



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“DISCERNING RIGHT FROM WRONG”

Scripture Lessons: Psalms 15; Luke 12:54-59

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, July 19, 2009.*

Several years ago a cartoon appeared in the “New Yorker” Magazine showing a group of contemporary Americans who had just arrived in Hell. As they are being greeted by friendly devil complete with pitch-fork and tail he says to them: “You’ll find there is no right or wrong here, just what works for you!”

I suppose that could be one definition of Hell alright --- a place where there is no right nor wrong, and many social critics and Christian ethicists have been arguing that as a society we seems to be heading in that direction at break-neck speed. Today people hesitate to speak in terms of right and wrong, virtue and sin. We are far more likely to hear that some action is inappropriate or unacceptable rather than morally wrong. The media may confront us with social ills, political corruption, personal mistakes, errors in judgment, individual indiscretions --- but we hardly ever find the word sin in the press. My own generation and each generation there after has really been raised to believe that everything is relative, that there are no absolutes, and that people can and should do as they please so long as they are not harming others (as if that can ultimately be determined). I am not really sure when this philosophy became popular but surely as early as the 60’s. One of my best friends from high school went off to Harvard and when he returned at Christmas from his first semester he shared with me that the great thing he learned as a freshman at Harvard was that “the only absolute is that there are no absolutes.”

And yet, despite this disturbing trend many of us (and especially those of us for whom scripture is authoritative as a guide for faith and practice) remain convinced that there are moral and ethical absolutes, regardless of whether we can always discern them or submit to them. Throughout sacred history God has offered his people commandments, guidelines, instruction and admonitions. After giving the law at Sinai before the people entered the Promised Land, the Lord had Moses to charge the Hebrews saying “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you.” (Deut. 6:18) That assumes, does it not, that the people were in a position to distinguish what was right and good from what was wrong or evil. And in our gospel lesson today Jesus must have assumed the same thing for he asks the crowd, “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Luke 12:57)

And so this morning I would like to offer some practical advice to anyone struggling with the rightness and wrongness of an ethical decision or a moral dilemma. I would like to suggest to you that there are some practical tests which can be applied to almost any decision or action. Some of these tests can be applied regardless of whether you are a person of faith or not. I am offering these tests not because of recent revelations by our governor and not because so many of our young people are headed out for New Orleans this week. I am offering these tests because I have talked with a number of you in recent weeks and know that you are struggling with some major decision in your life.

The first test that I would suggest for the propriety of any action or decision is the test of conscience. If it bothers your conscience it is probably wrong. You see, every person has within them a sense of “oughtness”, what one ought or ought not to do. It is like a built-in alarm system of the soul which goes off whenever we depart from what we have been trained to believe is right. Our conscience thus has the power to reach out and take hold of us and turn us away from many things that are wrong and would be detrimental to us and to others.

Of course, as important as our conscience is in helping us to make moral decisions, it certainly has its limitations and is never sufficient in and of itself. It is no infallible guide. So it will never do for us simply to say, “Let your conscience be your guide.” I say that because not every conscience is trustworthy and no conscience is as trustworthy as it could be. Jesus was crucified by conscientious leaders and the Apostle Paul claimed that he persecuted the church out of a good conscience. The pages of history are drenched in blood drawn from people who were the victims of men of conscience.

You see, no conscience is better than the rules and principles and teachings that inform it. If I teach my child and exemplify with my life that one race is superior to another or that it is ok to fabricate the truth, then that child can probably practice discrimination and lying with a clear conscience until he is retrained or reprogrammed. So a conscience is no better than the rules and principles that inform it. Nonetheless, for those of us who have been reared as Christians and to have been trained in the ways of God and the laws of love, the conscience should be a helpful friend and should ordinarily be heeded.

Sometimes we try to shake free from the promptings of conscience or ignore it all together, but we usually do so at our peril. When we continually act out accord with our own conscience, then either our conscience will become anesthetized or else we will become emotionally and physically scarred. So instead of rebelling against conscience, we should recognize it as an authentic and practical guide in helping us determine right from wrong, even with its limitations.

The second test I would commend to you is the test of human effect. What effect would my action have upon others or upon me? Will the thing I am thinking of doing hinder, hurt or handicap me or another person. If it will then it probably is wrong although it could be the lesser of two evils.

Jesus saw this as a crucial test regarding right and wrong. He taught and demonstrated that each act is to be judged on the basis of what effect it has on the human personality and the human community. Whatever contributes to human well-being and the development of the human personality is right and good. Any custom, practice, social system or individual action that prohibits human growth or adversely affects people is contrary to the will of God. All rules and roles should be judged by this criteria, but it is not always a simple or safe test. But clearly Jesus put people above abstract principles on occasion. Do you remember that Sabbath day when his disciples were hungry? The law said you could not work on the Sabbath, so to pluck corn would technically be wrong “Not so,” Jesus said. Human need is more important than the law. Or again, because of the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath the Pharisees believed it was wrong even to cure the sick or the lame on that day. “Not so,” said Jesus. Concern for the suffering is more important than some ridged rule.

Consistently the Bible teaches and Jesus demonstrates that the legitimate needs of people is an important criteria. Therefore, what serves human need, what helps and protects people, what helps them to reach their potential and experience their fulfillment is right. Conversely, anything that injures, oppresses, exploits, abuses or demeans another child of God is always wrong.

This test of human affects should also cause us to ask what effect my action will have upon me, since I too am a child of God. Will it impair my functioning or impede my growth? Will it impair or cripple me in some way? Will it even make me dislike myself? Do you remember the simple words in the poem by Edgar Guest:

“I have to live with myself and so  
I want to be fit for myself to know.”

You see, wrong attitudes and wrong actions can injure us though we may not realize it and can end up twisting, warping and damaging our character, our mental and spiritual health.

The third test is what I would call the test of human history and experience. Ordinarily any action is wrong if it goes against the accumulated wisdom of human experience and the clear lessons of history. Human ethics, and indeed Christian ethics, did not immerge from a vacuum. They were hammered out on the hard anvil of experiment, experience, observation and conclusion. Our ancestors learned through hard experience that certain things were helpful and other things were destructive and bad. There is no need for each generation to foolishly repeat the tedious and torturous process over and over again. After all, there is no crime and there is no virtue that has not been practiced before, and its lessons are recorded plainly in the fabric of life and in the lessons of history.

Here is where scripture comes in for us as people of faith. I don't think we should regard the Bible simply as a legal code that tells us what to do and what not to do. Jesus himself challenged many of the codes found therein. But scripture does provide us with the principles and ideals that should inform our decisions. Scripture also presents us with what our forefathers in the faith discovered to be the will of God for them and their world. In Jesus Christ the Bible offers us the perfect model of what love and justice, righteousness and godly ideals look like when they are incarnated in flesh and blood. Granted not every virtue or vice is dealt with in scripture, but many are. Nevertheless, the Bible is intended to inform our moral decisions and we should trust the sacred history and experience of the people of God.

A fourth test you may apply in determine right and wrong is the test of universality. This means we should ask of any act or attitude: What if everyone did this? What would then be the consequences? You see, sometimes we try to excuse or justify our waywardness by saying it really won't make any difference if I do or refrain from doing this thing. But, what if everyone did what you are about to do? What would happen if everyone cheated just a little on his income tax, if everyone stayed away from the voting booth, if everyone paid his debts as you do, if everyone was faithful to his church as you are faithful, if everyone conducted business as you do? So, would your action be right for everyone or have you deluded yourself in to believing its only right for you? Jesus said, “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.” (Matt 7:12) We call that the Golden Rule, but it is just a different way of applying the test of universality. And when we judge our actions and attitudes in this light, we will have a rather accurate indication of their rightness or wrongness.

A fifth test which may prove to be quite helpful is what we might call the test of foresight. In other words, ask yourself where your action will lead you. What can you honestly anticipate if you persist in this course of action? Too many of us have started down a road without ever considering its terminal point. We begin a practice which soon becomes a habit and then a way of life. And before you know it we are entrapped in a mess of our own making.

In a sense the present and the future are inseparable. What we do today helps determine what may happen tomorrow. Turn away from responsibility today and it may pursue you into the coming week. Throw self-discipline to the winds and the bill may not come due right now, but next week or next year it well may. Experts tell us that the first initial move in a game of chess determines the direction that the game will ultimately take.

“Sooner or later,” wrote Stevenson, “we all sit down to a banquet of consequences.” St. Paul put it this way: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” (Gal 6:7)

So if you employ the test of foresight you may not only be saved from a bad decision but from a deadly destiny.

And finally, I would invite you to use the test of publicity as you struggle with what is right or wrong. Think of the people you most admire and love and ask, would this action or attitude meet with their approval? Would they think less of me if they knew what I was doing? I find this more helpful than asking what if everyone knew that I was doing this. Some things we do are not necessarily wrong, but we still would not want everyone to know about it for fear that they would not understand. But what about those people who know us well, who understand us and love us and who inspire us to better living? Would they approve? Would they do the same under similar circumstances? Many people have been led to see and do the right thing and many people have been led out of a moral fog simply by remembering those people who have provided us with exemplary models of personal morality and integrity. Ultimately we can ask, would our Lord understand and approve?

So how can we better discern the right from the wrong, the good from the evil? There may not be a guaranteed, sure-fire and simple way of doing this, but I believe we are well on our way to making the proper decisions if we employ some of these tests:

1. The test of conscience
2. The test of human effect
3. The test of human history and experience
4. The test of universality
5. The test of foresight
6. The test of publicity

May God help all of us to have the wisdom to know the right thing to do and also the courage to do it through the guidance and the aid of his Holy Spirit within us. Amen.