

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com).com, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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## Judges 17:6 “Teaching Children & Youth Right from Wrong”

Intro. This morning I am going to bring a message mostly based on the book and tape series by Josh McDowell entitled, *Right from Wrong*. That book has become a best seller because it addresses a very serious contemporary problem. Our society is becoming more and more concerned about the lack of moral training of many of our children and youth. One evidence of a lack of moral training is the fact that children and youth are committing even violent crime at an earlier and earlier age. Josh tells of Elizabeth 16 and Jennifer 14, who lived in a nice neighborhood in a suburb of Houston, TX. One night they left a party at a friend’s house at around 11:30 at night, and they took a short cut through the woods from that neighborhood to their own. But in those woods they came upon a gang of boys who were going through an initiation ceremony. They saw the girls, chased them down, gang raped them, choked them to death, and then buried them. About 3 days later one of those gang members was on a TV talk show and he held up a can of beer and said, “Life is meaningless.” That was his evaluation of his own life, and the lives of those 2 girls. The next day they found Elizabeth & Jennifer, and soon arrested many of those responsible for their murder and rape, but they were unrepentant, even making light of it by saying, “Now we have hit the big time.”

There is a problem even among kids in our churches. A study was made in the 1990’s of over 3700 youth who were involved in conservative, Bible believing churches. We would consider these kids to be among the best kids in society. 86% of these youth professed a personal faith in Christ as their Savior, and 82% attended church and their youth group weekly, and 72% came from homes where both biological parents were present. Yet, the study revealed the following moral problems that had taken place during a previous 3 month period: 66% had lied to a parent or teacher; 59% had lied to their peers; 33% had cheated on an exam; 20% had tried to physically hurt someone; 16% had watched a pornographic movie; 5% had attempted suicide. George Barna found that 57% of teenagers believe lying is not simply understandable or acceptable, but *necessary*. In 2003 a Gallop poll revealed that 50% of *churchgoing* teens believe that it is morally acceptable for unmarried couples to live together.<sup>1</sup> One of the symptoms of the new culture is that there’s almost zero correlation between belief and behavior. We have Christian kids who believe in Jesus, but their behavior is only marginally affected.

Youth leaders have been seeing this problem manifested the past 20-30 years. A prominent group of them got together to try to decide what were the problems their youth were facing, and what were the causes and solutions to these problems. Well they concluded that the #1 problem they are dealing with is the lack of adherence to a standard of objective truth. Many of these youth have accepted the notion that they must determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong. They do not accept an external standard of right and wrong which applies to all people, for all times, and in all circumstances. In fact, 57% of the *Christian* youth surveyed said that there is no such thing as objective truth. 45% said that every moral issue in life is negotiable. In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup poll; margin of error: 3 percentage points; Marisa Navarro and Robert W. Ahrens, "Snapshots," USA Today (6-10-03)

it depends on the situation, and so forth. 85% of church kids are prone to reason like this: just because it is wrong for you doesn't mean it is wrong for me.

Now if this #1 problem is true of your child, then they are 33% more likely to lie, 48% more likely to cheat on an exam, 3 times more likely to use illegal drugs, 6 times more likely to attempt suicide.

Now what has happened to our society that has made moral depravity common in some segments of our society? What has happened that has caused over half of our youth to reject the wisdom of this book [Bible], and engage in sexual immorality, alcohol abuse, vile profanity, lying, and so forth? Though sinful human nature shares much of the blame, we can look elsewhere for much of the blame.

One problem is the value our society places on moral tolerance. Almost every time you hear the word "tolerance" now, it means that all values, beliefs, lifestyles and claims to truth are equally valid. Thus, we are being pressured to accept all kinds of behavior. Immorality and even homosexuality is now acceptable in most of secular society, and even in some so-called Christian denominations. Society says that we should not impose our values and morals upon others. Because of this, those that hold to absolute standards of right or wrong are considered intolerant and are routinely condemned, mocked, and criticized.

Another key teaching along the same line is moral relativism. This says that what is right or wrong depends upon the individual, and upon the situation. And the bottom line is this: many people no longer recognize any absolute moral authority outside of themselves. To such people, truth is not outside of themselves, waiting to be discovered; truth is there to be created by the individual. The modern era still believed that man could discover truth through reason and science. But we are now living in a post-modern society, which rejects objective truth.

One source of this kind of thinking is atheistic evolution. If evolution is true, then life has no real meaning, we have no purpose, and there cannot be any absolute standard of right or wrong. Man is then free to live as he pleases, and is accountable to no one for his actions. That's the real driving force behind evolution & moral relativism.

Now can you see the problem this causes? This approach to morality produces total chaos as each person does what is right in their own sight, just as Judges 17:6 says. As a result of that, a spirit of lawlessness is increasingly permeating our society and much of our world. Did you know that the Bible predicts that lawlessness will characterize the end times? (See Mt. 24:12; 2 Th. 2:7-8).

The result of all this is moral confusion. People have no basis for determining right from wrong. Many young people ask, "What is wrong with premarital sex as long as you 'protect yourself' or if you love the other person? What is wrong with getting drunk, as long as you have a designated driver to get you home from the party safely? What is wrong with lying, if it seems to serve a good purpose?" And many parents cannot give good answers to these questions, and many Christian youth are unprepared to answer such questions from their peers.

Another result is that too many do not have a conscience that controls their behavior. Then they lose any sense of shame or remorse<sup>2</sup> for doing wrong. We have to hire more and more police officers to restrain crime, when the fear of God and a healthy conscience would do more to keep people in line.

One main problem that we are facing today is this: Many youth do not know right from wrong partly because many parents do not have a clear standard of right and wrong. Even

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<sup>2</sup> Jer. 6:15 says, "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; Nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; At the time I punish them...."

Christian parents have difficulty explaining why something is right or wrong. Can you do better than say that something is wrong, “Because I said so”? Are parents the true standard of right and wrong? There are Muslim parents who teach their kids to hate Jews & Christians. They even encourage their kids to strap bombs around their waist & kill innocent people. We need to come up with a better basis for moral authority than a *parent* simply saying that something is right or wrong. Another person says, “Because the government says so.” Well government laws change all the time because we have abandoned the basis for law. Do you realize that at one time the Bible was a major basis for law in this country? Not anymore. Now, our laws are determined by popular opinion & by the personal beliefs of judges. Someone else says, “I tell my kids that something is right or wrong because the Bible says so.” That is a much better answer, but that may not be enough for many kids, especially if they are not convinced that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Besides, is legalism the best basis you can find for determining right from wrong? Well I want to show you that you need to go a step or two beyond legalism to instill in your children a clear sense of right from wrong.

So I want to share with you 4 main things that you should do to pass on biblical values to your children. These steps will also cultivate a healthy conscience, which will produce self-control. Researcher George Barna says that when it comes to instilling moral values, parents have more potential impact on children than churches or schools. So parents, listen up. First, your mission must be to:

## I. TEACH THEM THAT MORAL TRUTH IS ABSOLUTE

It is so important that your children understand that right and wrong is based on absolute truth. In fact, the fundamental issue here is truth. Jesus once stood before the governor of Judea, Pilate. He asked Jesus, “What is truth?” Pilate lived in a society that had no moral absolutes. The pagan gods were capricious. They changed from day to day. Law was based on might, not right.

So how would *you* define truth? There are several characteristics of absolute truth. First of all, it is objective. In other words, it is an external standard that establishes the truth of something. Absolute truth is not determined by the individual. For example, outside of Paris, France is located the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. They established all metric units of measurements. They have the true standard of measurements. If someone claims that they have a full liter of drink, then that claim can be tested by that true standard. Secondly, it is universal. It is for all people, for all places, and for all situations. It is wrong to lie in America, and it is wrong to lie in Europe, or Africa, or elsewhere. Thirdly, it is constant. It is for all times. Someone says, “It may have been wrong for your generation, but not for mine.” No, absolute truth is that which is true for all people, for all places, at all times. This is because God does not change. Mal. 3:6 says, “For I am the LORD, I do not change....” Likewise, Heb. 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Since God does not change, moral truth does not change from generation to generation, or from nation to nation.

I believe God’s creative order teaches the reality of absolutes. Can you imagine the chaos there would be if there were no absolutes? There would be no laws of science, no laws of physics. Take the law of gravity for instance. It is absolute and constant. Yet if it were not absolute, one time you might go to take a step and end up miles in the sky, and the next time you would not be able to move your body at all. Or think about the confusion what would happen if numbers no longer had absolute values. For instance  $2 + 2$  would no longer always equal four. If there were no absolute truths, the world would be in chaos. Furthermore, another evidence for the existence of

absolute truth is seen in our conscience. Our conscience tells us that the world should be a “certain way,” that some things are “right” and some are “wrong.” (See Romans 2:14-16). Do animals have a conscience? Does a cat feel bad after killing a rat & eating it? Our conscience was created by God, and it points to the reality of moral absolutes. A good question to ask people who say, “There is no absolute truth” is: “Are you absolutely sure of that?” It is totally illogical to make such a statement, since it is an absolute statement that in itself denies absolutes.

So what is the basis of determining right from wrong? It must be based on absolute truth. Then, the next question to answer is this: How do we know or discover absolute moral truth? Well, the means of discovering moral truth is not tradition. Jesus made that clear. It is not human reason. Instead, we believe that the Bible is the basis for moral authority. It is the objective standard of truth given to us by God.<sup>3</sup> But we can go even deeper than that. The Ten Commandments have moral authority only because they were given by God, the Creator and Lord of the Universe. The reason why honesty is right and lying is wrong is because God is truth, and lying is contrary to the very nature of God. God declares that lying is wrong, not because He made it up as an arbitrary rule, but because it is contrary to His very nature. The Bible is valuable because it reveals the nature of God, and provides an objective standard for us.

So I want to show you something that is very important. Behind every biblical precept is a principle, and behind every biblical principle is the Person of God, who is the Ultimate Standard of truth. The precept or command, “Thou shalt not bear false witness” is based upon the principle of truth and honesty. And there is a principle of truth because God is truth. And so if all you do is teach precepts and commands, then your children will not be prepared for the moral issues that they will face. You also need to teach the principles that will guide their moral decisions. And most important of all, you need to introduce them to God. You need to lead your children to know the nature and character of God. Teach them what God is like.

Let me show you the connection between the nature of God, and our conduct. God says, “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Jesus said in Mt. 5:48, “Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect.” The apostle John wrote that we should love our Christian brothers and sisters, for “God is love.” Clearly, biblical commands are based on the character of God. So the reason why love is right and hatred is wrong is because God is love. Fundamentally, lying is not wrong because your parents, or the church, or society says it’s wrong. Lying is wrong because it is contrary to the nature of God, who is truth. Injustice is wrong because God is just. Moral purity is right because God is pure.

This is where parents fail. If you only teach do’s and don’ts, if you only give commands, your children are less likely to obey, especially when they are away from you. But if you teach the underlying principles, and teach them about God, they have a solid basis for understanding the reason why they should obey. And so don’t just teach rules and commands. Legalism works only to the extent that you can enforce your rules. The legalism of the Old Testament failed to produce righteousness for the most part. But the emphasis of the New Testament is upon a person’s relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. We are taught to know God. We need to move from legalism to a relationship.

The public schools used to reinforce standards of right and right. They used to teach children about God by reading the Bible and praying. Some public schools make an attempt to teach children and youth to reject drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. They say, “Just say no.” But

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<sup>3</sup> Jer. 9:13-14 says, “Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked according to it, but they have walked according to the dictates of their own hearts....”

without teaching about God, they will have little success, and I believe that is quite evident by the change in society the last 40 years.

To sum this up, there is absolute, moral truth because God is the basis and standard of moral truth. It's not up to the individual to determine what is right or wrong. It is up to us to *discover* right from wrong based on the Bible, which reveals God's nature, His principles, and His precepts. The precepts of the Bible do not cover every possible moral issue we will face, but if we know God, and understand the principles of Scripture, we can know right from wrong. For example, there is not a command that specifically says, "You shall not have an abortion." But the principle of the sanctity of life is very clear in Scripture. Therefore the taking of such innocent human life is wrong.

One application I would like to make is this: read Bible stories to your children, and read a chapter a day of the Bible as a family by the time the oldest becomes teenagers. When you do so, ask, "What does this teach us about God?" If you teach your children to know God as He is revealed in Scripture, you will lay a good moral foundation for your children.

## II. LIMIT THEIR EXPOSURE TO OUR CULTURE

Our culture has experienced a dramatic shift in the last 40-50 years. It is now poisoning our kids spiritually and morally. The entertainment industry is giving out a godless message to a large degree. For example, sitcoms can indoctrinate our kids into the tolerate moral relativism of our culture. Our government has abandoned any attempt to make moral judgments of right and wrong. Did you know that many public libraries provide access to computers, where adults can view pornography? Not only is our government tolerating pornography, but they are providing it free of charge! The public schools are generally teaching situational ethics, and ethics based only upon self-interest. They have largely rejected the concept of absolute truth. After all, God is the only real basis of absolute truth. Kids are being exposed to all kinds of ungodliness on the Internet. In most cases their friends are repeating the concept that ethics are situational, and not absolute.

Now because of this shift in our culture, I am becoming increasingly convinced that we need to limit our children's exposure to the corrupt culture of our day. The Bible warns against the danger of being influenced by the world (Rom. 12:2; I Jn. 2:15-17; 5:19b; James 4:4). You can hardly deny that home schooled kids are generally better in their behavior & morals than the general population. They do better overall in test scores. One reason is they have less exposure to the post-modern culture. So parents need to seriously consider home school as a first choice, and Christian school as a second choice in terms of protecting them from the corrupt culture of our day. I think Christian teachers should be in the public school, but I'm less of a believer that our Christian kids need to be in the public school system, unless they are well grounded in their faith. Carefully screen what your kids see on TV, what music they listen to, what they see & here on the Internet, and so forth. And don't let your kids spend much time with friends that do not hold to the biblical concept of moral absolutes. We are to be salt & light to the world, and we have to interact with unsaved people in order to be a witness, but most younger kids are not mature enough. The world is more likely to adversely affect them, than they will positively affect the world.

Thirdly, if you are going to succeed in teaching your kids right from wrong:

## III. BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Now here is an important principle: Trying to pass on truth without establishing a good relationship leads to rebellion. If we are going to impact our kids with truth, we have got to

establish a relationship with them. Otherwise, they will say, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” That’s the battle most every step parent faces. So I want to give you 4 simple steps toward building a relationship with your kids, or anyone else. I suggest you write this down. They all begin with the letter “A.” First:

A. Acceptance - Paul wrote in Romans 15:7 that we are to receive one another as the Father has received us. Now how does God receive or accept us? He does so unconditionally, in spite of our sins. Our kids need to know that we love them, regardless of their performance at school or on the ball field. When a child feels unconditional love, it gives them a sense of security, and that is the basis of a good relationship with them.

B. Appreciation & Affirmation – I put those 2 together because they are closely related. Have you noticed that one characteristic of Paul’s letters is this: He usually starts off by expressing appreciation for his readers? He affirms that they are saints of God. God the Father expressed affirmation for His Son at His baptism, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Dad, when was the last time you expressed appreciation or affirmation for that son or daughter in front of others? Some have a sharp eye for criticism, and are blind to their good qualities, and rarely praise them before others. The more you catch them doing something good, and show appreciation or affirmation, the less you will catch them doing something wrong that will require rebuke and discipline.<sup>4</sup>

C. Affection - The Bible teaches that we are to love one another. We need to express loving affection in two main ways. First would be verbally. Tell them how much you love them, and tell them often. Secondly, express affection physically in appropriate ways, like a hug or embrace, an arm around the shoulder, or a kiss. Too many teenage girls are getting involved with boys sexually because they are not getting love and affection at home. They need to feel that they are loveable.

D. Availability - When we are available to our children, we are letting them know that they are important. When you do not take time to listen to your children, or play with them, or do things with them, then you are telling them in a way that is louder than words, “You are not important.” That hurts.

Let me illustrate: Suppose you are working in a big corporation. And you have a problem that you want to take to the big boss. You go to his office, and you are greeted by his secretary. You tell her what you want, but she says, “I’m sorry, but he doesn’t have time to see you today.” Now how does that make you feel, when you know that if the Vice-President wanted to see him, he would make time for someone really important. Even so, when you don’t make time for your kids, you telling them that they are not important. Kids spell love “TIME.” Of course there has to be balance. Kids need to understand that parents have responsibilities and can’t play all the time. But it is important that you be available to your kids when they need you, and when they really want you to be involved in their lives.

My 2 sons are grown. I always made time to be at their ballgames, and help them develop their sporting skills. I wrestled with them, the way boys like to play. I read bedtime stories to them. I prayed with them at bedtime. One thing I could have done better was to talk to them about the

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<sup>4</sup> These first two steps to a relationship are so important because they meet our two main personal needs. Acceptance meets our need for love and security, and appreciation meets our need for significance.

problems they were facing. Everyone has problems. And kids today have more problems and depression than a generation ago. Many are hurting. And they may not come to you with their problems. So from time to time take some initiative in getting them to talk to you about their problems. Don't let your kids keep their problems all bottled up inside.

#### IV. MODEL YOUR MORAL VALUES

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." That's how he led the new believers to live godly lives. He said, "Look at my example." Even so, we parents need to show our kids what God is like. Remember, knowing God is the fundamental basis for determining right from wrong. One way they learn what God is like is by seeing Him modeled in a parent's life. For example, when they see us, they should see a reflection of the love of God, the righteousness of God, the grace of God, and at times even the wrath of God! In that survey of youth that I referred to, 35% could not name a Christian adult that they really look up to. Parents, God expects you to be the one that your child looks up to as a positive, moral role model. In Dt. 6 God commissioned the Hebrew parents to teach God's law to their children and grandchildren on a regular basis. But He said that they should first write these precepts upon their own hearts. You cannot effectively teach Christian faith and values to your children if you have not internalized them in your own life. God doesn't expect you to be perfect, but he does expect you to be real, genuine, & authentic. Putting on a Christian mask on Sunday and living a different way the rest of the time just will not cut it. And when you do mess up, admit that you have violated a divine standard. You will find that your kids are very forgiving, and that will reinforce the concept of absolute truth. By the way, this applies to grandparents. You should teach and model right and wrong to your grandchildren.

Conclusion: Parent, you kids may get sucked down the drain of moral relativism if you don't act now to take the steps that I have given you. Teach them moral absolutes based on the character of God. Shelter them from the corrupt culture of our day. Build a relationship with your church. And model what God is like. Show them that you live by absolute moral authority. Parenting is a tough job, but it's going to be a lot tougher down the road if you do not take these steps.

If you want to know the absolute truth, the only way to do that is through a personal relationship with the One who claimed to be the "Truth," Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). To be saved from your sin you must acknowledge that there is a divine standard of right and wrong, and that you have violated it. Then, repent of your sin, and place your faith in Jesus today. He died to save you from the penalty and power of sin.

You may need a church home. If so, consider if God is leading you to join here. It is so important that you have a church home that will reinforce your teaching of right from wrong. A liberal church will not reinforce the concept of absolute truth. Your church can also help you as a parent to know God, and learn right from wrong in your own life.

Sources: Josh McDowell, *Right from Wrong* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994); Josh McDowell, Text of a speech delivered at the Assemblies of God 1998 Ministerial Enrichment Conference; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); <http://www.gotquestions.org/absolute-truth.html> (author unknown). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).