

Hebrews 5:11-14
Trained to Distinguish Good from Evil

I. Intro

- A. When we turn on television and watch the news there are stories, it seems every day over the past few weeks, where we see people rioting and demanding the defunding of police departments; mobs violently taking over parts of a city and looting and stealing from the stores; there are people who want to change our whole economic system; and as I listen to what they are advocating, it is clear we approach life from two very different perspectives.
- B. Flip the channel and there are two people from different political parties arguing about some issue and both people are talking over each other. It is just a shouting match.
- C. I was in the grocery store this week and a guy was standing beside me with a shirt that said, “I am secular and I vote”. And it said underneath “Freedom From Religion Foundation”.
- D. Watching television and being mindful of where the guy in the grocery store is coming from philosophically – it is very clear to me that I am in a very different culture than all of that. I am not a secularist. I don’t see the value in shouting down people. I believe that the police are here to help maintain peace. And I am not a socialist or Marxist. I, and I imagine most of you, approach the world very differently than what we see on television sometimes.
- E. The last lesson I taught a couple of weeks ago I talked about culture and said that cultures are created as people find themselves in the world and respond to it and seek to improve on what they find. And when they discover or figure out how to make part of life better and people agree that what has been figured out is better than what they currently have then they come together around that idea, the result is the formation or development of a culture.
 - 1. For example, the Preamble to the US Constitution says, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...” - The people are going to come together and form a more perfect union – a culture – A unique American culture.
 - 2. And the ideas and principles they are gathering around in this more perfect union are spelled out in the next part of the Preamble – “ establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...”
 - 3. And now within the US there are all kinds of other cultures – groups of people who are gathered together around ideas or heritages that they have in common and believe they make life better.
 - a) And these various subcultures often do not have too much in common with each other.
- F. Now the author of Hebrews tells us that God is creating within his church a culture. Heb 6:7 likens the church to a vine that God is cultivating and expects some fruit from it. God is gathering his church around the person of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. And part of what we understand and believe as members of God’s church is that we are being gathered around the belief that God sent his Son into this world to redeem us and show forth his glory. Faith is, in part saying, “Yes, I believe that and I want to be a part of

that.” It is wanting to be a part of the culture that God is calling us into, and we believe it is better than where we would naturally find ourselves in this world.

G. Now, as members of God’s church, it is clear that the culture and beliefs that we have are very different than what we find in society. We look at the world very differently. We approach life in a different fashion than the various cultures we find around us. And we teach our children and sit in SS and worship services and listen and make distinctions between right and wrong...good and evil...that ;the culture at large does not. In fact, we call some things evil that some in other cultures call good. And we call good things they call evil.

1. And in the midst of all of this God directs us – he has commissioned us – to go out into the world and make disciples and teach people who Jesus is and the gospel and also what we find in our text – how to distinguish between good and evil (5:14) and also what we read in 5:13 – the word of righteousness, which means “to become proficient in our reasoning about righteousness”.
2. God has called us as a church culture to teach one another within the church these things and grow in them, and also go outside of our church doors and speak to the various cultures that view life very differently than we do and proclaim Christ to them.

H. As I watch television and see people around town, the question we have to ask ourselves is this – What do we even have in common? Do we even have a starting point to begin a conversation? And as our kids and younger generations go to school and college and interact with the various cultures and those cultures seek to persuade them to become a part of their cultures, where do we even start with our own younger generations? Some of them may feel like we don’t have much in common with them.

1. If you are looking at the tv or talking to someone who is feeling the pulls of our secular culture and its values in their life, is there anything that we can agree on?
2. Economics? Politics? Religion? Values? Policies? I don’t know.
3. But, you know, we do have something in common. We do have a starting point. We do have something we all will agree on. Dave Berry said the one thing everyone has in common is that everyone thinks they are good drivers. He may be right, but I am not sure that is where we start. Our text gives us a good starting point.

II. Heb 5:13 says that immature believers are not “accustomed to (NASB) (or “unskilled in” ESV) the word of righteousness” (NASB). The word for “word” in our text is “Logos”. It means “word” in many instances. But it also means “reasoning” in others. And that is probably the better understanding of it here. The immature is “unskilled” in the word of righteousness. He lacks the ability to do something with it. He lacks the ability to reason using the word of God. Its parallel is found in 5:14 when the author is talking about mature believers who can make distinctions between good and evil. They are able to see the distinctions and reason out the differences.

A. That gives us a starting point with the cultures around us. There are many things that we do not have in common with people who come from other cultural perspectives. But, when it comes to certain aspects of the idea of righteousness everyone will find agreement.

B. Here it is: It does not matter what culture a person comes from if you ask them the question, “Is there anything wrong in this world?” We will find agreement. Yes, there is

something wrong in this world. It does not matter what your culture is – we all agree that things in this world are not as they should be. Something is off.

1. The reason that streets have been taken over; stores looted; people are calling to defund the police – is because they believe something is wrong and needs to be changed in our world. We Christians believe that also. Something is wrong.
- C. Now the second thing that most everyone will agree with is that something is also wrong with them. A sociopath may not agree, but any thoughtful and reasonable person will be able to see that they have acted in ways that are wrong. They have acted selfishly; out of anger; jealousy; revenge; hatred or prejudice; lied; been arrogant; and so forth. They have done the very things that we see that is wrong in the world. I certainly acknowledge that I have acted in ways that are wrong, and every Christian admits that. And reasonable, honest non-Christians from all cultures will say the same.
1. When it comes to teaching our children and new believers who are young in the faith – this is one of the cornerstones we need make sure they understand about themselves and the world. We are all sinners. There are none righteous. No not one.
 2. I heard someone change the words to Amazing Grace one time. Instead of saying, “saved a wretch like me” they said, “saved someone like me”. Part of the amazing thing about grace is that it is able to change a wretch – a sinner like me.
 3. None of likes to admit that we are a sinner. We don’t like to say that we have done things we should not have or failed to act when we should have. But if we all look at ourselves honestly, we know it is true. It is true of Christians and true of everyone else.
- D. Now, here is where the “reasoning about righteousness” which our text mentions comes into play. It is when we ask the next question. **Where do we turn for help in a world where things are wrong and a world where I too have done wrong things and acted from wrong motives?**
1. Well, it is not the world or the philosophies of the world. That is like asking a bad tree to yield good fruit (Mt 7:17-18).
 2. Some people want to look to science for an answer. The problem here is that science is descriptive. It can tell us what the consequences of our actions might be, but it can’t tell us that a certain action is morally right and another action is morally wrong. It can tell us which actions work and which ones do not. The problem with that is that the consequences do not govern whether an action is right or wrong. For example, lying in court. It may produce desirable consequences for the person lying, but not for the one he is lying about. How can you tell whether lying is right or wrong based on the consequences? It is purely subjective. Do you choose what is best for the most (utilitarianism) or what is best for me (egoism)?
 - a) I listened to a Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, who said answered the question whether science can tell us what is right and wrong. He said yes and no.¹
 - b) He had to say “no” because science describes it does not prescribe morality. It can tell you that torturing a cat causes the cat to suffer pain but it cannot state that causing a cat to suffer pain is bad. Some people think torturing a cat is bad. Others, masochists, think it is ok – pleasurable. That is Pinker’s example. Science does not have the tools to make that judgment.

¹ Steven Pinker <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ9YFGP8vw>

- c) But then he answers “yes” and gives examples of how science and reason help us evaluate situations. And his “yes” is based on consequences. Science is useful and a great gift but it cannot tell us what is right and what is wrong.²
3. **Here is the question: Where do we turn to find out what is actually right and wrong; good and evil? The world is messed up.** It is not going to be the best place to find a solution. It does not have all of the tools to distinguish between right and wrong.
 4. **Then how about me or you?** Maybe we can straighten it out??? Yeah, from my sinful, selfish, greedy, heart I am going to be able to fix the problems of the world. I have all the answers. No one even comes close to believing that.
 5. **Then do we take a survey and let the majority determine it?** That is nothing more than a bunch of “me”s and people like me getting together.
- E. The reasonable and rational place to look for help is away from us and outside of this world. And that would be to God.
1. And that is what salvation and evangelism is about. It is about us realizing what Jesus has done for us and then telling others what God has done for them. And one of the things that he has done is deal with the whole idea of unrighteousness in this world. **He dealt with the first thing that we all can agree upon.** There is something wrong in this world. The world is full of unrighteousness and injustice. And people are full of unrighteousness as well. We are all sinners.
 2. Our God sent his son to deal the unrighteousness of this world and the unrighteousness in each of us. Our God is concerned with justice. His son faced the justice of God’s holiness and wrath on account of our unrighteousness.
 3. And here is what the effect is if we will turn to him and believe. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus. God by the power of the Holy Spirit enters our life and gives us new life. Our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God and with each other is changed. There is reconciliation and a restored relationship between God and man. And there is reconciliation and a restored relationship between men.
 4. We have the chance to begin again. We have a chance to have the slate of our sins cleaned with God and with each other. And those of you who know me know that I am not talking theory here. It is experience and actuality.
 - a) And here is the thing – our broad culture does not give people much of a chance to begin again when they have made a mistake – or sinned in a grievous manner – or if they have said something unacceptable or did something years ago that was acceptable, but today it is looked at differently; or they have some sort of criminal record. In fact, right now, it seems that broad culture is cutting more and more people off with no desire to give them a second chance.

² As Christians, we are not opposed to science. It is a very valuable tool. It is useful in assessing situations and directing moral and ethical decisions. Just before we began our study in Hebrews we looked at Deuteronomy. We asked why God led Moses to write Deuteronomy when so much of it repeats what is found in Exodus. Then we saw that there were some things in Dt that were not in Exodus. Some things had changed in Israel’s life from since the time Exodus was written. Deuteronomy recognized that change and it showed Moses and the elders how to reason through God’s law to help them make decisions about right and wrong in their day. The only rule of faith and practice is God’s word. Science and reason can help us think through the application of God’s word to our life and distinguish between right and wrong. But we must first know what is right and what is wrong to apply the facts we get from science. And that comes through revelation from God – his word and his son.

- b) There is an unrighteousness in our culture – in any culture. That is why we have to look somewhere else – outside of us and our culture. And that is to the Lord.
5. Here is where the gospel and the culture that God is developing with his church comes into play. The church is the one place where our sin and wrongs meets up with righteousness. They find their union in Jesus Christ and he washes away our sin in his blood and we can begin again with God and each other.
 6. God calls his church together to grow in Christ and as we do to learn to distinguish good from evil and teach our children and new and young believers how good it is to belong to Jesus. Our life is truly much better in him than not.
 7. And then in all humility and gentleness speak to the community around us and let them see and hear that as well. Our world and community is fractured. Jesus Christ, and his gospel is where that can be changed.