Handout for

REL 113—Ethical Values in the Workplace
Ohio Valley College Institute for Adult Learning
For Roane-Jackson Business Technology Program

David B. Hamm, MBA, CPA
Facilitator

Class Handout #2:
“A Biblical Foundation for Ethical Principles, Part 1”

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(Assignment listed at end of handout)
A Biblical Foundation for Ethical Principles (Part 1)
David B. Hamm, OVC Institute for Adult Learning, October 2002

Author, speaker and leadership consultant John C. Maxwell was once asked to write a book on the subject of business ethics. His response was that there is no such thing as “business ethics”—there is only ethics. People fail at following moral guidelines because they seek to follow one set of ethical guidelines in their professional lives, another in their family and personal lives, and still another in their spiritual lives. Maxwell stated that ethics is ethics, and one who desires to be ethical must follow one standard at all times. (Maxwell, 2003, preface)

Why, Maxwell continues, do people fail at following moral principles? Why has business been plagued recently by extraordinary scandals at such large firms as Enron, Adelphia, Tyco, and WorldCom, some of which were publicly touted in national media as examples of “well run” firms before their fall?

Three Reasons for Making Unethical Choices (Maxwell, 2003, p. 5, ff)
1. *We do what’s most convenient*—we select the “easy” thing rather than the “right” thing
2. *We do what we must to win*—few people set out to be dishonest, but no one wants to lose. If a person perceives that he/she has the choices only to “do whatever it takes” and win, or be ethical, and lose, a great moral dilemma is created.
3. *We rationalize our choices with relativism*—In Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics* (1966), Fletcher argued that right is determined by the situation, and only love is the universal good. This “code” of behavior has run rampant in all areas of life, leading to the universal problems we face today.

But this is not a new problem. King Solomon wrote nearly 3,000 years ago, “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble.” (Proverbs 4:18-19, NIV)

So, if there is only one overall “source” of ethical principles to follow, what is it? In the western (Judeo-Christian) civilization, the only clearly recognized choice is the Bible. Let’s examine two fundamental moral codes presented in this great document.
The Old Testament Code: The Ten Commandments:

Although God gave Moses five books of “law,” the code that God Himself saw fit to write in stone were these ten rules (Exodus 20: 1-17, also Exodus 31:18):

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

1. You shall have no other gods before me
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything...You shall not bow down to them and worship them
3. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy
5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor (lie)
10. You shall not covet...anything that belongs to your neighbor.”
(summarized from Exodus 20: 1-17, NIV)

Some observations about the Ten Commandments:

- They don’t stand alone, but they can—much of the remainder of the Book of Exodus and all of the Book of Leviticus proceeds to describe specific laws derived from the Ten Commandments—how God was and was not to be worshipped, punishments for personal injuries, laws for property, observation of the Sabbath, laws of justice and mercy. But Exodus 20 provides a functional summation of all these responsibilities God set for His people.
- They are specific commands:
  - Five “you shall(s)”—Do this!
  - Five “you shall not(s)”—Never do this!
  - Failure to keep these commands was punishable by death—certainly spiritual death, but in most cases, physical death if the offender was caught in the act of disobedience.
  - Lesser violations were to be punished in accordance with the crime: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” (Exodus 21: 23-25, NIV)
- Why so specific?—Most Biblical writers agree that the Hebrews (Old Testament Jews) were a simple people living in dangerous times. They lived among barbaric tribes with no moral code whatsoever. Their code of conduct had to be clearly understood and the consequences for violating the code had to be clearly understood.
  - History indicates that the Hebrews regularly failed at following these commandments—the historical books of the Old Testament (Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and the Books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles)—all repeatedly describe violations of worship, of turning to idol gods, of the entire nation turning away from God. And God’s punishment was meted out either individually, or to the entire nation, when needed.
Later Jewish history reflects that only after the ultimate punishment—when the entire nation of Israel was driven into Assyrian and Babylonian slavery for deserting God—did the people come to their senses and return to their code of worship and conduct. And interestingly enough, it is only after this period when the synagogue form of discourse evolves when Jews would regularly discuss and argue about specific interpretations of their law. It seems that people tend to argue about what a code of conduct means only once they’ve made up their mind to keep it.


The weakness of the Old Testament code (by weakness, I refer to weakness of the people trying to follow it, not to imply a weakness on God’s part) is that the code was, in practice, difficult if not impossible to follow. The laws were very specific, punishments were strict, and later Jewish writings and synagogue practice only sought to add to their complexity. As civilization evolved from nomadic tribes to settled agriculture, cities, and commerce, a new moral code was needed that could still be clearly understood, was still specific in conduct, but was adaptable to changing living environments.

While it is not my intention to minimize any other teachings of Jesus, the one “commandment” He made that is most known and loved by all who study Christianity is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, recorded in its entirety in the Book of Matthew, chapters 5, 6 and 7. (and repeated in part in the Books of Mark and Luke.) Of this lesson, its “climax” is in Matthew 7:12—The “Golden Rule.”

The Golden Rule

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12, NIV)

Some observations about the Golden Rule:

- It is very interesting that a variation of the Golden Rule is found in many other religious cultures, but is expressed in a NEGATIVE form:
  - Buddhism: “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself”
  - Hinduism: “Do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you”
  - Confucianism: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others”
  - Nigerian Proverb: “One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.” (above quoted from Maxwell, pp 22-23)
- Jesus expressed the Golden Rule as a POSITIVE—“Do to others what you would have them do to you.”
  - A negative expression is reactive in nature—don’t hurt others because you don’t want to get hurt
  - But a positive expression is proactive in nature—treat others fairly, and they’ll treat you fairly also
It is a “Win-Win” philosophy: I treat you well, you treat me well, everybody wins

- It is easy to understand—even young children can understand it—The Golden Rule is typically one of the first lessons taught in Sunday schools.
- It is still a specific command—treat others the way you want to be treated. The method of treatment is not specifically stated, but is still clearly understood by its user.
- It is adaptable to any living environment—from a subsistence farmer in an African village to a bond trader on Wall Street. It has lost no value or applicability since it was first spoken almost 2,000 years ago. It just hasn’t always been followed. But it could be.

Logic and the Golden Rule

Christians accept the Golden Rule because it is a specific command of Jesus, whom we accept as the infallible Son of God. But set that aside for a moment and examine the rule on its own merits. Is there any problem with the rule? Are there any circumstances in which it won’t work? Is there a better alternative?

- An alternative to the Golden Rule, by logic, must imply that there would be a reason for treating some persons better than others. What would that reason be?
  - Should some be treated better than others because of circumstances of birth or culture?—History illustrates that the existence of a “nobility” only led to revolution and violence (see the American, French, Russian revolutions, for starters. More recently, consider tribal genocide in Africa.)
  - Should some be treated better than others because of their religious beliefs?—some seek even today to argue this, but again history begs to differ—from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition to colonialism to September 11.
  - Should some be treated better than others because of wealth? Consider the implications. If a businessperson making $150K per year believes he/she should be treated better by a waiter/waitress making $15K per year than he or she would treat the waiter/waitress, then the businessperson should expect to be similarly poorly treated by the executive making $1.5 million per year. Where is the good in that?
  - Should some be treated better than others because of talent? Athletic ability? Fame? Some like to think so, but these “advantages” never last.

- What if others don’t treat me fairly? Why should I treat them fairly in return?
  - But is there a positive benefit from treating someone poorly because they treated you poorly (revenge)? This is only a lose-lose situation.
  - In the same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elaborated “You have heard that it was said, ‘eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also…You have heard that it was said, ‘love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes
his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 7: 38-45, NIV)

- At the very least, the Christian who “turns the other cheek” may anticipate a moral justification in doing so. But refusing to react negatively may just defuse a difficult situation as well and create a positive current benefit.

“Do to Others”—What Does This Mean?

So what is the standard indicated in the Golden Rule? How do we want to be treated, and therefore should similarly treat others? Again, we turn to Maxwell (p. 38, ff) for a summary:

How Do I Want to Be Treated?

- I want to be valued—Maxwell reports that 70% of those who leave jobs do so because they feel undervalued. All of us, regardless of job or circumstances, want to know that we are important to others, that we are not ignored.
- I want to be appreciated—this is closely related to the above, but more specifically, we want to know that what we do matters, that we are appreciated for our abilities and usefulness.
- I want to be trusted—ever have a job where someone constantly looked over your shoulder to see if you were doing things right? That might be acceptable during a training period, but to feel it routinely itself genders a feeling of mistrust and discouragement
- I want to be respected—respect gives dignity and builds self-confidence.
- I want to be understood—here Maxwell wisely suggests, “When dealing with others, seek first to understand, then to be understood.” If we try to understand others, that will assist us in being understood in turn (Golden Rule strikes again!)
- I do not want others to take advantage of me—need I say more? This point sums up the other five.

Key Sources:

The Bible, New International Version


(To be continued)
Homework Questions:
(please e-mail responses to dbhamm@ovc.edu)

1. To put the Golden Rule in context, read the entire Sermon on the Mount found in
   the Book of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7. Select one other statement of Jesus
   from this lesson that particularly catches your attention, and comment on it
   briefly—one or two brief paragraphs.

2. Describe briefly (one or two paragraphs) a situation from your experience when a
   person in authority expressed value, appreciation, and respect for you (names or
   specific details may be omitted if desired). Why does this incident stand out to
   you? How did you respond to this experience?

3. Similarly, describe an experience in which you were not treated with appreciation
   or respect (again, you may omit details where appropriate). In what way did that
   affect your interaction with that person? Were you able to improve the
   relationship?

4. Can you think of a real or hypothetical situation in which applying the Golden
   Rule as an ethical standard would be difficult? How might those involved be
   affected by the situation?

5. ROLE-PLAY Exercise: Write about a half page to a page to describe your
   response and reasoning to the following scenario (next page)

6. Continue reading in Siebert and Procter, The Ethical Executive. The next section
   will be forwarded by surface mail.
Biblical Foundation for Ethical Principles, Part 1
Role-Play Scenario:

You have been employed recently as a junior manager in the regional branch of a national medical supply warehouse chain. You were hired by the regional vice president in charge, who appears to be a friendly and personable fellow, as are most of your co-workers. Unfortunately, you don’t seem to have hit it off as well with your immediate supervisor, a fellow in his mid-50’s who was not involved in your hire. While not openly hostile to you, you’ve clearly sensed some friction here. You heard a rumor recently that your boss told another worker he was worried about your upward mobility in the firm because you have a college background in management whereas he has no college training. Also the current vice president hired you without your boss’s input, whereas your boss was hired years ago by the vice president’s predecessor. You conclude your boss believes you might have been hired to ultimately replace him, possibly before he is ready to retire.

This friction has come out on a few occasions in subtle ways. On a couple of occasions you were given an assignment late in the day and told it was urgent by your boss (i.e., you’d have to work late to finish it and you’re only on salary) when you were sure the job laid around on his desk for awhile before he gave it to you. On one occasion, you made an “after hours” assumption affecting a customer order that generated an angry phone call and a subsequent dollar credit to the customer, for which you were blamed. Only later did you learn your boss had “forgotten” to tell you about the change in the customer order that generated the problem.

Today, however, the “shoe is on the other foot.” Your supervisor is working on a major project; the vice president has been hovering around all day asking him about its progress. You provided some reports needed for the project; in doing so you uncovered a very important piece of data you know your boss overlooked. You could give it to him now, while there’s still time to fix the project—but you feel certain he’ll take all the credit for any job well done. Maybe you could just forget you saw the data and see what happens—it is his project and his responsibility. After all, he’d probably only ask you to re-do some of the “grunt work” required by the new data and it would probably mean working late again.

Do you give your boss the missing data, or do you quietly stick it back in the file where you found it?

(End of handout)