

Use Your Bible - Knowing What's Right in the Pop-Culture Conundrum 3.11.18

Every summer, at some point the four of us, (my mom, dad, brother (Derek), and myself) would pile into the family station wagon. Early on it was the 90' blue Chevy Celebrity wagon and then it was the 96' forest green Ford Taurus wagon. Neither of which were nearly as cool as my grandma's 1986 Pontiac Parisian wagon. Burgundy interior, faux wood grain panels, and a third row that flipped up and you rode in reverse. It had a big block V8, and she would cruise. If you couldn't tell, "Old Myrtle" would be my first and favorite car.

We would get into my parent's wagon, and I always knew where we were going, because my dad would start telling stories. The closer we got, the better the stories. As we drove into town, he would say, "Boys, this is the only flat and straight ¼ mile stretch of the lake. You, see that tree over there? That's where Butch wrapped his 73' Barracuda around a tree. He was ok, but that car wasn't." We would then ask, "Dad, are we going to see Butch?" With a smile, he would say, "Yep." As we cruised onto campus, we would drive past the academic buildings, and he would tell us stories about different professors, or lectures that still resonated with him, or tests that didn't go so well. Then there were the stadiums and athletic fields, and the stories of cheering on buddies who played or that time the bowling team he was on almost won a title. That's right, bowling. I'm from Western PA; if there anything we know better than polka, it's bowling.

What I loved the most about those trips up to my dad's alma mater, Edinboro University, is the perspective it gave me into his life. What he valued, prioritized, and even how he saw himself. Here's the thing about culture, if we slow down and take a good look at it, we can tell a lot about those that are walking in it. And when we study or look at our culture, we need to ask, **"What is our source of right and wrong?"**

In Acts 17, Paul found himself in the city of Athens, and he found himself asking the same question. Let's take a look at his story.

The text gives us a significant note about Paul in v.16. It reads, **"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols."**

As Paul walked around Athens, he paid attention to not just what was going on around him, but also, what the source or sources of right and wrong were for the Athenians. Here's the thing, all too often it can feel like this 2000-year-old book isn't relevant to our lives today. But, what would Paul find if he walked around our city today? Would he see halls dedicated to learning? Markets where goods are sold? Temples of worship? Stadiums for athletic competition? And, theaters for the arts? He would. And, that is precisely what he found in Athens 2000 years ago. If when he walked around Athens, he saw that their city was full of idols, what would he conclude about ours? What would he find is our source of right and wrong?

What is unique about v.16 is that it says, *Paul's spirit was provoked*. Some translations use the word, *shocked or disturbed*. Naturally, there was something in Paul that was unsettled at what he was seeing. This isn't a shock from seeing or experiencing something for the first time. It is instead the shock of seeing something that is wrong because you know what is right. What the phrase, "his spirit was provoked/ shocked" teaches us is that this sense of right and wrong was **an abiding state of mind** for Paul. It wasn't something he just turned on here or there. It was who he was and how he saw the world around him. So, we need to ask this question, if Paul's sense of right and wrong was an "abiding state of mind" for him, where did it come from? The answer is the Scriptures.

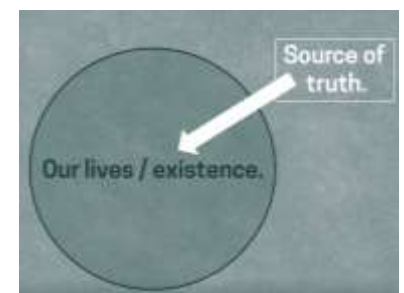
We learn God's heart for right and wrong from His Word.

Paul describes himself in Phil 3:5 this way, "**circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;**" Paul was raised to be a devout Jewish man. In, Acts 22:3, Luke quotes Paul talking about his Pharisaic education, and he was educated under one of the most prominent Rabbis of his day. In that education, he would have had to memorize massive amounts of the scriptures. Simply, Paul was well versed and highly knowledgeable in God's word. He knew God's heart for worship and for how mankind was supposed to be living. When he walks into Athens, because that knowledge so meshes into the fabric of his identity, he can see what is right and what is wrong.

Where can we find God's heart for right and wrong in the scriptures? In Exodus 20:1-17, God gives the 10 Commandments to the people of Israel. This wasn't the moment of inception for

these instructions, they have always been in play. They have always been God's heart. But here, they are written down, so that they would never be forgotten. The first four instruct us on God's heart for worship. Simply, we are to worship Him and Him alone. The second six, instruct us on God's heart for how we live and relate to each other. They include things like, honor your parents, don't lie, don't steal or murder, don't be filled with jealousy, and guard yourself sexually. If you are new to this Christianity thing, and you're wondering, how am I supposed to live or how do I follow Jesus in a life-defining way? Exodus 20:1-17 is the place to start. And, I truly believe it was the passage of Scripture that was going through Paul's mind as he walked through Athens.

Here's the thing about right and wrong. Over the last 11 years of being a youth pastor, I have done careful and highly scientific research on the topic of ethics. I have determined that 90% of the time we know what is right and what is wrong. We then try really hard to make it grey and fuzzy so that we can justify our wrong actions. We like to make things complicated so that we can just do what we wanted to do in the first place and not feel bad. Genesis tells us that we were created in the image of God, and as image bearers, there are parts of us that testify to that. I believe our ethics are one of them. The 18th-century existential philosopher Immanuel Kant explained our universal agreement on certain rights and wrongs this way: He said that we have certain absolute truths that are self-evident in the human experience because the truth is larger and exists outside the realm of human experience. In that, our experience cannot change what is true, but simply affirms the reality of an absolute set of truths. The Bible explains that God is the source of truth, and God is bigger than our individual experience but intervenes in our world and lives so that we can know what's right, wrong, Him personally. This is why I believe we tend to know what's right and what's wrong. I also believe that we like Adam all too easily buy into the lie, that we can become God, and so we think that we can redefine what's right and wrong.



God also knew that we would continue to struggle with that, and he gave us His Word to help us. Philip Ryken explains it this way in his commentary on Exodus,

*The Ten Commandments were written in stone because they would remain in effect for as long as time endured. When would it ever be permissible to worship another god, to misuse God's name, to lie, murder, or steal? **Never, because these things are contrary to God's very nature.***

Ryken points out that there is something very permeant in the reality that this code of ethics was written in stone. Again, something that I believe the philosophical works of Kant and years of doing youth ministry speak to. The reality of what is right and wrong never changes. When would it ever be ok to violate these 10 commandments? Never. God's heart for right and wrong doesn't change. Ryken also explains that it isn't just this list of 10 that comprise God's heart for right and wrong. We see it all through the scriptures. He says it this way,

We know this from the stories of the Bible, in which God often rebuked and punished people for breaking these very laws.

If we want to see the volatile and vicious effects of jealousy, read the stories in Gen. 11. Want to know what God thinks about life, murder, and our responsibility to each other? Read Genesis 4. Want to know God's heart for sex and sexuality? Read about David and Bathsheba or turn to 1 Cor. 16 and read Paul's teaching on the topic. We see God's heart for right and wrong all through scripture, because God desperately wants us to know it. That's one reason he gave us this book called the Bible.

This bible is supposed to be our source for right and wrong; and, we should be like Paul, with an abiding presence of God's ethics in us. Knowing the scriptures is only the first part of that abiding presence, the second is applying them.

Application requires a lens to see the world the world around us.

Paul is going to teach us in Phil 4:8, that there is a lens we should be using at all times to see the world and the cultures around us through. He says it this way,

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think about these things.***

"Think on these things..." The Philippians should choose these things as the subject of their meditation, have them **ever in their thoughts**. Remember, that phrase in Acts 17:16, Paul's spirit was provoked? How it meant that Paul had this abiding sense of right and wrong. Well,

Paul instructs the believers in the Philippian church to do that same! He tells an amazingly diverse group of believers, who could have easily been divided over issues of race, economics, politics, or any other thing to view the world through the lens of the six "whatever's." And, most importantly this "lens" should always be what they are looking through.

When Paul goes to Athens, he sees **a lot** of wrongs. But, he also sees things that are pure, noble, lovely, and true. It is from this Phil. 4:8 lens that Paul is able to make a gospel appeal in vv.22-34. And, he doesn't even quote the Bible! Instead, he quotes Greek poets who were talking about Zeus, to teach about the one true God! If we want to speak life and truth into the culture in fresh and heart softening ways, we not only need to know God's heart for right and wrong, but we need to know how to apply it. When we have Phil. 4:8 as our worldview, we will always be able to find ways that speak the truth in relevant ways into a culture that is changing at an increasingly rapid pace.

When we live out God's heart for right & wrong, we join Him in redeeming culture.

Shouldn't we just avoid pop-culture? Consider Jesus' words,

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

How can we make disciples (people who follow Jesus in a life-defining way) if we remove ourselves from culture? Jesus tells us to, "go" and this really means, "as you are going." We go to work, school, the gym, and to our families. If we don't know and find relevant ways for God's heart (for right and wrong) to be spoken in those places, who will?

God's Word not only teaches us right and wrong, but it also compels us to speak life and truth into pop-culture.

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