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guides to the deepest questions of life.*  
– Justin Brierley

The  
**Bible**  
and  
**Ethics**

*Finding the moral foundations  
of the Christian faith*

David Gooding   John Lennox





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# **The Bible and Ethics**

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Christian Faith

# **The Bible and Ethics**

Finding the Moral Foundations  
of the Christian Faith

**David Gooding**

**John Lennox**

**Myrtlefield Encounters**

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w: [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

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# Introduction

## *Changing Times and the Danger of Moral Chaos*

Today, many parts of the world are convulsed with very grave problems—economic, social, ethnic and political. These problems are compounded by the fact that in many places the old ideologies that held nations, and indeed empires, together have lost their grip on people's thinking, or else have collapsed completely. There is therefore a real danger of moral chaos. New thinking, new planning, new teaching are desperately needed. But here a difficulty arises. With the demise of older ideologies and with nothing as yet to take their place, whole nations find themselves without any shared moral values to form a basis for their ethical standards. There is, therefore, no motivation for people to deny themselves in the interests of their neighbour and of society as a whole. And without this, however good any new planning is, the carrying out of the plans is liable to falter, or even to fail altogether.

## **Religion as a source of values?**

In countries where the norms of behaviour were founded on some form of atheistic ideology, the natural reaction of many people in their disappointment and bewilderment at the collapse of those norms is to turn to religion. On the other hand it is not obvious to everyone that religion has the necessary answers either. It is notorious that in some parts of the world people are fighting, torturing and killing their opponents in the name of religion. And that surely shows an appalling perversion of human values; though, to be fair, it often likewise represents an equally appalling perversion of the actual tenets of the religion in whose name it is done.

## **Our responsibility**

All this places a very heavy burden on those who do not want the upcoming generation to face life in societies devoid of values. And teachers in particular, at whatever level we teach, owe it to our students to communicate moral principles and ethical norms that can provide them with a sound and healthy basis for their future private, social and professional lives. Scientists may well be tempted to argue that teaching students morality and ethics is none of their business. And maybe it is not their direct responsibility. Certainly science as such cannot give us answers even to the moral questions which science itself raises. Science has given us the hydrogen bomb; science by itself cannot tell us whether it is morally right to use it. But science teachers ought surely to

be concerned that their students be given adequate moral guidelines for reaching a responsible decision in such matters. Science, if altogether devoid of morality, might still make our students clever; but it might also make them clever monsters. And the same goes for subjects like economics and social sciences. Social engineering, based on an inadequate assessment of the intrinsic value of each individual human being, has been known in the past to carry out its schemes of population shift at the cost of millions of human lives simply for the sake of economic advantage.

### **The importance of immediate action**

For most teachers, it is not primarily the moral health of the world, or even of their own nation, but rather that of their own students that concerns them. These young people cannot wait for guidance until their teachers have developed some moral philosophy of their own. That might take years, by which time they will be grown up and gone. We urgently need to give our children here and now sound guidelines on moral values and ethics, lest they grow up a 'lost generation' as the result of a vacuum in serious moral teaching. This is what made an experienced teacher who grew up in a Communist country tell us on one occasion: 'We were taught to believe that Lenin was kind, loved children and sacrificed everything for the good of society. Now that belief is gone.' Her remarks would resonate with teachers in many countries today, for the fact is that around the world the ideas that once seemed like solid foundations for our lives have crumbled.

Though still an atheist herself, this teacher added: 'That is why we have to turn to Jesus. Either the children will learn from his example, or they will turn to crime, drugs and alcohol.' Her observation, of course, is good as far as it goes. Certainly, if everyone took seriously Christ's command to 'do to others what we would have them do to us' and to 'love even our enemies', the world would become a happier place overnight.

### **The ethics of Jesus and truth**

On the other hand, young people have minds of their own, and it is our job to see to it that they are encouraged to use them. If we try to teach them simply the ethics of Jesus they may well start asking us some fundamental questions. 'Love our neighbours as ourselves? Why should we? Did not Jesus himself, who preached and practised this kind of thing, get crucified as a result of not putting himself first and sticking up for his own rights? And shall not we too be worse off if we follow his example? If other people prosper in business by cheating and lying and profiteering, why should we always tell the truth, like Christ says we should? Is there some value in telling the truth for its own sake?' In other words, we can teach the ethics of Jesus adequately only if we also teach the fundamental and absolute values and beliefs on which he based his ethics.

What, after all, is the value of an individual human being? If I own a computer, and it does not work very well, I am free to smash it, if I want to. If my neighbour or my business rival does not suit me, why should I not destroy them too, if I can get away with it?

## Introduction

Even if I start now to follow the ethical teaching of Jesus myself, the world at large is still liable to be more or less as bad in fifty years' time as it is now. Is it worthwhile, then, trying to follow Jesus' teaching myself? What ultimate hope is there either for me or for the world?

### **Our programme**

To be able to answer questions like these and to make sense of Jesus' ethical teaching, we need to be able to trace its roots in the Old Testament and to follow the outworking of its implications in the New. That means, in fact, teaching at least the main major lessons of the whole Bible. That is a daunting task, particularly for anyone who has never attempted it before and may not even have read the Bible.

Of course, it is also a very worthwhile task. Even from the point of view of world history and literature, no other book has ever had such a vast influence on world thought as the Bible. No one, indeed, could be regarded as fully educated until they have read the Bible and understood at first hand the secret of its impact.

But for all that, the task remains colossal. And therefore we propose in the following chapters to present a survey of some of the leading historical events and personages, ideas, poetry, moral values and ethics of both Old Testament and New. At various points throughout this book we have included explanatory notes, discussion questions and suggestions as to how the moral and spiritual implications of this material can be made relevant to a class of students or else used to enhance discussions among the members of

## The Bible & Ethics

a study group. References from the Bible are given at the start of most chapters, and we encourage you to read these passages whether you are using the material in groups or on your own.

Our sincere hope is that you may find this material helpful in these changing times, whether you are a teacher, a parent, a student or someone who is interested in taking a guided journey through the Bible.

David Gooding  
John Lennox