

TO HELL WITH STANDARDS

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by Desmond Ford

To hell with standards! That has been the motto of millions of people in the democracies in recent decades. During the 1930's, when most were preoccupied with the struggle for bread because of the great depression, moral standards still prevailed to a considerable degree. But with post-war prosperity came moral decadence. When men and women no longer have to fight for food, when they are well clothed and warm, then their inquiry is "What can I do to avoid boredom?" It is at that point we are likely to hear the cry — "To hell with moral standards."

Declining Standards

Let's review quickly the twentieth century. It has witnessed the violent deaths of more people than in all preceding centuries combined. Over one hundred million people have perished violently since 1900. Hitler's murder of six million Jews, Stalin's execution of ten million Russian land owners — these iniquitous crimes were repeated by multiple dictators of the Third World such as the cannibal, Idi Amin, who cut up his own wife and stored the parts in his refrigerator to be consumed at leisure.

Turn for a moment to that bastion of Christianity and democracy — the United States of America. Post-war prosperity led millions in this land of the free to act as though anarchy were king and chaos the objective. In the

sixties, racial riots and student upheavals precipitated the igniting of innumerable city fires, looting, the dynamiting of the university buildings and death. Simultaneously, family morality faltered and fell. William Manchester, in his review of over forty years of American history (*The Glory and the Dream* — 1932-1972) has a section entitled "Reaping the Whirlwind," covering the years 1961-1968 and climaxing with the chapter entitled "The Year Everything Went Wrong." He tells of rioters running amuck in 114 cities in 32 states, involving scores of deaths and thousands of casualties. In Detroit alone, where the extent of the arson was almost unbelievable, there were 1600 fire alarms in 11 days. This was the decade of the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy; the decade of the Ku Klux Klan acting with senseless violence; the decade when sexual morality was rejected by most of the teenage generation and many of their seniors; the decade of the hippie, the drug culture, the My Lai massacre. Thousands upon thousands belonging to the most prosperous country on earth acted like animals.

There were gods aplenty on the American scene. Take commercialized sport for example. "It turned millions of men who ought to have been active outdoors — for their own benefit, if nothing else — into beer-drinking, flatulent spectators, watching young athletes romp joyously in gilded playpens."¹ No wonder Vance Packard referred to this generation as

the generation of the Waste Makers. Everything now was “throw away” — not just diapers, kitchen implements and containers, but morality, marriage, human life and all the principles of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount. The very best things had become trash.

The badge of the new morality was reflected in the attitude toward sex. “. . . the sexual balance between the sexes had been altered, probably forever. . .”² With reference to women, Manchester states that “More of them were sharing men’s vices, . . . public drunkenness, juvenile delinquency, and assault and battery. Women’s Liberation leader, Ti-Grace Atkinson called marriage ‘slavery’, ‘legalized rape’ and ‘unpaid labor’.”³

Each season’s X-rated movies went farther than the last. Soon they flaunted bestiality, cunnilingus and fellatio. If a little old lady wished to buy a magazine at a stand, she had to reach over three rows of smut magazines to get it. One reporter wrote of going backstage in Manhattan and seeing chorus girls, naked, shooting heroin behind their knees while their illegitimate toddlers watched.

In the years between 1940 and 1960 illegitimate births doubled and forty percent of the mothers were in their teens. Venereal diseases vanished (with the new miracle drugs) only to reappear as a national epidemic yielding in our own decade about twenty million cases of genital herpes and the new scourge AIDS which will take the lives of perhaps millions in the remainder of the century. This “anything goes” generation endorsed wife swapping and wife testing. During the sixties, the New York Hilton, Manhattan’s largest hotel, rented rooms by the hour.

Sex unlimited became the leading sport and tripping on drugs ran a close second. The music matched the mood of these youngsters “blowing their minds” on driving, drowning, acid rock. (In *USA Today*, of December 9, 1985, one AIDS’ victim who had had 2,000 partners testified to the fact that it was rock music which inflamed his sexual desires

beyond control. The beginning of all that was the erotic music of the sixties.) In 1967, ten thousand boys and girls got together in New York Central Park’s Sheep Meadow to honor love. A physician who opened a free clinic was immediately overwhelmed by pregnancies, venereal disease and hepatitis caused by filthy syringes.

Those who talk against the upholding of moral standards are sowing to the wind. They will reap the whirlwind. The most meager knowledge of history makes it plain that human nature is so depraved that without continuing and constant education in morality it sinks to the level of the brute.

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Extreme Theological Views

What is surprising is not that men and women who know not God should ditch standards but the fact that many professing Christ have done the same — at least in their theology. Standards have been equated with legalism and ridiculed. The tragic record of history is that with every revival of the gospel has come a revival of antinomianism — opposition to law. It happened in the days of Martin Luther, when in the Peasant’s Revolt multitudes raged without control, bringing devastation in their wake. It is true to say that literally millions of professed Christians will go to hell with puny standards. The fact that those who claim to believe in the imputed infinite righteousness of Christ, have simultaneously cherished in their own lives a shocking low-level of practical righteousness is a proof of the deceitfulness of

sin. Our Lord warned us of all this in the ordination sermon which we call the Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 7:21-27).

Human nature is proverbially one-eyed. It seems mysterious that some people can read the first half of every letter of Paul about salvation by grace alone and yet ignore or misunderstand the second half of those same letters which call for the dedication of body, soul and mind to the Redeemer.

Some Errors

The New Testament teaches that we are free from the law and dead to it as a means of salvation. It declares that if I shoulder again that yoke of bondage I am severed from Christ (See also Lk 6:46; Jn 14:15; Rom 7:12,14; 8:7; 13:7-9; 1 Jn 5:3; Rev 12:17; 14:12; 21:8).

Quite often confused behavior has its roots in confused thinking. This is certainly true in the case of professed Christians who live with low moral standards. Their grace is a cheap grace, not true grace. They may mouth New Testament texts against the law but reveal a colossal ignorance of what the texts are really affirming. Comparatively few who read the New Testament in the popular churches are aware that the word “law” has a wide variety of meanings and that the Decalogue is not one of them. The Hebrew and Greek words translated “law” imply a standard of truth and behavior but they are usually applied in a much broader sense than modern Christians apply the term. Precise exegesis of law passages in both Testaments show that the word is often a synonym for the Jewish religion or the Scriptures of that religion. Only one text in the whole Bible, beyond possibility of controversy, uses the word law as a synonym for the Ten Commandments (see Ex 24:12).

Positive texts used by Christians to support the Ten Commandments can be so employed because the greater includes the lesser, not because one is a synonym of the other. The fact is, the New Testament is much more demanding than the Old as regards conduct. It calls for a life charac-

terized by prayer without ceasing, continual thanksgiving and a single eye to the glory of God in every choice of life. While it protests against pharisaical, external righteousness, it makes no compromise in its antagonism to "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 Jn 2:16). That the Decalogue itself remains as a skeletal moral summary for Christians is made clear by our Lord's endorsement of it just a few days before the cross (Mt 19:18,19); Paul's continual reference to it as a standard for Christians (see for example Eph 6:1-3 which recognizes the Decalogue as a unit well known to those to whom he wrote); and the reference to the ark of the testimony in the Bible's last book (see Rev 15:5 — the word "testimony" when coupled with the ark always means the Decalogue and nothing else in both Testaments). In this age of the plenitude of the Pentecostal spirit, the revelation of Christ as explained and enlarged in the Epistles, the transition from the Old Covenant to the New and from national to personal religion, truth and morality have dimensions that are infinite when compared to a mere superficial reading of the Decalogue. Nonetheless, because the majority of people in our churches are spiritually immature, without some thumbnail sketch of prescriptive Christian behavior, masses of professed Christians unable to wrestle with the paradoxical dialectic of Paul will inevitably go the way of the flesh.

Another reason for the decay in moral standards in professed Christians today, apart from the confusion of the word law, is ignorance concerning the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is indeed distinct from justification but it should never be separated from it. Too few have contemplated the meaning of such New Testament expressions as "grow in grace," "rich in good works," "created unto good works," "cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit," "render your members as instruments of righteousness," "present your body as a living sacrifice," "I keep under

my body lest . . . I should become a castaway," etc.

It cannot be said too often that the New Testament is not anti-nomian. It is not opposed to obedience to the commands of God. It does protest against such concepts as: (1) that a person must become a Jew before becoming a Christian; (2) that a person should behave as though the age of shadows, type and ceremonies has not come to an end; (3) that one should imagine that duty's primary motivation springs from tables of stone rather than the cross; (4) that the depth of God's will is found in the Old Testament rather than the New, (5) that obedience is self-initiated rather than the fruit of the indwelling spirit.

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A third misunderstanding, following those concerning law and sanctification, concerns the significance of the term salvation. The first reference to this term in the New Testament is found in Matthew 1:21 where we read that Jesus would save his people from their sins. Salvation then is not just a fire escape. It is not just deliverance from guilt and death. Salvation is more, not less. Can it then be thought for a moment that the Christian is less concerned with obedience to God than the Jew at the foot of Sinai?

The Greatest Failure

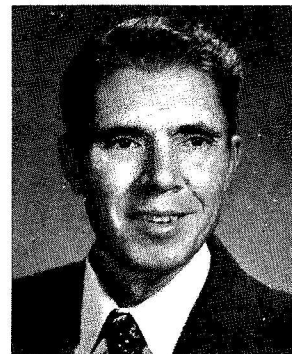
I suggest that it should be obvious to the most undiscerning, that apart from death the main thing wrong with this world's behavior is the lack of right standards. The multitudes think murder, even mass murder which we call war, is okay; rape is okay, including rape of the mind and soul by propaganda and pornography and twisted media; theft is

okay — from family, employers, neighboring territories or people. I submit, also, that this lack of standards springs out of the failure to worship God, the failure to see the priorities of reverence, adoration, holiness and abhorrence of all idolatry. I further suggest that these failures are a *result of the greatest failure of all* — to meditate upon the cross and the reasons for that most terrible of all tragedies and yet most glorious of all triumphs. The words of Griffith Thomas are most appropriate to our study:

Conduct as Matthew Arnold says, may be 'three-fourths of life,' but the other fourth is the motive power of the three. A train is much longer than the locomotive, but the locomotive provides the motive power. A building is much higher than the foundation, but the foundation is very necessary. A tree is much larger than the root, but it is the root which gives life to the tree.⁴

The cross of Christ is the "locomotive" that provides the power, the "foundation" that secures the building and the "root" that gives life. All Christian behavior springs from a heart that is daily transformed by the vision of the cross.

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1. W. Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*, p. 1089
 2. *Ibid*, p. 1105
 3. *Ibid*, 1106
 4. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Grace and Power*, p. 120



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