

# Truth vs. Values WHO DECIDES?

Dr. Laura Schlessinger, in the introduction of her book *The Ten Commandments*, makes this observation about the way Americans live and think:

*"Each day we make innumerable...decisions about things that don't really seem earth shattering. So what if we break a promise? Lots of promises are broken, and people get over it and get on with it. So what if we find passion in another bed while we or they are still married? We're entitled to derive pleasure and self-fulfillment. So what if we are too focused on work, TV, or clubs to spend time with family?...So what if religion is not a big deal in our lives?...No one has a right to tell us what to do." –Dr. Laura Schlessinger*



## DISCUSS

Does anyone really have a right to tell us what to do? Why or why not?

### MORAL LAWS OR MORAL VALUES?

*"We can see that we have abandoned belief in moral absolutes by looking at one key change in our language about morality: we no longer talk about moral laws, but about moral values. This may seem unimportant, but it is momentous." –Peter Kreeft*



## DISCUSS

What is the difference between a law and a value?  
Why or why not is this important?  
Why do some people disbelieve in moral absolutes?

## Examining Three Popular Arguments Against Moral Absolutes

### Argument 1.

**"EVERY CULTURE HAS A DIFFERENT CONCEPT OF WHAT IS RIGHT AND WRONG. THEREFORE, WHATEVER MORALS OUR CULTURE ELEVATES SHOULD DICTATE OUR VALUES AND WE SHOULD NOT IMPOSE OUR CULTURAL VALUES ON ANOTHER NATION OR CULTURE."**

Anthropologist Emile Durkheim expressed this view well: *"It can no longer be maintained nowadays that there is one, single morality which is valid for all men at all times in all places....The purpose of morality practiced by a people is to enable it to live; hence morality changes with societies. There is not just one morality, but several, and as many as there are social types. And as our societies change, so will our morality."*



## DISCUSS

What are the strong points and weak points of this philosophy?



## CHECK THIS OUT!

During the Nuremberg war trials in 1945, many people protested the trials, claiming that they were illegal according to international law. The idea that an action could retroactively be made a crime is alien to the laws of many countries, including the United States. Judge Robert H. Jackson refuted this argument in his closing statement, saying: "We should not overlook the unique...character of this...International Military Tribunal...[This justice] is not part of...internal justice of any Signatory nations...it rises above the provincial and transient and seeks guidance from the basic principles of jurisprudence which are assumptions of civilization."

Hitler and Nazi Germany thought that killing six million Jews was right. Because that nation and culture thought it was justifiable to murder Jews, did that make it right? The fundamental principle of law that Jackson referred to as "basic principles of jurisprudence" and "assumptions of civilization" is that there exists a transcendent moral law and legislator.



## DISCUSS

Can you think of an example of when imposing values on another nation or culture might be good? When imposing values on another person might be good?



## DISCUSS

Another, different conclusion can be drawn from morally diverse cultures. When Spanish explorers came to Mexico, they were horrified by the practice of ritualistic human sacrifice there. When missionaries went to the Auca Indian tribe in Ecuador in the 1950s, they were appalled at the practice of cannibalism by the Aucas. Is infanticide and cannibalism merely a "different morality?" Or, is it a defective and inferior morality? What about slavery, torture, racism and many other evils? On what basis do we determine what's defective?

# Argument 2.

"I HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE MY OWN VALUES."

## THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

A recent teen publication on sex, AIDS and self-esteem entitled, *The Quest for Excellence* says, "Early on in life, you will be exposed to different value systems from your family, church or synagogue, and friends....It is up to you to decide upon your own value system to build your own ethical code...You will have to learn what is right for yourself through experience...Only you can decide what is right and comfortable for you."



## DISCUSS

Is this helpful advice? Why or why not? Could the "quest for excellence" philosophy turn out to be—in the crunch of daily living—nothing more than doing what one wants to do regardless of the consequences? Why or why not?

## REFLECT

One potential problem with this philosophy of life is that it doesn't provide much motivation to live a moral life or develop inner character. Upright moral and ethical behavior and good character require effort to cultivate. Qualities such as honesty, integrity in relationships and keeping promises often require self-sacrifice and

inconvenience. But moral relativism negates most such efforts. As a result, there is really not much motivation to rise above moral mediocrity—which may be part of its appeal! This would mean having an ideal (moral absolute) to strive for (e.g. being honest regardless of the circumstances or consequences).

# Argument 3.

"WE CANNOT KNOW FOR CERTAIN WHAT MORAL TRUTH IS BECAUSE OF THE LIMITATIONS OF OUR PERCEPTIONS."

## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

Many people will say that we cannot know anything for certain about what God or ultimate reality looks like. All truth is really only a certain way of seeing or perceiving things. Often used to illustrate and support this position is an old story about six blind men trying to determine what an elephant is. One blind man, feeling only the trunk, thought that it was a snake. Another discovered only ears and concluded that it was a fan. The one who touched only the body said it was a wall and another, after finding a leg, said it was a tree. Finally, the last blind man felt a pointed tusk and informed them that it was a spear. To some, this proves that truth is what a person believes is truth, but only in a limited sense and only from his or her culture's perspective of things. Thus one should conclude that no individual, culture or religion has a corner on truth, but that all should be viewed as essentially equally valid.



### DISCUSS

Is the reasoning behind this illustration accurate? Why or why not?

### CHECK THIS OUT

C. S. Lewis explains that our conscience reveals our internal awareness of universal moral law. *"Everyone has heard people quarreling...They say things like this: 'How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?'...Now what interests me about these remarks is that...[h]e is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about...It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality...about which they really agreed. And they have..."*

*"But the most remarkable thing is this. Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining 'It's not fair'...I am only trying to call attention to a fact; the fact that this year, or this month, or, more likely, this very day, we have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people..."*

*"These, then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in."*



### DISCUSS

Do you agree or disagree with C. S. Lewis' view of universal moral law? Why?

## REFLECT

The biblical view of moral truth is that it comes from God (the transcendent moral legislator). In contrast to popular arguments, moral truth is not determined by culture or by individual preference. Rather, it is determined by God's character and desire. Humankind does not define truth but discovers it as God has revealed it. While we are indeed limited in our perceptions, the Bible explains that God has revealed truth in a way that we can perceive it, from things such as the Ten Commandments as well as human conscience.

## THE COMMANDMENTS: A REFLECTION OF GOD'S CHARACTER

*"In life, a higher idealism and a more profound, just, and consistent morality is only found in the commandments. My life has focus, purpose and meaning...I don't feel so alone anymore. I feel as if I am part of a bigger picture....I have a more fair, just, and consistent framework upon which to make moral decisions....I feel more able, actually, to help folks....I can offer them a plan, God's purpose; a way, God's commandments; and a goal, God's holiness." –Dr. Laura Schlessinger*

### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. "I am the Lord your God. Do not worship any god except me."
2. "Don't worship idols. I am the Lord your God, and I demand all your love."
3. "Do not misuse my name."
4. "The seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me."
5. "Respect your father and your mother."
6. "Do not murder."
7. "Be faithful in marriage."
8. "Do not steal."
9. "Do not tell lies about others."
10. "Do not want anything that belongs to someone else."

### REFLECT

On a scale of 1 to 100, how would you evaluate your own keeping of these laws? What if God were to allow your entrance into heaven based on your keeping of these laws?



### DISCUSS

How different would your workplace be if people treated you by these standards?  
Should they expect the same from you?

### THE RIGHT BLUEPRINT

*"Be sure to obey all these commands that I have given you... These teachings are not empty words; they are your very life. Obey them and you will live..." –Moses*

*"God's moral laws are still binding. They are the blueprint of God's expectations upon us and His plan for a meaningful, just, loving, holy life. Each of the Ten Commandments asserts a principle, and...each principle is a moral focus point for thousands of real life issues, including relating to God, family, our fellows, sex, work, charity, property, speech, and thought."*

–Dr. Laura Schlessinger



### TO THINK ABOUT

How consistently have you been living up to your own moral standards?  
Should you consider a renewed commitment to God's moral laws?  
How can one receive God's forgiveness for breaking His moral laws?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ▶ *The Ten Commandments* by Dr. Laura Schlessinger
- ▶ *True For You But Not For Me* by Paul Copan
- ▶ *Making Choices* by Peter Kreeft

