

Does democracy require morality?

Character and the Spirit of God

James C. Denison, Ph.D.

Reclaiming Our American Heritage
FBC Atlanta, July 28, 2010

Morality is much in the news these days.

In November, 2009 Tiger Woods was injured in a car accident, hitting a fire hydrant and a tree in his driveway in Orlando, Florida. As the investigation unfolded in the news media, we found out about Tiger's many affairs and his subsequent treatment for sex addiction.

Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was accused of sexual assault by a college student in Georgia. He has avoided criminal charges, but could face punishment from the league and his team.

In Hollywood, talk show host Larry King is divorcing for the eighth time. He and his seventh wife filed for divorce recently; she believes 76-year-old King had been having an affair with her younger sister for five years.

Today we need to explore the question: does democracy require morality? If it does, how can we draw our culture to a higher moral standard? How does this issue relate to your soul, marriage, family, and other relationships today?

The problem

If you could fix one problem in America today, what would it be? A recent survey asked a large number of Americans that question. Their #1 answer was, "restoring national economic stability." That's no surprise, in these days of recession. But tying for #1, ahead of "preventing terrorism" and "curing cancer," was: "restoring values and morality to society" ("What Americans Really Want . . . Really" by Dr. Frank I. Luntz).

Imagine for a moment what would happen if Americans chose to live by biblical morality. For instance, the Bible says that sex outside of marriage is wrong. No standard could seem more outdated and irrelevant in our society. But what would happen if we lived by this one simple principle?

The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. The Centers for Disease Control say that one-third of girls in America become pregnant before the age of 20; 81% of them are unmarried. Out of wedlock births accounted for four in ten of all U.S. births in 2007.

100,000 websites offer illegal child pornography, which generated \$3 billion annually. Ninety percent of 8-16 year olds have viewed porn online, most while doing their homework. There are 372,000,000 pornography pages on the Internet.

Pornography makes more money in America than Google, Yahoo, Amazon, eBay, Microsoft, Apple and Netflix—combined. Worldwide, revenues top all combined revenues of all professional football, baseball and basketball franchises.

How would living by biblical sexual morality change the issues of teenage pregnancy, abortion, and pornography?

The Bible says that stealing is wrong. Property theft in America costs us more than \$15 billion. Last year, more than 9.9 million Americans were victims of identity theft, our nation's fastest growing crime, at a cost of \$5 billion. Total dollar loss from Internet crimes is \$575 million.

Imagine a nation which lived by the biblical command not to steal.

The Bible says that murder is wrong. In 2006 in the United States homicide was the second leading cause of death for infants. Homicide with a firearm was the second leading cause of persons between the ages of 10 and 24, the third leading cause of death for persons between ages 25 and 34.

There are 774,000 gang members and 27,900 gangs reported active in the U.S. in 2008. There are 900,000 gang members overall across the world fostering illegal drug trade in the U.S. The availability of illicit drugs in the U.S. is increasing; 25 million drug users are under 12 years of age. Illegal drugs cost our country \$215 billion annually.

The Bible says that lying is wrong. In a recent survey, 83% of students confessed they "lied to a parent about something significant." Sixty-four percent cheated on a test during the past year—47% of students attending non-religious schools cheated; 63% of students from religious schools admitted they cheated. Yet 93% of students said they were "satisfied with their personal ethics and character."

And things are getting worse. A recent survey compared youth and young adults to their parents' generation:

- The younger group is nine times more likely to have sex outside of marriage.
- They are six times more likely to lie.
- They are almost three times more likely to get drunk.

- They are twice as likely to view pornography.

Why this trend? How did we get here?

Why the issue matters

Plato, one of the greatest minds in human history, was convinced that a democracy could not last. The people could be swayed too easily by public speakers, he warned. And once the people discovered that they could vote based on their personal interests rather than the good of the nation, their democracy would begin to fail.

In a democracy, we do not seek to legislate morality. But did the founders of our nation believe that morality was essential to their democratic experiment?

In his farewell address (September 19, 1796), President George Washington told the nation: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports...Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle...Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."

John Adams, our second president, claimed that "the general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were the general principles of Christianity." He stated, "Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited. What a Eutopia, what a Paradise would this region be."

Thomas Jefferson, our third president, was not a biblical Christian. He cut from the Bible every reference to the miraculous, and viewed Jesus as only a man. But he insisted, "Injustice in government undermines the foundations of a society. A nation, therefore, must take measures to encourage its members along the paths of justice and morality."

Abraham Lincoln said of the Bible, "Nothing short of infinite wisdom could by any possibility have devised and given to man this excellent and perfect moral code. It is suited to men in all the conditions of life, and inculcates all the duties they owe to their Creator, to themselves, and to their fellow men."

The Founders knew that democracy requires morality, a basic insistence on character and integrity by the culture. Returning to such a conviction is essential to our survival and future as a nation.

How to build character

Believe in absolute truth and objective morality. To claim there is no absolute truth is to make an absolute truth claim. We accept relativism when it is convenient. By this standard, the Holocaust was just "Hitler's truth."

Either the Bible is God's word or it is not. Either Jesus is God's Son or he is not. What is his standard for us?

How do we relate to others?

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:21-24).

What about sexual sin? *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28).*

What about those who do evil to you?

"You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:38-42).

What about enemies?

"You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48).

But we cannot keep God's word without the help of God's Spirit. And so we come to the focal text of our study: *"Be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).*

The text could be translated literally, "Keep on being controlled by the Spirit."
How does this work?

Remove all that hinders the Spirit. Ask the Spirit to bring to your mind anything which prevents his control and power, confess what comes to your thoughts, and claim the forgiving grace of God.

Ask the Holy Spirit to control and empower you, and believe that he has. Nowhere does the Bible tell us how it feels to be "filled with the Spirit." Stay connected with him through the day in worship, prayer, and communion.

Ask his help for those areas which tempt you. You cannot defeat them in your strength, or the enemy would not waste his time tempting you in these ways. Give them to the Spirit every time they attack you. See them as viruses sent to your computer—as soon as you recognize one, call the IT specialist who will come and remove it. View them as bombs left by terrorists—as soon as you realize that one is nearby, call the bomb specialists to defuse it. Don't try to deal with it yourself—ask for the help of God's Spirit living in you (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Conclusion

It is critical that America experience a moral rebirth, for the sake of our future as a democracy. Such a rebirth begins with us—with you and me. Where are you tempted morally today?

In 1831, the French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to study our nation. Here is his report: "I searched for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there. I searched for the greatness and genius of America in her fertile fields and boundless forest, and it was not there. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her public system and her institutions of learning, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

Does democracy require morality of you?