

# The Dangers of Thinking the Rules Don't Apply to Us

*The Wired Word for the Week of May 1, 2022*

## In the News

In Akron, Ohio, recently, a driver apparently decided that a "road closed" sign didn't apply to him (or her; news reports did not identify the motorist) and drove around the barriers only to end up stuck in a large patch of freshly poured concrete. Workers were able to extract the car and repair the roadway, but they advised the driver to get the concrete off the wheels and the underside of the car before it hardened. Police responded to the scene, but whether charges were filed has not been reported.

This is not big news, but it provides a ... uh ... *concrete* example of the human tendency to consider oneself not bound by the rules that apply to everyone else.

In this instance, the results are almost humorous, but a far darker example comes from Ukraine where some Russian troops have committed atrocities, murdering innocent civilians in cold blood, as though the rules of humanity -- and even of war -- don't apply to them.

Commenting on these war crimes, theologian and ethicist Russell Moore, who leads the Public Theology Project at *Christianity Today*, wrote in that publication, "The world should watch what these criminals are doing -- to call it what it is and hold them to account whenever the time comes. But Christians in particular should watch and recognize something we often want to ignore: how the human heart can justify great evil."

Moore went on to say that while most people have not committed war crimes, "every one of us has grappled with our conscience -- and in many cases, we have followed the same path, even when the sins are not as heinous and the stakes not as high."

Moore then spoke of ways in which we excuse ourselves from the rules of decent behavior.

"One of the first steps is to emphasize power over morality," Moore said. "An easy way to do this is to characterize the situation as an emergency, requiring a dispensing of the ordinary norms of behavior. ... Acting within the bounds of conscience is painted as a luxury, for times that are not as dire as these."

Moore noted that "the most dangerous form of lying is not the propaganda people give to others but the lies [we] tell [our]selves -- to quiet [our] consciences."

He said that this can happen in matters that fall far short of war crimes. "People can wall off certain categories of sin and refuse to view them as such -- placing the blame for the sin not on themselves but on those who would label it sin." As an example, Moore said we can "define sin merely in social terms: 'As long as I don't seem to be hurting anyone else in any kind of public way, then why is it anyone's business what I do in my private life?' Or one can do the opposite and define sin as merely personal, acting as though questions of social injustice are of no moral consequence."

Moore also said that sometimes an evil is too great to ignore altogether. "The conscience must reckon with it, but it does so by projecting that evil onto some other person or group. Rather than grappling with the indictment of one's own sense of right and wrong, one can short-circuit the blame by locating it elsewhere. This is how, for instance, Russian war criminals -- while carrying out the very same tactics as Nazi storm troopers -- can claim that they are fighting to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine," he said.

"Our consciences work by pointing our psyches to ultimate accountability," Moore said. "The apostle Paul wrote that the conscience bears witness to the day 'when God judges people's secrets through Christ Jesus' (Romans 2:16). One cannot bear the weight of that. Either we convince ourselves that such a reckoning will never come, or we find some authority -- maybe even a spiritual one -- to reassure us that we will never be found out."

As an example, Moore pointed to the "Butcher of Bucha," a Russian commanding officer of a unit that massacred civilians in Ukraine. This officer "allegedly spoke of his mission as a kind of spiritual warfare in which he was fighting on the side of God," Moore said.

"Perhaps the most dangerous step of all," said Moore, "is when the conscience gives up altogether and begins to say that this is just the way the world is. It shifts to saying depravity is realistic, while morality is not. We can see this in the smirk behind Putin's words and in the throat-clearing whataboutism of his Western defenders. This is all rooted in the idea that accountability will never arrive," he said.

But, of course, it will. According to the Bible, there is a day of judgment.

In conclusion, Moore said, "We were born into this century, this moment in history, and we have a responsibility to do everything that we can to stand against the murder and genocide of innocent people. We have a responsibility to call evil what it is," he said.

"We also have a responsibility to take warning -- to recognize the ways in which we excuse or reassure ourselves in the same way, while not to the same degree, as the most vicious war criminal," Moore said.

And that's about as concrete as it gets.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Wet Concrete Stops Driver Who Drove Around Barriers. \*Akron Beacon Journal\*](#)  
[What Russian War Criminals Teach Us About Excusing Evil. \*Christianity Today\*](#)

## **The Big Questions**

1. What are some common excuses you've heard when a Christian sidesteps a biblical or ethical norm? Did you ever challenge someone on using a strained excuse involving Christianity to justify such behavior? If so, what happened?

2. When have you been aware that you were seeking to justify or excuse non-righteous behavior or attitudes? How did that realization affect how you proceeded?
3. What do you think is happening in your soul when you give yourself permission to violate the very principles and values you espouse as a Christian?
4. Are Christian ethics meant for all occasions? Are there special circumstances where we can be safely excused from following some of them? How would we know? What information do we need to make such judgments? What spiritual condition do we need to be in to make such judgments?
5. How may we sustain spiritual alertness? What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41)? When have you given in to temptation because you felt too tired to battle it? What help is there for that? Has your faith ever been truly tested?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Jeremiah 17:9**

*The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse -- who can understand it?* (For context, read [Jeremiah 17:5-13](#).)

Jeremiah uses "heart" metaphorically here to mean our spiritual, emotional, moral and intellectual core, but he says that that core of our being is "devious" and "perverse."

Those are two dark words. The underlying Hebrew word for "devious" derives from the same root as does the name "Jacob." Jacob was an occasionally devious character in the Old Testament who cheated his brother out of his birthright and deceived their elderly, blind father. "Perverse," according to the dictionary, means "directed away from what is right or good" and "obstinately persisting in an error or fault; wrongly self-willed or stubborn."

Jeremiah is telling us that at root, we have a tendency to turn away from what is right or good, sometimes even to take a path that we know for certain leads to trouble.

**Questions:** What experience, if any, makes you think Jeremiah was correct in his assessment of humankind? What steps should we take to safeguard ourselves from perversity?

#### **Genesis 3:2-4**

*The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die ..."* (For context, read [Genesis 3:1-19](#).)

#### **Romans 1:25**

*... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator ...* (For context, read [Romans 1:18-25](#).)

The Genesis verses are from the story of Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit, and the verses above illustrate one way we humans give ourselves permission to disregard God's commands: We accept another view of the situation. In this case, that other view was provided by the serpent, who contradicted God's warning that death would result from eating the fruit. "You will not die," the serpent said, and Eve liked his conclusion better than the one she'd heard from the Lord.

While not commenting expressly on the Garden of Eden story, in the Romans verse, Paul's words could nonetheless apply: "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie ..."

In John 8:44, Jesus describes Satan as "a liar and the father of lies."

**Question:** What rationales that are in conflict with God's commands are you sometimes tempted to buy into? (For example, "You only go around once so you should grab every opportunity you get, regardless of what's right or wrong.")

### **Ephesians 6:13-17**

*Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (For context, read [Ephesians 6:10-20](#).)*

Paul here uses military imagery to convey the idea of successfully defending oneself from temptation.

**Questions:** Paul says that the "sword of the Spirit" is the "word of God," but he doesn't tell what the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield and helmet are. To what Christian disciplines and practices would you equate them? What do you make of the fact that the word of God is the only offensive weapon in this armor collection?

### **1 John 2:1-2**

*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (For context, read [1 John 1:5--2:2](#).)*

Here is a timely reminder that God doesn't intend our sinful slips and falls to be the last word about us. When we turn back to Jesus, he becomes our advocate with the Father, to restore us.

**Questions:** What hope do you hear in these verses? Conversely, what excuses might you find at a time of temptation?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Are there instances of rules and commands given in the Bible that we now properly believe should be limited to the time at which they were written and to the people to whom they were written? An example might be from Deuteronomy 22:11, where the ancient Israelites are told not to wear clothes made of wool and linen mixed together. What are we to make of that admonition today?
2. What penalty do you think the driver who got stuck in the concrete should have? Why? What penalty do you think those who committed war crimes in Ukraine should have? Why?
3. Why do you think God gave us a conscience?
4. In light of this week's topic, respond to James 4:17: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin."
5. Respond to this from TWW consultant James Gruetzner: "I think it important to consider the questions of 'which rules' (i.e., what establishes an objective morality) and 'what's the situation' (i.e., what is the current situation in which to respond). A third question combines the two: 'What is the moral response when someone is breaking "the rules"?"

"In the Putin-Ukraine case, taking Putin at his word, the people of Ukraine are properly part of the greater Russian ethnic group who are in rebellion against the rightful authorities. In this view, the Russian army did not invade Ukraine, but is engaged in 'special operations' in territory belonging to Russia. While to most of us this is objectively false, to Putin and others of that belief, it is objectively true. He is not lying (knowing or negligently telling a falsehood in order to deceive) to himself. His belief, however -- his moral situation -- is false."

### **Responding to the News**

This lesson can be a call simply to be aware of when and how we give ourselves permission to sidestep Christian norms.

To learn more about Christian ethics, you may wish to read this [interview](#) by TWW team member Bill Tammeus with Christian ethicist David P. Gushee.

### **Prayer**

Almighty and merciful God, please hear our prayers and help us stay away from the behaviors and attitudes that give the lie to our faith-witness as followers of Jesus. Help us to be fit places for you to dwell. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Other News This Week**

## **How One Teacher Addressed Student Questions About Jesus**

*The Wired Word for the Week of May 1, 2022*

## **In the News**

Last week, Paul Prather, a Kentucky pastor, wrote an opinion piece for the *Lexington Herald-Leader* about how a fourth-grade public school teacher, whom he did not name, handled student questions about Jesus. The teacher had assigned her students a project to develop questions about a topic of interest to them. They were then to research the topic to find answers to their questions.

Two boys in the teacher's class were curious about the identity and behavior of Jesus, so she asked Prather if he would tackle their questions. They asked:

- What did people think about Jesus when he was alive? Did they think he was crazy?
- Why was Jesus so nice when people were mean to him?
- What made people like and follow him? What were the most important things he did? What convinced people to believe him?

In response to their first question, Prather said that people had mixed opinions about Jesus, sometimes changing their views of him over time. Some were fans at first, but later rejected him, and others thought ill of him in the beginning, only to become his ardent followers later.

Regarding why Jesus was "nice" even when people were mean to him, Prather said that Jesus wanted people to "start thinking and acting in the ways God does ... to replace violence with peacemaking, hatred with love and selfishness with generosity toward everybody -- even our enemies."

As to reasons why people liked Jesus, Prather mentioned how people were attracted to his kindness, his teaching and his miracles, adding that the most important thing he did was to rise from the dead, which convinced some people to believe him.

Whatever you may think of the way the pastor answered the questions posed by the students, Prather's larger point was to commend what he calls "brave" education "that doesn't seek to indoctrinate kids so much as to stimulate them to think for themselves about things that matter to them. And it trains them to pursue answers ... [trusting] growing minds to eventually find their path."

Prather observed that in recent years, due to Covid-19 restrictions, political activism and other stresses, some public school teachers and administrators increasingly find themselves under pressure. Some veteran teachers are leaving the profession, and fewer students are preparing for a career in education.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 8% of the nearly 3.4 million public school teachers who taught during the 2011-2012 school year ended up leaving the profession entirely the following year. The National Education Association indicates that "the number of college students studying to become teachers is less than half what it was 50 years ago."

TWW recognizes that teachers leave the profession for a variety of reasons: reaching retirement age, recognizing that teaching is not their calling, etc.

"Although [teaching] is one of the most rewarding professions in the world ... it is one of the most draining professions," Clarence McFerren, a high school teacher from Tennessee, says.

One challenge teachers face is how to handle matters of religious belief and practice in the public square. Prather wrote that some people seem to believe that school teachers "are intentionally tearing down students' religious faith." While that may be true in some cases, many teachers have strong faith in God.

Attorney Colby May, of the American Center for Law and Justice, wrote that federal courts have ruled that "teachers may address religious issues in more detail in response to student questions. The bottom line is that religious beliefs and practices may be discussed in the classroom in an academic, non-devotional manner." Schools may not endorse a religious viewpoint, require that students participate in religious activities, or censor students' religious expression on campus.

"There is a key difference between ... instructing students that the tenets of one religion are true and should be followed, which is not permitted, and teaching about religion, such as what members of various religions believe, which is permitted," May explained.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Two 4th-grade Students and Their Queries on Jesus Make Me Proud of Public Education. \*Lexington Herald-Leader\*](#)

[Characteristics of Public School Teachers. \*National Center for Education Statistics\*](#)

[We're Here to Make Sure That Every Student & Educator Succeeds. \*National Education Association\*](#)

[2021 Code of Ethics for Professional Teachers Explained. \*DepEd Tambayan\*](#)

[Religion's Legal Place in the Schoolhouse. \*AASA, The School Superintendents Association\*](#)

## **The Big Questions**

1. How would you have answered the questions raised by the students in the news?
2. How are the roles and responsibilities of parent or guardian similar and dissimilar to those of educators in a community setting?
3. Recall a time, if you can, when a teacher dealt with religious issues in class. Was the topic handled appropriately, in your opinion? Why or why not? What did you learn from that exchange?
4. Discuss the pros and cons of teaching about religion in school.
5. What can you do (as an individual, and as a group) to support and encourage educators in your own community?

## **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **1 Kings 3:7-10**

*[Solomon said,] "And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. (For context, read [1 Kings 3:5-10](#).)*

### **James 1:5**

*If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (For context, read [James 1:5-8](#).)*

When Solomon was appointed to become king after his father David, he felt inadequate and ill-equipped. So when God asked him what he should give him as a coronation present, Solomon acknowledged how much love God had already shown him and his father. Instead of asking for wealth or fame, power or possessions, he asked for "an understanding mind to govern" and for the ability "to discern between good and evil."

TWW team member Joanna Loucky-Ramsey says that when she was in her teens, she struggled to understand various scripture passages. She was greatly helped when an older Christian referred her to John 16:13, which says, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Her friend reminded her that the Spirit had come at Pentecost (Acts 2) and that nowhere in the Bible does it say that the Spirit ever left. So while the promise was originally given by Jesus to his closest disciples, it would be logical to conclude that the promise applies to all of Jesus' followers, up to the present day.

Loucky-Ramsey came to understand that while human teachers can be useful, the real source of wisdom and understanding is God, who "gives wisdom and knowledge and joy" to the one who pleases him (Ecclesiastes 2:26). She learned that she could ask the Spirit of truth to guide her into all truth.

**Questions:** What do children learn when parents or teachers admit that they don't have all the answers to their questions, and that only God is all knowing? What does it take for parents and teachers to acknowledge that fact? How can children be encouraged to take their deepest questions to God?

### **Luke 2:46-47, 51-52**

*After three days [Mary and Joseph] found [Jesus] in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ... Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (For context, read [Luke 2:41-52](#).)*

When Jesus was 12, probably a couple of years older than the students in the news article, he and his parents went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, as they did every year (vv. 41-42). When it was time to return home, Mary and Joseph set off, assuming that Jesus was hanging out with relatives and friends among the other travelers. But when they couldn't find him at the end of the first day of their journey, they hightailed it back to Jerusalem to look for him (vv. 43-45).

When they finally located Jesus, he was in the company of the nation's elite teachers, listening carefully to them and probing them with questions. Mary and Joseph didn't understand why Jesus had stayed behind, but Jesus thought it should have been obvious that he had to be in the house of God his Father (vv. 48-50).

**Questions:** How could it be that Jesus, whom Paul called "the wisdom of God" and "wisdom from God" ([1 Corinthians 1:24, 30](#)) "increased in wisdom"? What could Jesus learn from his parents that he could not gain from the teachers in Jerusalem? How might this passage about how Jesus matured help us understand the needs and potential of other children and youth?

### **Proverbs 22:6**

*Train children in the right way,  
and when old, they will not stray.* (No context needed.)

While some children had the benefit of tutors and teachers in biblical times, parents (both fathers and mothers) and guardians were more often responsible for the instruction of children ([Ephesians 6:4](#); [2 Timothy 3:10-17](#)). They were to recite God's words and teach them to their children, talking about them at home or while traveling, at bedtime and upon rising in the morning ([Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#); [Deuteronomy 11:18-21](#)). They were to explain the meaning of monuments ([Joshua 4](#)), festivals, such as Passover, and special observances, such as the Sabbath.

The book of Proverbs contains several references to children learning from their parents ([Proverbs 1:1-9](#); [Proverbs 2:1-11](#)). Parents are to instruct their children so that they will gain insight, practical skills, discernment and prudence, and learn "wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity." Most of the book deals with developing and establishing wise principles in the area of human relations, attitudes toward God, creation and things.

**Questions:** What is the most important lesson you learned from one of your parents or caregivers? If you are a parent, caregiver or teacher, what important lesson(s) do you hope to impart to those in your care?

### **Matthew 19:13-15**

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.* (No context needed.)

### **Mark 10:16**

*And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.* (For context, read [Mark 10:13-16](#).)

In these parallel passages, there is no indication that Jesus "taught" a lesson about religion to the children he met. But he was still able to pray for them and bless them. It isn't necessary for public school teachers to present a theological thesis or a gospel tract in order to minister to the spiritual needs of children. Sometimes a kind word, gentle touch or silent prayer is enough.

While public school teachers have certain legal constraints with regard to the way they speak about religious matters on campus, no one can prevent them from praying privately for their charges throughout the school day, as well as before and after school hours.

**Question:** How can you best follow Jesus' example by intentionally and faithfully praying for and blessing the children in your community, their parents, guardians and teachers?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "if one couldn't communicate the most profound ideas about God and the Bible to children, something was amiss."

In the article, ["How to Give Kids Faith They Grow Into, Not Out Of,"](#) children's pastor, Sam Luce, wrote: "It is the job of the church to help parents present the bigness of who God is in such a way that the smallest child can understand." And this: "Every kid is a theologian. Honor their questions and make way for wonder."

In the article, Luce describes how hard it was to try to explain the theological concept of the Trinity to his young daughter. Putting mystery into words is hard enough for adults to comprehend, let alone for children.

Luce advises against oversimplification which can give the false impression that God is a person we can easily define and thus control. He says, "The problem is we tend to oversimplify truth we don't understand or are fearful our kids won't understand. So we do something worse than fail to answer their question -- we give them a small faith in a weak God. ... We have given them just enough of the gospel to inoculate them from the whole of it."

How does your church teach children and youth about God?

2. In the article mentioned above in #1, Luce discusses the purpose of teaching Bible stories and theological principles: "Your kids need more than answers -- they need to see modeled for them what a life lived in pursuit of Christ looks like. They need to understand at a young age that the goal of theology is not knowledge acquisition but worship. If our theology does not lead to doxology, we have failed to understand its purpose. It is seeing Jesus more clearly and loving him more dearly. Stories do that and theology empowers that."

How does your church help children and youth develop hearts that see Jesus more clearly and love him more dearly?

### **Responding to the News**

Brainstorm ways your group could provide much-needed support to teachers in your community who may feel beleaguered and stressed to the point of exhaustion. You might gain insight by reaching out to administrators or educators you know, about what type of encouragement might be most appreciated. Flowers? Volunteers? Therapy dog visits? Homemade goodies? Gift

certificates for a night at the movies? Handwritten notes of thanks? Choose at least one idea to implement.

On the other hand, if you believe that teachers and/or administrators in your local schools or districts are misusing their authority, by indoctrinating children in a particular religious belief or by requiring them to participate in a religious activity, or by prohibiting them from constitutionally protected expression of their beliefs, brainstorm ways your group might constructively handle your concerns.

### **Prayer**

All-wise and all-knowing God, you created us and know us inside and out.

Help us to grow every day in our knowledge of your goodness, power, grace and mercy, seen perfectly in the person of Jesus our Savior and Lord, who reveals you to us.

By your Spirit, teach us to know the difference between good and evil, and give us the desire and power to always choose what is good and right in your sight.

For your honor and glory, we pray. Amen.