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# Dismantling the Myths: Realigning Moral Choices with Faith

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## On Guard

### *Preparing for the Culture Battle*

#### **Price Tags**

One of my favorite television commercials these days is that of a fast-food hamburger restaurant. To illustrate the point that all their hamburgers are selling for 99 cents, it shows two six-year-old boys holding their own garage sale, obviously without their parents' knowledge or permission. They've spread all their toys across the front yard and taped 99-cent sale tags on everything, including a baby sister! Some of their toys are worth less than 99 cents and some much more. No matter. Everything is going for one low price, including the sister.

The ad is amusing because we realize that not everything in our world has the same value or the same price tag. A value is the relative worth we place on experiences, people, relationships, and possessions. It is what causes us to see some things as more important in life than others.

Let me illustrate. Remember as a teenager when you just *had* to have a particular type of shirt or dress because everyone else had it? You thought you'd die if you didn't get it! Or at least that's what you told your parents. The article of clothing, or your friends seeing you wearing it, was of great value to you. Then, some time later, it ended up in a rag box or donation sack; its value had dropped to the bottom of your scale.

#### **Value Systems and Lifestyle Choices**

The philosophies and our worldview that we discussed in the last chapter play a major role in setting the values or price tags we place on things in life. If you know what philosophy a

person has adopted, you can accurately predict where his or her values lie. Once you understand a person's value system, you can understand his or her lifestyle choices. Note the following observations about values.

1. *A value is not really yours unless you choose to accept it for yourself.* Your parents, pastor, or good friend may have a value and may want you to have it as well, but you alone decide whether it is a personal value or not. Most people misunderstand the rebellious stage many adolescents experience. They sometimes exhibit strange behavior. It is not that they want to do the opposite of what their parents want them to do. Rather, it is part of a process for children to try values for themselves and make them their own.

I've watched numerous times as teenagers "go off the deep end," so to speak, for a period of trial and error with values. One particular example of this occurs with a few of our students every fall on our university campus. Parents bring their children to the university from all over our region of the nation. Their cars are filled with clothes, personal supplies, dorm room furnishings, hopes, and dreams. Everything is placed in the dorm room. Tears are shed. Good-byes are said. The parents head back home. Some students watch as their parents head out the circle drive, then have an amazing realization. All of a sudden it occurs to them that parental observation, even parental control, is over. They immediately respond by doing everything they ever wanted to do that their parents would not allow. In a week or two parents get word that their child is living out of bounds. Some parents, not realizing what is happening, blame the college for a permissive environment. They brought us a well-mannered, perfectly adjusted student, and the university environment corrupted their child in two short weeks!

What really happened? Students who respond in this manner have been living their parents' value system while at home. They performed as expected to win parental approval. But given the freedom, without parental control, they opted for a different value system. The university environment did not corrupt their actions—the true desires of their hearts did it. They had never truly adopted their parents' values as their own.

Some students find the adoptive process harder than others. But regardless of the difficulty of this stage, more often than not these students come full circle and accept a personal value

system very similar to their parents'. There is a difference, however: now the system is their own.

2. *Parental values must be transferred to children.* Parents would like to save their children a lot of heartache and just *give* them *their* value system. That's exactly what they do with their children when they are young. They set the rules for almost all personal behavior. When children question the *why* of a particular directive, parents often respond with "Because I told you so." What kind of an answer is that? It's an answer that indicates the children are living by their parents' values. Making choices in this fashion works fine for small children, but it doesn't work very well for teenagers; it doesn't work at all for adults. A time should occur in all our lives when we launch out to live by our own set of freely chosen values.

I used the phrase "should occur" in the previous sentence to indicate that it doesn't happen in everyone's life. Some people unfortunately live their entire lives making choices according to the values of others. They may make choices according to what their parents, pastor, or friends tell them they should do. But they don't think for themselves, and they don't live by their own value system.

I remember one particularly painful experience of one of my baby boomer students related to this topic. I had given an assignment for students to come to class with a list of their most important values and the source from which each came. While working on the assignment, this lady in her mid-40s came to the realization that none of her values were her own; they were all her mother's. In other words, she governed her actions based on what her mother told her to do rather than on what she believed was right; she lived to please her mother. This realization was traumatic for my student. She didn't know what she believed or why. She began that day to develop her own value system.

3. *Values are chosen from among alternatives.* Simply put, if you go shopping at the mall with a \$20 bill burning a hole in your pocket, you cannot buy two CDs, a watch, a book, a flower arrangement, and an afternoon snack. You have to buy the one or two most important items on your list and let the others wait. The same is true with values. Everything in life cannot be at the top of our value list. From childhood throughout adulthood, we see many alternative forms of behavior, relationships, and pos-

sessions and decide which ones will become most important to us.

4. *Value researchers indicate that during value establishment, we go through various stages of development.* First, we accept the values imposed on us by our parents. We do something because parents make us do it or at least *strongly* recommend it! Next, we reach a stage in which we prefer these values for ourselves. We choose to eat beets even when Mom doesn't put them on our plate. Last, the highest stage is when we commit ourselves to a value. Now it is our own personal conviction. I'm freely committed to this course of action by my own choice.

### **Stages of Value Development**

#### *1. Imposed*

#### *2. Personal Preference*

#### *3. Personal Commitment*

Let me illustrate the above principle with an example from our son Brent's life. Sue and I decided he should learn to swim when he was three years old. He hated the swimming pool, and he hated the idea of swim lessons. In fact, he cried every day on the way to the lessons as he begged us not to make him learn to swim. We made him go anyway. He caught on quickly, and before we knew it, he was swimming across the deep end of the pool. By the time he was eight years old, he was asking us to take him and his friends to the city pool for the afternoon. Today he goes swimming every chance he gets, and we take family vacations every year to the ocean. This past summer he decided to get his license and work as a lifeguard at the local YMCA pool.

The point? We imposed the value on Brent at first, then he made it his preference, and finally he embraced it as a personal conviction.

### ***Think About It***

1. List five things that you highly value (people, relationships, possessions, and so on).
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.

- d.
- e.
- 2. Has your experience of making values your own been easy or difficult? Why?
- 3. Think of an illustration from your own life in which one of your values was first imposed, then you made it a preference, and finally it became a personal commitment.

### **Sources of Values**

We must consider the sources from which we derive our values as we think about our personal value system. Though we are often not aware of them, many definite reasons exist for the choices we make in life. We usually take our value system for granted and make choices unconsciously, so it's a good idea to consider the methods we use for making our choices.

**A. A higher authority.** A higher authority is an obvious source of values for Christians, who seek to live their lives according to the will of God. But we cannot simply say we look to God for our system of values. Within this major heading are several types of authority bases, for we recognize that God directs in various ways.

We often find God's will through reading *the Bible*. Thus, we appeal to the authority of Scripture for our moral choices. We believe that in His Word God has given humanity a blueprint for living. As we read and apply it to our lives, we find the direction we need for making moral choices in our complex world. This form of Christian authority should be our first and most important source for a personal value system.

A second Christian authority is *the tradition of the Christian community*. Christian tradition is the "beliefs, values, and customs transmitted from one generation to the next."<sup>1</sup> It is very important to the Church, since it provides a stabilizing influence for the faith to be passed to the next generation. Creeds, interpretation of Scripture, theological formulations, symbols, rituals, and the like all represent components of Christian tradition. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential in guarding God's truth as it is passed down through the ages.

A third Christian authority is *the individual direction of the Lord*. This can be a tricky one! This is the authority in which you feel the Lord impressing a particular course of action on your mind. It sounds good to say, "The Lord is directing me to do

this.” The problem arises when such supposed directions are not in keeping with Scripture or the character of God. Unfortunately, some people use this authority to justify their own selfish desires and then seek to lay the blame for misconduct on the Lord. So we must be careful to test this source with the Bible and common sense.

**B. Logic or reason.** Another source for moral choice is the brain God gave us with which to think for ourselves. We have the ability to look at the facts, predict probable conclusions, and make choices on the basis of what appears to be the reasonable thing to do.

The greatest danger here is in allowing our logical or reasoning ability to be clouded by preconceived desired outcomes. In other words, we work backward from a course of action we desire to a reasonable plan to justify it. Given enough time, the human heart has an amazing ability to justify almost anything it desires. Thus, while reason is an essential source for making value choices, it must always be balanced with the authority of Scripture and the tradition of the Christian community.

**C. Personal experience.** Sometimes our values are derived from trial and error. Hopefully, we learn from our successes and failures in life. If we do, we become wiser with time. Otherwise, we are doomed to repeat our same failures over and over again. This source of values is often referred to as “the hard knocks of life.” Thankfully, when it comes to making moral choices, we don’t have to learn everything the hard way. We can listen to God’s Word and other Christians and avoid the heartache of experiencing failure firsthand. The value of avoiding premarital sex, adultery, illegal drugs, and a host of other sins should never have to be learned through experience.

**D. Emotion.** Emotion is an interesting source for values. In this scheme of thinking, people make choices according to what they want to do or the way they feel. It’s a fairly easy and uncomplicated way of life: just do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it. When asked to justify your choices, simply say, “I did it because I felt like it.” This is called an “emotive” ethic, because it is based on personal emotions. Believe it or not, a great number of people live their lives in this manner.

**E. Sense perception.** Values are chosen in this method by using the senses. We choose on the basis of evidence gathered by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling. God has giv-

en us wonderful instruments to use to make wise choices. However, they cannot always give us enough information to make wise moral choices. We must be careful with this source when it comes to ethical matters. We can do what I call selective sensing. That is, we pay attention to what we prefer in order to influence the outcome in a certain direction.

**F. Peers.** As a source of values, peers are very similar to the first source. We turn to someone else for guidance in making choices. Here, though, the source is other people instead of God. Often it is a lower instead of a higher authority; other humans do not always offer good directions for life.

We have known since childhood the vital importance of our friends' opinions. No matter how far-out the hair or fashion style became, if our friends had it, we wanted it too. This is an easy source of values, because you don't have to think for yourself—you just follow the crowd and go with the flow. To some degree, most of us are influenced by peer pressure throughout life. We don't want to be totally unique in our lifestyle. However, by the time we reach adulthood, we should be making our own value judgments.

**G. Significant others.** Values also come our way from parents, grandparents, other family members, teachers, coaches, and other significant people in our lives. God places older people along our path to give us wise counsel in setting our standards for life. Remember when you were a child and it seemed adults controlled your every move? At home your parents, guardians, or grandparents told you what to do. At school your teachers told you what to do. At church your Sunday School teacher or pastor told you what to do. Sometimes you resented it, and sometimes you realized it was for your own good. Somewhere along the way they quit imposing their values, and you adopted your own value system for proper conduct. Looking back, we realize the important contribution these significant others have made in our lives.

**H. The media.** The media comes at us from almost every direction. Its message comes through television, radio, compact discs, newspapers, magazines, billboards, movies, and the computer. It offers value suggestions and persuasive arguments on what to eat, how to dress, how to comb our hair, how to treat our family members, how to spend our money and time, and just about every other choice we make in life. We can avoid me-

dia's influence only by moving deep into the woods or out into the desert. Media has more contact hours each day with the average child in this country than parents, church, or schoolteachers. It is a powerful shaper of our value system.

### **Think About It**

1. Look back over the eight sources of values discussed above. Which two are most influential in the average teenager's life?
  - a.
  - b.
2. Which two were most influential in establishing your own personal values?
  - a.
  - b.

**Note:** When I ask the first question in class, my baby boomer students with teenagers in the home always give the same answer: media and peers. This is evidenced in the information below from the most recent research. Notice the change in the most influential sources over the years. Also, notice how quickly media moved to first place and how church dropped out of the picture.

<b>TOP SOURCES FOR PERSONAL VALUES</b>				
YEAR	FIRST PLACE	SECOND PLACE	THIRD PLACE	FOURTH PLACE
1960	Family	School	Friends/Peers	Church
1980	Friends/Peers	Family	Media	School
1990	Media	Friends/Peers	Family	School <sup>2</sup>

### **Putting It All Together**

The philosophies presented in the last chapter influence our thinking and living. They assist us in placing price tags on everything in our own personal world. The crucial question then becomes "How do we come in contact with these philosophies?" Few of us took a philosophy class in high school to learn to think in these ways. Yet every high schooler I have ever known has been adept in applying one or more of these philosophies to life. So when did it happen? Junior high? Elementary school? Daycare center? Were we born with these ways of processing reality hardwired into our brain?