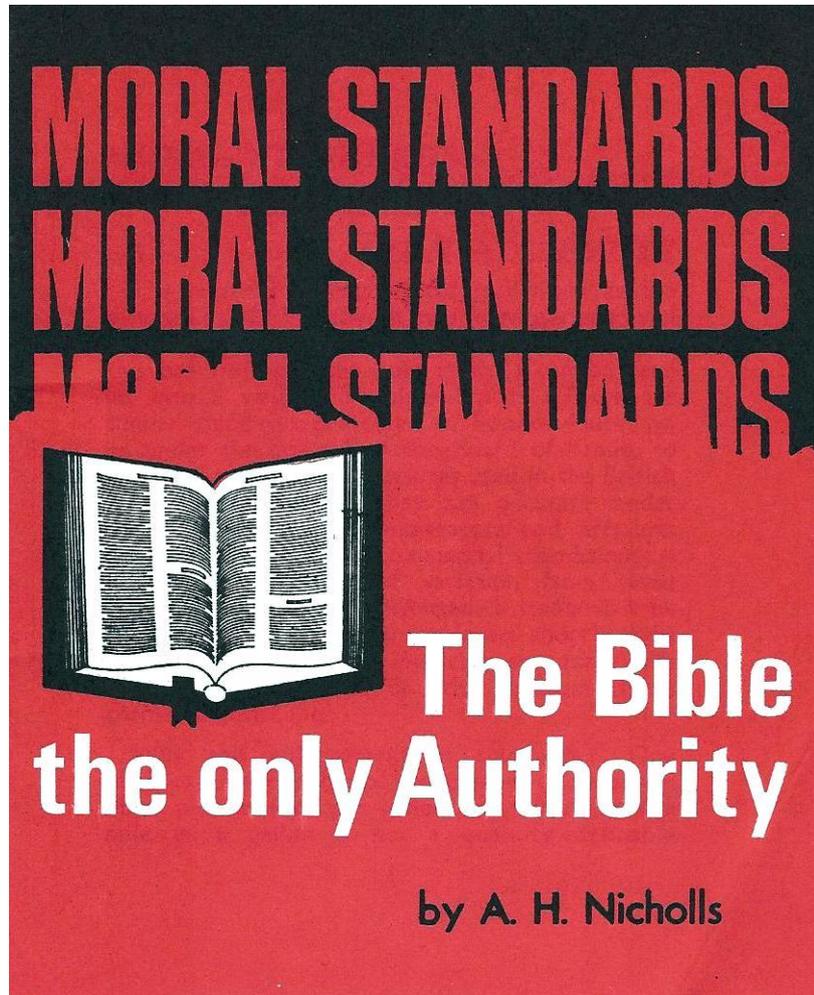


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the message for yourself



MORAL STANDARDS- THE BIBLE THE ONLY AUTHORITY

The Imperial Standard Yard is defined as the distance at 62° F. between two fine lines engraved on gold studs sunk in a bronze bar. A replica of this bar (without the gold studs !) can be seen let into a wall in Trafalgar Square. There are similar standards preserved in Science Museums, or under the control of the Board of Trade, to which all weights and measures used in the British Isles must, conform. They are accurate under certain conditions of temperature and pressure, and although under commercial conditions a certain small degree of variation from these scientific standards is permitted, a trader can be prosecuted for giving his customers short weight or measure. The local inspector can force him to maintain his scales or other instruments in correct adjustment.

Why this enforcement of standards? One obvious answer is that of convenience or necessity. Miles per hour or per gallon mean nothing if a mile or a gallon is not a quantity definable in Land's End or John O'Groats. A small area or special trade can retain its own names for measurement - the stone, the score or the punnet - but this is impracticable for a world-wide market, as witness the agitation for the use of the Metric System or a decimal coinage in Britain.

There is another reason. We do not want to be cheated. And because we do not want to be cheated ourselves we have an interest in seeing that others do not cheat. Cheating is a form of stealing and stealing is anti-social behaviour, that is, it affects the relationships of one individual with another on which any society is based. Thus, a community frames its rules or laws for its own protection, and forces its members in one way or another to conform to them.

But there is another, more fundamental reason why traders should always give a full yard of cloth or a gallon of petrol if such is paid for, one which is not often remembered by modern society. It is clearly illustrated in this quotation from the law of ancient Israel: "You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a great and a small, full and just weight you shall have, a full and just measure you shall have; that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God".¹

This categorical statement, a reference to the practice of using one set of measures for buying and another for selling, always to the merchant's advantage, is repeated in several forms in the Bible, always with the same emphasis. It raises the whole matter above the level of social convenience. The point at issue is not merely that society would be better off if everyone conformed to such a standard, true though this is. A healthy society is obviously preferable to a corrupt one. But the question is also one of the individual's relationship to the Lord his God. The observance of the law is demanded by God not for the preservation of society, but because He Himself is righteous. It has become a moral issue, related to a higher and more permanent standard than the Imperial Yard, even when engraved on gold studs, or than a law which enforces some sort of harmony in a society.

God has laid down certain rules of personal conduct on which a man's eternal life and welfare depend. Neglect of these rules is not merely anti-social, it is sinful, a Bible term which denotes the innate tendency which all men have to pursue their own ends without reference to the will of God in the matter. It needs more than social custom, or even law, to keep sin under control, as this booklet is concerned to point out. And all those parents who are almost literally "worried to death" about the activities and the future of their children would do well to reflect that this coincides with the drift away from Christianity. However pale a shadow of its first-century form, it was Christianity which formerly exercised some restraining influence on young people's behaviour.

Our Bible quotation above gives the moral standard underlying the legal requirements in ancient Israel, which had its own distinctive social customs and scales for measurement. Now, it is possible to change one's standards of weights and measures. Britain could change over to the Metric System, and thousands of Britons with a minimum of inconvenience change to it for a brief period every summer when they visit the Continent on holiday. Social customs and codes of etiquette vary considerably from age to age. But moral standards cannot vary, since they are by God Himself. Morality from the Christian point of view must have a religious basis, and its requirements are binding in every age and on all types of society. The Bible alone clearly reveals the principles of morality, and in the Sermon on the Mount particularly these principles, the reasons for them and their relation to law and social custom are summarised. Before we consider some of these in the context of the modern world it is worth noting how the authority of the statements is emphasised. This is what the Master requires of his disciples: "This is my Son, my Beloved on whom my favour rests", God had said of Christ at the commencement of his ministry.² His requirements are to be accepted not as the moral teaching of a philosopher but as the commands of God to which the Teacher himself submitted completely. His pupils can do no less.

For what are the other possible courses? A man can decide to please himself entirely, and to be bound by no restrictions whatever. In which case he is not, likely to get far. Sooner or later, usually sooner, society will enforce its code of behaviour on him and he will conform or become a criminal, liable to penalties, which will restrict his liberty completely. No one can please himself entirely while in gaol!

Most people, however, recognise the obligation to conform to society, at least outwardly. Society gives them a certain freedom, it creates the conditions under which they live, and they have an interest in preserving that society. This is where the problems begin, and where the conditions arise which nowadays cause so much concern in the minds of those who have the welfare of young people - or any people - at heart. Parents, teachers, doctors, youth leaders, social workers all are aware of a decline in standards of morality in modern society, which have their effects in disease, deformed characters, broken homes and all forms of violence. Respect for public and private property has gone with respect for the laws which protect them, and it seems that all the Ten Commandments have been replaced in the minds of men with one which is all-embracing: "Thou shalt not be found out".

Is this really true? Or is it an impression of people with a natural tendency to ask "Whatever is the modern generation coming to?" The answer is suggested by a recent newspaper article on "Can We Afford to Tolerate Minor Theft?" The author was discussing the statement of the Chief Constable of Southend that it was a waste of public money to prosecute for shoplifting where the value of the goods stolen was small or the offence not persistent or likely to be repeated, and also the opinion of a Reader in Criminology of Oxford University that increasing affluence could reinforce "the existing tendency to be tolerant of minor theft." The writer's comment on these two examples was, that "there is really no strong element of moral judgement at all; or if there is moral judgement, it is offset wholly or partly by external practical factors - notably the cost of bringing the thief to justice in relation to the cost of what he has taken."

Other important facts emerge from the discussion. Magistrates tend to blame not the thief but shopkeepers for putting temptation in the way of the thief; it is an affluent society, not a needy one which encourages theft; it is often "respectable people" who are seen helping themselves: and some firms find it cheaper to accept a measure of theft by their employees than to set up a system to prevent it. One of the factors which has caused the remarkable change in attitude to theft in the last

100 years or less is that society was once exceptionally sensitive to the rights of property, now it is more sensitive to the rights of human beings.

Now our argument is not that the death penalty should be reinstated for shoplifting to the value of 25 pence. Or that society should become insensitive to the rights of human beings. Christian teaching would forbid that anyway. A purely human view of right and wrong is always likely to produce such extremes. A "frightened" society could revert to harsher penalties as easily as an "enlightened" one could abolish them altogether. But surely it is plain that, when moral standards are so influenced by questions of cost, convenience or social conscience that moral objection to crime is weakened, the human view is no true basis for morality.

This is the problem of the secular society: the only morality it can enforce is what people believe to be moral. The danger is, as the author of the newspaper article expressed it, "that if one category of offence is deleted, the next most serious category may become eligible for deletion in turn at some future date." But "Thou shalt not steal" is an authoritative statement which covers shoplifters and train-robbers, juvenile delinquents and fraudulent company directors. The rider to it is not "Lest thou be punished", but "I am the Lord thy God: be thou therefore perfect as I am perfect."

Or take murder and violence. In spite of perplexities as to how to deal with offenders modern society still condemns them. It does not allow people freedom of conscience and action to kill or knock other people on the head, and it does its best to restrain such criminals. Supposing the law were changed or one lived in a society where it is customary to carry a gun in one's pocket - and there are such in the civilised world of the twentieth century! For the Christian the law and social custom have nothing whatever to do with it. "You have learned that our forefathers were told, 'Do not commit murder; anyone who commits murder must be brought to judgement.' But what I tell you is this: Anyone who nurse's anger against his brother must be brought to judgement".³ Moral standards are a discipline on heart and mind, which guides the individual's actions without respect to consequences. Evil thoughts are as immoral as evil actions.

The word "immoral" is most often associated in people's minds with sex, as though immorality was manifested only in this sphere of human life. Indeed, social conventions seem always to have varied between a hypocrisy which professes to regard the whole subject of sex as degrading and veils it in indirect speech, and a frankness and candour pushed to the point of indecency. A Victorian father would have considered himself moral and upright if he threw his erring daughter out and shut the door of his heart as well as his house against her. Many a modern parent does not even guard his own conversation before his children.

One has always to be careful when dealing with statistics. The cynic says they can be manipulated to prove anything. Moreover, when records are kept in greater detail it is possible that higher recorded figures for crime, say, or road accidents could mean simply that there was more information available, not that the rate of accident or crime had increased. But when all allowances have been made it is plain that in Britain alone the number of divorce cases of illegitimate births and of people suffering from venereal disease (particularly young people) has risen sharply over the last ten years. The "new morality" as it is sometimes called seems to be the old immorality on a wider scale.

The reason lies in the changed moral attitude towards sex as well as towards the other things we have discussed. It is argued that young people mature earlier in a society which does not, however give them the opportunity of sufficient security for marriage; that repression is bad psychologically; even that failure in marriage is so serious a thing that wider sexual experience ought to be sought prior to it - presumably to increase the chances of finding a suitable partner. In other words, the purely biological aspects of human life are to be exalted above the spiritual. Sometimes it is claimed

that people need to react in this way because of a hunger which must be satisfied in the same way as hunger for food, or there may be serious consequences. The contrary is in fact true. All appetites grow by indulgence, and in the modern world the sexual appetite is stimulated and indulged to the full. It has become glamorised in picture, word and song. It is almost exclusively the theme of the "pop" singer, and the advertisers have thoroughly exploited it. It has been used to sell anything from shampoo to central heating.

The argument is that this "frank" attitude is a safety-valve, an outlet for repressed instincts which helps to avoid perversion or illicit sexual indulgence. It has also been said that all the young people, again the subject of a newspaper article, who claim - yes, claim - to have had intercourse before leaving school, were in fact only boasting. Well, which is the more realistic attitude to take? That which says that if people give free reign to their conversation and their fancy, then their actions are less likely to be perverse? Or that of Christ who said, "You have learned that they were told. 'Do not commit adultery'. But what I tell you is this: If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart"?⁴ If one can control his heart he can usually control his actions. The converse is never true.

The Sermon on the Mount deals with other aspects of morality, many of them not often considered as such. Again they are absolute standards (God's standards) which bear no relation to the popular thought of any age, and where connected with law are not concerned with the letter of it and the avoidance of any penalty, but its moral basis. The swearing of oaths, for example, found necessary in law because it is not possible to depend upon everybody to tell the truth. It has been well said that no one ought to swear an oath on the Bible without believing what it says, and if he believes what it says he cannot swear on it. For "You have learned that they were told, 'Do not break your oath', and, 'Oaths sworn to the Lord must be kept'. But what I tell you is this: You are not to swear at all - not by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by earth, for it is his footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King, nor by your own head, because you cannot turn one hair of it white or black. Plain 'Yes' or 'No' is all you need to say; anything beyond that comes from the devil".⁵ If this applies to legal oath - taking which has a serious purpose, what should be said of all the various expletives with which it is common practice to interlard trivial conversation?

It should not be thought that Bible teaching on moral standards is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount alone, or that we have covered all the points with which it deals. There are the questions of dishonest work, of hypocrisy, of keeping up with the Joneses, of unfair dealing in all departments of life. And the Sermon is only a summary of what is dealt with elsewhere in the New Testament, often with special relevance to a practical situation, like payment of rates and taxes, marriage problems or labour relations.⁶ Nor should the Old Testament be excluded, for although the Mosaic law was given as law it had, as we have seen, a distinct moral basis designed to keep in mind the Lord God as a God of purpose in His dealings with His people. The theme of the prophets is often the moral aspect of that purpose. In a, Midland "Red" bus the law, now honoured more in the breach than the observance that "children under 14 may travel at half fare providing they do not occupy a seat while adults are standing" provides a definite economic incentive to courtesy! A similar law in Israel, not concerned with public transport, said. "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of an old man and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord". Indeed the whole chapter which contains that injunction has laws against stealing, swindling, slander and sexual irregularities. It is introduced with the words "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy", and each section ends with "I am the Lord your God". Failure to observe these laws, was an offence against God as well as against the state.

What other authority can there be? If moral standards are equated with public opinion they will degenerate until every man does what is right in his own eyes unless forcibly restrained by law. And

as has been said before, the only morality the law can ultimately enforce is what people believe to be moral. For in practice, what specifically moral teaching is provided by contemporary society, even on its own terms? What guidance can young people who become members of it expect? It is too often assumed that the compulsory religious education in schools - and even this is now regarded as an infringement of the child's liberty of thought - will do what compulsory mathematics and physical education are supposed to do in equipping a child for adult life. But there is no evidence that when the child has flexed his spiritual muscles a few times he is morally equipped to enter a secular society, which completely ignores that aspect of his education. In the introduction to his book on Teenage Religion, Harold Loukes says, "Schools are expected to make their pupils love good books when their parents do not read; be discriminating when their parents are being pushed around by advertising; be honest and truthful in a world that makes little effort to be either; to be unselfish in a world that is proud of its organised greed. In the world of values school life represents almost the last chance for many children to learn to love the best; and the school leaver's 'goodbye to all that' is, for many of the riches of the mind and spirit, final, his is particularly true of religious instruction, laid upon the schools by Act of Parliament, but thereafter laid upon nobody who does not want it. This curious requirement is made by an adult community that has virtually cut itself off from religion: nine tenths have dropped the habit of churchgoing; three quarters never go at all. The reasons for this statutory injunction on the schools to do something society does not do for itself have been a puzzle, both to agnostics and to Christians. Professor Niblett is probably right in saying that religious instruction is demanded in the Act because 'though belief in Christianity is not actual in the majority of people, many of them wish it were'."

These words from the chairman of a Study Group appointed specifically to enquire into the question of religious education in non-selective secondary schools help to underline Bible teaching on the relationship between religion and morality. It is because the community has virtually cut itself off from religion that moral problems have become so acute. We have seen that Bible teaching sets a very high standard, making purity of thought and control of the heart the guiding principles. A conventional pattern of conduct is not enough. We also know only too well that in modern society even conventional patterns are breaking up. "Thus, because they have not seen fit to acknowledge God, he has given them up to their own depraved reason. This leads them to break all rules of conduct". Another quotation from some social worker or psychologist? No, this time the words, very much to the point, come from the pen of the Apostle Paul.⁷

In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul describes the moral situation in the world of his day, a world which, like our own, had reached a high degree of "civilisation" and material prosperity. Everyone of his phrases could be applied to our contemporary situation. "They are filled with every kind of injustice, mischief, rapacity and malice; they are one mass of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery and malevolence; whisperers and scandal-mongers, hateful to God, insolent, arrogant, and boastful: they invent new kinds of mischief, they show no loyalty to parents, no conscience, no fidelity to their plighted word; they are without natural affection and without pity". "Robbers with violence, warring Mods. and Rockers, juvenile train-wreckers, the gutter press, pedlars in filth and gossip, the "I'm all right Jack" fraternity, the mockers at religion and the despisers of authority - all, and many more besides, are comprehended in this terrible indictment. And the rest of society has no cause for pride because many who would not actually commit some of the crimes enumerated take, their pleasure in reading or seeing plays and films; about them. "They know well enough the just decree of God, that those who behave like this deserve to die, and yet they do it; not only so they actually applaud such practices".

But Paul goes even further. The purpose of his letter (and the purpose of this booklet), is not the condemnation of everybody else. Human nature is human nature in all of us, and will manifest itself in sinful ways unless it is re- strained by some means, as the Apostle says, "You, therefore, have no

defence - you who sit in judgement, whoever you may be - for in judging your fellow-man you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, are equally guilty. It is admitted that God's judgement is rightly passed upon all who commit such crimes as these; and do you imagine - you who pass judgement on the guilty while committing the same crimes yourself - do you imagine that you, any more than they, will escape the judgement of God? Or do you think lightly of his wealth of kindness, of tolerance, and of patience, without recognizing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to a change of heart?"¹⁰

The Apostle's purpose is to underline the gravity of a situation in which moral standards are so low and to show how that all men without distinction - "for God has no favourites"¹¹ - are implicated in it, and to emphasise two points of fundamental importance. First, that there is to come a crisis when God will once more intervene in human affairs in "the day of retribution, when God's just judgement will be revealed, and he will pay every man for what he has done";¹² and secondly, that by the preaching of the Gospel God is earnestly seeking to lead men - again without favouritism - to a change of heart before it is too late. As Paul expressed it in the ancient university town of Athens, before a group of philosophers who tried to build a system of moral behaviour around their own theories of the origin of the universe, "As for the times of ignorance, God has overlooked them; but now he commands mankind, a" men everywhere, to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his 'choosing: of this he has given assurance to a" by raising him from the dead".¹³

This change of heart - otherwise called repentance - is only possible if there is understanding and belief of God's requirements and intentions. The purpose of this booklet is to appeal to a" its readers to read and study the Bible, the word of God, and accept it as their only authority in matters of belief and conduct. We have already seen how reliable and accurate is its assessment of the human situation. It is in fact the only book which takes such a realistic view of human nature and explains the reason for its moral failures. This is because it deals with the subject from the point of view of God, the creator of man, who is the only ultimate authority on the purpose of man's existence and therefore of the standards upon which he must regulate his life. These standards are not laid up in some heavenly museum to be checked upon from time to time. They are standards revealed in living history, especially in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was the embodiment of all divine principles.

Sickness and death entered into the world because man preferred his own standards rather than those set by God. Although life and happiness depended upon obedience to God's word Adam chose what seemed to him pleasure, self-expression, freedom from restraint, to find as we find today that it means pain, bondage to whatever form of self-indulgence takes our fancy, and even the destruction of a personality. But the same Word of God in the Bible is the only book that says so clearly and with such authority, "Do not set your hearts on the godless world or anything in it. Anyone who loves the world is a stranger to the Father's love. Everything the world affords, all that panders to the appetites, or entices the eyes, all the glamour of its life, springs not from the Father but from the godless world. And that world is passing away with all its allurements, but he who does God's will stands for evermore".¹⁴

Men have deduced from the fact that man has a conscience and from the wonders of science that there is a Supreme Being. The Bible had already forestalled them even in that when it declared that "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork", a fact which, Paul says, leaves men with "no possible defence for their conduct" since "His everlasting power and deity have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made".¹⁵ But it is only in His revealed word that God has shown men His thoughts and intentions, set a pattern for their conduct, offered the gift of immortality and revealed what the end of all things is

to be. Nowhere else could we learn of the coming Kingdom where the legal, social and moral code will be based entirely on the standards God has set and not on what every man considers to be right in his own eyes. Those who wish to be "perfect even as their Father who is in heaven is perfect" will base their lives on these standards now. It will need considerable change of heart and mind for any of us to achieve it and it is the only standard to set before young people from their earliest days if they are to have any hope of keeping themselves free from the bondage into which free thinking and loose conduct inevitably plunge them and of sharing in the everlasting life to come.

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to thy Word".¹⁶

REFERENCES

Old Testament references are the Revised Standard Version, those in the New Testament to the New English Bible.

¹ Deuteronomy 25:13.

² Matthew 3:17.

³ Matthew 5:21, 22.

⁴ Matthew 5:27, 28.

⁵ Matthew 5:33-37.

⁶ Ephesians 5:22 – 6:8; Romans 13, etc.

⁷ Romans 1:28.

⁸ Romans 1:29-31.

⁹ Romans 1:32.

¹⁰ Romans 2:1-4.

¹¹ Romans 2:11.

¹² Romans 2:5, 6.

¹³ Acts 17:30-31. The whole speech from verse 22 is worth reading.

¹⁴ 1 John 2:15-17.

¹⁵ Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:20, 21.

¹⁶ Psalm 119:9.

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