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Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This
by David Servant

FOUR

The Angel on Your Shoulder

“Who says it’s wrong to have sex with someone else’s wife? I can do my own thing. There are no such things as moral absolutes. I’m not bound by the rules invented by some ancient religious killjoys.”

If I could find someone who really believed that philosophy to the degree that he lived it out *consistently*, then I might listen to him. But I haven’t found a person yet, who in his every day life, consistently walks and talks as if there really are no moral absolutes.

The most hedonistic playboy still has a code of ethics that he limitedly lives by and that he expects others to live by. As I have said previously, that code of ethics is built in by God. Whether we want to admit it or not, *we all know what is right and what is wrong*.

Let’s take the playboy who says he sees nothing wrong with having an affair with another man’s wife. His motto is, “If it feels good, do it.” If he *really* believes there are no moral absolutes, then he should never complain when other people who’ve adopted the same motto commit selfish acts that hurt *him*.

If I decide to take a sledgehammer and smash the windshield of his car, then he has no right to criticize me. If he does, I’ll just say, “Hey, I felt like doing it. It made me feel good. And besides, there are no such things as moral absolutes. There is no right and wrong. I’m not going to be bound by some stupid law that some ancient killjoy invented.”

How do you think that playboy would react to *my* line of reasoning? He’d object violently because he believes in a code of ethics. It’s not right to destroy another person’s property. Everyone in the world knows that, even people who live in the most primitive societies. Furthermore, people have *always* known that it is wrong to act in their own self-interest if others are harmed in the process.

Self-Evident Moral Absolutes

Our founding fathers expressed it eloquently when they penned, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” These truths *are* self-evident. Selfishness is wrong because all people, created in God’s image, are equal-equally loved by God.

When we act on our own behalf in such a way that causes others to suffer, we have sinned. That is what makes stealing wrong. That is what makes lying wrong. That is what makes adultery wrong. That is what makes gossiping wrong. That is what makes abortion wrong. Practically every law that has ever existed has been based upon the underlying principle that there are self-evident moral absolutes-particularly that selfish acts which harm others are morally wrong. And laws that don’t reflect that principle-laws that favor one person over another-we detest.

When the hedonistic playboy stands before God, the Creator won’t buy his excuse that he didn’t know what was right and what was wrong. God will have volumes of incontrovertible evidence from the man’s daily life proving his obvious belief in a standard of conduct. Every time the man criticized another person for acting selfishly, his own words testified of his belief in moral absolutes and thus condemned him.

That is precisely what will take place at his judgment before God. God has a record of each person’s every careless word. Read what Jesus said:

“And I say to you, that every *careless* word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, *and by your words you shall be condemned*” (Matthew 12:36-37; emphasis added).

Now before we self-righteously condemn every self-seeking playboy, don’t forget that all of us are in the same boat, either bow or stern. All of us have broken the sacred rule that Jesus said sums up the moral teaching of the Old Testament: “Do unto others as you want them to do unto you.” All of us stand self-condemned before God because of our own judgments of others.

The Oldest Law Code

Let’s answer the question of where the idea of moral absolutes originated. Who decided that selfishness is wrong?

Let’s look specifically at adultery. Was it some ancient religious killjoy who decided that adultery is a sin? If it was, then which one was it?

Was it some prudish New England Puritan who dreamed it up? No.

Was it a group of ascetic monks in the dark ages? No.

Did Jesus introduce it? No.

Surely it must have begun with Moses and the Ten Commandments. No, it didn’t.

You see, archaeologists have uncovered the civil codes of several ancient cultures, codes that even predate the Ten Commandments by *hundreds* of years. Probably the most well-known example would be the Code of Hammurabi (an ancient king of Babylon).

Discovered in 1901 by French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan, the Code contained 282 laws inscribed upon a stone shaft, dated around 1750 B.C., and now preserved in the Louvre in Paris.

And what did Hammurabi, who lived three to five centuries before the Ten Commandments were given, have to say on the subject of adultery? Read it for yourself:

If the wife of a man has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them [together] and throw them into the water.¹

It's as obvious as a whale in a wading pool: everyone, everywhere, has always known that there are moral absolutes.

So when did the idea originate that selfishness is wrong? As I said in the second chapter, the answer ought to be obvious to anyone who has ever heard a two-year old protest, "That's not fair!" His protest is based on an inborn principle.

Every person is born with the knowledge of moral absolutes. That knowledge has been given to him by God, and that is exactly what the Bible teaches.

Our Conscience, Where God's Law is Written

In the book of Romans, chapter two, the apostle Paul compares God's revelation to the Jews with His revelation to the Gentiles. The Jews were given the Ten Commandments-engraved upon tablets of stone by the finger of God-but the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, never had that privilege. Paul states, however, that every Gentile has had God's law written upon his heart by God Himself. That inward law of God is what we refer to as our *conscience*.

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law *do instinctively* the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law *written in their hearts*, their *conscience* bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Romans 2:14-16; emphasis added).

You've no doubt seen the cartoons of the person who has the devil sitting on one shoulder and an angel on the other shoulder, each one speaking into an ear. Actually there is more theological truth to that picture than many people realize. The error in it is that our moral instructions don't come from the outside-they come from the inside. They are, as Paul said, instinctive.

We've all perceived that inward guidance that leads us to resist the temptation to be selfish. Probably everyone has obeyed that inward leading to some degree. But *all of us*, more or less, have violated it more than we care to admit.

Why did God give us a conscience? The apostle Paul revealed the reason in the above-quoted verse, and it only makes logical sense: Someday, God is going to judge us on the basis of whether or not we obeyed our conscience, whether or not we did what we knew we were supposed to do.

Why is that so important to God? Because God has an ultimate plan for a future perfect society, and selfish people won't fit in there. In the final chapter, we'll examine what the Bible has to say concerning this future society.

Of course, since all of us have violated our conscience, we all stand condemned before God, deserving whatever punishment He deems appropriate. There isn't a person reading this book who hasn't acted selfishly. Most of us have led lives that are characterized by

selfishness. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, even our “good deeds” are selfishly motivated.

We wine and dine others to get something from them.

We flatter people in order to gain an advantage.

We serve “unselfishly” so others will know how unselfish we are.

We volunteer so we can add a self-promoting paragraph to our resume’.

We obey the law motivated by a fear of getting caught and suffering the consequences- rather than a true concern for those who would be hurt by our breaking the law.

We give gifts so the recipients will think more highly of us. Too often, our gifts are really bribes. And if we aren’t immediately thanked in proportion to the amount spent on the gift, we criticize the recipient behind his back! (Now isn’t that unselfish love!)

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For *men will be lovers of self...*” (2 Timothy 3:1-2a; emphasis added).

Endnote

1. Samuel Noah Kramer, *Cradle of Civilization*. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1978, p. 82.