

Making

TAKING a quiz on “Professional Conduct and Ethics for Architects” seemed like an easy way to obtain the continuing education credits I needed. I couldn’t believe I flunked it . . . twice. The quiz’s author made it clear that since ethics are often subjective, many of the questions have no right or wrong answers, even though the entire quiz was true or false. I concluded that the exam was simply a sinister plot to drive me crazy. It seemed to be working.

Guarding Our Testimony

My frustration with the quiz caused me to think about the ethical decisions I had faced over the past few years. In most cases, I did OK. One, however, still haunts me. A client had skillfully managed to get me to do work considerably beyond the scope of our agreement. When I discovered that he had no intention of paying for the extra work, I thought of other ways to collect “my” money.

During a conversation with my structural engineer, I explained my dilemma and asked if he would consider increasing his bill, which I could collect from the owner. I would pay the engineer the original amount and pocket the difference, partially offsetting my loss. As soon as he refused, I was embarrassed and overcome with guilt. I couldn’t believe I had suggested it. I knew better. I had been trying to witness to the engineer, and here he was, showing me what ethics were all about. This painful episode showed that I was still quite capable of doing something really stupid. I should have dealt with the issue of “more work-more pay” when it first came up instead of waiting and assuming. I quickly learned that an untarnished testimony is more important than my perceived “rights.”

My experience forced me to think about what I would do next time. I sensed that I was making the ethical decision-making process more difficult than it needed to be. Surely, I thought, God wouldn’t want something as important as doing the right thing to be vague. After all, we are called to let our minds dwell on what is right, not what seems right (Philippians 4:8).

Tough

Just as the Bible explains right from wrong, there must be a standard to help us universally apply the truth we have learned, regardless of the situation. As I thought about it, I soon realized that with God, it’s not about the money. Jesus put the issue into perspective when he asked, “For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Matthew 16:26, *American Standard Version*).

Taking Heed

The more society’s morals and ethics decline, the greater the tendency to let our own values slide, a little here, a little there. As we have become desensitized to violence by daily images presented in graphic detail, we run the risk of compromising in areas where we once held fast. In most cases, we can identify the line separating right from wrong. The problem is, we often try to see how close to the line we can get without crossing over instead of seeing how far from it we can keep. We all face the temptations to stretch the truth (lying), to use the office copier for personal use (stealing), or to say things about people we would never say to their face (gossip). The good news is that God knows what we’re up against, and in every case, he provides a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13), an option that will honor him. We must choose wisely.

Aligning Our Lights

One night as the famous Bible teacher F.B. Meyer stood on the deck of a ship approaching land, he wondered how the crew knew when and how to safely steer to the dock. It was a stormy night and visibility was low. Meyer, standing on the bridge and

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peering through the window, asked, “Captain, how do you know when to turn the ship into that narrow harbor?”

“That’s an art,” replied the captain. “Do you see those three red lights on the shore? When they’re all in a straight line, I go right in.”

This illustration gives us some good advice when we’re faced with difficult decisions, especially when business ethics are involved. After considering the lessons I have learned, I see three lights, which, when aligned, will guide us to wise decisions despite the complexity of the situation.

The first light is the light of God’s Word. This seems obvious, but when push comes to shove, we are quick to abandon God’s clear commands, even though most of our questions have already been addressed. Our problem is that we don’t like the answer he has given. We are quick to buy into the philosophy of “business is business,” believing that the world’s rules now apply. The world has taught us to look out for number one, and the flesh is happy to oblige. My experience with my structural engineer shows the “effectiveness” of this approach.

The second light is the light of God’s concerns in the situation. He has a broader agenda than we do, and he wants us to be a part of it. After some serious soul searching, I have concluded that ethics aren’t about us. They’re not even about doing the right thing. For the Christian, ethics are about cooperating with God’s desire to accomplish his will in a particular situation. Our problem is that we usually ask the wrong questions with the wrong motives. We’re willing to consider God’s interests as long as the demands for our rights have been met. The question we should be asking is, “What might God be trying to accomplish through this situation?”

He may be stretching our faith. Often we make wrong decisions because we don’t really believe God will reward us for doing the right thing. Sometimes we’re afraid that his response won’t be the one we want. We think we must take matters into our own hands. He wants our complete trust.

He may be making himself known to someone. Sometimes he orchestrates situations to bring others into his kingdom. Maybe he’s been

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drawing someone to him, and your decision is just what he or she needs to see or hear.

He may be displaying his character. Ethics aren’t arbitrary lists of dos and don’ts someone dreamed up a long time ago. They are reflections of God’s character. Cheating is wrong not merely because the Bible says it’s wrong, but because cheating is contrary to the character of God. The same goes for lying, stealing, and all the rest. Maybe he wants to display his character to a searching world through our decisions in tough situations.

The third light is the light of decision. Out of all our options, one will bring God the most glory. We must place his interests above ours. This is where our faith is tested. We must ask ourselves if we trust God enough to do what seems unreasonable. He wants us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. If we do, he’ll take care of the rest for us (Matthew 6:33), and he’ll do it far more effectively than we could imagine.

So when you face your next tough decision, align your lights by asking: (1) What does the Bible say about my situation? (2) What might God want to accomplish? and (3) What decision on my part will bring him the most glory?

When the answers to these questions are in alignment with one another, it is safe to proceed.

Oh, by the way, I passed the quiz on the third try. ■

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