

DISCERNING THE RIGHT AND THE GOOD

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Saw an interesting [story](#) the other day in which the very well-known actor Kevin Bacon (Footloose, Apollo 13, A Few Good Men, Taking Chance, to name a few of his movies) went out amongst us hoi polloi and found that life without the privileges of fame just ain't quite as easy. This isn't to denigrate Kevin Bacon, who IS a great actor but rather makes one reflect upon why so many people look to celebrities for life's advice when they are often so insulated from the lives of the vast majority of common people.

But such stories and considerations DO elicit the thoughtful question: What/who determines what is right and good?

Well, we might decide to decide democratically, as it were, letting society be the arbiter of right and wrong. But there's a problem. Society's standards blow rather like the wind—what is good today is bad tomorrow, and vice versa. If we lived in the 1860s southern U.S., we might think that slavery was, if not good, at least acceptable; only a very fringe few would even consider that today. Or, in our day, terms go in and out of acceptability with remarkable rapidity ... without us knowing who the “arbiter of terms” may be. It could also be how various persons are treated, whether by race, gender, religion, or whatever. Right now, it seems that it's open season on Jews in some areas, for instance, due to the Gaza action, even though some random Jew minding his own business who gets beaten up has nothing to do with Israel's actions or policies. But hate knows no logic.

Or, we might decide to be autocratic about the whole thing and decide that whatever benefits ME—regardless of how it affects others—is the good. After all, why should I really care about the welfare of the other guy; if he is destroyed, it's no skin off MY nose! What matters is ME...me, me, ME! And maybe my family, but only inasmuch as they profit ME.

Sadly, sometimes there seems to be no shortage of these latter types. Think about all the scammers that rob the elderly of their life savings as a very heinous example. Or pedophiles, or rapists, or spouse beaters, or any type of vicious crime. Or those who lie or perjure themselves for revenge or to save their skin, letting others take the fall for their own actions. Or some fictional politician (never possible, surely! (eye-roll)) who would lie, cheat, steal, and arrange vote fixing to ensure that he either gains or remains in power, or those who help in fraudulently “fixing the vote.” Would they not be placing themselves above the will—and even perhaps above the welfare—of the people—simply advancing their own agendas to the detriment of the national will?

For a society to thrive, however, there must be mutual support. Therefore, what is good and right in society must be that which is most beneficial to all. Those who are myopically selfish are not unlike termites, consuming for their benefit despite increasingly weakening the very structure upon which they depend.

So ... what is most beneficial to all? Thousands of years of human society have been the crucible refining that which is most profitable for society—a list which is remarkably uniform throughout cultures. And so, unsurprisingly, we find them in the ancient texts in the Ten Commandments, the teaching of Jesus, as well as the teaching of great philosophers and other religious leaders.

Take the Ten Commandments, for example. Even if the atheist put aside the first three strictly “religious” articles of honoring God, what remains is the universally recognized virtues of honoring parents, respect for human life and individual property, loyalty in marriage, integrity, and justice (not bearing false witness), and resisting obsessive envy/desire. Fast forwarding a few thousand years to Jesus, who advocates the same, but also the love of one's fellow Man (regardless of who it may be), charity towards the needy, poor, downtrodden, and disadvantaged. Humility and compassion toward the hurting. Forgiveness of offenses, i.e.,

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reconciliation. Mercy. Treating others as you would want to be treated. Who can find fault or detriment to society in any of these?

Yet excess of self-interest can easily worm its way in and, by its very nature, can blur the vision of these things which are the good—thus, the seven deadly sins. Pride refuses to forgive and/or seeks self-glorification rather than humble service. Wrath destroys relationships and human life. Lust exploits. Greed dismisses respect for private property and charity. Envy eats the heart and cultivates hatred. Sloth and gluttony wreck charity and body. All of these can, like our termites above, destroy the very society upon which they depend.

We Christians, reveling and rejoicing in the teaching that is God-given, know that it is not our decision to decide what is good or not; God has so very kindly outlined that already, like the good parent who sets rules for the home for the benefit of all within. The Word is not only our rule but, as in a home's mandates, an act of love. Thus, when we follow God and His Word, we do the good; when we depart from it, we do wrong and even evil. Yes, it's that simple ... not always easy, but simple. But we are often like the foolishly inquisitive child who, disregarding the munificent loving authority, still puts our hand on a hot stove. Hopefully, the experience teaches the usually hard lesson. But, sadly, many repeat it time and time again to see if the stove is still hot.

So ... looking for a guide in life? In a world in which "right" and "wrong" change like the wind, you need look no further than the best-selling and most-read book of all time: the Bible. Yes, it is a compilation of books about, from, and for very imperfect people, but people nonetheless seek what is good. Like churches, it is not a collection of primarily saints but a hospital and guide for sinners and the lost ... buttressed by history, including warts and all. But, if you read ... if you come ... with open mind, you may find that faith follows as surely as dawn follows night.