Well, school is starting back, already has started for a lot of folks and seems like this would be a good time to do a message on how to tell right from wrong. You know your children and your grandchildren are going to be facing new opportunities this year to do right or do wrong that they've never faced before. They're going to encounter influences, some of which will not be good influences and really it's not just our kids who are going to be encountering that. You are too! And what makes it especially important for us to talk about this is that we live in a culture where there is more and more confusion about what's right and what's wrong. And so I want to do my best today to draw from the scriptures some principles that can really help us make these tough decisions.

And I want to say, first of all, that there are two, two types of teachings in scripture regarding right and wrong. First of all, there are some passages of scripture that say very plainly, just in black and white, clearly “this is right, this is wrong.” Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. It’s Romans 13:13, “Because we belong to the day we must live decent lives for all to see. Don’t participate in the darkness, wild parties and drunkenness or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living or in quarreling and jealousy.” There’s an example of some things that are just plainly wrong. There are those things in the Bible and there are plenty of those type commands in the Bible and it covers a lot of the moral territory. But at the same time there’s a whole lot of moral issues that are not clearly spelled out for us in the scripture. And the better you know your Bible the more aware of that you are. There are a whole lot of moral issues that you and your children and grandchildren are going to face for which there’s no specific thou shalt or thou shalt not verse. What do you do with those?

Well, in these cases a Christian has to, has to search the scripture for himself, for herself. You’ve got to sincerely seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit. You’ve got to learn to draw principles from the Bible and see how to apply them in your lives because there are some things that are, for the Christian, a matter of personal conscious, things you have to workout for yourself. That’s part of what the Bible is talking about in Philippians 2:12 where it says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” The fear and the trembling means, you are
very careful here. You are not wanting to make the wrong decision. You understand how important moral issues are and so with reverence and fear and awe before God, you’re seeking Him for direction. That’s what we’re doing here today.

I want to give you an example of an issue like that. In fact, the entire 14th chapter of Romans is all about these, these matters that are not spelled out in black and white, things that we do have to make personal decisions on and we’re not all going to make the same ones. Let’s read verses 2-4. Here you have an example of something that was a big, big deal in the church of the 1st Century. “For instance, one believer believes it’s alright to eat anything but another believer with a sensitive conscious will eat only vegetables.” Now, I know that for the vast majority of folks in this room what we eat may be something we take very seriously for dietary reasons and for health reasons but not for religious reasons. That’s not something that is a spiritual issue for most of us but you need to know it was in the 1st Century. The closest counterpart I can think of to the 21st Century within the church is the matter of drinking alcohol. You say, “Is it right to, is it alright to have a glass of wine with a meal?” There are some Christian people who are very comfortable with that. They’ve worked through that before God and that’s not a moral sin for them. Other people have a different view of that and don’t want anything to do with it at all. And so, use that type thing as an example when you’re reading about what to eat and not to eat. That will help you take something, the principle from the 1st Century and apply it in the 21st Century.

I’m going to read that again now. “For instance, one person believes it’s alright to eat anything but another believe with a sensitive conscious will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don’t.” Do you hear that? “Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don’t.” Because here’s what happens, for example, people who, who have no problem with having a, having a drink with their meal tend to sort of roll their eyes at Christian people who think that’s wrong. On the other hand, it goes the other way too. “And those who don’t eat certain foods must not condemn those who do for God has accepted them.” Now here we go again. I know a whole lot of Christian people who are teetotalers and they look down with a judgmental attitude on anybody who’s a Christian and uses any alcohol at all.

This is the kind of stuff that we’re talking about. It’s not new. Christians have always had to work through these type things. From the very beginning and so it will be to the end of time. There are certain things that are black and white, right or wrong, you just turn or your burn. It’s just that simple. There are other things that you have to work out for yourself with fear and trembling.
And my goal today, my goal today is to help us all tell the difference, learn to tell the difference between the things that are moral absolutes and things that are matters of personal conscious. We've got to learn to do that because otherwise we will pass judgment on those who don't share our position on these matters of personal conscious and that's a dangerous thing. It's just as dangerous though especially in today's culture to not believe in moral absolutes or not and just find ways to justify almost any kind of immorality, to make excuses that condense ourselves something is okay when Jesus Himself, the scripture itself plainly told us it was wrong. In such cases we're fooling nobody but ourselves. And so we've got to avoid either of these extremes.

And let me, let me, let me, let me say this. Whether you are a Christian who looks at moral and religious matters with a very narrow, rigid perspective or you are one of those Christians who is more open minded and you're, you're, you find it easy to understand how different people can see things different ways. Whichever camp you're in, whichever type personality you are there are good things about being that way but if you're not careful there are also bad things about being that way. There are dangers. There are pros and there are cons.

For example, I want to give you an illustration of, of, of being really by the book legalistic. This is a true story. I cut it out of a news magazine in 2008. I've been saving it for just the right day. This fits today. True story. A Wisconsin woman has spent six days in jail for unpaid library fines. Her name is Keely Javon. She's a mother and a college student. Police initially pulled her over for not having a light bulb over her back license plate and then they ran her and discovered, ran her number and discovered she had unpaid library fines. I think maybe this was the campus police. Then they informed her she owed $159 in unpaid library fines and $172 for missing a court appearance about those unpaid library fines. She couldn't pay them so she was arrested, spent six days in jail.

Listen to what Captain Bill Tyler said. Here's Captain Bill Tyler's position. “A violation is a violation whether you've got dope or library books.” Okay?

Now there are Christian people who are just that legalistic and see things just that either/or, or, in that either/or fashion and there's a danger there. But there's also a danger in just taking a whatever attitude. Let me give you an example of what I mean there. Another one from real life but this is something I saw and experienced myself.

My Granddaddy Blanton was born in 1910. He was a Godly man. He was a deacon in his church and he had a very strong and strict conviction that you did no work on Sunday. You didn't even do anything that involved much physical exertion on Sunday. When we went to his house to eat lunch on Sunday afternoon, we would go after church to eat lunch and he had a really good fish pond behind his house. He would not allow us to go fishing in his pond on
Sunday because in his boyhood fishing was not something you did just for fun, it was feed yourself. It was a form of work. He was very, very strict about that. He would do no work even though he was a very hard working man.

Now, I have to say that I don't hold that strict view that my grandfather did. For example, I don't think it would be a sin if you went home this afternoon and piddled in your flower garden. Perhaps that could be a form of relaxation, even possibly a spiritual experience for some. And I don't think it would be a sin if you took your kid or your grandkid fishing this afternoon as long as you were back for the evening service. But I want to point out something. When you find a very rigid, hard-lined position it's usually there for a good reason and before you just throw it out or roll your eyes at it you better pay attention to why that, why that was in effect in the first place.

When my granddaddy was growing up and running his businesses nothing was open on Sunday. We live in a completely different world and I want you to see the differences and how getting lax about what seems trivial to us has transformed our society in a very negative way. For example, employers today think nothing of requiring their employees to work on Sunday. I mean, that's a, that's just a standard thing and it's usually not something you can talk them out of if you happen to be that employee. If you're involved in some sort of shift work, you probably, you probably work every other Sunday. We have a lot of church members who work every other Sunday. They can't help that. You see, we're not condemning them. But I'm saying, do you see when a society loses respect for “Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,” that's the world you create.

Now, how does that effect families? How does it effect churches? Well, first of all if you can only be at church two Sunday's a month, that does more than just cut your attendance in half. It puts a huge limitation on the service you’re able to do within the church, the responsibilities you’re able to take on. That means two Sundays a month your family's going to church without you, if they go on those Sundays. That's two Sundays that you're not part of the body, you're not being fed spiritually and you're not getting the Christian fellowship the church is designed to give you. Now again, if you’re working in that, if you’re caught in that it's not your fault. But I'm saying, do you see what happens when an entire society laughs at and throws out a conviction that my grandfather was very strict about?

I mean, in Muskogee, you see it in kid's athletics. In Muskogee, our teams are pretty good, baseball, soccer teams are pretty good about not having practices and tournaments on Sunday. There seems to be more and more of that but in other places, Tulsa, it's just common place. If your kids in it, they're going to be there. That puts you, parents, in a position where you’ve got to make a moral
decision and it's also a spiritual decision because how you handle that is going to, is going to teach your kids what's really important in life. You can tell them all you want that God is the most important but if the sports activities take precedence over that, what you said means nothing.

Now, do you see how we just took something that on first glance looks almost trivial to us today, what's okay and not okay to do on Sunday, do you see what huge implications that has for families and for society? Now if something like Sunday afternoon activities can have that big of an impact than how much more important is it for you and me to use fear and trembling and reverence when we are looking at issues involving sexuality, money and personal honesty? God's people have got to be the people who set an example rather than just follow the examples of people in the world around them.

And so you see what we've done so far? I've shown you a danger of being too rigid and that's what Paul does but there's also a danger in being too loose. The Christian has got to be, either one of those is really irresponsible. To be overly rigid does not require a lot of thinking but then neither, but to be too loose doesn't require much conviction. You see, God's people, the reason there's a whole chapter devoted to this subject is that we have got to get this right.

I'm bringing out some general principles to help tonight, I mean this morning. Tonight I'm going to come back to the same chapter and dig even deeper into it verse by verse and some of you will want to, will want to make a point to hear that, I hope.

Now what are we supposed to do? First of all, we need to recognize that it matters. Listen to what this passage says, Romans 14:12, "Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God," each of us, I will, you will. I won't give an account for you and what you did. You won't give an account for me and what I did. Each of us will give a personal account to God and we will be given account to a God who already knows everything about us. He knows whether we love Him or not. He knows whether or not He's the most important thing in our lives. I mean, we can lie to ourselves about that. We can't lie to God. We have got to be honest with ourselves. We've got to be honest about the moral issues, where we are just going along with whatever the culture says but we've also got to be honest - and you see, we've got two types of people here. There are some people in this room who really aren't honest with themselves. They consider themselves Christian but their moral decision making doesn't come from scriptural guidelines. It comes from the culture. Fooling yourself.

On the other hand, we've got people in the church who are very rigid and very judgmental and it is you, you are the people who give Christians a bad name and for good reason because it's pharisaical. It's the very kind of people that Jesus
had such a clash with. And I think we’d be shocked if Jesus came into today’s church and we saw who had conflict with Him and who didn’t. It would be some of the more rigid, dogmatic people.

Now our duty is to find a way to balance this and it is not easy. Here are some, here are some, some principles that I know can help. The first one is a famous line that comes from St. Augustine. Do you know what Augustine said a long, long time ago? Here’s your guide for your decision making. He said, “Love God and do what you will.” Do you hear that? “Love God and do what you will.” Now to some people that’s going to sound like, “Oh, free ticket to do whatever I please!” False! If you love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, that’s the thing and your desire and your main goal in life is pleasing Him, then you will do things that you know will please Him and you will not do things that you know are displeasing to Him.

Jesus said something very similar to this only He carried it a step further. He applied it and He talked about God but He also, He also applied it the way we treat other people. This is Matthew 22, Matthew 22:37-39. “Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is equally important. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Then He goes on to say, “The entire law and the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” If you do those two things you’re going to get it right. You’re going to get it right even in instances where there is not a clear, spelled out obvious right or wrong.

You see, it’s part of Christian maturity to be able to make a moral decision in a gray area. Children can’t do that. For children everything’s got to be spelled out, black and white. It is a sign of maturity if you can recognize that some areas really are gray and Godly Christian people are going to differ on their opinions but you’ve got to make your decision before God and one that you can stand before Him and feel good about. It takes spiritual maturity and a lot of growth to get there. That is what we’re after. Start by loving God and do as you please. And recognize different Christians, different Christians are not always going to agree with you and that doesn’t mean that they are of the devil.

Let me give you an example. I have a concealed carry permit and I’m guessing that because it’s Muskogee, majority of people in this room wouldn’t see anything wrong with that but I’m sure there are people in the room who do, who think a Christian, much less a preacher, shouldn’t have a pistol. But I’ll tell you this, there are hundreds of thousands of very Godly people, very devoted Christian people who would think it’s horrible that I would have that concealed carry permit. Now what I’ve got to be careful about is not rolling my eyes at them and they’ve got to be careful about passing judgment on me. I’ve got to make that decision before God, you see.
Listen to what the scripture says about this thing. Chapter 14:10, “So,” in light of what we’re talking about here, “So, why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember we will all stand before the judgment of God.” Verse 12, “Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.” We will have to explain to Him why we did what we did or why we didn’t do what we didn’t do. And so you know, if I’m going to be ready to do, to stand there and do that I better be talking to Him about it now and listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to me and searching my scriptures very seriously because this stuff matters.

Verse 13, “Yes, so let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.” That verse tells us two things. First of all it says stop condemning each other. I’ve already talked about that enough. The second part turns your attention to other people and how your actions and your words will affect other people and that’s my next guideline on determining right and wrong when the answer is not clear. How’s it going to affect other people?

I heard once a mathematical rule of thumb for deciding right and wrong. Here it is. The more other people you take into consideration when you’re making a decision, the more other people you think about, you’re concerned about how it’s going to affect them, the more other people you think about in making a decision the more likely you are to make it right. And the fewer other people you think about, the more likely you are to get it wrong because you’re probably just thinking mainly about yourself and what you want. And it’s not all about you.

That’s what the scripture tells us in verse 7 here. “For we don’t live for ourselves.” Christians, we’re not here to live for ourselves and just get what we want. We don’t live for ourselves or die for ourselves. It’s not all about you! And if you think it is then you’re going to make the wrong moral choice almost every time, even when it’s something clearly wrong you’ll find some way to justify it, why in your case it doesn’t apply. You see, how’s it going to affect other people?

Let me take this to a, in a different direction, this principle of how it affects other people. This could be a third guideline. How will, how will this decision affect your spouse and your children? What you’re tempted with, what you’re weighing, how will it affect your spouse and your children? You can also ask, you should also ask, how is it going to affect my church? How’s it going to affect the reputation of my church in the community? Some of us are very good for God’s reputation. Others give Christ a bad reputation because if we are, if we are making immoral decisions and taking immoral actions and saying immoral
things out there in the community and people know we’re part of this church that makes us all look like a bunch of hypocrites.

You know that there’s a stereotype, “The church is full of hypocrites.” Do you know where stereotypes come from? Most every stereotype I know of, the reason it exists is because it’s partly true and because people keep reinforcing it. Is what you’re thinking about going to reinforce the stereotype that Christians are hypocrites or will you show them something different? Will you cause somebody to do a double take and say, “Hey, maybe Christians are more authentic than I thought they were.” How will it affect other people?

Then you’ve got to consider the long term effects. Here’s what I mean by that. There are a whole lot of bad choices, wrong choices that create irreversible consequences, things that we can’t take back or redo no matter how much we want to. What will the long term effects be? Do you know what the latest craze in plastic surgery is? The latest craze in plastic surgery is loosely called “virginity restoration.” And for between $2-5000 a woman can go to a plastic surgeon and have the hymen reconstructed and there are woman who go and do this to try to give, so they can give virginity to the person they love. You see that attempt to get back something but once it’s gone, it’s gone. It’s not just the teenage girls that need to hear that one. It’s all of us.

It’s everyone of us in this place have the potential to do and say things that create permanent damage to other people and once you say it, once you spread that, that rumor you can’t get it back. Once you hurt, you can ask forgiveness and you can receive forgiveness from God and the person who was hurt but the damage is irreversible. What will the long term effects of your decision be? Serious stuff. Morals matter! But it’s not simple stuff. There are not simple, easy answers for all the moral questions. If you’re a Christian and you think it’s that way, you need to read Romans 14 and you need to see the reflections of yourself there but also, folks, in a world that no longer seems to know the difference between right and wrong, if Christian people don’t know it and live it who will?

Now this is a message primarily for Christian people. That passage, Romans 14, was written to the church. I want to say a word to those of you who are not yet followers of Christ, not yet committed your life to Him. Maybe you’re thinking about it or maybe this is the first time it’s entered your mind but you’re not yet a follower of Christ. Let me tell you what my message to you is not! My message is to you is not that you need to clean up your act, that you need to straighten up and do better. Shame on you! That’s not the message to you. Not at all. It’s something totally different. Let me, let me express it this way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “If you board the wrong train it is useless to run along the corridor in the opposite direction.” Okay. If you’ve not committed your life to
Christ you’re on the wrong train. Right now in the stillness of this moment that train is stopped and you can get off and you can get on a train with Christ and start heading in the right direction and it’s a journey that will last the rest of your life and He will teach you right and wrong all along the way. He will, He will teach you to forgive others who’ve done wrong and He will teach you to forgive yourself for the things you’ve done wrong.

Everybody I know, practically everybody I know struggles with one of two things. They have to have other people they can't forgive or they can't forgive themselves. Do you know what? Both of those are wrong. Christ is not interested or impressed with either. He is hurt by both. He’s all about forgiveness, a new direction, a new day, a new start. You can have that today.