and thieves. It’s likely that Zacchaeus’ dishonorable profession had hardened him on the outside, but we cannot doubt that living day by day with the obvious contempt of his fellow countrymen caused deep inner shame. How could anyone expect Jesus to offer grace to such a shameful, thieving, deceitful traitor to his own people?

Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus was coming and, being a short man, had climbed a tree to get a better view of him. When Jesus walked under that tree, he looked up and said something that shocked the tax collector to the core. Rather than confronting Zacchaeus as a cheating thief and traitor to his people, Jesus said, “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today” (Luke 19:5). Why was this so shocking? Because in the culture of that time, good Jews would never allow any kind of fellowship with such tax collecting “scum.” To dine with such a man openly, in the clear light of day, was tantamount to condoning his abhorrent practices. Yet Jesus invited himself to dinner with this lying, cheating thief.

How did the people respond? They were confused and distraught. “‘He has gone to be a guest of a notorious sinner,’ they grumbled” (Luke 19:7). The Jewish religious leaders were outraged. Jesus seemed to be disregarding this man’s despicable behavior. It appeared that he wasn’t reinforcing the rules or requiring strict obedience to the law. After all, how can you expect to correct people’s bad behavior unless you point out their failure to adhere to the rules?

It’s the same question facing Christian families and the church today. For example, how can we lead a person that’s into porn down a path of sexual purity without first requiring adherence to biblical truth about sexual lust? It seems that if we accept a bad person before stressing his need for godly behavior, we get the cart before the horse. Like those outraged religious leaders, some people see rule enforcement as the key motivator to behavioral change. Jesus, on the other hand, saw the key motivator to behavioral change as grace that was completely non-condemning and accepting of the person.

When Dr. Ted Roberts spoke to an audience that included recovering porn addicts, he described the power of God’s grace in this way: “The gift of non-condemnation enables you to stop sinning.”⁶ That may sound like an odd statement until you begin to understand the transforming power of grace. As we accept Jesus’ grace, we also receive the power of his Holy Spirit that gives victory over a life of sin. “As the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NLT).

Jesus’ kind of grace accepts people for who they are. When grace is offered, it separates the person from his performance and offers forgiveness. It drives out shame. The vocabulary of grace is, “In spite of your sins, I see you for who you really are, and I love what I see.”

Grace does not condone bad behavior; to the contrary, it motivates the person to seek forgiveness, and in response the Holy Spirit empowers behavioral change. When Jesus extended grace to Zacchaeus, he didn’t have to preach a sermon on honesty. As a Jew, this tax collector knew all about the eighth commandment and the need to be honest. What was so amazing about this loving grace was that it accomplished what condemnation never could: It motivated and empowered this dishonest man to change.

That’s what people of grace do—they cast out unhealthy shame in others and that motivates them to change. The apostle Paul urged us to pass on Jesus’ gift of accepting grace when he wrote, “Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you” (Romans 15:7). He goes on to say, “Let your conversations be always full of grace” (Colossians 4:6, NIV).

There is probably no group of people who need grace more than those who are struggling with sexual pressure. They cannot do it alone. They need the loving support and accountability of

others. That is part of what the Body of Christ—his Church—is all about. “And since we are all one body in Christ,” the apostle Paul said, “we belong to each other, and each of us need all the others” (Romans 12:5, NLT).

God designed that our spiritual growth be through him and the ministry of others in our lives. Yes, God is our ultimate provider and the supplier of our needs, but he is pleased to channel some of his provisions and supplies through his Body. Therefore, we need one another.

Wise Solomon knew how we needed one another to grow and make right choices. He explained:

Two people are better than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble...A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Our young people need parents of grace and the grace-filled Body of Christ to help set them free to make right moral choices in life, including their choices regarding Internet porn. We can fulfill this responsibility by teaching our kids to make right moral choices. No, it's not easy. And our kids won't always make the right choices. But with God's help and a few effective tools, we can instill God's moral values within our kids to “live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people” (Philippians 2:15).

¹ Barna Research, “The End of Absolutes: America’s New Moral Code.” Research released in Culture & Media article, May 25, 2016 – Barna.org

² Ibid.

³ The Porn Phenomenon Study, 2016, 84-85.

⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁵ Barna Research, “The End of Absolutes: America’s New Moral Code.” Research released in Culture & Media article, May 25, 2016 – Barna.org

⁶ Dr. Ted Roberts as quoted during the Josh McDowell Ministry/Covenant Eyes hosted Set Free Summit on Thursday April 7, 2016 in Greensboro, NC.