

# BASIC BIBLE THEMES

## SESSION 2: LAW

by Gerard Reed

**Scripture Background:** Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 119:45; Matthew 19:16-17; Galatians 5:6; 6:2; James 1:25

“Let's face it,” says Ann Landers, “[Our culture] is sick.”<sup>1</sup> The sickness where of she speaks is a plague of immorality. From the urbane white-collar con artists to urban teenagers “wilding” and “tagging,” something has subverted our morality. Yet, exactly what has happened is generally more confused than clarified by television, newspapers, or congressional hearings.

An ancient explanation rooted in the Christian tradition claims that our sickness stems from failing to know the truth of our own moral nature. Embedded in human nature is an abiding reality—an ethical vein. Doing right, we live according to its structure; doing wrong, we violate its essence. We humans share a common nature: living creatures designed in God's image and likeness, animated by our Creator, coded to live out His standards. So, living rightly requires religious roots. Forsaking the vision of our divinely designed character, we forgo the capacity to do good. Religion as the source of morality has been replaced with personal feelings and societal programs.

One of the keys to understanding what has happened resides in the values that emerged in the 1960s, a decade that was devoted to “little else but sex and rights—specifically, how to get more of each.”<sup>2</sup> Since then, we've been swept along by an avalanche of collapsing moral standards. In some ways, this process is best illustrated by the sexual behavior of a man named Gaetan Dugas, the airline steward who played a prominent role in spreading AIDS. In the decade before the disease became an epidemic, Dugas averaged 250 sexual encounters a year. In his words, “It's my right to do what I want with my body.”<sup>3</sup> His “right,” of course, cost him his life and lethally infected thousands of others. Individuals who insist on their rights rather than

assuming the obligation to do right grease the cultural slide into a moral quagmire.

Sociological data illustrate such moral anarchy. *The Day America Told the Truth*, a portrayal based upon extensive interviews, profiles a woman who worked as a prostitute for two years and is now married. One of her daughters, she suspects, was fathered by a man other than her husband—though neither her husband nor her daughter suspect this. The woman is unhappy with her marriage, uses drugs, admits she is bulimic, and has considered suicide.

She does, however, consider herself a “good, ethical person. On a ten-point scale from ‘terrible’ to ‘great,’ she gives herself a nine. She is religious, a frequent churchgoer, absolutely certain of God's existence.”<sup>4</sup> She no doubt believes in a God who loves her unconditionally, too gracious to hold her accountable before any bar of justice.

This woman illustrates the findings of a survey that reveals only one out of every three “Christians” believes faith should shape his or her lifestyle! Believe that God accepts us just as we are, accept the fact that we are accepted, and then do whatever is acceptable to us! Professed believers feel free to construct their own morality, removing the Ten Commandments from the walls of their hearts as well as the halls of our public buildings.

No wonder onlookers scoff at so-called Christians! Too many “believers” are like chubby physicians who tell their patients to lose weight. If the Christian church is to recover its integrity, we Christians must reclaim and proclaim some timeless truths, some moral imperatives, and walk rightly with God.

This issue, in a philosophical sense, stands revealed in Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the*

*American Mind*. Today's students, Bloom says, are nice enough, even if unusually self-centered. Disinterested in human nature and lacking curiosity about philosophical themes such as God, freedom, and immortality, today's youngsters think mainly about their own feelings and frustrations. They want to "discover themselves," to find some "self-esteem," to be "self-actualized," as preached by the psychogurus of our era.

Without objective standards, Bloom believes, we're awash in a pervasive ethical relativism, a philosophical dogma espoused by virtually everyone who enters or prowls about the university. Under the flag of "openness" and "tolerance" (while tolerating no universal truths or traditional values), folks freely follow their own feelings.<sup>5</sup> As a Hemingway character contended: "Morality is in the eye of the beholder. So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."<sup>6</sup>

Such moral permissiveness, many believe, constitutes a "free and democratic" society. To probe deeply into the reasons for this, Bloom digs for the philosophical roots of today's malaise and finds "nihilism, American style"—the "attempt to get beyond good and evil" by substituting "value relativism" for Judeo-Christian absolutism.<sup>7</sup>

Bloom's critique finds support in a speech given by Michael Novak. "One principle that today's intellectuals most passionately disseminate is vulgar relativism.... For them...there is no truth, only opinion: my opinion, your opinion." Consequently, "The most perilous threat to the free society today is neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism."<sup>8</sup>

Given this threat, Christ's church must recover a moral source higher than opinion polls and momentary personal feelings. It makes no more sense to consult public opinion on moral questions than it would to hold an election to determine the size of the highest peak in the Rocky Mountains. Moral standards resemble mountain ranges—they're majestically there, they're measurable, they have an arched pattern, and we ignore the unyielding absoluteness of their nature to our own discomfort or destruction. So, we must intentionally point out and teach moral standards. This means pastors, parents, and teachers must reclaim their rightful

responsibilities, wresting them from television talk shows, movie stars, politicians, and street gangs.

It's time, in short, to recover and proclaim traditional Judeo-Christian moral standards! The crisis of oral illiteracy overshadows other crises. We live in a society where many people lack any sense of propriety or civility and have minimal confidence in moral standards beyond their own preferences.

At the heart of this crisis, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn saw, is this: "Men have forgotten God."<sup>9</sup> Everywhere, it seems, there's a great vacuum regarding supernatural reality. By nature, humans crave a "Holy Other," an ultimate reason for being that gives the present meaning and direction. When God is shoved aside, conscience evaporates and anarchy ensues.

Fortunately for us still rooted in the Christian tradition, there are some absolutes, some imperatives that have stood the test of time. The list was etched in stone, embedded in the Ten Commandments—10 rules to live by; 10 words to guide us; 10 ways to sustain a lasting, loving relationship with our Creator. Indeed, in the Jewish tradition, the day the commandments were given on Mount Sinai was often portrayed as a wedding day—a momentous event when binding vows were exchanged between two parties, which cemented a loving union. They are 10 steps to freedom, for, as the psalmist rejoiced, "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts" (Psalm 119:45).

### **Boundaries Create Freedom's Context**

With the 10 "words" in Exodus 20, the God who had delivered His people from slavery set forth principles whereby folks live in relationship with Him. To know God is to enjoy the freedom that grows out of faithfulness, and this is the only true liberty there is, the freedom that comes from living by vows. Real freedom emerges through self-discipline and integrity, through doing the truth, through living in the truth.

Eight times in Exodus 20 the Lord begins a statement with "You shall." Here, we hear a commanding voice. He also said, "Remember" and "Honor," two more imperative verbs. Some things, He made clear, we must do to maintain faithfulness with Him. There are limits to healthy, holy living.

All good things have boundaries. Our bodies, for example, have bone boundaries. Were there no

restraints on the molecules of my bones, if every individual cell did its own thing, slipping and sliding wherever it pleased, I'd be a glob of jelly, unable to walk or hold hands with my wife. I'm free to move, free to experience the joys of life, because my bones have hard-and-fast boundaries, hard-and-fast edges.

My skin as well is a restraining boundary, a definable limit to my body, keeping out what would injure me, keeping in what is vital for me. I'm able to live freely because my skin keeps me together, firmly, in the place where I ought to be.

So, too, social and personal boundaries are necessary for the good life. Increasingly, it seems, what was once disgraceful now elicits little condemnation. A rabbi asks an important question with the title of his book, *Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?*<sup>10</sup> Some of us wonder today if there's anything truly off-limits or inappropriate. Are there real boundaries?

In truth, there are boundaries acknowledged by healthy men and women. If we're morally mature persons, we see how things are and act accordingly, doing the truth. The boundaries are there for us to discover as responsible persons. Good relationships need boundaries, limits, dos and don'ts.

### **Responsibilities Firm Up the Boundaries**

When we accept responsibilities, we firm up the boundaries needed for good relationships, for a good life. This stands out clearly in an essay written by a college senior that appeared in *Newsweek*. He listed his laments, a series of complaints against his elders. He admitted this generation of collegians have poor Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, know little geography or foreign languages, read very little, and are prisoners of fashionable fads. Yet, he claimed, "You did this to us. You prized your youth so much you made sure ours would be carefree." Parents loved their children, urging them to succeed and be happy, but they failed to teach them "to be responsible."<sup>11</sup>

This illustrates what John Rosemond, a psychologist, predicted years ago when he spoke out against the so-called experts in his profession who were "promoting the entirely ludicrous idea that happiness and self-esteem go hand in hand." In fact, "Self-esteem and happiness are not one and the same. Keeping a child happy is as simple as giving

the child everything he or she wants. That may prove expensive, but it's not difficult. Keeping a child happy takes less effort, less stamina, and certainly less courage than helping a child to grow up."

If parents keep a child "happy" for 18 years, Rosemond asserted, they will "completely destroy the child's self-esteem. Self-esteem is composed of equal parts initiative, resourcefulness, imagination, autonomy, and determination." When parents fail to insist that children accept responsibility, when they try to keep them "happy" all the time, they keep them from growing up. "When the time comes for these children to leave home and begin fending for themselves, many of them will not be prepared for self-sufficiency."<sup>12</sup>

The key to personal dignity is the self-sufficiency that comes through taking responsibility, through accepting and carrying through obligations—in short, through self-discipline. To live well, to live maturely, to live freely demands self-discipline. Others may force us to do right, but only self-discipline, freely embraced, enables us to be righteous, to be good. Ultimately, self-discipline is moral—doing what's right because it's good.

I could pour a gallon of gasoline on the ground at the service station and light it (assuming no one stopped me), but it would just create a brief blazing bonfire. Only when I put it into my gas tank, routing it to my car's engine, where it explodes under tight restraints, does it serve my need for transportation. Only contained, restricted, disciplined explosions of gasoline do productive work.

### **Relationships Demand the Limits of Self-discipline**

That, really, is what the Ten Commandments are all about. They are not endless rules with penalties for failure; they're 10 principles to live by. Ten ways to maintain fellowship with God. Ten words to be kept so as to behold His manifest presence. Ten boundaries to respect in order to nurture a loving union with our Maker. They are 10 steps to freedom!

Note that no threats accompany the commandments. God didn't say, "You shall not make graven images, because if you do, the next day a locomotive-sized meteorite will annihilate you." He didn't say, "You shall not commit adultery, for if you do, the next morning you'll be reduced to a glob of putty." No, He just spoke 10 "words"—a recipe for living rightly with Him.

The Ten Commandments are a bit like guidelines for courteous courting. The only good reason for courting is to develop a good relationship with another person. Now, I know some folks date for the wrong reasons—sexual thrills, ego satisfactions, free food. But those are just perversions of the only good reason for dating—to get to know another person.

Consequently, healthy dates have definable limits. Single persons, if they're wise, don't try to date two people at the same time. What's true for dating is equally true for marriage. A couple out for a stroll does not continually inspect and favorably comment on the attributes of every other person they pass. There are limits to how much they can notice others, to how much they can admire others, when they're in a loving relationship.

It's obvious: self-discipline (restricting ourselves to one person) establishes what we most long for—a loving relationship, a lasting union with a person. So, just as there are limits we must respect in courtships that mature into loving bonds, there are limits we must revere if we sustain any bond with God.

Rightly understood, God's commandments are not narrow restrictions meant to cramp our style. They are liberating steps, guiding us to the self-discipline basic to any lasting, loving relationship with God. The Lord seeks to draw us into a covenant bond, a lasting union, a spiritual marriage with himself.

We who want to live with God have clear guidelines for doing right—the Ten Commandments. We need to grow up, to accept the freedom God has given us, and to take responsibility for our actions. We must remember, however, that these commandments were given us as ways whereby we complete a covenant, not as edicts arbitrarily imposed to exact obedience. Only in covenant can the law be truly fulfilled. Only in covenant is the law fully liberating. And only in the new covenant, consummated by Christ Jesus, is the law truly liberating.

Such covenant theology underlies God's call to holy living. It sums up the Bible's call to holiness, personified in Jesus, incarnate Truth. In Christ, we discover our calling to freedom in obedience to the divine law summarized in the commandment of love of God and neighbor. This is what takes place through the gift of the Holy Spirit: in Him we are enabled to internalize the law, to receive it, and to

live it as the motivating force of true personal freedom, “the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25).<sup>13</sup>

Jesus is the Light of the World. We who follow Him walk in the light and, by obeying His Word, live holy lives. Consequently, as we wonder how to decide what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, we discover that Jesus Christ is the Answer to all of humanity's deepest hunger for truth. Thus, the Gospel account of the rich young man who came to Jesus illuminates the entire human condition. The young man asked: “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). All of us ask that question, a fundamentally moral question, which implicitly wonders about life's purpose, our final end.

Responding to the young man, Jesus reminded him that “there is only One who is good” (v. 17), God himself. Revering and serving God precedes all morality. Then we rightly obey His edicts—both the commandments inscribed in the natural law and the divine law revealed on Mount Sinai. To that, we add the righteous attitudes and motives prescribed in the Beatitudes, which enable us to follow Christ, who gives meaning to Christian ethics.

Through the grace given us as believers, the presence of the Holy Spirit enables us to live conformed to Christ's likeness. Law and grace work together. “Faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6) is the central formula, for it enables us to “fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). There's an interaction to the Christlike life. Faith is more than mental assent. It's a commitment, a devotion to a loving relationship with God through Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This faith, totally trusting Him, opens our hearts to His love, which in turn enables us to love Him and our neighbor.

When we try to live under the law, we seek comfort in grace; and with grace, we find strength to live out the law. Saved by grace through faith, we're enabled by the Holy Spirit to live out the new law, which enfleshes in our hearts the statutes of Sinai.

Christ's church, therefore, has one compelling commission—to bring persons to Jesus. By preaching the gospel, by bringing sinners to salvation, by affording them means of grace, the Church gives persons the opportunity—the birthright of believers—to live righteously. The high standards of morality

are for Christians, men and women willingly transformed by the supernatural workings of God's grace. Such is possible only for persons free to choose, so freedom must be treasured in order for morality to exist. It is, in fact, possible to live rightly, for God does not command us to do what we cannot do.

Consequently, there are various behaviors that are clearly right and others that are manifestly wrong. Just as there are clearly defined rules in a game of baseball, there is an objective reality to moral acts that makes them intrinsically right or wrong. This eliminates various personal opinions and calculating ethical judgments, for Christians ought never to focus solely on the bottom-line consequences of their acts.

God has called us to live rightly, pleasing Him as we allow Him to conform us to Christ. Salvation full and free moves beyond forgiveness of sins. Christ's redemption grants us "the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being," the freedom from sin's bondage for which we are fundamentally designed.<sup>14</sup>

In the covenant's fulfillment there is freedom. Redeemed through the grace of God, we are set free to live in accord with the plan of our Master, Christ Jesus our Lord.

#### Notes:

1. Quoted in William Murchison, *Reclaiming Morality in America* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 1.
2. Murchison, 55.
3. Murchison, 86.
4. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe About Everything That Really Matters* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 41.
5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 19-21.
6. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribners, 1932), 4.
7. Bloom, 141.
8. *First Things* 45 (August-September 1994): 20-21.
9. Murchison, 53.
10. Manis Friedman, *Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore? Reclaiming Intimacy, Modesty, and Sexuality in a Permissive Age* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990).
11. Daniel Smith-Rowsey, "The Terrible Twenties," *Newsweek*, June 17, 1991, unnumbered page.
12. Quoted in Robert H. Schuller, *Believe in the God Who Believes in You* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 93-94.
13. John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth—Veritatus Splendor* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), 104.
14. John Paul II, 125.