

Does God Determine What Is Moral?

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"...the righteous principles which are the basis of God's law." - Letter 32, 1909, par. 6



Ellen G. White



Sabbath School With Branch Davidians

A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 4th Quarter
Present Truth In Deuteronomy
Week 7
by Mary Zebrowski
Edited by Trent Wilde

This week's lesson is entitled, "Law and Grace," and talks about the relationship between the two. Sunday's lesson is entitled, "Law in Heaven," and asks,

"Why is the idea of a moral law inseparable from the idea of moral beings? Without that law, what would define what is moral and what is not?" Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Sunday, November 7, 2021

This is a great question, and the answer we will give to this question may surprise you.

The Hebrew word for "law" is torah, as you probably are aware. It is better translated as "instruction." The moral law is the moral instruction. In that way, the moral law does define what is moral and what is not. In other words, it **describes** what is and isn't moral, and it instructs us to do the moral things and to not do the immoral things. But it's common for people to think the law of God defines morality in a different way – not just describing it, but actually determining it. In other words, it is thought that God actually decides what is moral and what is immoral. But this raises some questions:

What if we didn't have the moral law of God? Would morality still exist?

Is something moral because God says so?

Does the moral law of God **determine** morality, or is morality determined by something more fundamental?

Another way to think about this is to ask, Could God have decided upon a different morality? For example, Could God have chosen for stealing to be moral, or for honesty to be immoral? If we say that what is moral and immoral is totally up to God – that it is just by his decision and he could have chosen something else, then morality is ultimately arbitrary.

This is exactly how Satan portrayed the law of God in heaven. Ellen White said,

"In heaven he complained against the law of God, declaring it unnecessary and arbitrary. He misrepresented the Lord Jehovah, and the high Commander of heaven." – Review and Herald, April 25, 1893, par. 4

If God's law isn't arbitrary, it must be based on something. If God just said, "Well look, I'm God – I made everything, so I get to make the rules." Then Satan would actually be right in saying that God's law is unnecessary and arbitrary. But, as Ellen White said, this is a misrepresentation. God's law actually does have a basis. Ellen said,

“By precept and example, the workers are to instruct those who come within the reach of their influence to obey the words of Christ, teachings that magnified the righteous principles which are the basis of God’s law.” -Letter 32, 1909, par. 6

Notice, Ellen does not say here that God’s law is the basis of righteous principles. No; it’s just the reverse. The righteous principles are the basis of God’s law. Ellen gives us more insight into this in another statement where she’s describing Jesus’ rebuke of certain Pharisees:

“He charges them with disbelieving the Scriptures which they profess to revere, carrying out its forms and ceremonies while ignoring the great principles of truth that are the foundation of the law.” – Spirit of Prophecy, Vol. 2, p. 171, par. 1

Notice again, that God’s law is said to have a foundation, and its foundation is said to be “the great principles of truth.”

The Psalms also agree with this. Psalm 119:160 says,

“The head of your word is truth
And every judgment of your righteousness is for time ineffable.” – Psalm 119:160

The word “head” is often used in the scriptures to refer to the source of something. Here, the head, or source, of God’s word is truth. It isn’t that God and His Word are what make truth truth; instead, truth is what it is, and God bases his word and his law on truth.

If you think about this, you’ll see it makes a lot of sense. Consider the fact that Satan’s rebellion has resulted in the suffering and death of millions. This is just a fact. To say that Satan’s rebellion has *not* resulted in suffering and death would just be false. And this is the case no matter who said it. Even if God Himself said it, it would still be untrue. But God wouldn’t say that because, as we just read from Psalm 119:160, God makes sure to base his words on truth.

God’s law isn’t arbitrary – He doesn’t say, “I’m God so I get to make the rules” – No! He doesn’t base his law on himself or on his own decisions; that would be arbitrary. Instead, he bases his law on truth. When he says, “Don’t lie.” It simply isn’t the case that God decided he doesn’t like lying. Instead, it is because lying violates an unavoidable principle of reality – things are what they are, and to say otherwise is wrong, factually and morally. Truth is just the way things are in material reality; and so necessarily, material reality must be the foundation for all true things. If you want a true theory of gravity, it has to be based on material reality; if you want a true theory of chemistry, it has to be based on material reality, etc., etc. It’s no different with morality. For a moral system to be true, it has to be based on material reality.

We all know that sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). We also know that Jesus came to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21). But now we’re learning that the law itself is based on truth. So, to sin is to act against the truth. Remember, Eve first believed a lie, and then acted on that false belief – and that is what we call sin. Anytime anyone does something immoral, what they are really doing is basing their actions on falsehood. This is the essence of immorality. And this is why Jesus said that the solution to immorality – to sin, is truth. He said,

“...you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” -John 8:32.

Satan is the father of lies, and one of his greatest lies is that morality has its basis in God. If that were true, it would mean that God could only appeal to himself as the basis for his law. It would mean that God wasn't basing his law on anything – just his own inclinations. This is exactly the accusation Satan brought against God in heaven – it is the idea that God's law is unnecessary (it doesn't have to be what it is) and ultimately arbitrary. In reality, God's law does have a basis; and its basis is truth – the way things are in material reality.

We need God and his law – his instruction, not because God is a moral dictator, but because He is a moral teacher, and we are ignorant and often deceived by Satan's falsehoods. God isn't the originator of morality or of truth, but He is the One who guards the truth, maintaining a pure and undefiled understanding of it, so he can impart it to us as we are able and willing to receive it.

Psalm 146:6 speaks of God as the one who “...made skies and land and the sea, and all that is in them; the One who is guarding truth for time ineffable.”

For more on the nature of material reality, see our studies by Trent Wilde entitled, “Materialism or Immaterialism,” “Theories of the Basis of Morality,” and “Material Reality as the Basis for Morality.”