SESSION THREE: IF WE KNOW WHAT IS RIGHT, CAN WE DO IT?

Introduction

But can we do it?

In the last session, we saw that, through people of faith will generally look to their religious traditions for ethical guidance, there is an objective moral law that we can know through reason. This is known as natural law ethics, and it provides a common foundation for ethics even in pluralistic societies.

But once we have our idea of right and wrong, the question arises of whether or not we can do the right thing. Why is it that even when we know what is right, we sometimes choose to do otherwise? And how do we change our actions so that they better align with the good?

Training in virtue

C. S. Lewis’s book The Abolition of Man once again helps us to understand the problem. Lewis explains that our appetites and desires (our “belly”) need to be under control of reason (our “head”) if we are to live a well-ordered life. But given the strength of our appetites, reason by itself is insufficient to control them. The head thus needs “the chest” to govern the belly. Our “chest” is “the seat of emotions trained by habit” to pursue virtue. The problem in our society, which Lewis saw coming in 1943 when he published the book, is that we have rejected the idea of training people in virtue and then are shocked when people do wrong.

This is played out in the “ethical lapses” we see in government and business, where moral relativism has replaced moral truth in people’s education. It is also seen in our rising incarceration rates as shown by Richard Herrnstein and James Q. Wilson, who concluded that crime is caused by lack of moral training in the morally formative years.

Habits of the heart

The solution, then, would seem to be to develop habits of the heart that lead to right behavior. This, in turn, requires two things. The first is what Dr. Samenow refers to as “conversion.” This isn’t necessarily
religious, but does involve a radical change in the direction of life away from vice and toward virtue. In order for that to happen, however, both history and experience tells us that some form of community support is necessary.

When societies have a moral consensus, all the different communal groups work to support and reinforce core moral messages. The first and most important communal group is the family, which provides the essential moral foundation for the child. These moral concepts are reinforced in school through a curriculum that taught and modeled virtue. Other civic groups such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, or the Rotary Club—the organizations philosophy Edmund Burke called the “little platoons”—all simultaneously reinforce ethical norms and build cohesion in the society.

Institutional disarray

None of these institutions are functioning as well as they should in American life today. We face an unprecedented breakdown in the family, education often seems more concerned to undermine the foundations of major belief than to promote ethical conduct, civic groups are facing a major decline and in many places have been replaced by gangs, etc. No wonder, then, that we are facing an ethical crisis today.

We can learn to live ethically, but it requires several things of us. First, we must begin a process of education so that our hearts as well as our minds can be schooled in virtue. Second, we must make a firm commitment to live ethically and to habituate our hearts in right behavior. And to take these steps, we must find others who will work with us, tell us the truth about ourselves and our choices, and support us in our efforts to live more ethically.

Video Outline

I. The danger of self-righteousness

II. The properly ordered soul
   a. Reason and the passions
   b. Conversion
   c. “The chest”

III. Developing integrity
   a. The paradox
   b. The role of community
   c. The nature of freedom
   d. The conscience
Questions for Discussion

1. **Consider:** C.S. Lewis argued that reason must govern passion, for we cannot trust our passions—or our heart—as a reliable source of ethical decision-making.

   **Discuss:** Read Jeremiah 17:9; Proverbs 4:23; and Matthew 15:16-20. On the basis of these passages, should we agree with Lewis? Why or why not? How should your answer affect the way you make ethical choices and decisions?

   **Consider:** Lewis said that the mind can only govern the heart through the chest. By this he meant that learned and settled moral convictions are able to reign in the passions according to good judgment and sound reason.

   **Discuss:** The Scriptures use the idea of “conscience” where Lewis wrote of the “chest.” Read the following passages: Hebrews 9:14; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; Romans 2:15; 1 Corinthians 8:7, 12; Hebrews 10:22; and 1 Timothy 1:5. What is the conscience and how is it supposed to work in relation to the mind and the heart? How would you suggest that a person might strengthen his or her conscience?

2. **Consider:** Dr. Samenow argued that the solution to criminality is conversion, that is, reorienting a convict’s life and ethos away from criminal behavior and toward an ethically sound way of life. Talk about some people you know, either contemporary or historical figures, who have undergone this kind of conversion.

   **Discuss:** What does “conversion” mean in Christian terms. Read Ephesians 4:17-24. Is Christian conversion a “one-time” or an ongoing experience? Explain your answer. Do you think that real and lasting conversion can occur in a wholly secular or unbelieving situation?

3. **Consider:** The panelists made a strong argument that true freedom is not merely freedom from restraint, but that it involves our reason. We must use our minds to control our passions; however, often it seems as if people today live the other way around.
Discuss: Read Romans 12:1-2 and 1 Peter 1:13. What does it mean to “be renewed” in our minds and to “prepare” our minds for right ethical action? Discuss some parameters of a regimen of exercises or disciplines that one might adopt in order to realize this objective.

4. Consider: Robert George said that growing in ethics is a paradox: no one can do it for you, but at the same time you cannot do it on your own. Communities and groups can be important for helping us act in an ethical way, but group members must be intentional toward one another to this end. Today, many of the “mediating structures”—groups—in our society that should be helping us live ethically are in disarray.

Discuss: Read John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 12:24-25; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 5:18-21; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24. What recurrent phrase do you identify in these verses? Taking all these verses together, what do they teach about the kinds of “groups” or “communities” that might strengthen us to live in a more ethical manner?

5. Consider: Accountability to others can be an important resource for integrity and ethical accountability. Chuck Colson suggests having a circle of close friends to help you make important decisions and to hold you accountable in various ways.

Discuss: Considering the various passages of Scripture we’ve examined in this lesson, how might a group of close friends help one another to grow in mind, heart, conscience, and ethical living? What would such an accountability relationship look like? How might you take steps to put such a group in place in your life?