

Christian Values in a Changing Society

Societal and Personal Values

We can speak about the topic of values on two levels: group or societal values and individual or personal values.

On the first level, we know that a set of values is characteristic of every society. Usually, the basis for societal values has been religious beliefs. In our countries, for example, the founding principles have been based, to a large extent on Christian principles, even though not all individuals live by them.

On an individual level, ones personal values are vital in influencing actions, motivating behavior, and determining life-styles. Our values are reflected in the judgments we make and the solutions we choose. They are real and relevant.

Christians find that their personal values are often different from the values of others and from many societal values, especially in the changing world in which we live today. In this presentation, we will consider some of the features of today's society, Christian values and their basis, and how we deal with the differences between our values and those of others.

Features of Today's Society

We live in a time of changing values. Such times have existed also in the past. Believers have always had to deal with differences between their own values and those of the society in which they lived. Jesus even compared the end times to the time in which Noah lived. "But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." (Matt. 24:37-39)

However, I think that it is safe to say that this is a time in which change is happening more broadly and more rapidly than in the past. While not all of the changes that are taking place affect the values of our society, many of them do. This period of rapidly changing values had its beginnings in the 1960's and continues today. This is not a phenomenon that only Christians notice, but it is noted by many in our society.

One aspect of life in which we see significant change today is that of home and family. The family unit has been a fundamental unit of any society. Scripture bases all authority on parental authority. For these reasons, changes in the family unit and its role cause concern.

Today, many families are unstable. In our schools, we find that a large percentage of children come from so-called "non-traditional" family situations. One extensive study done in the late 1980's found that out of every 100 school children only 41 will reach age 18 in a normal family setting. In such unstable homes and families, the teaching of fundamental values is often lacking. In the past these values were taught and fostered in the home and family, and the schools supported the family's teaching. Now the schools are often called on to function in lieu of the family.

This has been recognized by educators. Beginning in the 1970's, there has been a movement toward so-called "values clarification" in our schools. I will quote from two widely used resource books:

"People are finding more and more trouble making meaning out of their lives. This seems to make values clarification more important in these vastly changing times."

"Schools should help students examine, develop and rationally choose their values. Students need help with sorting through the conflicting values of television, newspapers, peers and parents. Students need to judge these values for themselves. And they need to feel good about their own decisions and behaviors. Students must process society's confusing signals in a way that will let them live with themselves and interact with others."

What is taught in the schools in the way of values will often be that which is encouraged and accepted in today's society. This especially includes acceptance of alternative lifestyles and values.

Today, we see the erosion of the basic family unit in the many broken homes and children born to unwed mothers. We also see a tolerance and acceptance of promiscuity, couples living together outside of wedlock, and even homosexual relationships. Such lifestyles are clearly the result of deteriorating values and disappearing morals.

In many societies, values have changed significantly during the last 30 years. The fear of God is disappearing. As this happens, the foundation for morals and for the teaching of morals to the young shifts away from the Word of God. There are pressures to remove mention of God from all aspects of public life. Those who would base morals on the Bible are labeled "fundamentalists," a label that has acquired a decidedly negative connotation. At the same time, there are pressures for greater tolerance of so-called "alternative life-styles" and individual rights of expression.

These changes are reflected in many ways, and they are mirrored in our children and young people. In our schools, the conduct and attitudes of the young reflect the conditions in their homes and in society. Many of the signs that we see in our schools are disturbing.

Many school age youth are quite well-behaved and cooperative. However, studies and surveys of students show that a growing number of them are involved in sexual relationships and the use of alcohol. This is also happening at younger ages. These behaviors are promoted through the media of printed material, television, radio, and movies.

Indiscrete use of improper and explicit language has increased. Basic manners are often lacking. There is more disrespect shown to peers, to other people (especially authority figures), and for property. Occasions that were once formal and treated with dignity are no longer treated in that way by some.

In many ways, the lifestyles of today reflect a preoccupation with fulfilling the lusts of the flesh. It is often said that we should not discourage our youth from engaging in such behaviors or lifestyles, but rather teach them how to participate in them in a safe way. This attitude is also reflected in the popular music, reading material, and dress styles of today.

In the midst of such teachings, the pursuit of ones own pleasures becomes foremost. It is not surprising then that we also witness a diminishing of basic manners, respectfulness, and humility.

The Apostle Paul has aptly described these times in his second letter to Timothy: "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts. Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (II Tim. 3:7-7)

The Christian's Foundation

Already in the Old Testament time, the foundation for Christian values was revealed. Moses explained to the children of Israel, "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy Fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live." (Deut.8:2-3)

The psalmist has written, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." (Ps. 119:9-10)

The Word of God thus forms the foundation for the life of a believer and is the basis for Christian values. Paul explains this to the Ephesians by telling them that they "are built upon the

foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." (Eph. 2:20) In the same way, Jesus said, "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock." (Matt. 7:24-25)

By faith, the child of God has, as the foundation for his life, the Word of God and Jesus Christ as the chief corner stone. Even in the midst of a rapidly changing world, this foundation is secure. Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever." (Heb. 13:8) And His Word is enduring and timeless. Jesus himself said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." (Matt. 24:35)

For that reason, we want to treasure the Word of God, as expressed in the words of the Psalm that we just heard, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart." Throughout Psalm 119, the importance and preciousness of God's Word is expressed. There also the psalmist writes, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." (Ps. 119:105)

Especially in these times, it is important that we read and study God's Word. This is true for all of us, but I would like to especially emphasize this to the young believers. It is a great joy when the Word of God is dear to a young believer. This will provide a sure foundation in all of the storms of life. The Apostle Paul had this joy for his younger brother-in-faith Timothy, and mentions in his second letter to Timothy, "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (II Tim. 3:14-15)

Christian Values

The Word of God shines as the bright sun of grace into the heart of a believer. The Heavenly Father, by His grace and through the Holy Spirit, teaches and guides us on the way of faith. The Apostle writes to Titus: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2:11-14)

The child of God, as a pardoned sinner, knows the truth of the Apostle Paul's words when he writes, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Eph. 2:8) Jesus Christ revealed the depth of God's love when He gave Himself for us. In the heart of a child of God has been born a love for Him who has first loved us. With Paul, the Christian says, ". . . the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

In this way, God's love and grace work in a believer's heart to effect an inward, personal humility and a desire to walk in obedience of faith. The believer does not want to lose this great treasure that he has received. Because of this, the believer chooses to avoid those things that war against faith and a good conscience. For that reason, he does not wish to go to the dance halls, theaters, drinking places, and sports arenas of this world. For that reason, he wants to avoid that music and literature that appeals to the flesh and its lusts. For that reason, he does not want to bring television into his home. For that reason, he wants to keep the sanctity and permanence of marriage; he avoids intimate relationships outside of marriage; he wants to keep the right priorities in his home in the care and upbringing of his children.

Also for that reason, at the work place, a Christian endeavors to do his duties honestly and diligently. At school, he wants to be diligent in his work and obedient to his teachers. He wants to be content and thankful for the school and work opportunities that God has given him and not join with those who complain and resist the people whom God has placed in positions of authority. A Christian wants to conduct himself so that he shows respect for other people and their belongings. He wants to keep holy the Sabbath day. In short, a Christian wants to "abstain from all appearance of evil." (I Thess. 5:22)

Why does a child of God want to so live? It is not so that he by his good life might be saved. Rather, he wants to keep faith and a good conscience. Because his conscience is sensitive, the child of God wants to avoid those things that offend the conscience. When sins have wounded the conscience, he wants to put sin away and believe it forgiven in the name and blood of Jesus. He has not wanted to be found having his own righteousness, "but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." (Phil. 3:9)

The Apostle Paul characterizes Christian values near the end of his letter to the Philippians: "Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Phil. 4:5-8)

In the World, but not of the World

In the face of differences between his values and those of others, the Christian can encounter difficult questions. How do I relate to the world and to people in our society? How do I deal with differences between my values and society's values? How do I tell those on the outside of God's kingdom how I believe and why I continue to cling to traditional Christian values?

The fact that the values of a child of God differ from some of the values in our society does not mean that we avoid contact with the world. It simply means that we choose to avoid those things that war against faith and a good conscience. The prayer of Jesus on behalf of His own was this: "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world,

even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." (John 17:1,4-76)

We live our lives in the midst of our society. A large part of our lives are spent in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our universities, at our work places, perhaps at community events, and in certain civic duties. This we cannot and do not try to avoid. Jesus did not pray that we would be taken out of the world, but that we would be kept from evil.

Yet, believers often encounter differences between their values and those of the world in which they live. This is not new. The Bible gives us many examples of former believers who also encountered this.

Joseph, in Egypt, served in the house of the Pharaoh's captain of the guard. There he tried to serve faithfully. But he also faced temptations and suffered injustice because he endeavored to live as a child of God. Moses experienced the same things when he was raised in the house of the Pharaoh. His choice was "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." (Heb. 11:25) Daniel and his friends had similar experiences in Bablyon. And we could go on listing the experiences of former travelers. When we examine the lives of those believers, we notice that even though they suffered because of their faith, they nonetheless endeavored to humbly and faithfully perform the duties that had been given them in this life and in their societies.

The greatest example of this is the life of Jesus. His life was one of servitude. Often He was wrongly criticized and ridiculed. When He was brought to be crucified, He was beaten, a crown of thorns was placed on His head, He was spat on and mocked, and finally He was nailed to the cross to die. Nonetheless, on the cross, He spoke to God on behalf of those who had treated Him in this way and said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

By His example, Jesus showed us what our attitude should be toward all people. It has been said in this way that we should "hate sin but love the sinner."

In this, a child of God often feels that his measure of faith is small and his confession of faith is weak. The child of God is also aware that he is lacking in understanding. Because of this, he can wonder, "How will I answer those who ask about my faith? How can I explain that my values are and why I live as I do?" Often the simplest answer is the best. One can simply say, for example, "I am a child of God, and I do not want to do anything that will offend God."

The Apostle Paul was once called on to confess his faith in a very difficult situation. He stood before King Agrippa and his wife and a large group of people that included high ranking officials. Paul's confession is recorded in the book of Acts, chapter 26. It is a simple confession, in which Paul confessed his faith in Jesus and spoke about his own life and how he had been called to repentance.

But, a believer does not confess his faith by words only. The life of a believer shines as a light in this world. In it is reflected his faith, his peace with God, and the values that he holds. The world

observes the lives of believers, even of their young children at home or at school. Other people can sense that there is a special force at work in the life of a believer. The values by which they live are not confused and inconsistent. Nor are they the values that parents, school, or society force upon them. On the contrary, their values are personal convictions and serve as the foundation of their lives.

Very often, the life of a child of God is a sermon that reaches the heart of a person who is seeking meaning and direction for his or her life. And if such a person comes to question us about how we believe and live, we can then in a simple way speak about God, who has been gracious to us, and about His Son, who has redeemed us, and about the gospel, that is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." (Rom. 1:15)

Conclusion

We live in a time of rapid change and of deteriorating moral values. The fear of God is disappearing and, with it, personal humility. Nonetheless, it is our duty and desire as Christians to publicly express our understanding and the values that we hold. This we can do without apology. We want to do so because we love our countries and people and because we believe that respect for God's Word and observance of its teaching will also gain God's blessing for our nations.

We want to yet hold in our hearts the timeless truths of God's Word. The Prophet Micah has written words that seem to provide a foundation for our value system. "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8)

The child of God is on a journey through life. Jesus said of this journey that it is on a narrow way that leads unto life. (Matt. 7:14) The destination is heaven. To find this way and to remain on it, a person must receive God's grace. God is gracious. He gives His grace to the humble. (I Peter 5:5)

We humbly ask God that He would hear the prayer of His Son also on our behalf and keep us from evil. We ask, as the psalmist David did, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24)

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