



# How to Know What's Right ... And Do It

by Dale G. Lasky

## Decisions and Human Beings

Bob Crawford sat in his office worried and perplexed. He kept turning over in his mind what to do about Tony Salvio. A decision had to be made, but none of the options was attractive.

Bob managed a small machine shop started by his father after World War II. Tony had been with the company from the beginning. Bob's father had considered Tony a good friend, and Bob had worked closely with him for many years. But lately Tony had been making costly mistakes; his work was not up to the standards of the shop. He had lost the keen eye and sure hand required by his job.

The Crawford Works had built its reputation on quality work, something no longer easy to find. The profit margin was never large. All of the employees depended upon each doing his job well, including Tony—and Bob, as well.

Bob Crawford knew that Tony was too old to find another job easily yet too young to retire. And the long illness of his wife Betty had made it impossible to build up even modest family savings during the years after the children finished college. If only the company were larger, Bob could have found something else in the plant for Tony to do. But there was nothing.

Bob Crawford faced a problem. And we can only respect him for considering it a problem. Many other employers in his place might have considered the whole question simply in terms of business efficiency and profit and would have let Tony go without many regrets. But Bob could see that whatever course of action he followed, it would affect the lives of many people.

In Tony's case, it would not be simply the loss of a job. His pride in his work would be deeply hurt. He would not feel good about himself. Yet, Bob had to consider the welfare of the other people in the shop, too, and there was the important matter of meeting the demand for quality which customers expected of the company.

Bob Crawford's problem was a moral problem. The heart of morality is concern for the well being of people. Trying to be moral means nothing more nor less than trying to act as a fully human person and to treat other people in a humane fashion.

Each of the hundreds of decisions we make each day has a moral dimension as those decisions affect our lives and those of other people. This does not mean, however, that every choice we make is automatically a moral one. Some decisions appear to be morally neutral, matters of taste. For example, we face a variety of choices in what

we eat for breakfast, what kind of car to buy for the family, where to spend Friday night, or what TV program to watch this evening.

But even in these everyday choices the moral dimension is sometimes present, though we may not always call it that. Whatever our choice for breakfast, we need to eat those things that will preserve good health and keep us going through the day. And if the doctor puts us on a diet, we become very careful to choose wisely. The energy crisis suddenly gave importance to the gas mileage of the car we buy, not only because it affects the family budget, but also because we feel an obligation to conserve scarce natural resources for future generations.

There are many ways to live the good life, and matters of taste are not directly moral questions. But whatever we do affects other people. And that's what gives the moral dimension to decision-making.

## Moral or Legal?

To do the moral thing means something other than simply doing what is legal. As far as the law is concerned, Bob Crawford would have been perfectly within his rights to dismiss Tony from his job. But Bob was not satisfied simply to do what is legal. He knew more was demanded of him.

Everyone knows that there are fully legal ways to cheat people, and each person has a fully legal right to waste not only time or money, but his whole life. Nevertheless, morality plays an important role in the drafting of laws by which we govern ourselves. We demand laws that will protect our rights. We also want laws that will protect our homes and property from burglars and con-artists. Moral concerns lie behind consumer laws and safety regulations. And the taxes, about which we complain, require that citizens pay their share in providing for the health and welfare of other citizens, building schools and paying teachers, constructing highways and hospitals, providing for the sick and the jobless, and defending our country from hostile powers. But laws usually deal only with minimum requirements. The moral demand reaches far beyond that.

## Morality and Behavior

Morality also is something more than a matter of custom and good manners. It is important for us to know what kind of behavior is expected at work or at a football game. We may be embarrassed by not knowing which fork to use at a formal dinner. But these aren't moral matters in themselves. And yet, the moral dimension may suddenly surface even here. Social customs and good manners make life more pleasant for others and show we respect their feelings and tastes. So deciding whether or not to apply the generally accepted rules of society to our behavior and deciding the customs which give grace and order to life may become moral decisions. They determine the quality of our own life and that of the people around us. And if the rules of etiquette or social custom ever get in the way of dealing with people in a direct and personal fashion, no doubt we would feel a need to create new and better rules, not simply do without them.

## Conflict

If every decision we made were simply a matter of choosing between two options, one right and the other wrong, it would be easy to make those decisions morally acceptable. Morality would then be a matter of always choosing the right and avoiding the wrong. But the decision-making process is seldom that simple. Often we are forced to choose between two—or even three and four—right options. At those times we experience the tension between

the desire to make a moral decision, one that will not harm other people, and the certainty that however we decide, someone will definitely suffer for our decision.

Bob Crawford faced a moral problem because he saw the conflict between his concern for Tony, his duty toward the other people in his shop, and his responsibility to his customers. Parents often experience the conflict between finding enough time with their family, participating in community activities and carrying out the demands of their work. Citizens and government officials have to balance their own interests, the interests of their country, and the rights of people in other countries.

Disagreements arise between people because they differ on which obligation takes priority over another. The way we arrange our priorities depends on our own vision of what we mean by fully human life—our personal philosophy of life.

## Something More Than Conscience

You may not be accustomed to spending much time talking about your philosophy of life. But at times you may find yourself, or hear others, saying something like, “Everyone ought to live life to the full, but not interfere in the lives of others;” “We all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;” or “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Phrases such as these point to a personal philosophy, a set of values or beliefs on the basis of which we evaluate events and people, a standard we use in making decisions.

Our personal view of life is a very complicated thing which has been shaped by many experiences. It bears the influence of parents and friends. It comes from—and is reflected in—the newspapers and books we read, the television programs we watch. It may involve the way we coped with the death of someone close to us. It is shaped by our having lost a job, served in the armed forces, or dropped out of school.

We express our philosophy in what we say and in the way we choose to live. It is embodied in our conscience which determines how we feel about ourselves before and after we have made a decision.

Conscience exerts a strange power over us. Each of us has his own, yet none of us controls it. We cannot dictate to our conscience nor totally ignore it. It is there constantly, calling us to account for what we are about to do or what we have already done.

The old saying, “Let your conscience be your guide,” is not very good advice because conscience turns out to be a rather unreliable guide. If a friend were to fault Bill Smith for cheating on his wife, his answer might be, “Well that’s simply the kind of person I am. Can’t blame me for being myself, can you?” But we would blame him, especially if he really were being himself. On the other hand we feel sorry for Harry Jones who never seems able to do anything freely and happily because his conscience is always getting in the way.

The full force of conscience works at a deeper level than matters of right or wrong. Conscience is the force in each of us that tries to develop a pattern and consistency in life.

We want to anticipate what we will be like in the future and we want others to know what they can expect from us. That personal integrity goes beyond our concern not to do what we consider wrong.

In fact, most of us at one time or another have acted contrary to our personal moral standards. We may have gone along with a company policy we knew was wrong or kept silent about a decision of a group to which we

belong even when we disagreed with that decision. Or we may have strongly disapproved of the programs for which the government used our tax money—but we paid our taxes anyhow. These become serious issues of conscience when they assume such importance for us that we can no longer continue acting as we have and still preserve our personal integrity. To act contrary to conscience in such situations threatens us at the very center of life. When that happens, we may find it necessary to quit our job, leave the group, or work as hard as we can to change the policy of the government. However we respond, we know that we have to follow our conscience, even if it should turn out to be in error, because something even more vital than a sense of right and wrong is at stake. The issue is our personal integrity, our identity.

## Who We Are—Who We Will Be

Just as we grow physically, we also grow morally. When conscience speaks it represents the voice of our past. But we also need some picture of the kind of person we want to become in the future, something to direct our growth toward maturity and to a fuller life. We need a vision of ourselves as people who realize their full potential. The apostle Paul emphasized the importance of the vision by which people live when he wrote to the Galatians, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female.” Paul put his finger on three common ways in which people still answer the question, “Who am I?”, and he found each one inadequate.

“Jew or Greek.” Ask a man who he is and he may answer as follows: “I’m Jim McDougall, an American citizen, descended from Scotch-Irish ancestors who settled in Pennsylvania in the 1800s, a member of the Rotary Club, and production manager for Electronics, Inc.”

A modern Paul would say that is a good answer. It supplies Jim with a sense of belonging and helps him to understand who he is and what he is doing. But he also would point out that Jim’s life has potential which goes beyond all that. Life is more than living out tradition and doing one’s job. Jim is a unique individual and he belongs to a larger community than that of his family, nation, and business. If he fails to recognize this, he will never realize all God meant him to be.

“Male or female.” Other people picture themselves in terms of abilities received at birth. A woman answers the question, “Who am I?” “I’m Mary Douglass, age 32, I.Q. 110, able to jog five miles in 32 minutes, with all the talents necessary to compete with other people and surpass them when the need arises.” Mary knows her unique talents, and she aims to realize all of them in her life.

However, our modern Paul says, “Fine, but life means more than using all the talents with which you were born.” Mary may fail to recognize an even greater personal fulfillment which can come through intimate interaction with others. Without that her life will be confined to simply proving she is superior to everyone around her.

“Bond or free.” Still other people define life primarily in terms of their social status and roles. This person says, “I’m John Cooper, a middle-class worker, respected by most people with whom I live, and able to get along with every person I meet, if they give me half a chance.” John is sensitive to the feelings of other people and tries very hard to live harmoniously with everyone. His motto is “Live and let live.” The happy and peaceful social life most of us desire depends on people such as John. But he lacks the sense of personal worth which will let him dare to do what disturbs others and to measure himself by something more than what others expect of him.

Each of these visions of self merits consideration, yet Paul insisted on something more. That “more” was the sense of dignity and worth that God passed on to people who recognized Jesus Christ as their Lord. That role as God’s favorite surpasses the identities found in the good traditions of the past, one’s talents and the highest

social status attainable. That role also provides a sense of responsibility toward others that goes beyond personal desires or private goals.

Being moral means more than knowing the difference between right and wrong or having a clear set of rules to follow in every situation. To be a moral person means to be continually growing in the breadth and depth of our vision of life. To act morally means to act on the basis of a certain knowledge of who we are, who other people are, and who God expects all of us to be. It is significant that Jesus never formulated a new code of rules for life; yet no one has been a greater source of insight into the moral life than He. As He dealt with people, He demonstrated a unique ability to uncover what was controlling their lives. And He challenged them to break free from a stifling preoccupation with themselves and their perceived limitations. He experienced the greatest hostility from people who refused to open their lives to the freedom He wanted them to know, a freedom He personified in His own will to be a servant to all.

## Morality and Love

For many people the vision of a full personal life has been expressed in the word “love.” It is not an abstract ideal or sentiment, however, because love directs us continually into living and working with people, imperfect human beings like ourselves, rather than abstract, ideal, or hypothetical creatures.

Genuine love also stands in contrast to the pseudo-love which is nothing more than dependence on others. For example, life for some parents suddenly becomes empty when the children grow up and move away from home. Suddenly they see that the attention showered on the children, what they considered love, actually hid a need to have them present in order to give meaning to the parents’ life. Certainly separation from people with whom we have lived each day is a painful experience. But love means having a sense of self-worth as a gift of God, not as something determined solely by our relationships with other human beings.

The personal integrity which God bestows on us in Christ and the loving servant role He asks us to assume willingly do not imply always giving in to the demands of others. Love can even take the form of insisting on one’s own rights.

Many people traveling in another country have been surprised to discover that they do not take kindly from others the very criticisms they themselves voiced back home about their own country. Suddenly they have discovered themselves to be more than tourists abroad; they represent their own nation and its people. And they feel compelled to speak in its defense.

Or, take the case of Mrs. Smith in light-hearted conversation at a party. She picks up repeated remarks which are demeaning to women. On a purely personal basis, she might let them pass. But she is aware that she represents all women. She cannot let the remarks go unanswered. In many similar situations, we must insist on our rights because we represent all human persons. In love, we insist that others respect us and demand the same right for others as well.

When we recognize ourselves and others as persons of value, we have a key to solving the moral problems that confuse and perplex us. The decision-making process goes beyond determining what is legal and what is not. It involves a concern for the quality of life, expressed at times in customs and manners, that we desire for others as well as for ourselves. Moral decisions reflect our philosophy of life and the behavior which our conscience either approves or condemns.

Good moral choices also require more than traditions from the past, a knowledge of our needs and powers, or an awareness of what is socially acceptable. They involve a vision of the fullness of the life to which God has called us. And that fullness can be experienced best as we live in a genuine personal relationship with God and with other people.

Understanding all that, however, will only be a beginning point. We will still have to make hard choices. We will have to act. And we can expect to experience conflict in ourselves and with others as we try to deal seriously with moral issues. But now we have a clear point from which to begin. The goal of the moral life is not simply to find rules of right or wrong. It is the continual task of growing up to be a mature person, aware of self and others. From such a perspective we can begin working through the questions of right and wrong.

## Accepting Freedom

Growing up is a matter of taking charge of our own lives. Children depend on their parents not only to provide food and clothing but also to make many important decisions for them. To be an adult is to take responsibility for our own lives to make choices on the basis of what we know to be true about ourselves, the people around us, and the God who wills only good for all human beings.

Being mature means learning to be free. Unfortunately, freedom has often been reduced to an anemic shadow of its vital self.

Many people think of freedom only as liberation from parents, from the burdens of work, from interference by others, and from rules which prevent them from doing what they want to do. Instead of opening the way to a fuller life, the quest for freedom turns people in upon themselves. They end up fitting the description of the inmates of an insane asylum given by the superintendent in Ibsen's drama *Peer Gynt*:

“Beside themselves? Oh no, you're wrong.  
It's here that men are most themselves—  
Themselves and nothing but themselves—  
None has a tear for other's woes  
Or cares what any other thinks.”

As citizens we pride ourselves on our freedom. We are quick to react when we feel our freedom threatened. But to be a free citizen means more than being protected from interference by others. It means the rights and the duty to assume the responsibilities of a citizen. It means the freedom to participate in the political process, to assume roles of responsibility in our community, and to decide who shall represent us in the halls of government. Trying to live a life free of all interference ends up letting others make the important decisions and leaves us nothing more than the small space of our private lives.

But human freedom does not depend on living in a free country. The pages of history record the lives of people who were free even though they lived, sometimes died, in nations which would not tolerate their freedom—Socrates, Joan of Arc, Thomas Moore, Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. On the other hand many people living in the freest nation in history live crimped and narrow lives.

It has been said that the beautiful face of a child is a gift, but the beautiful face of an elderly person is an achievement. The good life is not simply a matter of good fortune, it is also an achievement, the result of deliberate effort. We have to work out a pattern of life for ourselves instead of simply letting it happen to us. Some people, however, only play out the role written for them by tradition or other people: study and work hard,

pay your insurance premiums, send the children through school, make decisions based only on instinct or emotion, avoid responsibility, retire, and die. But we can write a quite different script for ourselves. We can decide who we shall be.

It would be foolhardy, of course, to write a role we cannot play. The playwright has to write a drama which can be performed within the limits set by the stage and by the ability of human actors to play the parts. Our humanity sets down limits, and we have to take them into account. Yet, we have to take charge of our own lives.

It is possible to do that within the context of Christian faith. When God approved the sacrifice of His Son as sufficient payment for all human failure, He enabled us to dispose of the sense of guilt which otherwise kept us in bondage, afraid to act either on our behalf or on behalf of others. The resurrection of Christ also frees us from the frightening prospect of our own death. Our life and the choices we make transcend the limits set by our humanity. Even more than that, once freed of guilt and fear, God empowers us to attempt lives of service and sensitivity to others. God's presence in our own life makes us bold to become positively involved in the lives of others since God provides the resources upon which we can draw.

No writer produces a great drama simply out of his or her mind. A masterpiece embodies the insight gained from the experience of a full life and from attentive listening. The superficial lives of many people stem from letting TV dramas write the story they try to live or from patterning their life after those of sports heroes and entertainers.

Each of us needs heroes on whom we may model our own lives. Some of us have been fortunate enough to have lived with people who provide positive models—parents, friends, a great teacher, or a person with whom we have worked. Even though we cannot simply make our own lives copies of theirs, we may learn from them how to shape our own destiny.

For the Christian, Jesus Christ becomes a model of service and love. Fully conscious of His own identity as the Son of God, He willed to love all people in need by sacrificing Himself for them. The question of His own identity was not a factor in His decisions and actions. He was free to focus His efforts on others. Also the vision which guided Him went beyond the immediate and tangible world. It involved the spirit of mankind and the needs of the soul as well as those of the body. Those who follow Christ are called to imitate Him, trusting the Father to create in them the same will to love that Christ demonstrated. In that they will discover fullness of life and a vision of what they can become. In that will to love they also find the ground for moral decisions.

## Deciding What to Do

Morality means making decisions and following through on them. To illustrate the process, let us follow the steps of two people working out a decision.

For some time, Harry and Barbara Sabatini had been considering whether Barbara should return to her old job at the ad agency. She had quit the job eight years earlier upon the birth of Susie, their first child. Soon after that came little Kevin. Now both of the children were in school, and Barbara wondered whether she ought to resume the career which she had enjoyed so thoroughly. And with the increasing rate of inflation, she and Harry would soon be facing budget problems trying to give the children all they had planned on his salary alone.

## 1. Values

Harry and Barbara discussed the matter for many evenings. They began by trying to get clear on their own values. Both of them were happy to discover they still agreed on priorities. Of first importance was their marriage, a happy and full life together as husband and wife. Close behind came the concern to provide the children a full and happy home life in both its physical and spiritual dimensions. They wanted to be available for whatever the children truly needed of them.

Unlike their friends the Carvers, they had no argument on how important a career should be to Barbara. Harry felt willing to share some of the household chores to make it possible. They agreed that taking part in school and church activities as well as community projects was also important. And they felt the need for an income sufficient for a comfortable life, although neither was interested in many of the frills other people considered so necessary.

The decision might have been a simple one if they had been the only ones involved. But both of them, especially Barb, had been disappointed and a bit hurt during the weekend visit of her Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth. The plan for Barbara's going back to work had popped up during the conversation Saturday evening. Although both her uncle and aunt had politely agreed with their decision, it was clear from the look on their faces that they really didn't approve. Barb had always loved her aunt and uncle and she respected their judgment. She knew what a happy life they had lived together and how they had cared for their family. She couldn't help feeling hurt by their disapproval and she felt a tension between her decision and her feelings of respect for Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth.

Sunday evening, after her relatives had gone, Harry and Barb talked about their reaction to her going to work. The more they talked, the clearer it became to them that they and her aunt and uncle valued the same things in life. They regarded marriage and home as of primary importance. If it had come to discussing the matter seriously, they were sure that Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth would have agreed. But they had grown up with different experiences, and had different ideas on how to put their values into practice.

## 2. Clarification of Conflict

It is important when disagreements arise on moral issues to make clear the point of difference. There may be a genuine difference on values, or people may differ on the relative importance of values they hold in common.

At other times, however, people who agree fully on values and their importance relative to other values differ on the best way of putting them into practice. The disagreement is not one of different ends, but on the best means by which to achieve them. Many bitter arguments in politics are carried on between people who agree on basic values but who differ sharply on how to apply them into action. Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth expected the result of Barbara's going back to work would be something quite different from what she and Harry envisioned.

## 3. Strategy

When Harry and Barbara finally decided on her return to work, they began to figure out a strategy of action. They decided how the children would be cared for and what household chores each would bear. Certain nights each week, they agreed, would be spent at home and one weekend each month would be devoted entirely to family activities.

Without a clear plan of action, many decisions prove ineffective. There is an important difference between making a moral judgment and working out a moral decision. Many people are experts at evaluating the actions of

other people. The moral life knows an abundance of Monday morning quarterbacks. But passing judgment is a self-serving exercise unless we have a plan of action to replace what is now being done. We may find it easy to deplore action taken by politicians, businessmen, or union leaders. But often we fall silent when we are asked for an alternative plan of action.

## 4. Follow Through

Last of all, we need the power to carry through on our decisions. We have to find adequate motivation. In the case of Harry and Barbara, this seems to have been no problem, but such is not always the case. Frequently we are able to sit down and think through a problem, even work out a practical plan of action, but we lack the will to act. Some people seem by nature able to carry through on their decisions, but almost everyone, at one time or another, finds himself searching for the power to do what he knows must be done. The cause of this failure of will takes many forms.

Sometimes our lack of motivation lies in the fact that we are not genuinely convinced of the importance of what we should do. Our minds may be made up, but this conviction has not reached the deeper springs of human action, our needs. We have to take the time to involve ourselves more fully in the situation that calls for a decision and some action. Confrontation with the drastic needs of people may spur us to immediate action. At other times talking with a friend or actively seeking additional information will stimulate us to act.

Sometimes we feel threatened by what the action will cost us. The cost may be something more than money. We dread the opposition and criticism of others. For Harry and Barbara, it was the disapproval of Uncle Ted and Aunt Ruth. It could be the scorn or anger of close friends and people at work. Suddenly we feel very much alone. But why not admit the need for support and encouragement and seek it out? Decisions need not be made in isolation. In fact there are individuals and groups all around us who are willing to help in the decision-making process.

One of the strongest inhibitions to action stems from the fear of making a mistake. The possibility goes with the fact that moral decisions involve skill, not merely following rules. Such decisions also involve other people in their consequences. Often we jeopardize our own well-being by the decision we make. There are no guarantees that we can act without mistakes. In fact, we acquire skill only through practice, in the process of which we are bound to make some mistakes. We may need to remember that doing nothing will often prove more harmful than a good mistake. Many of us have to learn the truth in the motto, "If a thing is truly worth doing, it is even worth doing poorly." Waiting for the perfect time or the perfect solution can get in the way of doing the less than perfect action which needs to be taken now. We need to remember as well that forgiveness is an essential element of love, whether given or asked for.

The ultimate dimension of motivation may find expression in prayer. Prayer is not a mere matter of adding pious words after all the important thought and struggle has taken place. The reflective dimension of prayer becomes a way of thinking through the problem with which we are trying to cope, and the words of our prayer voice our convictions and our commitments. Beyond this, prayer puts the action we are about to take and ourselves into the larger purpose and the will of God.

Our struggle to be moral marks our struggle to be fully human. The great philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above us and the moral law within us." Listening to the moral demand within us leads to struggle, frustration and even pain. But out of this struggle emerges the dignity and greatness of our humanity. We do not simply perform good and just actions, we move toward the human maturity God desires for us. We respect the achievement of moral decision making in others and experience both wonder and a proper pride when we achieve it in our own lives. Failure to decide issues morally threatens not only our own integrity, but the entire human society of which we are members. Therefore, one can not resign from the endeavor.

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