

HONESTY, MORALITY, & CONSCIENCE

Sample from *Honesty, Morality, & Conscience* / ISBN 1600062180

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HONESTY, MORALITY, & CONSCIENCE

MAKING WISE CHOICES IN THE GRAY AREAS OF LIFE

JERRY WHITE



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

Sample from *Honesty, Morality, & Conscience* / ISBN 1600062180

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*To Mary,
my wife, companion, and friend;
and Stephen, Katherine, Karen, and Kristin,
my children,
who have taught me truth of life and honesty*

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FOREWORD

As a professor of Christian ethics, I have through the years read many learned volumes dealing with the deep theological and philosophical issues of morality. But I cannot remember a more helpful, down-to-earth discussion of behavioral specifics than this one by Jerry White. Taking the Word of God as his norm, he applies its absolutes to everyday problems and does so with illustrations that make abstract principles both concrete and conscience-probing. He shows how biblical standards, admittedly inflexible and demanding, can be worked out in business, the home, education, and yes—in church!

In a day of ethical confusion, this book will, I trust, be used of God to remind Christians that their lifestyle ought to be qualitatively different from that of our relativistic society. Only by putting into practice the God-sanctioned directives which Jerry White explicates can we who are professed biblicists become salt and light amid twenty-first-century decadence and darkness.

—Vernon C. Grounds
president, Denver Conservative Baptist
Theological Seminary

PREFACE

Our couples' Bible study was cruising along smoothly in Philip-
pians 2: nice thoughts, generalized comments, spiritual conclu-
sions, insightful analysis, intellectual questions—all so very
acceptable.

Finally, John, a banker, could contain himself no longer. “I feel like a hypocrite!” he blurted out. “How does all this spiritual stuff work in real life? It’s not working for me. I go to work and do great for ten minutes and then I act like everyone else. By Friday I’m just one of them. I want to help people, but my managers say my job is money first and people second. I don’t even feel like a Christian. Something is wrong!”

Our group wasn’t quite the same the rest of the evening. The real world had smashed our spiritual reverie. We all tried to figure it out with John. We discussed how to relate Scripture to life in the world, yet the Bible did not seem to spell out *specifically* how to live in the banking profession. And John was torn by the gap he saw between biblical principles and what he felt he had to do to survive in his job.

That is what this book is about—the scriptural principles of honesty, morality, and conscience applied to those areas of life where

a specific rule book was never written. It is a guide to help you handle the “gray” issues that confront you daily by using the Bible and your conscience, and by depending upon the Holy Spirit.

I am convinced that God has given us everything we need to face the kinds of moral questions and issues treated in this book—understanding the conscience; overcoming peer pressure; dealing with questionable business ethics; the special challenges of maintaining honesty in the home, in church, and in school; being honest with ourselves; maintaining sexual morality; and developing personal convictions in all these areas. It is from this confidence in God’s provision that this book was written.

These issues were stimulated significantly by responses to the book *On the Job* written by my wife, Mary, and me, and to public seminars I conducted on the Christian and work. Many of the problems people were facing were not matters of job satisfaction, but were of an ethical and moral nature. Then I realized that the basic principles of honesty and conscience apply to much broader issues than business and work. In fact, they penetrate every area of life.

Many have contributed to this study, but special thanks are due to my wife, who edited the entire manuscript; to my secretary, Karla Boaz, who laboriously typed each draft; and to Adam Holz, who assisted in the revision.

Additionally, four couples were the source of special encouragement and stimulation during the year this book was written—Rick and Sharon, John and Paula, Steve and Beth, and John and Nancy.

THE DILEMMAS OF HONESTY OR THE PROBLEM DEFINED

“**G**uilty!”

The word sent chills up his spine and made his hands tremble.

The judge continued, “Guilty on all counts—lying to your wife, cheating on your income tax return, and stealing from your employer.”

He sprang to his feet and screamed, “That’s not true! I can explain every—”

“Silence!” the judge interrupted. “The verdict stands. You will be held for sentencing.” He pounded his gavel sharply.

Bill bolted upright in bed. His hands were moist. His pillow was damp with sweat.

“Bill! What’s wrong?” asked his startled wife.

“Nothing. Just a bad dream.”

Even sleep would not allow Bill to escape the issue. For the fifth time the crazy dream had wakened him. Each time he carefully reasoned through each point. The IRS thing, for example—it was perfectly legal. He had checked it with a tax lawyer. Of course, the matter of the travel expense reports was still a question. But, what of

it? That trip had been a tough one. He deserved something extra.

But as he lay awake, a sickening feeling began to fill his body. *I did lie and I did cheat*, he thought. *But what can I do? It's done and I can't change it.*

What should Bill do? Had he really lied and cheated, or was his conscience simply playing tricks on him? Even if he had cheated, wouldn't it be best to forget it and start over?

What about the rest of us? Various dilemmas of honesty, morality, and conscience confront us daily. We read the Bible and find no clear-cut, direct answers for many of the questions. We face situations that seem to have no pragmatic answer. Yet we know there is a right and wrong. Furthermore, we realize that even Christians make decisions in these areas based on the thinking and habit patterns of the non-Christian world.

Let's look at actual dilemmas that some have faced in this area. Consider how you would respond in each situation.

CASE STUDIES

Case No. 1. A politician in a western city won his party's nomination in a primary election. Shortly afterward several people accused him of misrepresenting his educational background. He had said he had a doctorate, they alleged, when he had not completed his work for it. Later he confessed that he had allowed people to call him "Dr." although he did not have the degree. He also admitted he might have written at some time that he had a PhD. He subsequently was forced to withdraw from the race.

Was this really dishonesty by misrepresentation? Was the controversy really necessary since the degree was unrelated to the office? Was it a serious enough offense that he should have withdrawn?

Case No. 2. A teacher in a small town received a salary below industry standard. Because of this, he would stock up on cheaper goods in a nearby city when he had the opportunity. One of the townspeople

reprimanded him, saying that since the town paid his salary it was only right that he give his business to the merchants there.

Did the teacher act unethically? Should he purchase goods in the town to foster better relationships and maintain a Christian testimony among the townspeople?

Case No. 3. A church board was meeting to discuss the sale of bonds for a new building. The bonds were financed through a reputable bonding company. The church could sell the bonds in any state in which the bonding company was registered. As the church board met, they discussed at length whether they should sell a bond to someone who resided in a state where the company was not registered. One possible solution, practiced by a number of investment companies, was to have the buyer drive across the state line to conduct the transaction. This would have met the requirements of the law.

But would this be right? Would it be stretching the law? Could a business do this, but not a church? A representative of the bonding company had described the plan as “the right way to do a wrong thing.” Legally it would pass. But ethically it would not. Should the board reject the plan?

Case No. 4. A pastor of a Spanish-American church frequently had illegal aliens in his congregation. If he turned them in to the authorities, he would not be able to give them the spiritual help they needed. But if he did not, he would be violating federal law.

Should he tolerate the situation, justifying his silence by pastoral confidentiality? Should he try to persuade the aliens to turn themselves in? What would happen if he was caught harboring aliens?

Dilemmas of ethics and honesty without clear-cut answers are legion. But that is where we live—in a real world with real problems that do not fit a simple “do and don’t” list. How can a person get direction for these areas?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

When a word is used, each of us immediately forms a mental picture of what that word means. But often we function on differing definitions without knowing it. Words such as *morality*, *values*, and *ethics* can mean different things to different people. Unless we clearly define what we mean by these words, the possibility of miscommunication exists.

Imagine an employment interview where the company representative says, “Our company operates with a high degree of morality and integrity. You need to be aware of that before you consider joining us.” When he says “morality,” is this company rep speaking of how each employee treats the company (for instance, personal use of company supplies is not allowed)? Or is he speaking of how the company treats outsiders (for example, customers are to be treated fairly)? Depending on a person’s background and belief system, it could mean any of these.

Thus, we need to define terms. The basic definitions given here will be expanded later in the book.¹

Ethics encompasses the broad science or teaching of how to live a good life in the context of one’s society or culture. It incorporates the accepted standards of the community as well as the personal conduct of individuals in that community.

Morality emphasizes the attributes of those who live this good life. Their conduct and character are excellent—defined both by their community and their personal religious beliefs. The moral person displays:

- *Integrity*, the state of wholeness, consistency, and sincerity, with no deception or pretense.
- *Honesty*, the absence of lies, crookedness, deceit or fraud. Honesty is truthfulness, sincerity, and frankness.
- *Conscience*, the inner compass that helps navigate the moral areas of life.

The definitions are influenced by the values that we put into them—from society, family, Scripture, and religious beliefs. With this in mind, let’s expand the basic definitions by exploring the roots of these words.²

Ethics: Derived from the Greek word *ethos*. In the plural form it means manners. It refers to rules or principles of conduct; a code of morality, a system of conduct; the branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness and to good and bad motives and ends of such actions.

Honesty: From the Latin word *honestos*. Related to *honos*, which means honor; the state of being credible, virtuous, upright, sincere, truthful.

Morality: From the Latin root *mores*, meaning customs, manners, character. It is excellence in conduct, virtue, or character; a conformity to the rules of right or virtuous conduct; virtue in sexual matters, chastity.

Conscience: From the Latin word *conscientia*. *Con-* meaning “together with,” and *scientia* meaning knowledge. It is an inner awareness of what is good or bad, internal recognition of the moral quality of one’s motives or actions; the source of moral judgments; an inhibitor to actions that are perceived as wrong.

Integrity: From the Latin *integer*. It is a state of wholeness (as in the word *integral* from mathematics), sound, complete, uncorrupted, innocent, and virtuous; usually applied to a person’s actions and intent.

THE SPREAD OF DISHONESTY

It seems easy enough to say, “Of course everyone can be honest—at least most of the time in the big things.” But why not all of the time, and in little things also?

Consistent honesty doesn’t happen easily, even among Christians. In business, in the home, and in the classroom, honesty is not simple. We slip into “white” lies and half-truths almost automatically.

Joan Beck of the *Chicago Tribune* writes, “Lying is commonplace in our society—sometimes for what may seem the best of reasons, often for personal gain, almost routinely for social or business convenience (‘Tell him I’m in a meeting’).”³ We cannot assume that honesty is a way of life in our country—or in our churches. The forces of society have subtly squeezed us into new definitions of honesty, morality, and ethics. Absolutes of right and wrong have largely disappeared and have been replaced by a fuzzy, gray fog of inconsistent moral choices.

Perhaps we can all see ourselves in Mark Twain’s story:

When I was a boy, I was walking along a street and happened to spy a cart full of watermelons. I was fond of watermelon, so I sneaked quietly up to the cart and snatched one. Then I ran into a nearby alley and sank my teeth into the melon. No sooner had I done so, however, than a strange feeling came over me. Without a moment’s hesitation, I made my decision. I walked back to the cart, replaced the melon—and took a ripe one.⁴

Or can we follow the example of the famous baseball player Ted Williams?

When Ted Williams was forty years old and closing out his career with the Boston Red Sox, he was suffering from a pinched nerve in his neck. “The thing was so bad,” he later

explained, “that I could hardly turn my head to look at the pitcher.” . . . For the first time in his career he batted under .300, hitting just .254 with 10 home runs. He was the highest salaried player in sports that year, making \$125,000. The next year the Red Sox sent him the same contract.

“When I got it, I sent it back with a note. I told them I wouldn’t sign it until they gave me the full pay cut allowed. I think it was 25 percent. My feeling was that I was always treated fairly by the Red Sox when it came to contracts.

“I never had any problem with them about money. Now they were offering me a contract I didn’t deserve. And I only wanted what I deserved.”

. . . Williams cut his own salary by \$31,250!⁵

Would you do that? Was it honesty or foolishness? In our society such honesty is rare. Yet it is basic to Christian living and crucial to the moral life of our country.

Clare Boothe Luce, former congresswoman and ambassador, has, along with many others, expressed great concern about the decline of moral standards:

Under the impact of science, religion has lost its social authority. Under the impact of technology, family life has disintegrated. The automobile, the radio, TV, etc., have destroyed parental control over the young. The process, which has taken more than a century, would seem to be irreversible.

Our educational system has long since abandoned the teaching of morals, or what is now called in academe “value judgments.”

Today, ever-growing numbers of individuals feel fewer and fewer inner restraints or inhibitions against disobeying any law or moral code that interferes with their private desires or impulses. As the social stigmas that were once attached

to lawbreaking and deviation from the traditional morals grow weaker, the distinction between liberty and license becomes more and more blurred in the mind of the individual. Pleasure and profit become the only guides to personal conduct. “The law” is seen as an enemy to be destroyed or outwitted. In the end, the only “sin” is “getting caught.”

. . . If our democratic form of government continues for another two decades to fail in the discharge of this responsibility [maintaining social stability], it is bound to collapse, and our people are bound to turn to some other form of government that offers the promise of restoring order.⁶

How can a Christian make moral and ethical decisions in areas where society has erased restraints? We can be confident that the Bible presents workable answers to our moral dilemmas, and guidelines for living honestly. And in God’s Word we discover that complete honesty is His commandment for us: “Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being” (Psalm 51:6); “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor” (Ephesians 4:25).

The very discussion of honesty, morality, and conscience implies some set of absolutes or standards by which we judge our actions and thoughts. But we encounter a serious problem. *The world has changed.* Increasingly, there are no agreed upon absolutes. Our moral base is rapidly fading into history. We now live in a world of relativism. We live in a society that has been overtaken by secularism. Its central tenet is not religious—or even moral. Some would say that we are living in a post-Christian or postmodern world. But what does that *mean*? Are serious issues at stake? A significant change in moral and ethical thinking over the last three decades is revealed by statistics of crimes of violence, sexual beliefs, standards of behavior in business, and the content of the visual media.

Secularism rejects any religious content in the mainstream of our society. Postmodernism rejects belief or faith in absolutes of any kind.

This combination results in the belief that we are in a post-Christian age.

The most visible result of this breakdown in belief in absolutes is a deep and pervasive relativism—a belief that there are no standards that comprise a norm. At best, ethical standards are seen as useful in conducting business. Thus, a business person may act honestly, not because he values honesty or truth, but because being honest is pragmatic and useful to achieve his ends. At worst, right and wrong are defined only in the eye of the beholder. This results in perverse logic, which reasons, “It might be wrong for you, but it’s okay for me.” Ethics or moral behavior are thus reduced to pure subjectivity, more often than not based upon how we *feel* about a given issue. Right and wrong, in any absolute sense, have been taken captive by feeling. Such logic cannot be critiqued by a standard of truth, because it does not recognize the authority of any truth outside itself.

It would be easy to presume that these changes have not permeated Christian churches or people. But they have. They are a part of the unseen force of culture that shapes the practical belief systems of young people. The unstated assumptions of secularism and relativism are an integral part of their thinking. Therefore, the discussions of this book are not easily pursued without both a recognition and a rebuilding of these inherited cultural values. To accept biblical statements on a subject requires an acceptance of the Bible as a reliable authority. This is difficult in a relativistic world. Thus discussion of these issues is pointedly counter-culture.