



HOW TO
DETERMINE

Right

FROM

Wrong

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How to Determine Right from Wrong

"Do you believe lying is wrong?" I asked the teenager standing next to me on the platform.

During my talks on the subject of knowing right from wrong, I often pose two questions to the audience about an act that people recognize as wrong: lying. I generally ask a teenager, a parent, and a youth leader or pastor to join me on the platform. I ask each of them two questions about lying, and here are the typical responses I get:

"Do you believe lying is wrong?" I ask the teenager. The answer is always, "Yes."

"Why do you believe lying is wrong?"

There is always a pause. Then the answer is generally, "I don't know. I guess I've just been taught it's wrong."

I ask the parent, "Do you believe lying is wrong?"

"Yes."

"Why do you believe lying is wrong?"

The parent generally responds, "Lying is wrong because it's being dishonest. And it's not right to be dishonest with people."

I press a little further: "Okay, what makes dishonesty so wrong?"

A pause, and then the parent asserts, "Well, dishonesty just isn't right. It can hurt people and relationships, and that's not right."

I move over to the minister. "I assume you too believe lying is wrong?"

“Sure,” the pastor responds.

“Why?”

“Lying is wrong because the Bible clearly teaches it is wrong,” the pastor declares confidently.

“Why does the Bible teach it’s wrong?” I continue. “Well, oh. . . it teaches it’s wrong, uh. . .because it’s wrong.” Typically the response is every bit that fumbling and uncertain.

I thank the three for participating in my little survey, and they go back to their seats. Then I explain that on the surface, each answer given was true: lying is wrong. But it isn’t wrong simply because we’ve been taught it’s wrong. It’s not even wrong because dishonesty hurts people or damages relationships. Those are the negative consequences of lying. What I’m about to say next may alarm you, but hear me out: Lying isn’t even wrong because the Bible says it’s wrong. The Bible declares certain actions and attitudes such as lying, cheating, stealing, murder, adultery, and other behaviors to be wrong. But that declaration itself isn’t what makes them wrong. There is an even deeper and more elemental factor that makes right, right and wrong, wrong and that factor is the very essence and character of God Himself.

Scripture reveals to us the essence and attributes of God. We are told that He is perfectly holy (Isaiah 54:5; Revelation 4:8), that He is love (1 John 4:16), that He is just (Revelation 16:5), and that He is right (Psalm 119:137). These are not things that God decides to adopt; they are what He is. All that is right and holy and just and good is derived from God’s core nature—His essence. Scripture says, “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights of the heavens” (James 1:17).

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.

Many Christians think certain things are wrong simply because the Bible speaks against them. And that's true. In biblical terms, sexual immorality is all sex that occurs outside of a married relationship (See Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20; Ephesians 5:3-5). Yet the bottom line is that 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.

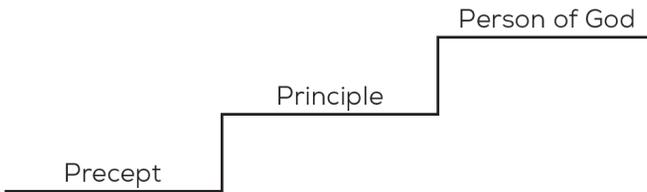
Chastity is moral and promiscuity is immoral because God is *pure* and *faithful*.

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

Honesty is right and deceit is wrong because God is *true*. Some things are “fair” and others “unfair” because our Maker is a *just* God.

So many of our kids can't distinguish between truth and error, between what's moral and what's immoral 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.



The Bible says that God spoke to Moses “face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). Afterward Moses prayed, “If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you” (Exodus 33:13 NIV). Moses recognized that learning God’s ways—understanding His precepts and the principles behind them—would acquaint him with the person of God Himself. Ultimately God doesn’t simply want our strict obedience to a set of rules and commands. As He told Hosea the prophet, “I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). This is why Jesus said, “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth” (John 17:3).

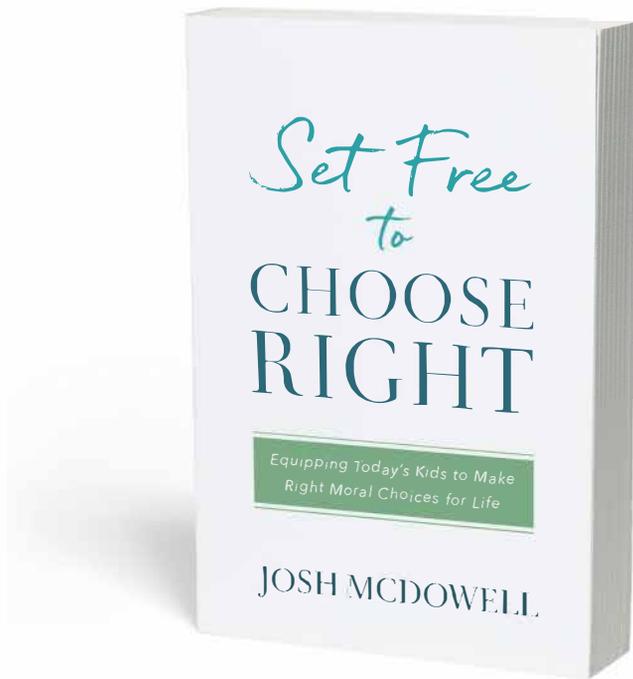
God wants to be in relationship with His creation, and His laws are designed to lead us to Him.

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 loving, relational God.

Placing scriptural instructions and rules for your kids within this relational context is critical in the process of setting them free to determine what is right and what is wrong. They need to see that behind those rules there is a compassionate God who loves and cares for them. He doesn't issue commands to restrict them, but to free them—free them to enjoy the benefits of living in God's likeness.

It is important that our kids see that right is defined within the person of God. But just as important, they must see the positive reinforcement that occurs when we do what is right. When we obey God's commands, we can count on His protection and provision.

To learn more about how to equip your kids to make right moral choices for life, pick up a copy of ***Set Free to Choose Right*** by Josh McDowell



Available on the Josh McDowell Ministry website at www.Josh.org/store

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Josh McDowell has been at the forefront of cultural trends and groundbreaking ministry for over five decades. He shares the essentials of the Christian faith in everyday language so that youth, families, churches, leaders, and individuals of all ages are prepared for the life of faith and the work of the ministry. This includes leveraging resources based on years of experiences, new technologies, and strategic partnerships. Since 1961, Josh has delivered more than 27,000 talks to over 25,000,000 people in 125 countries. He is the author or coauthor of 142 books, including *More Than a Carpenter* and *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, recognized by *World Magazine* as one of the top 40 books of the twentieth century. Josh's books are available in over 100 different languages. Josh and his wife, Dottie, are quick to acknowledge that after their love for the Lord, family is their greatest joy and top priority. They have been married for 46 years and have four wonderful children and ten beloved grandchildren. For more information, please visit www.josh.org.