

RIGHT or WRONG? Ethical guidelines

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Some people act as if the Ten Commandments were the only ethical guidelines in the Old Testament. Aren't ethical values stated in other ways in the Old Testament?

The Old Testament states ethical values in a variety of ways. They include absolute commands, conditional commands, proverbs, prophecies and narratives.

The Ten Commandments are prime examples of absolute commands. They give no conditions and usually are short and succinct. This kind of command appears to have been unique to the Old Testament in the time it was written.

Conditional commands, usually have an "if ... then" form. They prescribe just remedies for various circumstances. For example, Exodus 21:12-14 says anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall be put to death. If he didn't kill him intentionally, he can flee to a place of refuge. But if he killed him intentionally, he is to be executed. Absolute commands are easier to apply to our ethical reflection than conditional ones. However, conditional commands provide important data for making moral decisions.

The book of Proverbs also is a valuable source of ethical guidelines. For example, Proverbs 7:1-27 warns against sexual sin and shows the harm such sin brings. Proverbs 10:1-11:31 contains a collection of varied wise sayings, many of which touch on moral questions. These sayings include admonitions to honesty, integrity and generosity.

The prophets have much to say on ethics, particularly in the area of social

justice. Amos prophesied against oppression of the poor, sexual immorality and idolatry. Isaiah pointed out his people's hypocrisy as they worshipped the Lord and then went forth to commit injustices. Jeremiah admonished Judah to administer justice "every morning" and rescue from the oppressor's hand the one who had been robbed. In response to the question, "What does the Lord require of you?" Micah said, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

The Old Testament also weaves ethical material into its narratives. The account of creation in Genesis provokes moral reflection on a variety of topics, including the sanctity of life, the meaning of marriage, the goodness of God's creation and human stewardship of the earth. Genesis 3:1-24 addresses human brokenness, human responsibility for moral behavior and the temptation to rebel against God. The story of Joseph's life gives ethical instruction on morality, integrity and forgiveness. The powerful account of God's deliverance of his people in the book of Exodus notes God's concern for oppressed people and judgment on their oppressors. The story of David's sin with Bathsheba considers issues like sexual morality and the abuse of power.

As we formulate our ethical positions, we do well when we include all these forms of Old Testament Scripture.

Robert Prince, pastor

First Baptist Church, Waynesville, N.C.

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.