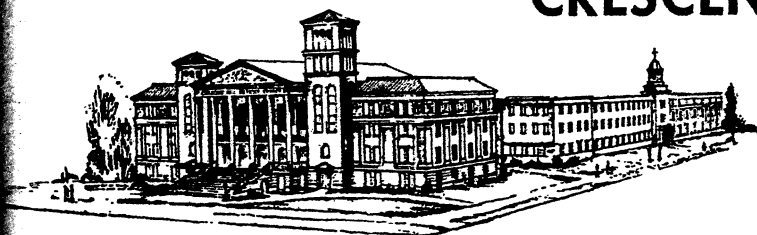


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS



"WHEN RIGHT IS WRONG"

Sunday Morning, May 21, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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The ethic of Jesus was once compressed into five words: "Turn right and go straight." This summary has the virtue of brevity and simplicity, but it begins to lose its power when one turns to life. For in our ambiguous, paradoxical world, it is not at all manifestly obvious which direction is "right" or which way is "straight." And, to so describe the ethic of Jesus could be a great disservice, for it implies that He did not sense the true profundity of life.

In point of fact, I think the exact opposite is true. Instead of being a "popularizer" who tended toward oversimplification, Jesus made ethical issues more complex by demanding a thoroughly comprehensive view. The determination of right could not stop with the act itself. One must inquire about the motive, the means, the timing, and the possible effect. No surface appearance was sufficient for Christ; His concept of righteousness probed every aspect of a deed and demanded total purity. It was precisely at this point that He antagonized the religious leaders of His day. They had settled into a comfortable pattern of prescribed legalism; as long as a person observed certain external rituals he was deemed "righteous." But Jesus could not come to terms with such superficiality. He placed alongside this "ethic of externals" an "ethic of entirety," and said flatly: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:20) From this, it is clear that the way of Jesus is not one of "black and white simplicity," but rather a way of agonizing appraisal. There are no "short cuts" or "canned answers." Because He was true to the Real, the ethic of Jesus is complex, and demands insight and sensitivity of those who would follow in His way. We must not settle for "snap opinions" in this realm, but give our most careful attention to every facet of the decision.

It is about this comprehensive approach to ethics that I want to speak this morning. And because of its complexity, I have purposely chosen the title "When Right is Wrong." I know these words may sound strange, but I am convinced that they are true to the thought of Christ. For to Him, what may in isolation or on the surface seem "right," could under a more thorough analysis be wrong. What, then, are the occasions "when right is wrong?" I have chosen three that grow directly out of His teachings.

The first is this: right is wrong when it proceeds from improper motives. Now it is obvious in life that no deed can rightly be detached from the sources that bring it into existence. Back of every "what" is a "why." The fruit of the vine can only be understood in relation to the roots out of which it grows. We are familiar with the significance of motivation in our courts of law. The intent back of a deed goes a long way in determining the degree of crime. There is all the difference in the world in a hunter whose gun discharges accidentally and kills

his best friend and a man who premeditatedly shoots down an enemy in cold blood. The external deeds may be much the same, but the motivation invests them with differing moral significance.

What is so obviously true in life, Jesus applies to religious practice, for He repeatedly affirmed that in all endeavors it was the motive that mattered most. In light of this, He could not condone many of the current religious practices. It was not enough to pray on the street corner, or give huge sums of money to charity, or fast at obvious discomfort. These deeds were good in outward appearance, but the real question went deeper: why were they being done? If they were directed toward God and stemmed from honest devotion to Him, that was one thing. However, if they were done "to be seen of men" and were a calculated attempt to create an image of piety, then what looked to be "right" was actually "wrong." Jesus dismissed such actions with one devastating phrase: "they have their reward." This means that their whole religious practice was nothing more than a commercial transaction. They had "purchased" the approval of men just as one would buy a horse. And since the whole process moved on the human plane, God was not involved and nothing eternal had transpired. They "got what they paid for," and nothing more.

This linking of motive with deed is a timeless truth, and we must apply it to our own religious practices. We must never allow Christianity to consist only of outward performance; neither must we support an ethic that deals only with appearances. This essence of our faith is far more than "being present every time the door is opened", or tithing, or being loyal to certain activities. One can do all these things for inferior reasons. This is but one example of "when right is wrong."

A second occasion is this: right is wrong when it resorts to improper methods. This raises the age-old dilemma of "ways and means." The question always comes up: does not a good cause permit one the use of any means to achieve it? Is there no occasion where the end justifies the means?

The answer of Jesus is no, and His own painful experience with the Tempter is a graphic demonstration of that fact. As I pointed out in an earlier sermon, the basic question of the Temptations had to do with means. Jesus had a task to perform, and the alternatives before Him pertained to how He would fulfill His role. He shunned the subtle suggestion that "end results" are all that mattered. He knew full well that the end is implicit in the means, and that it is ontologically impossible to attain morally good effects from causes that are morally bad. Can a pear tree produce plums? Can roses bloom at the end of thistles? Of course not, and neither can one achieve thoroughly good results by questionable means.

Here again is an obvious truth about life that needs a wide modern hearing. For though we see this point theoretically, we are prone to keep on trying the opposite. One of the ironies of history is what might be called "the circular movement of reform." Men set out to correct certain evils in society, but by the very methods they employ, they wind up participating in the very evil they meant to destroy. The Communist movement is a graphic example. It started in reaction to the exploitation of the masses. They were being disenfranchised of their just deserts, and thus rose up against the landed powers. But what has happened? Now the leaders of Communism exercise the very same control over the masses as they decried in the capitalists. The Russian peasant swapped one set of chains for another, and the last state may prove worse than the first. Another example of

this "circular movement" is even closer to home: the present racial crisis in our city. In their effort to secure one set of human rights, the Negro proceeds to violate an equally precious right - the right of private property. Thus, what is a legitimate protest in itself loses its moral power by resorting to the same type of evil it seeks to correct. What we must recover in our day is a sense of the vital unity of ends and means. We cannot, in any area of life, produce good results by immoral methods. Therefore, the second occasion "when right is wrong" develops when improper means are used in the name of good.

There is one other example: right is wrong when it acts at an improper time. Now I realize that some would vigorously argue this point, and maintain that right and wrong are eternal issues and bear no relation to time. From an idealistic standpoint this is true, but in terms of actual experience the matter of timing cannot be ignored. It all depends on your ultimate objective. If your only interest is abstract truth and you have no concern for its actual appropriation in life, you will take the radical, "never look back approach." However, if you are concerned for both truth and people, and want to develop rather than destroy, you will take into account where the people are with whom you deal.

Is not this exactly what Jesus did? He knew from the time of His baptism that He was God's Messiah, but He did not proclaim it. The concept was so confused in the minds of the Jews and so explosive to the Romans that to have proclaimed it in the initial stage would have blocked His work. So He "evaded" it in the early days, kept it as His famous "Messianic secret," until He could lay the proper groundwork. All through His life He fashioned His message to what His disciples could comprehend. He did not bombard them irresponsibly; because of His great concern that they understand, He reckoned with the factor of time. And as He was about to leave them, He confessed that there were many things He wanted to tell them, but "ye could not bear them now." (John 16:12) He promised the Holy Spirit, Who in relation to time, would guide them into further truth. Jesus was no coward or compromiser; He had courage enough to face the Cross voluntarily. Yet the learning processes being what they are, He recognized the importance of "when" as well as "why" and "how."

Here, once more, we need to learn. I do not mean that we should "buckle under" to prevailing opinion or say only those things which people want to hear. There is a great need today for moral courage that dares to stand and suffer for unpopular right. Yet we must keep a constructive objective in view. Dr. Roy McClain once said: "There are times when silence is golden; there are other times when it is just plain yellow." That is precisely what I am talking about - the distinction between "golden" and "yellow" moments for right. Martyrdom can be a tremendous moral force, but it loses its power if it is self-inflicted. Some men die, not because they are heroes, but because they are fools. The true martyr is willing to die if necessary, but he does not seek this role. The example of Jesus is manifestly clear at this point. He did not foolheartedly "flirt with death." In Gethsemane He drew back from it in natural horror. Yet when the choice was death or compromise, He set His face toward the Cross, and thus its inexhaustible power. When martyrdom "seeks" us, it has redemptive possibilities; when we seek it, the results are meager. Therefore, in an abstract sense right is always right; but in terms of historical achievement, there are moments "when right is wrong."

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I have tried this morning to do justice to the profound complexity of Jesus' ethic. It is not my purpose to confuse, but rather to clarify His effort "to be true to the Real." Superficial judgments are out of touch with the righteousness of Jesus. If you want to follow Him, there is more to it than "turning right" and "going straight." You must test every facet against His will. He does not stop by asking "what"; He goes on to "why" and "how" and "when." Remember, His is not "the ethic of externals," but "the ethic of entirety"; thus, there are times "when right is wrong."

God grant us the wisdom to know the difference!