

An Unanswered Question
Romans 12:9b
#55 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – January 28, 2007

Introduction

Those of you who were here at Faith Church under my father-in-law's ministry know that he loved to hunt. Both of my other brothers-in-law hunted, and I joined my brother-in-law Dan and my father-in-law for a couple of years. Male bonding stuff.

I think it was the second year I went deer hunting. I was sitting behind a rock, and suddenly spotted a pretty good sized deer just a few dozen yards away from me. I grew up around guns because my father was a police officer and took me target shooting as a kid, and I'm a pretty good shot, especially with a scope. So I lined up the shot, took it, waited for the deer to fall, and . . . nothing happened. I have no idea why that deer didn't drop, because the crosshairs of the scope were right on it. It was an easy shot. And I was so surprised that I did what you shouldn't do – drop the gun and lift my head. As soon as I moved, the deer saw me and quickly ran off.

No big deal. I was along more for the fun of being in the woods, and being with the other guys in my family, so if I didn't get a deer, it was not a major issue to me. So I would have been content to shrug it off and continue to enjoy the quiet of the woods and the experience of having seen a deer that close. But that wasn't going to happen. My father-in-law heard the shot and it didn't take long for him to make his way to where I was sitting and ask, "Did you shoot?" And I had to tell him the story.

I'm sure that it was in order to help me do better the next time that he asked, "If you had to make that shot again, what would you do differently?" Asking it once was fine. But several times through the rest of the day he asked "If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?" – to the point where the answers in my head were ranging between "I would have stayed home" to "I wouldn't have fired the dopey gun."

"If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently" is a question that is good for us to ask about a lot of things in life. Some things we can't change, but some things we can go back and fix. And I'd like to do that this morning. I want to go back and fix my sermon. Oh brother!

Let me explain. I think most pastors go over what they say and how they say it. I don't think I've ever come away from a Sunday feeling like I said everything perfectly. Most of the time it is no big deal. But as I went over what I was talking about, I realized two things. First, I had not answered the question about whether was such a thing as a moral grey area. Second, I was talking about Christians going through judgment, and I felt that I may have left some people unsettled or confused. Both of those topics are just too important to say, "O well." I want to finish talking about the so-called "grey area" this week and next week I want to talk with you about the subject of Christians, sin and

judgment. Hopefully you'll see why it is worthwhile for us to take some time with each of these subjects.

Prayer

A Question We Need to Answer

Is there a moral grey area?

We looked at the second part of Romans 12:9 last Sunday. Paul tells us, “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” If you remember, I had started my sermon with a set of questions about issues of right and wrong. Most people would agree that those categories exist (right and wrong), but in our culture we hardly have agreement over what behaviors go into those categories. As a result, we have what some call a grey area – things we’re not sure about.

A friend of mine is currently writing a book that will be published later this year by Crossway Books. It’s entitled *The Discipline of Discernment*. I had the privilege to read through the first several chapters this past week and thought I would share these words with you:

Discernment itself is rooted in the understanding that there is good and bad, that there are God’s ways and other ways. A secular worldview, on the other hand, teaches that truth exists along a continuum. Truth is subjective; it is relative. One author says that in this worldview *“Every idea is a shade of gray. There is no right and wrong or true and false, but only shades of right and wrong or true and false spread along a continuum. The poles of this continuum are extended so far out towards the wings that for all practical purposes they are unattainable and therefore worthless. Nothing, then, is wholly right or wrong. All is relative; most of it is subjective.”*¹

Are questions of right and wrong primarily relative and subjective? Most of the people you rub shoulders with think so. And that’s the reason why it is worth going over this territory again, because – whether you know it or not – you are navigating in a world that believe in moral shades of grey. So when we read “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good,” how can we possibly do that unless we can clearly identify what evil is and what good is?

So what’s the answer? Is there a “grey area?” Are there only “shades of right and wrong?” Based on what the Bible says, I would have say that the answer is no.

¹ Challies, Timothy, quoting from Jay Adams (*A Call to Discernment*) in the forthcoming book, *The Discipline of Discernment*, Crossway, 2007

But what about . . . ?

Now when someone asserts that there is such a thing as absolute moral right and wrong, there are two questions that are often raised. The first has to do with the existence of “moral dilemmas.”

A moral dilemma is “a situation that often involves an apparent conflict between moral imperatives, in which to obey one would result in transgressing another.”²

For example, during the second World War, a Dutch woman named Corrie ten Boom was a part of a group that hid Jewish people from the Nazis. There were times when she had two choices – lie and protect the Jewish people, or tell the truth and see them killed.

We have a story like that in the book of Joshua. (Read Joshua 2:1-14). Rahab’s choices were to rat out the spies or to lie. In point of fact both choices violate God’s moral standards.

I’m not going to deny that there are such things as moral dilemmas. There are times when it seems that the only choices are between wrong and wrong, and people end up choosing the “lesser of two evils.” Some might say that this sounds like situation ethics – a way of thinking made popular in the 1960’s. But it is not that at all. Situation ethics is very subjective, and turns a wrong thing into a right thing because of the circumstances. I’m talking about situations where there is no right, and frankly, I think they are incredibly rare. We’re not talking about it being ok to cheat on an exam because the greater good is to pass the test, pass the course, get a good job, pay for your family, etc. That’s just sinful rationalization.

I don’t want to get too far a-field here, but there is something we can learn from the existence of even these rare moral dilemmas. I think it reminds us how awful and pervasive sin is. It has such an impact on life and on the lives of people it is no wonder that we are to abhor what is evil.

The second question that can be raised when we say that there is no moral grey area is this: doesn’t the Bible tell us that there are actions that may be wrong in one context, but right in another? The passages in question are Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 & 9.

We’ll see this better when we actually make it into Romans 14, but the issue is not a matter of something being good in one set of circumstances and evil in another. Rather there are ways of behaving that, while not sinful, might cause a spiritually weaker Christian to struggle or to be offended because of the associations they have with that behavior. In those situations the issue of right and wrong has to do with our being willing to set aside our freedom out of concern for others.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_dilemma

The best way to approach moral choices:

Look at Hebrews 12:1. Ron pointed me to something he had read by John Piper that is worth sharing with you. Piper writes, “. . . *the fight of faith - the race of the Christian life - is not fought well or run well by asking, "what's wrong with this or that?" but by asking, "is it in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and greater patience and greater self-control? Not: Is it a sin? But: Does it help me run!"*”³

He's dead right. A pursuit of holiness is not concerned with how much we can get away with. It is concerned with what pleases God. We are told to “*Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*”

That's why it is not right to cheat on your taxes if you don't like how the government is spending. The Bible says “*For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed* (Romans 13:6-7).

That's why the question is not “How far can a couple go without being married?” Paul wrote to Timothy that he was to treat “*the younger [women] as sisters, with all purity*” (1 Timothy 5:2).

That's why you don't end a marriage when things get rough but you retain the commitment you made before God and the people who witnessed your vows, because Jesus said, “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*” So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:9-10).

Last week I asked: What happens when you leave the bank with \$20 more than the check you cashed? What do you do when you get home and find that you paid less for the groceries than you should have? Is it ok if it's under a dollar? How about under \$5? \$10? How much before you have to go back? Paul's goal was to “*aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man*” (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Moral ambiguity? I think not. There's a whole lot less up for grabs when we are interested in pursuing a life that is pleasing to God.

Applying this Passage to Our Lives

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Ten simple words. But what an impact they have on the way we think and the way we live.

³ From a sermon delivered on August 17, 1997: *Running With the Witnesses*. www.desiringgod.org

The constant call of God through Scripture is to pursue what pleases him. Let's be sure we are setting aside the morality of dying culture – that's what it means to not be conformed to this world – and embrace God's good and acceptable and perfect will.