

# ***THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST***

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

## **“Morals in an Immoral World”**

### **Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:**

*THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST*. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, James Gravelle.

“O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jer. 10:23). Welcome to the Gospel of Christ. Thank you for joining us for this series of topical lessons. In our lesson today, which is titled, “Morals in an Immoral World,” we will be looking closely at the topic of morals. Let’s start with a basic question: Has God, within His Word, set for us an absolute standard of morality and conduct that is to regulate all phases our lives? This is a question with which mankind has struggled throughout human history. When man decides that he is his own master, tragedy is sure to follow. Examine with me three statements made by different men, each of whom is (or was) a religious man.

“No action is good or right in itself. It depends on whether it hurts other people, and whether or not it serves love’s purpose in that particular circumstance.” This statement was made by ordained-Episcopalian-priest-turned-atheist Joseph Fletcher, in his work, *Situation Ethics*.

“Nothing can of itself be labeled as wrong. Sex relations before marriage, or divorce, may be wrong in ninety-nine or even one hundred cases out of one hundred. But they are not intrinsically so, because the only intrinsic evil is lack of love.” That statement was made by John A.T. Robinson.

“The new moralist does not at all accept the notion that there are moral standards which are revealed by God. He does not believe that God laid down laws which are for all men at all times and all circumstances. He is, therefore, a relativist.” This statement was made by Ernest Harrison, a priest in the Anglican Church of Canada, in his book, *A Church without God*.

Quotations of this type can be greatly multiplied, but these are sufficient to establish the belief of some that there is no absolute standard of morality, and that morality is determined more by the situation in which a person finds himself than by any absolute law on the matter. When men, especially men of religion, begin thinking and writing in such a fashion, it is inevitable that there will be those who will hear them, believe them, and then act accordingly. When preachers begin telling people that there is no absolute standard of morality, what can we expect but anarchy and immorality of the worst kind?

Is there an absolute stand of morality or not? What if there is no God? What if there is no standard of morality? Did value exist before the first human being? Let me take you back in time—to the years between 1945 and 1949. The location was Nuremberg, Germany. The place was the Palace of Justice. In the years following World War II, many Nazis were brought to trial. During their trials the question was asked, “In murdering six million Jewish men, women, and children, were the Nazis guilty of real, objective, moral wrong?” If morality is subjective, it can be nothing more than what one likes or dislikes—such as liking or not liking spinach, or liking or not liking the color orange. Man’s decisions—which would include even the horrors of the Nazis’ actions in Germany when they took children, put them in train boxcars, and covered them with quicklime so that the children not only died, but

died in excruciating pain—would represent nothing more than one’s individual approval or disapproval. What law did the Nazis violate? Was it the law of Germany, the law of England, the law of the United States, the law of God, or even some other law? Or perhaps they violated no law at all. During their defense, the Nazis said that their society had its own needs and desires, and made its laws based on those needs and desires. The Nazis said that their laws instructed them to exterminate the Jews, so it would have been wrong for them **not** to have obeyed those laws. The Nazis further stated that those who were judging them were doing so based on societal laws to which the Nazis were not amenable—that is to say, a value system that had nothing to do with the Nazis. Robert Jackson, a United States Supreme Court justice who was the prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, said in his closing address, “These men should be tried on the basis of a higher law—a higher law that rises above the provincial and the transient.” The word “provincial” referred to the geographical area of Germany. The word “transient” referred to the period of time during which the Nazis reigned supreme in Germany. In other words, Jackson contended that the Nazis did not have the right to invent a law (to murder people) within their own nation that said, “This is right for us, even if it seems wrong to you.” If there is no law that rises above the provincial and the transient—a law by which the conduct of individuals or societies may be correctly judged as either morally right or morally wrong—then it is false to say that the Nazis actually committed a real, objective, moral evil by murdering six million Jewish men, women, and children. There would be no more moral difference in killing a human than killing an insect. To murder a human being would be on the same plane as squashing a cockroach.

Let’s now examine some attempts by men in our past to set moral standards. From the time of ancient Greek philosophers until now, mankind has been trying to justify its actions by something other than a divine standard. “Might is right!,” said a man by the name of Thrasymachus, who lived in the era around 400 B.C. He explained justice as being in the interest of the stronger party. In other words, whoever was the mightiest should be the one to make the rules. Some have insisted, however, that power corrupts—and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Protagoras, who also lived in the year around 400 B.C., said that “man is the measure of all things, and that right is what is right to me.” But an argument can be made against this standard by asking, “Who is right when two people have conflicting thoughts regarding what is right.” Aristotle, who lived around 300 B.C. and was a student of Plato, was one of the best-known Greek philosophers. It was his position that right is found in the path of moderation—that is, the middle course between two extremes. But sometimes, “right” calls for extreme action.

Epicurus, who lived around 200 B.C., said that right is what brings pleasure. He taught that pleasure and pain are the measures of good and bad for an individual. He also taught that death is the end of the body and the soul, and therefore should not be feared because the gods neither reward nor punish human beings. From his teachings has come the modern-day thinking, “If it feels good, do it.” But the question could be asked, “If it feels good **to whom?**” What brings pleasure to some may bring pain to others.

The English philosophers also tried to settle the matter of morals. One such man was Thomas Hobbs, who lived from 1588 to 1679. It was his belief that whatever the ruling powers said was the standard. “The king said so” was basically his philosophy. But authorities have been known to be wrong. In our own recent history we have had two different presidents who were quite different in regard to morals. We need look no farther than the last two American leaders—George Bush and Bill Clinton—to see two totally different opinions regarding morality. But even if the person in authority is right, that would not necessarily make him correct since it always would be possible to ask why we should accept what the person in authority said. How would we know the person in authority was cor-

rect? Who told **him**? Who is the ultimate authority? In our own American history we have had philosophers who struggled to define morality. One such man was William James, who lived from 1842 to 1910, and made his home in New York City. He unabashedly suggested that something was right just because it worked! “The good is the expedient,” he said. Acts or intentions are not necessarily good, but instead become good if they bring good results. In other words, his was a case of “justification by results.” The fancy name is “pragmatism.” But a simple question—“Results desired by whom?”—can unmask the fallacy of William James’ teaching. Even desired consequences do not prove that something is right. Suppose a child was in critical need of medication, yet the child’s parents could not afford the cost. To save the child’s life, the father stole some money to pay for the medicine. Initially, we might be tempted to think that such an action was acceptable since it saved the life of a little child. But suppose that the father stole money that someone else was going to use to buy food?

The men I have mentioned here, and others like them, are the very best that history has to offer. They tried—but failed—to put in place some kind of human standard of morals. Man is not the measure. If they had only listened to Jeremiah who, a thousand years prior to any of these men said (not by using the wisdom of men, but by inspiration of God), “O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jer. 10:23). When it comes to morals and morality, God has spoken. We know beyond any shadow of doubt that God exists. Have you ever wondered why the first words recorded by God for mankind say simply, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1)? There is no explanation regarding the existence of God. Rather, His existence is simply an accepted fact. The apostle Paul helped us to understand why this is the case when he wrote in Romans 1:18-22,

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.”

Paul spoke of men who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” We can clearly see such men denying God, yet trying to explain why it is that humankind possesses so firm a set of values and morals. Paul said, in referring to the very men who tried to deny God, that God “is manifest in them.” How is this possible? We all can look at the world around us—the heavens above, the Earth itself, and even our own human bodies—and see design. That design cries out that there must be a Designer. Therefore, the human body that each of the men discussed above possessed proved that God does exist. Paul said in Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen.” Paul’s point was that anyone who has a brain capable of reasoning to a conclusion should be able to understand that God exists. Paul said that God’s attributes are “understood by the things that are made,” which would include you, me, and even those who have gone before us who may have come to wrong conclusions. Paul also said that such men are “without excuse because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God.” People who reject God reject good and honest reasoning. Paul went on to say that such men had “foolish hearts” that “were darkened.” The professed “to be wise,” but “became fools.” Have you ever known someone who held to a position, even when overwhelming evidence against it was clearly presented? In Psalm 14:1 the psalmist said, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

But God has not left us with just knowledge of His existence. He also has revealed Himself to us through the pages of the Old and New Testaments. We learn that God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipresent (everywhere at all times). In 1 Timothy 6:15-16 Paul explained that God “will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power.” His word is absolute and authoritative. This brings a whole new understanding to Paul’s words in Colossians 3:17—“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Some would have us believe that “in the name of” simply means “doing something for someone else.” But let’s allow the Bible to be its own best interpreter. Look at Acts 4:5ff. When the rulers, scribes, high priest, and others gathered, having arrested Peter and John for teaching the truth regarding the resurrection from the dead, Acts 4:7 says that the Jews asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” The true meaning of the question, and the true meaning of the phrase, “in the name of,” is “by the authority of.” The Jews were asking, “By whose authority have you done these things?” Thus, the phrase “whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,” means “by the authority of” God.

But how can we know what God does or does not authorize? We find in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the answer to this question: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” God’s authority is to govern us in everything we do. He has provided instruction to guide us in the social realm. Matthew 7:12 states, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” We know this passage today as “the Golden Rule,” and recognize it as the very heart and soul of how we ought to treat others in our society. God’s authority also must regular our moral conduct. Manners and morals **do** matter! Paul wrote in Titus 2:11-12, “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.” Paul summed it up nicely in 1 Corinthians 15:33 when he wrote, “Be not deceived: evil companionships corrupt good morals.”

Within the Bible we find recorded for us God’s creation of three institutions—the home, the government, and the church. Each has a place in God’s plan for mankind. God established the home, which was composed of a husband and wife who would be the parents of their children. Regarding wives, we are given such passages as Ephesians 5:22-24 where Paul wrote, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.” What woman would not want to do exactly that—if her husband would obey God’s command in Ephesians 5:25—“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her”? The relationship of one man and one woman for life has been God’s plan since the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:24 we read, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” In Ephesians 6:1 Paul wrote, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” To help them do this, Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”

Within the pages of God’s Word, the Bible, we also see God’s authority for the government of our civil lives. Read with me Romans 13:1-2 where Paul said,

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.”

It took an intense lesson for King Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, to learn this fact. In Daniel 4:33 we read what God did to Nebuchadnezzar to convince him. He was “driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws.” The outcome of this is recorded in the next verse:

“And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation.”

The lesson is stated in clear language in Daniel 5:2—“The Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.” We are to obey civil law—the only exception being when it conflicts with God’s Word. Governments have the ability, but not the right, to place into effect laws that are contrary to God’s Word. Currently, in the United States, abortion is legal. Yet the killing of the unborn is a sin. For more information on abortion, I invite you to view a lesson on this topic in our “Truth Series.”

God’s authority is intended to regulate our lives in the religious realm as well. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus said,

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

It is not enough to simply “call on the name of the Lord.” God has given us His Word so that we can know and understand what to do. He also gave His Son as the Sacrifice for our sins. In John 3:16 we read, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Jesus gave Himself to die in our place as the Sacrifice for our sins so that we might live in such a way as to have Heaven as our eternal home. In Romans 3:23 we read, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In Romans 6:23 we learn that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In 2 John 1:9 we read, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” The disciples were given the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” God has provided us with laws that apply to every aspect of our lives. If this was not so, then there would be an insufficient standard for morality—a subjective standard. Then, the conclusion that we would be forced to accept would be that there is no such thing as right or wrong, but instead only man’s opinion. We understand, however, the truthfulness of what the writer of the Book of Hebrews said when he wrote, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1-2). It is up to us to recognize and accept the evidence that God has given to us. It is true that God has spoken. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to join us next time.

**Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:**

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## STUDY QUESTIONS FOR “MORALS IN AN IMMORAL WORLD”

1. What important assessment regarding man did Jeremiah make in Jeremiah 10:23?
2. At the Nazis' Nuremberg trials, to what law was prosecutor Robert Jackson referring when he said, “These men should be tried on the basis of a higher law—a law that rises above the provincial and the transient”?
3. According to Thrasymachus, what constituted “right”?
4. According to Protagoras, who or what constituted the measure of what is “right”?
5. According to Epicurus, what was “right”?
6. According to American philosopher William James, what constituted “right”?
7. Paul said in Romans 1:18 that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven” against something. What is that “something”?
8. In Romans 1:20 Paul said that something was able to be “clearly seen.” What was it?
9. In Romans 1:22, what did Paul call those people who refused to believe in God?
10. In Psalm 14:1, what did the psalmist have to say about people who refused to believe in God?
11. When Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:15-16 that God would “manifest in His own time He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords,” to whom was that description referring?
12. When Paul wrote in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,” what does the phrase, “in the name of,” mean?
13. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, what is to be the sole authority for man's morality?
14. In regard to morality, what does Titus 2:11-12 teach us to do?
15. What three institutions did God create to exist on Earth?
16. In Matthew 7:12, what did Jesus urge us to do?
17. In Romans 13:1 what did Paul urge us to do?
18. What is the only exception to Paul's command in Romans 13:1?
19. According to Daniel 5:2, where does God rule?
20. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus said that some people would be rejected by God. Who were those people?