

Chapter 1

Ethics and the Gospel

We are immortal individuals whose constant challenge is to apply immortal principles to life's constantly changing situations. . . .if we are truly attached to immortal principles, some decisions need to be made only once, really, and then righteous reflexes can do the rest. Absent such fixed determinations however, one can be tossed to and fro by temptations which then require case-by-case agonizing.
- Elder Neal A. Maxwell¹

What decisions will you face today that may present an ethical dilemma? By what decision-making process will you solve your problem so that its resolution will bring you inner peace?

There are eternally-reliable guidelines to follow that will have that desired result. They are found in the *immortal principles* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, spoken of by Elder Maxwell. They are *fixed*, and if we are *attached to them* and *apply* them in making decisions and in solving dilemmas, we will not be *tossed to and fro*, nor will we have to *agonize, case by case*, in their resolution. And some of them may *need to be made only once* so that our *righteous reflexes can do the rest*. These guidelines for solving both personal and professional ethical dilemmas are the subject of this book.

Ethical dilemmas are among the toughest problems with which we deal. Since they often require 'heat of the moment' decisions, the philosophy which forms the foundation of our decisions, must reflect deeply held convictions. If these convictions are based upon immortal principles, they will lead us to respond righteously in moments when difficult choices need to be made.

These dilemmas involve difficult decisions concerning choices that sometimes appear to be between competing values. Many people believe that mistakes can not be made when resolving an ethical dilemma — that people can come to different solutions of a dilemma based on their situation, value system, and understanding of the problem. This belief may lead to a philosophy of 'situational ethics'. David B. Haight commented on this philosophy in a general conference address in October 1987,

One reason for the decline in moral values is that the world has invented a new, constantly changing, and undependable standard of moral conduct referred to as "situational ethics." Now, individuals define good and evil as being adjustable according to each situation; this is in direct contrast to the proclaimed God-given absolute standard.²

The gospel, as pointed out by Elder Haight, does not allow for this philosophy. It insists that ethical decisions must be based on standards. Without standards upon which to base our choices and to define what is good, we, given our unique circumstances, may conclude that competing values are equally good when in fact they are not. Belief in situational ethics leads to poor resolutions of dilemmas.

A standard implies constancy, something firm and dependable — like a lighthouse, which provides the mariner a fixed position in both good and bad weather, and guides him through dangerous waters safely to shore. Similarly, a data-base of all known standards of physical properties and measurements are maintained by the United States National Bureau of Standards which provides a point of reference in the solution of technical problems.

The four standard works are the point of reference that form the basis of a moral philosophy for the solution of ethical problems. Elder Bruce McConkie wrote of them:

These four volumes of scripture are the standards, the measuring rods, the gauges by which all things are judged. Since they are the will, mind, word, and voice of the Lord (D&C 68:4), they are true; consequently, all doctrine, all philosophy, all history, and all matters of whatever nature with which they deal are truly and accurately presented. The truth of all things is measured by the scriptures. That which harmonizes with them should be accepted; that which is contrary to their teachings, however plausible it may seem for the moment, will not endure and should be rejected.³

President Gordon B. Hinckley affirms the eternal nature of standards:

While standards generally may totter, we of the Church are without excuse if we drift in the same manner. We have standards — sure, tested, and effective. To the extent that we observe them, we shall go forward. To the extent that we neglect them, we shall hinder our own progress and bring embarrassment to the work of the Lord.⁴

[Our] standards have come from [the Lord]. Some of them may appear a little out of date in our society, but this does not detract from their validity nor diminish the virtue of their application. The subtle reasoning of men, no matter how clever, no matter how plausible it may sound, cannot abridge the declared wisdom of God.⁵

The Lectures on Faith and Ethics

The *Lectures on Faith* are valuable in developing a philosophical base to be used in the understanding and the analyzing of ethical dilemmas. A brief review of key points within them will demonstrate this basis.

While there were others who taught some of the Lectures, Joseph Smith was the primary teacher. In Lecture 3, he said,

Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, the idea that he actually exists. Secondly, a *correct* idea of his character, perfections, and attributes. Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to his will. For without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive; but with this understanding it can become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness, unto the praise and glory of God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Lecture 3:2-5)

It would help to know if our faith was productive if we were to receive a grade for our performance as we journey through this earth life. In the above reference, Joseph Smith gave us three keys to determine how we are doing. By knowing these keys, we can determine if our faith is productive and if our decisions are placing us on a path to return to God's presence.

In Lecture 1, the Prophet Joseph teaches us that faith is the moving principle of all action. Since ethics involves making moral judgments, an understanding of what faith is and how it moves us to action will help us to know why we behave the way we do.

There needs to be an object to our faith. Joseph says that the object consists of knowing that God exists (Lecture 2) and knowing of His correct characteristics and attributes (Lectures 3 and 4). These characteristics and attributes, as defined by Joseph are:

1. "He was God before the world was created, and the same God that he was after it was created" (Lecture 3:13);
2. "He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness, and that he was so from everlasting, and will be to everlasting" (Lecture 3:14);
3. "He changes not, neither is there variableness with him; but that he is the same from everlasting to everlasting, being the same yesterday, today, and for ever; and that his course is one eternal round, without variation" (Lecture 3:15);
4. "He is a God of truth and cannot lie" (Lecture 3:16);
5. "He is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him" (Lecture 3:17);
6. "He is love" (Lecture 3:18);
7. "Knowledge" (Lecture 4:5);
8. "Faith or power" (Lecture 4:6);
9. "Justice" (Lecture 4:7);
10. "Judgment" (Lecture 4:8);
11. "Mercy" (Lecture 4:9);
12. "Truth" (Lecture 4:10).

As we grow in our knowledge of God and His nature, it can serve as an object for our faith. We can then apply our faith to strive to become like Him so that our daily decisions are based on a true moral philosophy.

Gratefully, God has not left us alone in the solution of life's problems. He is willing to help us with our decisions. Not only is He willing to help, but we need to know if the decisions we make

conform to His will for us. We need a confirmation that our decisions are correct. When we receive this, we feel their rightness and we are at peace. To be certain that our decision-making and problem-solving procedures are agreeable to God, we must know how to communicate with Him and how to listen by the Spirit to His promptings.

Examples of Ethical Dilemmas

The scriptures contain great examples of individuals facing ethical dilemmas. Nephi, the carefully taught and obedient son of Lehi, a prophet in Jerusalem during the reign of King Zedekiah, anguished over one of these. After leaving Jerusalem with his family, his father told Nephi and his brothers that the Lord had commanded them to return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates which contained the writings of the holy prophets. Nephi obediently responded,

I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them. (1 Nephi 3:7)

He then recorded his dilemma:

And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do. Nevertheless I went forth, and as I came near unto the house of Laban I beheld a man, and he had fallen to the earth before me, for he was drunken with wine. And when I came to him I found that it was Laban. And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel. And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban; but I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him. And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. Yea, and I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property. And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me again: Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief. And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise. Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass. And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. (1 Nephi 4:6-17)

After wrestling with the problem, Nephi finally made a decision and resolved the dilemma.

Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword. (1 Nephi 4:18)

The dimension of Nephi's dilemma was extreme and could only be solved by direct revelation and command from the Spirit of the Lord. Most of the ethical situations in which we find ourselves may seem less dramatic in nature. But whether they are of a personal nature, affecting only our spiritual growth, or whether they impact the lives of others as they most often do — they are nonetheless of great importance in their resolution.

As an exercise in moral judgment, how would you resolve the following dilemmas?

- A family is experiencing a crisis. A rebellious teenager, second oldest of 5 children, is not living a moral life. She has made a series of decisions in her life that have led to this. She started a job on Sunday which kept her from attending church. She began doing things with other rebellious youth. Her immoral behavior is beginning to effect the younger children in a negative way as they observe the violation of family and societal rules. What do loving parents do to correct this situation? Do they ask the rebellious daughter to move out to protect the younger children?
- Away from work while shopping with his family, an engineer overhears two other engineers discussing proprietary information concerning a potentially marketable product. He realizes the two work for a competitor and that the information could help his own company secure an advantage over the competitor. Does he say something to his boss since it was not his fault that he was in position to overhear the proprietary information? Or, does he ignore the conversation that he overheard since the two other engineers were innocently discussing the information in what they thought was a private conversation?
- A roommate returns from an appointment with her Bishop and waves a temple recommend exclaiming, "I got it!" Her roommates are surprised. They know her immoral behavior would not qualify her for it and they surmise that she wasn't honest with the Bishop. Out of her hearing, the roommates discuss their responsibility in the matter. Do they report her immoral behavior to the Bishop? Do they talk to the roommate about the situation? Or, do they decide that it is between her and her Bishop?
- You are the catcher on a baseball team that is playing in a game to decide which team will advance in a tournament. The score is tied and the opposing team is up to bat. With two outs, a runner breaks for home on a steal attempt. It is a close play and the umpire calls the runner out but you know that you missed the tag. Do you ignore the fact that you missed the tag and not say anything to the umpire? Or, do you tell the umpire that the runner should be safe allowing the go ahead run to score?

References

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5. Hinckley, G.B., *Be Thou An Example*, Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981, p.12.