

“TOØ MESSY” / Part 2: Loving and Loathing

2.3: Right and Wrong / October 25, 2015

Okay, let start off with a quiz. Just 3 questions. I am going to give you three scenarios, and I want you to determine whether the people I describe do right or wrong. That’s it: did they do right, or did they do wrong?

- Scenario 1: A woman is cleaning out her attic and she finds an old American flag. It is stained and tattered. It really can’t be flown, and she doesn’t want the flag anymore ... so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom. Did she do right or wrong? No problem, or big problem... And if you think she did wrong, what makes it wrong?
- Scenario 2: A family’s dog is killed by a car in front of their house. It was a good sized dog, and only the head was injured, so they found a recipe in a Korean cookbook and cook the dog for supper. Did they do right or wrong? No problem, or big problem! And, if they did wrong, what makes it wrong? ... It’s just a dog.
- Scenario 3: A brother and sister like to kiss each other on the mouth. That’s it, nothing more. They just like how it feels. Is it right or wrong? No problem, or big problem... And if it’s wrong, what makes it wrong?

By the way, there is no answer key. And I suspect that if we threw these open for discussion, some of you guys would get pretty fired up. But I’m really not after whether any of these is right or wrong, I’m way more interested in how we decide. Every day we make decisions about whether something is right or wrong. How do we decide? How should we decide as Jesus followers?

Now, let me back up a little. If you are new here today, we are in an extended series we’re calling “TOØ MESSY,” can we lean in “to the messy,” like Jesus did; or do we find some people “too messy,” so we

lean away? You see, our natural inclination is to lean away from the messy; and when we lean away from them, they lean away from us. But Jesus challenges us to lean into the messes – with God’s grace, and God’s truth. Because, to be honest, that’s what he did for us. That’s the big picture, that’s the overarching idea. Our job is to lean in to the messy.

So we have been exploring why this is so hard for us. This is incredibly important, guys. If we are going to be God honoring Christians, if we are going to be a God-honoring church, we need to get this one right. So we have been exploring the whole notion of disgust, because that’s what makes it hard to lean in. Why do people disgust us, and what do we tend to do with people when they disgust us, and how do we keep on loving people when they do disgusting things – like Jesus did; like Jesus does ... with us. Last week we looked at how we tend to weigh sins. Even though we know that all sin is sin (from God’s perspective), in our minds we see some sins as way worse than others, and we lean away from people who sin big sins. Jesus didn’t.

And this week I want to explore how we determine right and wrong. How do we decide? How should we decide? And we’re going to discover that if we mess up on this one, we’ll never be the people God wants us to be, and we’ll never get done what God wants us to do. So, we need to get this one right. So how do we decide what is right and what is wrong? I’m telling you, it’s not always easy, and people in this room decide very differently.

- Your kid comes out as gay (he says he was born that way). He moves in with his gay lover, and he asks for your approval. Do you give him your approval, or do you tell him you love him, but you can’t approve of what he’s doing? As a Jesus follower which is right, and which is wrong? How do you decide? What would our world tell you to do? How do they decide what is right, and what is wrong?

- Or, you are not married, but you are sexually active. You are not fooling around with anyone who is married, but you are fooling around with another consenting single adult. Is that right or wrong? How do you decide? Would our world consider it right or wrong? How do they decide?
- Or, you stumble on an incredible steal at a garage sale. You know it's priceless; the sellers – who need the money – they have no clue. Should you give them just what they are asking, or should you let them know what it's really worth? What's right; what's wrong? How do you decide? What would our world tell you to do? How does it decide what's right and what's wrong?
- Or, you learn that a close friend is involved in an affair. Do you tell his spouse? Or, you walk past a homeless person begging on the street. Do you give him any money? Or a family member asks for a loan. You've got the money, and they need it, but they don't handle money well. What do you do? What's right, and what's wrong? And how do you decide? Who or what influences your decisions? What grid do you use to determine the right thing to do.

And here's a piece that complicates matters. Sometimes we change our minds. Have you ever changed your mind about whether something is right or wrong? I have.

- It used to be morally acceptable, in fact it used to be right, to spank your kids. In fact if you didn't, you were probably a bad parent. And now a lot of people think spanking is child abuse (probably some of you, judging by how your kids behave). Have you changed your mind on spanking? Our world has.
- It used to be morally acceptable to let your girls play with Barbie dolls, and your boys play with toy guns. That was great when I was growing up. That's changing. Have you changed your mind on Barbie dolls, and toy guns? Our world has.

- It used to be considered thrifty to shop at Walmart where you could buy clothes from third world factories and food from corporately owned farms. Now they picket big box chain stores that have the audacity to sell such stuff.
- We used to get all excited about fast cars with massive engines. Now big oil is at most a necessary evil, and big cars, and big trucks are almost immoral. Have you changed your mind about what a person should drive? Our world has?
- We are shifting our moral views on things like plastic bottles, and disposable diapers, and fast food, and sugar, and beef, and even bacon. I saw an article last week that claimed that bacon could be as big a cancer threat as smoking. These guys are out of control!

But sometimes we change our minds going the other way. Why do we do that? Why do we decide that some things we used to call wrong, are now just fine? I grew up thinking that drinking any amount of alcohol or smoking any kind of tobacco was flat out wrong. Now I still don't drink, and I still don't smoke, but I'm not so quick to call any use of alcohol or any use of tobacco a sin any more. I've changed my mind; have you? There are all kinds of issues that our world used to call wrong, that most folks find quite acceptable now.

- Children born to single parents once were once called "illegitimate," or crasser yet, "bastards." But today nearly 2/3 of our Millennials have at least one baby outside of marriage, and that is considered perfectly acceptable.
- At one time divorce was scandalous; today it is almost normal.
- Recreational drugs have become acceptable, even legal in some of our states.
- Atheism used to be considered immoral. Now it is considered enlightened, and open minded, and progressive, and

sophisticated. We're the ones they are calling immoral ... go figure! We've changed our minds on what is right and what's wrong.

So how do you decide what's right, and what's wrong? Do you let someone else decide for you? And if you decide to be the decider; what criteria do you use? Now this is hard stuff for us – even in church. We fight wars over this stuff – even in church. People walk away from churches because we disagree on what's right, and what's wrong.

- How about yoga pants – are they okay for church? On stage? If they are not okay up here are they okay down there, or over in the student sanctuary? And if they are not okay here, are they okay out there?
- How about these basketball shorts our young guys always wear ... to church? Are they okay, here in worship? How do you decide? Or flip-flops? How about our kids who like to lead worship up here barefoot? Is that okay?
- How about the fog machine we use? Some folks think the fog and the lights corrupt worship so that it feels like a show. Randy told me that last week a family walked out of his service; told the greeters they wouldn't be back ... because of the fog machine. What do you think? Right, wrong, neutral? How do you decide?
- How about the preacher? I intentionally use words that are a little earthy – because that's where most of us live. Is that wrong? Randy and I are digging into a book called Unclean for some of the themes of this series. The guy who wrote it is a professor at Abilene, a very fine Church of Christ school down in Texas. Well, this guy got in trouble at his church for preaching in jeans, with his shirt untucked, and he used the word "crap." The young guys at church thought it was fine, they didn't bat an eyelash. The older guys thought it was vulgar and crude. Was he wrong? Randy told me that one family left his church when

he was preaching on the prodigal son because he talked about the “pig poo.” Was Randy wrong? How do you decide?

We could make this list pretty long if we tried. This is hard stuff. And this question of how to decide right and wrong is really, really old. We Jesus followers have been debating this stuff from the beginning. Have any of you guys ever read the letter in the Bible we call 1 Corinthians? It’s about 16 chapters long, a pretty interesting read. Because they are struggling with this question: how do we decide what’s right and what’s wrong?

- Chapter 5 is about how to deal with a guy in the church who is sleeping with his step-mom. It’s not just about whether a Jesus follower can do that (that’s clearly wrong), it’s about what to do with a Jesus follower who is behaving very badly?
- Chapter 6 is about whether it is right or wrong to take a fellow Christian to court. What do you think? Is it right or wrong? How do you know?
- Chapter 7: What about divorce? Is it ever right? Is it always wrong? How do you decide?
- Chapters 8, 9, and 10: Can I eat meat that has been offered to an idol in a pagan temple? Is it still just meat, or am I supporting idolatry somehow? And what if I decide it’s okay, but my choice offends another Jesus follower? Do I have to avoid doing anything that might offend one of you? How do I know what’s right or what’s wrong?
- Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 are about worship. What is allowed in worship? How do we treat each other in worship? What’s the right thing to do?

Well ... let’s get to it. Let me show you some principles all of us use to decide what’s right and what’s wrong. And then I’ll try to suggest how a Jesus follower applies these principles. Now if you are not a Jesus

follower, you probably won't want to apply these principles the same way we do. But this still might help you understand how you tick. And you might discover that the Christian way makes a lot of sense. Here are 5 moral principals we use to determine right or wrong. These are foundational principals that all of us use.

Principle #1: Do no harm. Is it going to hurt somebody, unnecessarily. You see, it's right to take care of people, isn't it? And it's wrong to hurt them, unless you have to for some reason. Kindness is good, compassion is good, mercy is good; hurting someone is bad. So, do no harm. You buy that? Some people would use this principle to justify smoking marijuana: What does it hurt? Who does it hurt? I'm doing no harm. Some people use this principle to justify consensual sex outside of marriage: As long as no one gets hurt.

Principle #2: Fairness. Is it fair? Are you treating people equally? Are people getting the same opportunities, and the same pay for the same work? Are women treated with the same respect as men? Are blacks treated with the same respect as whites? This is pretty big one today, isn't it? Are your kids being given the same opportunity as my kids? Are there equal rights? Is there equal justice? Is it fair? Fair is right; inequality is wrong, right?

Principle #3: Loyalty. You stick up for your own. You've got each other's backs. You don't throw a friend under a bus. Loyalty is good, disloyalty is bad. Think patriotism. Think team spirit. If you don't defend your family, if you don't defend your team, if you don't defend your country, you are wrong. Right? You don't rat on someone. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, right? Isn't that how a lot of people think? In fact, I'm supposed to be loyal, even if I suspect my side is wrong. It's a Louisville fan trying to justify or evade the moral failures of their recruiters. It's a wife defending her husband when she knows he's wrong. It's a Republican attacking anything a Democrat does, or a Democrat attacking anything a Republican does. This one can get pretty twisted.

Principle #4: Purity / Sanctity. Anything that demeans a man, anything that demeans a woman, anything that demeans God is wrong, right? If you show disrespect for what I consider sacred, it is wrong. If I believe human life is sacred, and life begins at conception, abortion is wrong. If I believe life is sacred then euthanasia is wrong...and suicide... and maybe even capital punishment. You see, purity has roots in the sacred — that which is set apart by God. So sexual sin violates the sacredness of God-ordained marriage union. Therefore it is wrong, right?

One more, Principle #5: Authority / Respect. Respecting authority is right, disrespecting authority is wrong, right? So you respect your parents, you respect your teachers, you respect the elders of your church, you respect your bosses, you respect your government ... you respect your God. If you fail to respect those who have authority over you, any action or attitude that grows out of your disrespect is wrong, right? Sometimes respect means obedience. But this can get hard. All of us are under authority – all of us. In fact we are under multiple authorities. And when those in authority over us contradict each other, which one do you follow? Are you going to listen to teachers, or to your parents? Are you going to listen to your government, or to your God?

You see, these five principles form a grid by which nearly all of us decide right and wrong. But we don't treat the principles as equals. We prioritize them differently. And they don't always lead us to the same answer. Take same sex marriage. Which of these principles is the biggest when it comes to same sex marriage?

- Do no harm. Well, some would say, it's not hurting anyone. Others would say, Well yeah it is; it's hurting the kids!
- How about fairness? Are we treating gays fairly and equally if we oppose same sex marriage? That's a big deal to a lot of people.
- How about Loyalty? Loyalty to a friend, or loyalty to a lover?
- How about purity / Sanctity? Is a guy lifestyle in itself disgusting, degrading? Does it degrade people; does it degrade marriage;

does it degrade God? Some people think this one is huge when it comes to same sex marriage; others don't think it applies at all.

- How about authority? And does the authority of the government trump the authority of God, when it comes to protecting the "rights" of our people? Whereas some who oppose same sex marriage say that the authority of God's word is bigger than all these others principles combined.

You see that last one, that principle of authority is a big deal for us Jesus followers. When the will of God is clear, the rest of these principles don't count much for us Jesus followers. And yet, this principle of respect, this principle of authority, especially the authority of God and his Word has been under attack since the 60s. We don't automatically grant respect to those in authority – not even God. In fact our children are taught to question, even oppose those in authority. Randy and Mary Ann visited their grandkids a couple of weeks ago. They are great kids, almost as perfect as mine – but all our kids have some issues. They have a granddaughter named Josie, who is 8, and who struggles with respecting authority. Go figure! It didn't help when she told her parents about what the school counselor was teaching them. The theme: "Don't give in." It was probably supposed to be about peer pressure, maybe dealing with strangers. But the counselor had drilled home the point: "Don't give in! You are in charge of you! Don't let anyone else influence that!" Which to Josie means, "No one can tell me what to do! I don't need to listen to my parents, I don't have to do what they tell me, because I am in charge of me!" A child with a leaning toward belligerence doesn't need that kind of encouragement. And yet that's what our culture is pushing right now.

And as our culture has moved to diminish the principle of respect, and authority when deciding right and wrong, God's Word is becoming less and less important in these decisions. And as the authority of the Word of God shrinks, fewer things are considered sacred. So there is less emphasis on purity. Virginity is no longer honored as a virtue; in fact it's treated as an embarrassing sign that no one wants you. Culture has become casual with gutter language, and provocative

dress, and promiscuous lifestyle choices. And if it was just out there, that would be one thing; but the authority of God's will is under attack here too.

And as authority and purity lose ground, the principles of do no harm, and fairness gain ground. Now it's not about what God thinks, it's up to me to decide what's right and wrong, applying these principles as I see fit.

In reality we are left with three options:

- I can make the rules. I can decide for myself what is right and what is wrong for me. And if I am arrogant, I will decide for you, too. We'll all play God.
- Or, I can let the culture make the rules. We can let culture play God. Now, understand that if culture makes the rules, the rules are going to keep changing.
- Or, as a Jesus follower, I can let God make the rules. That's hard for most of us. First it's hard because most of us never take the time to really search out what God wants; I just assume He agrees with me, and you just assume he agrees with you ... and he often doesn't. And second, it is hard because sometimes when we learn what he wants, it's not what we want. Sometimes we just don't agree with God. We just don't want to do it God's way.

But we're Jesus followers! And all of us Jesus followers have made this confession: I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and I accept him as my Savior, and my ... Lord. Which means it's not about what I want, or what I like, or what I think. It's about what he wants, and what he likes, and what he thinks. I want to wrap this up by taking you to one of my favorite places in the Bible, and it speaks directly to how we decide what's right, and what's wrong. Here it is: 1 Corinthians 4.3-4. It's powerful stuff.

The apostle Paul says, "It matters very little to me what you think of me, even less where I rank in popular opinion." He says, "I don't really care what you think of me, and I don't really care what they think of

me.” Now that kind of sounds rude, doesn’t it? But this is what he’s saying. He says, “You are not going to decide what’s right and wrong for me; they are not going to decide what’s right and wrong for me. I won’t be driven by peer pressure, I won’t be driven by culture.

He keeps on going. He says, “I don’t even judge myself.” Well that’s weird. He says, “It doesn’t even matter whether I think is right or wrong.” He says, “My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.” Wow! That’s so radical! We think, “It feels so right it can’t be wrong.” Paul says, “Poppycock.” We tell ourselves, “Well it doesn’t feel wrong!” Paul says, “So; I don’t care what you feel!” We tell ourselves, “If it feels good, do it!” Paul says, “That’s crazy.” Because ... and here’s where he gets to the point.

He says, “It’s the Lord who judges me.” And it is his opinion that really matters. He says, “It is the Lord who will examine me and who will decide the right that I have done, and the wrong that I have done.” You see, in the end, they don’t get to decide what’s right and wrong for me; in fact, I don’t even get to decide what’s right and wrong for me; I’m a Jesus follower, I am a servant of God ... and that’s his call. And that goes for you too. Do you buy that?

Here’s one reason this is so important for this little series, guys. We are not very good at deciding for ourselves what’s right, and what’s wrong. We are not as smart as we think we are, we are not as good as we think we are. We are not as smart as God, and we are not as good as God. When we try to outthink God we inevitably make one of two mistakes. We either go soft on truth, or we soft and grace. And the messy need 100% truth, and 100% grace. I need 100% truth and 100% grace; you need 100% truth and 100% grace; and so do they. And doing life his way, and trusting him even when his way is hard, trusting him even when his way seems weird to us, that’s the only way we’ll ever come close to that perfect blend of uncompromised truth and inexhaustible grace.