How to Reason Ethically in a Secular Culture without Using the Bible

By James P. Moreland

J.P. Moreland:

[Cut off] said that the church's anti-intellectual behavior created a secular culture, that we need to restore to the local church a vibrant intellectual life and rigorous training in how to think, and reason, and use the mind as a part of the Christian life. And I'd like to give some very brief samples of that the rest of our day. And I want to begin. We're still in session number two here with Roman numeral two. And from now until lunch I want to talk about some broad principles of moral reasoning that I hope will be helpful to you in your attempt to discuss ethical issues with your friends, with people outside the church, and so on.

To begin with, we want to ask the question: what is a moral absolute? We claim to be absolutists and we claim to be against relativism. So, what we want to do is to try to get a little bit of clarity about this. More of this is in the book scaling The Secular City, or in the book The Life and Death Debate on Ethics. But I want to try to whet your appetite and at least get the ball rolling in this topic. When we claim that some moral value is an absolute. Let's take the statement: It is wrong to steal, or that it is wrong to murder, or a lie, or something like that. What does it mean to say that a statement like that is a moral absolute? Well here's the first thing that it means, and this is the most important thing that it means. It means that the principle is objectively true, whether or not anybody believes it. It means that the moral principle is objectively true whether or not anybody believes it. Now let's think about that for a minute. The
point is that, as absolutists, we believe that there are moral principles that are discovered, not invented. We can say it like this: moral principles are like mathematical principles--2 and 2 is 4 and that sort of thing. They're not relative to culture; they can be discovered. You can be right or wrong. You can have the right answer or the wrong answer on a moral topic. And that there are moral truths that exist out there that we are supposed to discover.

Now this contrasts with subjectivism. Okay? Subjectivism. As the word suggests, that means depends on the subject. What does that mean? That merely means it's true for me if I choose to believe it for myself. That's subjectivism. That kind of an idea says that moral principles are invented by believing them. Then if you believe them, then they're true for you. And absolutists disagree with that. The absolutist says "no, moral principles are out there and they're real, and they're true or false, whether anybody believes in them or not. And our goal is to try to find out what they are. We're not making it up." That's the first thing that an absolutist believes.

Now number 2: absolutists also believe that moral principles are exception-less, exception-less. Now what--I'm going to use a dollar 98 cent word here, That's what they pay me to do, I already told you they don't pay me very much--but it's called Universalizability. Can be universalized. And the idea goes like this. If it's wrong for me to murder on Tuesday, then it's wrong for me to murder on Wednesday, and Thursday, and Friday; and it's probably wrong for you to murder, too, if you're like I am. That we can we can generalize these things. They don't have exceptions to them. That a moral principle is true, throughout all the cases that are similar to each other under its reign. That a moral principle applies equally to all the principles that are under its scope of influence. If stealing is wrong in the United States, it's wrong in Russia. If it's wrong in 1993, it was wrong in 1105. That if a moral principle is true, that it can be generalized
without exception to cover all cases. So when absolutist believe, say they believe, in absolutes they believe at least that moral principles are objectively true and exception-less, in that they apply equally to all cases that are similar to each other.

Now, there's a third thing that I want to say that I don't think you absolutists should mean. This is going to take a little bit more difficulty to explain. But, it's the idea that there are no exemptions to moral absolutes. Sometimes absolutist claim that moral principles don't ever have any exemptions, and I think that that's wrong. So now what I'm going to have to do is to talk to you about what an exemption is, because it's different from an exception. Moral principles come in greater or lesser degrees of importance, arguably. Not greater or lesser degrees of being true. They're all true. But some of them, as Jesus put it, are weightier than others. Remember He said Matthew 23 that there are weightier matters of the law. He didn't mean by that that the less weighty matters of the law weren't true, and He didn't mean they weren't moral principles. But, they weren't as important as binding. Now sometimes it happens that two moral principles can come into conflict with each other. Now if that happens, and if conflict is unavoidable, in my view it is permissible to honor the weightier principle, and to exempt the lower principle and honor the weightier one. I'll illustrate this for you in just a minute, but the point is, you might think "well how is that different from an exception?" An exception is when a moral principle should apply to a case and it goes on a holiday and it doesn't apply. You don't have to think about it anymore. If a moral principle has an exception to it, you no longer have to pay any attention to the moral principle that makes sense to you? By contrast, if a moral principle is exempted, it is still there. It still applies. It still has to be respected. And you can only override it to the degree necessary to honor the weightier principle.
Let me give you an illustration of this. I was teaching an ethics class to a group of nurses once and this one nurse went down on a paramedic's unit, and she'd gone to a man's home who'd had a heart attack in his early thirties. He was on the truck going back to the hospital, and he was extremely anxious and he looked up at her and said, "Did I have a heart attack?" Now she felt like, as a nurse, she had a couple of moral duties; and one moral duty was the patient's right to know what had happened to him. He had a right to be told what was going on. You don't have a right to just cart somebody somewhere and not tell them what's going on. That violates that person's individual freedom. You have a right to know that. On the other hand, she knew from her experience, that if she told him the truth that it would place him at risk to precipitate another heart attack. So she had two duties. She had to do one of them. She didn't know what to do. She chose to honor the duty that she felt like was weightier than the other duty, namely to not place him at risk. And so what she did was changed the subject. That already violated his right to know. That already violated his right because he asked her a flat out question, and she violated that. But notice that she violated it as gently as she could to honor the way to your duty. Well he said to her "look, I asked you a flat out question I want to know what's going on." So she told the gentleman sort of a half-truth, hoping he would be misled. She said "Look you're going to be okay. Don't worry about it, we'll be to hospital in just a minute." Finally he said "you're beating around the bush." She said "No, you didn't have a heart attack." Now, you may agree or disagree with her strategy. My point is that Christians are divided over whether or not there are some moral principles that outweigh others.

I'm an ethicist with nursing homes and we've, up until this year, for the last eight years and met 5 to 10 times a year to do case consultations with situations that arise in nursing homes. There was one lady in a nursing home who was taken with her husband. They checked into a
facility to retire. Within 3 months her husband was dead of an unexpected heart attack. She kept herself going bye by practicing for a performance of Handel's Messiah in her church Christmas pageant. She was a concert pianist. A week after the pageant was performed, she had a stroke that paralyzed her hand so that she could not play the piano. She was not in any particular pain, but she was on kidney dialysis. She petitioned the director of the nursing home to be permitted to forgo her dialysis treatment and to be allowed to die in the facility. Now, these kinds of decisions, these kinds of cases, often pit two moral principles against each other. And the 2 moral principles in cases of this sort are called the principle of autonomy and the principle of beneficence. The principle of autonomy says "I have a duty to respect the wishes of a patient; if a patient doesn't want medical intervention I have no right to force medical treatment on a patient."
The patient doesn't want a shot, or doesn't want an operation, I have no right to force the patient to get an operation. On the other hand, I have a duty to benefit a patient and not harm the patient. And of course forgoing kidney dialysis would be a harm not a benefit. So do you understand the tension in the case? There were two moral principles--you couldn't honor both of them.

Same thing happens in nursing homes with elderly people who want the freedom to walk around the nursing home. If you allow certain people the freedom of motion, they become very easily victims to falling, and breaking bones, and that sort of thing. On the other hand, if you restrain them you’re limiting their liberty of motion. There are two moral principles that seem to be coming into conflict now. I say this, as follows then: as far as I know, all Christians are agreed that as absolutists, we believe that moral principles are objectively true and they don't have any exceptions. There are no exceptions. A moral principle applies to a set of cases, and it doesn't go on holiday. There are, however, differences of opinion about whether or not we ought to also claim that there aren't any exemptions either. I happen to be with those Christian ethicists that
think that it is possible from some moral principles to override other moral principles. But when that happens, that doesn't mean the weaker principle is not still true and binding. It means that you've got to give it respect as well; that you override it only to the degree necessary to respect the weightier principle. Now, these are only in cases where it appears that it's unavoidable that you have to violate one principle. So I say to you, then, that Christian thinkers differ on that third point. But at least we all agree, then, that moral principles are objectively true and exception-less, even though we may differ in the Christian community about the matter of whether or not there can be exemptions to moral principles. That, I hope, will help you a little bit in understanding where we agree on absolutism. The fundamental idea is that we think there are true exception less moral principles. We're not in agreement as to whether some of them may be weightier than others in certain problematic unavoidable dilemmas.

Now, a question in the back, and then I'd kind of like to move on. Yes.

Speaker 1:

Is there is a difference between situational ethics and what you've been saying in that very definition you've given us?

J.P. Moreland:

Yeah. It's much deeper than that. In situational ethics, there either are no moral absolutes at all, or there is only one and it is: do the loving thing. For this view there are myriads of moral absolutes. They're all true, there binding, there are no exceptions to them. You see, somebody like Joseph Fletcher would say that's crazy. There's only, if there are any at all, there's only just love do the loving thing, which doesn't tell you anything. You know that--it's too formal to be
much help. This view says that in every ethical dilemma you're in there are moral principles that are true that apply to that situation, and only in the rare cases where it appears a conflict is unavoidable, only in those rare cases, you may have to make a choice as to which principle you think is more binding. And even then you still have to give respect to the weaker principle, because you still honor it, it's there. You don't have the freedom to just take an elderly person, because you agree they shouldn't have freedom of motion, and gag them and tie them in their bed, because the principle "respect patients" goes on a holiday. Okay, let's keep going because I think there's some more important things now I want to talk about.

By contrast, our culture holds to either ethical skepticism, now not everybody, I don't want to overstate this. But ethical skepticism, or ethical relativism. And very briefly: ethical skepticism is the idea that there are no true moral principles. There really aren't any absolutes, or if there are nobody could know them. If there are, nobody could know them. So, first of all, there probably aren't any moral truths. But even if there were, nobody would know what they are. Kind of an interesting view. Why would people hold something like this, do you think? I don't mean, I don't mean now, what's their spiritual and psychological motivation for it. But can you think of a reason somebody might give for why they end up here? Yeah.

Speaker 2:

[Unintelligible]

J.P. Moreland:
Okay, yep. That's certainly true, and that's that individual "I got my rights and I get to create my own world, thank you very much, I don't want anybody telling me how to live." What else? What sort of an intellectual? Yeah.

Speaker 3:

[Unintelligible]

J.P. Moreland:

Yeah, yeah. I think you've hit something very important. You see, if you come into life and you're already an empiricist, Okay, you believe that really the only claims that we can validate are what are testable with the five senses. Well folks, morality is not testable with the five senses, look. If you asked me if there is a lectern up here in the room, I can answer that question by just having some sensory experiences. I'm feeling a smooth object now, I'm seeing something brown, I hear a sound from my hand has a certain spatial region up here, okay. So there's is, there are sensory tests, you understand that? What about the proposition: murder is wrong, or it's wrong to steal? Can you think of any sensory experience that could decide whether that principle is true or false? The answer is No. I mean there's nothing that you can see, smell, touch, taste, or hear, that you could appeal to decide whether a given moral principle is true or false. How about a scientific test? Can you think, could we put this in a beaker somewhere, or maybe weigh it on a scale, or something, or put it in a magnetic field? No, of course not. You're not going to have somebody who has a bumper sticker that says "I break for moral values." They're not--they're just not those sorts of things. So you see, if you're already committed to the idea that the universe--you remember this 2-tier universe I gave you last night? The visible world
and the invisible one? That this is the only one we can know? Then, even if there is anything up here, it's irrelevant to human knowledge.

Now, how do you respond to ethical skepticism? Well, let me give you 3 things to think about, by way of critique. First of all, and this is where we put our thinking caps on, now. The thing that motivates it is often self-refuting. The thing that motivates ethical skepticism is often self-refuting. What did I just say was the intellectual reason that many people will claim that they can't believe this is a surface tier? It's because you can't prove its science, any moral position scientifically, you understand that? Or you can't test a moral position with your 5 senses. Now the problem is, that that position itself can't be proven scientifically, or tested with the 5 senses. Take the statement: I can only believe what can be tested scientifically. That statement itself cannot be tested scientifically. It's not, frankly, it's not a philosophical--I mean it's not a scientific statement. It is a philosophical statement about science, and it's self-refuting. It's like the statement: there are no truths. Or the statement: I cannot utter a word of English. Or the statement: all English sentences are less than 3 words long. That statement, it refutes the position, itself. Something's self-refuting, that means it provides an example of its own destruction. You understand that? For me to say "I don't exist" would be self-refuting. There are no truths is self-blah blah blah blah blah. The statement "I can't believe anything if I can't test it with my five senses," that statement itself cannot be tested with the five senses. Do understand that to some extent? So many times, and listen this is a tip, I'm going to get to this after lunch but whenever you're listening to something and somebody is espousing a position, asked the question "does that position really destroy itself?" We'll come to this in a minute when we talk about tolerance. But you want to listen to see if a position is self-refuting. Okay, and the idea, for
example, that I can only believe something if it's a scientific statement, or something like that, is an example.

Secondly, assert specific counterexamples. Assert specific counterexamples. Here's what I mean by that. Go ahead and take some obvious moral truth and just assert it. Just assert it. Somebody says "well, nobody can really know any moral principles at all," and what they're trying to say to you is: the burden of proof is now on you. And until you can prove to me that you can know something morally, you can't say anything. Well, I'm not going to accept that. I know some things are wrong. Let me give you an example of something that's absolutely forbidden, it's objectively wrong. Torturing babies for fun on feast days. It is wrong to torture little babies for the fun of it. That's wrong. Now somebody says to me "how do you know it's wrong?" We'll come to this later. My response is going to be "what makes you think I have to answer how I know something before I can know it? Why do I have to be able to tell you all the time, how do I know something, before I can know it? What would make you think that?" Now we'll have to work on this later. But the idea, this is called--you listen, you don't start knowing things by first of all having a set of answers to the question: how do we know things? You start by just knowing some things. We all know a few things. And you work on criteria later. But we all know that torturing babies for fun is wrong. Now look, if this fellow is going to come back to me and say "well, I'm not so sure about that," you know, then my response to him is going to be: "then you must get help." Do you hear me? You need help desperately. Now, you don't want to start with controversial air. I'm not claiming that there aren't moral controversies. You understand my point there? But I'm saying, start with something like this: torturing babies for fun is wrong, or kindness and mercy are virtues. Fairness is a virtue.
Does anybody look in their baby's crib, when they're little babies, young and say Dear God, if there is a God, course I want my child to grow up to be whatever my child wants to be, but I hope that my child will grow up to be a greedy coward, that is utterly unfair and has got a terrible, no sense of mercy, or justice, or kindness. Please, if it would be, if you're out there and it's your will I'd sure like to see that happen. I pray that my child will grow up to be a lesbian, please. I want my daughter to be a lesbian. People don't pray that because they know that that would be the height of moral lunacy. So all you have to do is to assert a few things that are so obvious, and then don't accept the burden of proof. Don't think that you've got to prove it is right; return the serve and say you've got to prove to me that there's good reason to deny what we all do know to be the case. Just don't accept the burden of proof.

Finally, finally, this is the third thing under ethical skepticism. Even if it's true, even if we grant it's true--that nobody knows any moral principles--no moral recommendation follows from it. If we grant that ethical skepticism is true, then the ethical skeptic cannot go on and give me a moral exhortation. For it, to be specific, the ethical skeptic can't say "listen nobody knows what's right and wrong, and so you Christian fundamentalists need to be more tolerant." Okay, now let's think it through. How can you deny that there are any knowable moral oughts' in one breath, and then turn around five seconds later and assert one? Do you understand the point? If we don't have any moral knowledge, then there can be no moral recommendations given whatsoever. Okay, but a lot of people somehow think that if we can establish that we don't have any moral, objective moral principles, that then they can go on and recommend that we have some sort of duty--you know it almost feels like it's a moral duty--because people kind of get enraged and incensed if you don't go along with it. And that just seems to me to be patently bizarre. It's bizarre. And we need to just say that. I wish more people on these TV talk shows would just say something like
that. "Look you're saying that everybody has a right to make up their own beliefs. And over here this is a child molester. Get off this case--that's a child molester, he doesn't expect you to be that way; what're you on his case for?"

Now there's another view, called ethical relativism. Everybody knows that there's right and wrong, and I'll get to that now. Ethical relativism. This is a little different than ethical skepticism. Ethical skepticism was the view that there aren't any moral truths at all, or even if there are, who knows what they are. Ethical relativism says I have a moral truth, and here it is: right and wrong is relative to my culture. Right and wrong is relative to my culture; everybody should follow their own society's moral code. Everybody ought to follow their own society's moral code. Now this can be made into, this can be given in an individual version--I just gave you the cultural version. What would the individual version sound like? Morals are relative to individuals. Everybody ought to act in keeping with his or her own code. Okay, now this tells me what I should do in any case. Here, I'm facing a moral situation, the skeptic says: "Who knows?" The relativist has an answer: "Consult my code. Well what are my values? Well then, I ought to follow my values." Now my values may be wildly different from yours, right. And I'm not claiming that my values are true. They're true for me. Yours are true for you. We have different systems of values, each system is true to the individual that holds them, or the culture that holds them. You understand that view you probably all too well. You hear it regularly.

Let's talk about a critique of this. The first thing to notice is that it makes, this position makes it impossible to morally criticize Hitler in a robust kind of way. You can't really criticize Hitler's behavior. Why? Because as long as Hitler was acting in keeping with his own code, or the code of the Nazis, then he was following your moral system, which says "everybody should act in keeping with their code." You understand the point? In fact, that's the--at the Nuremberg
trial the Nazi war criminals actually use this as an argument. They actually used something called legal positivism, but you have to get hung up on the terminology, it was a version of this kind of relativism, to say "hey, law and morality differ from culture to culture. What makes you think the rest of Western Europe and America have the right to tell us what we would value in our culture?" Not a bad argument, if relativism is true. Now, you see the point is that if relativism implies that I really can't keep real moral praise or blame on Hitler, there's something wrong with this view; there's something wrong with it. That's an unpalatable consequence.

Now somebody may come back, and this is the second, this is a second critique. Somebody may come back and say--now try to follow me on this, this is a little harder to get. But someone may come back and say "well, look, I can criticize Hitler because what he did is not in keeping with my moral code. And so I'm my moral code says that you ought to criticize everybody who murders wherever they do it. Hitler happened to murder, so I criticize him because what he did was not in keeping with my code." You understand? Because somebody might say that. But of course, the proper response to that would be "well why should Hitler give a rip?" because all you're doing is expressing autobiography now. Right? You're just running around telling people what you like or don't like. Well, why should anybody care, number one. And number two why should anybody care what Barbra Streisand thinks. Well there are many reasons for that--not to care what she thinks. Not the least of which is, I doubt seriously, I don't know her, but I'd be willing to bet dinner that she's not spent a ton of time every week cultivating moral virtue in her character. What makes her a moral expert? Has she as she studied these things? I don't know; I don't want to get off on that.

But, so here's the relativist. The relativist says "well I can criticize Hitler because what he did was not in keeping with my code, and my code says what he did was wrong." But now listen
to the problem the relativist is in. Are you tracking the argument so far? Now listen to the mess that the relativist has landed in. Now the relativist has got two contradictory positions. The first one is this: I can criticize Hitler because what Hitler did isn't in keeping with my code, and my code says I can criticize him. But I also am a moral relativist, and as a moral relativist I say Hitler has a right to do whatever is in keeping with his code. So now I'm simultaneously in the position of criticizing and saying it was okay for Hitler to do what he did. Now, just think that through for a minute. If I am a moral relativist, and you do something that I criticize you for because it's not in keeping with my code, then while I may criticize you for my codes perspective from the point of view that I'm a relativist I've also got to say that it was okay for you to live in keeping with your code. So no I've got to both criticize you, and say that what you did was okay, and I'm engaged in a contradictory moral posture. Did you follow that to some extent? Now let me tell you. Listen to this on the evening news. Listen to these things, and listen to how quickly discussions will start off talking about morality and they'll all of a sudden start talking about law. They'll be talking about the morality of something and then somebody will start saying "well I have rights," and now we're into a legal discussion. I thought we were talking about moral issues. And they'll espouse a relativist view.

There was a caller on the Channel 9 news here last week. They had this cross talk on the Channel 9 Evening News. This one guy called in, they were I guess in--Where was it? They're flogging these people for graffiti over in Singapore. And so they had call in, and everybody was for the flogging, which I found quite interesting. "Yeah they ought to flog him. Doggone right!"

It was kind of interesting. But this one guy said, "Well yeah I think they ought to flog him, I mean why is he doing that?" And then the news anchor said "Well do you think that we ought to flog people in this country?" And he says "well no, you know, I mean I think every culture,
every culture has a right to do whatever they want and everything's kind of relative to your culture. But I still think it's wrong for them, it would be it would be wrong for them not to flog this guy." I mean it was just an absolute contradiction. And of course the befuddled news anchors, you know without the talking Max Headrooms up there, just kind of went on.

All right. Here's one other problem with moral relativism that I hope will be of help to you. Moral relativism makes the existence of moral reformers impossible. Moral relativism makes the existence of moral reformers impossible. How so? Now, let's remember what moral relativism is. Let's take the cultural version of it. What is cultural moral relativism say: something's right if and only if it's in keeping with my culture's code. If my culture says it is right, then you ought to follow it. If my culture says it's wrong, and you're part of the culture, you shouldn't do it. You understand that. Now what is a moral reformer? Like Martin Luther King, or Mahatma Gandhi, or Moses, or Bobby Kennedy, or something like that? A moral reformer is a member of a society that stands outside of his society's moral code, or hers, and says that our code is wrong, we need to change our code. Now if moral relativism is true, what must we say about the moral reformer? He is immoral. Why? Because his values are contrary to our society's code. Now, do you follow that? Now I'm trying to show you the radical nature of relativism that almost never gets brought out. It is so implausible that it makes the existence of people who want to reform their society’s code impossible.

Let's apply this to an individual who is considering changing his code. Suppose I'm thinking about changing my moral code. Suppose that I had the view, I have a negative view of women and I've kind of got these wild views about such and such, and I'm thinking about changing my views. Well, now suppose a week later I've got views about women, that they ought to be treated as human beings. Now suppose that's my view a week later. Have I improved my
moral code? Have I improved it? Well if I'm a relativist, no sense can be given to improving my code. The only thing you can say is I've changed it. It's like changing clothes. How so? Well look, from the vantage point of my new code, the old principle was wrong. Can you see that? But from the vantage point of the old code, the new principle is wrong. You see that? The idea of moral growth and improvement assumes a vantage point above the codes from which you can judge, on a scale, that the new one is better than the old one. But you see, that vantage point is denied if I'm a relativist. Do you see that? You've got to operate from inside the raft, as it were. And the only thing you can do is change lifeboats. There's no sense that can be given to the idea of improving our code. You can just change them.

Now folks, we need to be telling people this. The next time somebody says "Who's morality? Well whose values?" and what they mean, if they mean by that, there is no right and wrong and everything's relative. If that's what they mean, because usually they use the "whose morality" to justify a fallback position that says that everything's relative to individuals. You're tracking with me? Then what we need to remind people of is that that applies, unfortunately, sir or ma'am, that you believe that it is impossible for people to improve in their moral knowledge and their moral values. And that is awfully hard to choke down. One thing that follows from that is that it would be pointless to have moral education, because moral education assumes that there's some point to teaching people moral values. But of course, the only thing you're doing is changing people's values, little children's, you're not improving them. This is bizarre stuff.

Now there's a third view here called the principle of tolerance. The principle of tolerance. And the principle of tolerance has two different meanings, and old meaning and a new meaning. Here's what the principle of tolerance used to mean: some things are right, some things are wrong, I think you're wrong. I'm going to do everything in my power to show that your views are
aborrent, however, I respect you as a person. And I respect your right to assert your views, and argue for them, and I will not treat you in a demeaning way. I will tolerate you. I will give you your right to make your case. So the idea here is that there is a right and wrong. I think I'm right and you're wrong, and I'm going to argue against you with everything I can that stops short of being wrong. I'm going to make a case against you. I'm going to debate, in public, your views and I think you're dead wrong, but I respect your right to make your case and I'll protect it. I want you to have a right to argue your case and I will respect you as a person. I will not engage in activities that demean you as a person. I'll demean your viewpoint, in the sense of argue against it, but I will not demean you unless we're dealing with character, and then you have a right to talk about people's character. But that's a different question, now. The principle, that principle of tolerance assumes what? Absolutism, doesn't it?

Well now the principle of tolerance today means that everybody's right and nobody's wrong right. For you to even pass judgment on another person and say they're wrong is out of bounds. Do understand my point here? I have a, I'm looking at a fellow right here, I don't want to mention his name, who is a USC student that just turned in a paper here a week ago or so, he told me a while ago, and he gave me a guide at USC of how to write freshman pros and cons for freshman English classes. And this has a politically correct guide for language that will be tolerated and language that won't be tolerated to get a passing grade and undergraduate English. Well, he had the distinct misfortune of writing his paper critiquing the approach. He got an F on the paper, folks. He's in this room. He got an F on the paper, and it was a well-written paper. How do I know? He told me so. Now, a couple of words. I take his word for that. He flunked; it wasn't an F paper, but because he was on the wrong side of the issue. Now tolerance today means that you can't even argue against the politically correct position. You can't make
judgments that other people might be wrong. Do you see how radical this is? I've got a question to ask. Here's my question. If everything's relative, so nobody is really right or nobody's really wrong, then what is there to tolerate? What does it, what does it now mean to tolerate something? I can understand what tolerate means if it means that you really think somebody is wrong, but you're still going to put up with it. I know what that means. But do you tolerate-- does somebody who goes to McDonald's tolerate people who go to Burger King? I mean, do you tolerate them? If there's no, because there's nothing to tolerate, understand.

Now listen, people know that are absolute moral values. And I'll give you a final by way of summary. I was in a dorm, sharing Jesus Christ with a college student. He began to espouse relativism to me. "Oh," he said "I know, I know, but everything's, you know, everybody has a right to come up with their own views of God, and right and wrong. And I have different views than yours. And you know that's--your views are fine for you, but mine are fine for me, and I certainly would not want to put my views on you. And I hope that you wouldn't put yours, Force your values on me." "Right," I said "I understand where you're coming from. Well it's been great talking to you. I got to get going. So I pick up the guy's stereo and start walking out his door."

[Audience laughter]

And he says tome, he says "well, what're you doing?" I said, "Well, what do you need these? I'm walking out the door with your stereo. What do you mean, what am I doing? Are you having trouble seeing what I'm doing? What, I don't understand your question." He said "You can't do that." I said "hey, I lift weights, I think I can handle it."
"I might if I need help, I won't ask you, but I can do it, it's not that big." I said, "You're not--you're not trying to say that you think I shouldn't do this, are you? Because we've already established some things here and I certainly wouldn't expect you to believe what I believe. Namely, that if something will help my religious devotions, with sacred music, it's okay, it's permissible to steal it. Now, I don't expect you to believe that, but surely you're not going to put your values on me, are you?"

Now see, here is the lesson to be learned. People's real beliefs often come out in their spontaneous, uncalculated reactions to things, not in, not when they've had a chance to think about how they're going to respond. Because if they have a chance to think about it, very often they'll respond in a way they think they're supposed to given the culture. Do you understand that?

Greg Cocoa, raise your hand. This guy took an ethics class under me, and Greg went to a chiropractor office and before he went in to see the chiropractor, he talked to the receptionist and said "I got, I'm taking an ethics class, and I'd like to ask you some questions. Do you believe in absolutism or relativism?" She said "spell it out, I know I don't know what it is." So he explained it to her. "Oh, I'm a relativist; I wouldn't be an absolutist." He said "Do you think that torturing babies for the fun of it is wrong?" She said "Well, I would certainly never do it." He said "Well, I'm glad to hear that. But, is torturing babies for fun is wrong, is that wrong?" "Well, I mean I certainly would never put my values on anybody else, but I wouldn't do it." Now, you see. She
couldn't bring herself to say that it was wrong to torture a baby. Now, when she got home that
night at dinner, folks, and if she found out that the little baby next door to her and her neighbors
was howling with pain every night, because the parents were sticking pins in its eyeballs. I
suggest to you that that lady would have said "my neighbors are moral monsters." But do you
understand, she'd been so badgered into the way we're supposed to respond, when she had a
chance to think about it, she just parroted the mantra. You often find out what people really
believe by their spontaneous reactions.

And you know another way to demonstrate that people are absolutists is by way of
summary? Just pick their hot button issue, and relativize it. Pick whatever it issue is they love,
and say you know let's, I mean let's just take, let's take racism, for example. That is an important
moral issue, and I don't, I'm not making light of it. But suppose somebody says that racism is
wrong. Then the thing I think to say will be "well of course if that's your view, that's great. Okay,
great. But I happen to know a bunch of racists that believe that racism is tremendous. And of
course, they have the equal right to advance their racist attitudes, because they're fine for them."
Now of course, that's ludicrous, isn't it? And a person who is concerned about this is going to
have trouble.

[Cut off]

And are knowable, are knowable by all human beings a part from the Bible. Certain
moral principles are true, and are knowable by all human beings, without the Bible, apart from
the Bible. These truths are rooted in creation; are rooted in creation. Let me list some passages
by way of Biblical basis. We won't look at these; Genesis 18:25, Amos 1 and 2, and Romans 1
and 2. Now let's talk about these very quickly. In the Genesis passage, Abraham applies a standard of justice against God, Himself, and basically God says He's going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham says you can't do that because it wouldn't be just. In Amos 1 and 2, very, very interesting, brothers and sisters. The Prophet Amos is criticizing some of the gentile pagan nations around Israel for their moral behavior. He never once appeals to the Bible, one time. Every time he rests his diatribe against them on some self-evident, intuitively obvious, moral principle that he assumes that they know to be right, even though they don't have the Law of Moses. For example, you have dealt unjustly and unfairly with widows and orphans. You have stolen from your brother, blah blah blah blah. Now, in Amos 2, he turns to the nation of Israel, and for the very first time in the text, when he berates them he says to them, you violated the law of the Lord, and he means by that the Torah or the or the Law of Moses. My point is, that when he was contesting with people that did not have the Law of Moses, he did not appeal to the Law of Moses to make his argument. He appealed to General moral principles that he assumed that they knew. When he appealed to Christians, he used holy writ in his argument, because they accepted the scriptures. Now we've got to think about this for a minute, but let's just keep talking and then we'll talk about implications. I'm still under biblical basis here. The idea is that the Bible is not the source of morality, God is. Morality doesn't come from the Bible, it comes from God. And God has revealed right and wrong in creation, itself, and not only in Scripture.

Now I just wish I had time about this. But look let me ask you a question. Let's suppose that people had no knowledge of goodness or evil, outside the Bible, that they could trust. Then how in the world could the Bible ever come to a culture, and how can people ever understand the Bible, when it says that God is good? Aren't people supposed to evaluate the biblical God and to be able to make a judgment that this Being is holy and good? Well if you don't already have
some notion of what it is to be holy and good before you pick up the Bible, how could you ever form the judgment the God of the Bible's good? How could you do that if your concept of goodness was all, was itself contained in the Bible, then the only thing you could say is that God fits the concept of good that God says He fits. And that's all. It's a circle. The scripture presupposes that the unbeliever has knowledge of morality, and can form knowledge of right and wrong, and good and bad. And, by the way, I think the Bible also teaches that non-Christians can engage in morally virtuous acts to a certain degree, and there are limits. They can't please God and earn salvation, but they're capable of doing things that are morally virtuous within a certain limit.

Now what this does then, and this, the idea of natural moral law, is biblical. And let me tell you now, for moral reasoning, and in this by the way, this has been held throughout church history. It has extremely important implications. For one thing, for moral reasoning, we ought to go to the Bible to find out what we believe about things, and then try to find arguments for our positions that don't rely on the Bible. Did you follow that? We ought to go to the Bible to try to find out what we believe about something, and then try to find independent reasons for our conclusions that don't rely on the Bible. This teacher that asked me a question last night about trying to respect and teach values in a multicultural setting, that's very tricky. But, I don't think that the teacher should be appealing to Holy Scripture to settle moral discussions in a public school. I think that's inappropriate. If I were a Jewish, if I were Jewish parents, or Buddhist parents, that would be very offensive to me, and I wouldn't be very open to your gospel if you were, if you were using the public schools to force my children to accept your religion. Now, that's different from allowing different religions to present what they are in the public school. That's very different, as an exchange of ideas. But what the Christian needs to do, is to
try to find arguments that are independent of Holy Scripture, that advance sane moral principles, that are in keeping with common sense morality, in the natural moral law. I can't go any further on this.

But, for moral reasoning, let me give you an example of how I've used this. There are, this is still for moral application for moral reasoning. There are two--we have to make a distinction here between reasoning within morality, versus reasoning about morality. This is extremely important. When we're reasoning within morality, we are already assuming certain moral principles that we agree on. Things like it is wrong to kill and steal. We ought to respect human beings and human persons. It is important to be kind, and courageous, and fair, and just; and that it's good to be upright. We ought to be reliable and trusted, and be good to our neighbors. Things of that sort. That human life ought to be respected, and I think most people agree with that. I think even the pro-abortionists agree with it--at least in principle, I think they try to make the claim that the fetus is not a human being, or a person, or something of that sort, which is another issue I'm not addressing now. But anyway, notice that you can engage in reasoning within morality, without having to appeal to God.

I'm on an ethics committee I mentioned we have a Jewish agnostic on the committee, he's a lawyer. This fellow agrees with me on a set of objective moral principles that he thinks are right. He thinks that we have a duty to tell patients the truth in nursing homes. He thinks that we have an obligation to respect the freedom of patients. He thinks that we have a duty to benefit and not harm our patients; to treat them justly and not lie to them, et cetera. So, we can discuss moral cases together because we have a shared set of common sense moral principles, without which the moral life itself would be impossible, by the way. These are so universally held in moral codes all around the world, that it's impossible to even conceive of morality without them.
They're rooted in respecting others, and fairness, and kindness, and in treating humans as creatures of value. Okay, you with me on that? Now, the point is though, that I go to the coffee urn at break with this guy and we stop, now, talking about moral issues within morality. And now we start reasoning about morality itself, as to whether there could be such a thing as morality. Now we're arguing about the institution of morality, not within it. It's like having a debate about what's the best way to score a touchdown within football, compared to a debate about whether anybody ought to play it to begin with, as opposed to giving our money to some other cultural thing, okay.

So I go to him, I said "you know, Stan, I've got a question. I know that you hold that human beings have values, and you're an agnostic." I said "honestly, for the life of me, and I'd really like to know what you say about this, I can't find any reason given your view of things as to why human beings should have any value. I mean how do you justify that? Where does that that come from in your system? You know, it just it's sort of a bizarre view to me. Do you have you thought about that?" He said, "Yeah I have." He said "frankly," he said, "We've got to live, and I've got to start somewhere, and I just posit these things as kind of faith assumptions; that these things matter. I don't know where else to go with it." I said "Well you know I got some suggestions on that, I think that if there is a God, and if that God is virtuous, then morality is grounded very deeply in the universe. However, if the world came from matter and motion, and the big bang, that moral values kind of are 'Johnny come latelies' because the big bang didn't contain moral values in it, if you catch my drift, and it's sort of odd to see these things popped into existence." Well, yeah these are problems."

So anyway, you can bring God in, usefully as an evangelistic tool, to argue about how there can be morality in the first place. See, that gives us the freedom, then, to engage in
meaningful moral discussion with unbelievers within morality, but then raise nasty questions about it. Let me give you an example of this. I'm trying to show you a new way to bring Christianity into the discussion, instead of bringing it in here, because we've got to establish civic morality that doesn't depend on the Bible. But, that doesn't mean we abandon scripture. For one thing or scripture comes in in us insuring ourselves of what Scripture teaches, then trying to find independent arguments to support it. But secondly, our faith comes in in trying to argue that without God, there probably couldn't be any values in the first place. And let me show you how I do that. My daughter came home, Ashley. She was here yesterday and she came home from 6th grade, and it was Martin Luther King Day. She had a flyer from school. And it said Martin Luther King taught that all human beings should be treated equally and with respect. And I said to my daughter, I said, "What's this?" And she said, "Oh, it's a flyer we got at school." And I said "well, look at this. Do you believe this?" I said "Do you believe that we ought to treat everybody equally?" And she says "Yeah." I said "How come?" Well, she knew where I was headed and she says, "Well because of God." And I said "Nope, can't do that. Can't do that."

[Audience laughter]

"Let’s say, let’s pretend there's no God that He's make believe. So God's make believe, now. Here, there isn't a God. Now, why do you believe that?" I said "look around the room here. We have a painting over here on the wall. It's a lovely painting of some boats. Very, very nice. Now," I said, "look over here on the coffee table. Last night I scribbled a little stick figure," for my other daughter doing a homework assignment, took me about 10 seconds. I said, "Do you think these should be treated equally? What if the house is burning down? Do you think it would
be okay to take the stick figure out before we took that painting?" "Well no." I said, "Okay, then we learn a lesson: if things aren't equal, it's wrong to treat them equally."

And really, if you want to know what the principle of justice really teaches, it is that you ought to treat equals equally, and unequals unequally. That's justice. And here's why. If I treated unequals equally when I came to grading time at school, if I treated unequals equally, people would have a right to say to me I was being unfair. And so unequals. Do you think it is right to punish a murder with the same amount of punishment that you'd punish somebody who had a parking ticket? Why, why do you think it's wrong to punish them equally? Because they're unequal. They shouldn't be given equal punishment if they're unequal, and what they did was unequal. You catch my drift here? So hang in there with me. So I said to her, now I said, "do you know, Ashley, that human beings don't have anything in common that's equal? There are smart human beings, there are dumb ones, there are good looking ones, there are ugly ones, there are fat ones, skinny ones, athletic ones, un-athletic ones, slow ones, fast ones, people who can do art, people who can't do art. They're unequal. They haven't got anything in common." She said, "Oh yes they do." I said "What is it?" She said "belly buttons." "Okay," I said, "problem with that is that there are people with big belly buttons and people with little ones. Should we treat the people with big belly buttons with more respect than the people with little ones?" I said "furthermore, it's not clear to me a belly button matters because if it did. Let's ask this question: what if we took your sister to the doctor, and had her belly button cut out. Could we then use her as a doorstop?"

[Audience laughter]
See, you have to throw those in to keep the kids interested. Now I said, "You know the truth is, honey, that the only reason you ought to treat people equally is that they've got something in common that's equal. And if what it is they have in common is relevant. If it really is relevant to treating them." And I said "Martin Luther King was a Christian; He believed in Jesus Christ. And the reason he said that, is because he believed everybody had something in them equal, namely God's image. And since we all have God's image equally, in a sense that makes a difference. That is why he was right, and we ought to treat everybody equally; because everybody is equally made in His image. But honey, if God doesn't exist, why should we do this? Why should we do this? I don't know. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me." You see what I'm doing to my children? I'm helping them realize?

[Audience laughter]

Can we recall those lunch tickets? These people, I just, I don't know. I'm just. Okay, alright.

Now for political involvement, for political involvement. This is still bottom of page one. We should work for a just state, not a Christian state. I said that yesterday. Folks, we should not try to Christianize the state. We do not bring the state under the Bible. We should work for a just state, and bring it under natural moral law. We should try to bring the state under common sense, general natural morality; we ought not to try to Christianize the state. Now I want to cover, in the last 10 minutes before we go to lunch, some general tools for reasoning. We'll have to come back to some of this. But this is where, in Roman Numeral 2, and then we'll take our lunch break.
I've already used examples of A, B, and C. When you're reasoning about morality, the first thing you want to start with are intuitions. Intuition. Now, an intuition means something very special in philosophy. It isn't just a feeling about something that you don't have any arguments for. An intuition is a reflected way of seeing something. It is a reflective or reflected way of seeing something. It is the way you see it after having thought about it a while. Now, intuitions are the way we start knowing everything. If I were to ask you: "how do you know 2 and 2 is 4?" Trust me, the answer you're going to have to tell me is going to be this: "Well you can just see it's true. You can just see it's true." You understand what 2 means, and 4 means, and the plus sign means, you can see it's true. We all have to start with some fundamental reflected ways of looking at something. And so, don't think that you've always got to be able to give some reason for why you believe something, before you're within your rights to believe it. For the life of me, I could not tell you any reason why I believe 2 and 2 is 4, apart from the fact that I simply can see it is true; I simply know it's true. And there are fundamental moral principles that we simply know to be the case by simply reflecting on them. You can simply reflect upon the notion of kindness, and fairness, and mercy. And once you understand what mercy and kindness means, and what fairness means, you can see that it's a virtue, not a vice. You understand that? Once you reflect upon the principle: is it right to kill people, or is it wrong to just kill people for no reason? Well, just reflecting upon that you are led to the idea that it's clearly the case that you ought not to kill people.

So it's okay to start with intuitions in clear cases. The problem is you don't want to just use intuitions in borderline or unclear cases. So it's okay to start though, in morally reasoning with somebody, with some fundamental intuitions that you take to be self-evident. Declaration of Independence; "We hold these truths to be," now, that what does the word self-evident mean? It
means an intuition that you know to be true once you understand the proposition. Now just let me say that again. There are some propositions that when you come to understand them, you don't know if they're true or false. They're 50 grasshoppers in the yard out there. Everybody knows what that proposition means. But knowing what it means doesn't settle for you whether it's true or false, does it? The statement 2 and 2 is 4, however, once you come to understand what that proposition means you not only know what it means, but you also can see it's true. Did you see that? Now that those propositions, that once you understand what they mean you know they're true, are called self-evident. And some moral principles are like that. And the Declaration of Independence says that "we hold these truths to be self-evident." My point is that in moral reasoning it is permissible to start with some things that you claim to be self-evidently true. You're not asserting the most faith posits, you're not saying these are my faith principles. Faith has got nothing to do with it. These are things you claim that any rational person ought to be able to see, that these moral principles are correct.

Now the second thing you want to do and reasoning with somebody, is to learn to give counterexamples. Learn to give counterexamples. Now what I mean is you take the other person's moral position, they're asserting something, and you show that it leads to unacceptable moral conclusions. So you're always thinking, you're trying to say "well what does the person I'm discussing withhold? And if I held that view, would it lead to immoral consequences or conclusions?" Like I said, the relativist, if you're a relativist, you can't criticize Hitler. That was an attempt to do this. It was a counterexample. I said okay, let's assume relativism is true, for the sake of argument. Now, does that assumption lead to any conclusions that seem to be troublesome? Well yeah, if that commits me to not being able to criticize Hitler, I'm in trouble. What about the right to choose, versus the right to life? What you do, is you show that there is no
such thing as the right to choose. There is no such thing. By giving counterexamples, first of all, the right to choose is like the right to hit. It's an incomplete right. There is no such thing as choosing. There is only choosing this or that; choosing is not a complete idea. You've got to fill in what you're choosing. Now, whether I have a right to choose something depends upon the prior question of what it is I'm choosing. So there is no right to choose in the abstract. There are only rights to choose specific things.

Whether I have a right to choose something depends, then, on what the thing is I'm choosing. And here's where you give a counterexample, you'd say "Surely you don't think you have a right to just go over to your neighbor and knock his head off with a baseball bat because you want to practice your swing, right?" Right. So there are limits on the right to choose. So there is no such thing as a right to choose that goes across the board. How do I know that? I just gave a counterexample. I don't have a right to choose to be people over there with a baseball bat for the fun of it. What that counterexample establishes is that there is no such thing as the right to choose anything I want, and that pushes the question then: well, what is it we're choosing in the abortion controversy? And do you see that that makes the real issue, then, in this controversy not the issue of choosing, but the issue of what exactly is an act of abortion. What exactly is it? And that is the issue; and I'm not saying that because I'm pro-life. It's just obvious. Why is it obvious, again? It's obvious because the right to choose is incomplete, I can't answer the question if I have a right to choose until I tell you what it is I'm claiming to be able to choose. And so I'm saying then that the right to choose is dependent on the more fundamental question: what I'm choosing. How do I know that? The counterexample of the baseball bat. Well, that means then that the real issue in the abortion question is: what is it that you're choosing when you do an abortion? So
that's where the debate ought to be rooted, not on abstract concepts of rights to choose. That's not going to help. That doesn't help the discussion.

Now what I want to do is I want to come back, and there's a couple of things after lunch that I think you're going to be extremely helpful to you. I want to make one final remark, I have 3 minutes. I've been asked a bunch of questions, and I told a couple of you I'd say this to the whole group. We have a master's program at Talbot in philosophy and ethics and apologetics. There are only 2 of these that I know of credited in the United States and other evangelical schools. And it started 2 years ago. We have 2 full time PhDs philosophy. We have another third professor who teaches who has a doctorate in medical ethics, and this weekend we've just hired another Professor in Medical Ethics. I can't tell you his name, but he's known widely around the country. We have about 40 graduate students. If you know of someone who is interested in studying philosophy, and ethics, and apologetics, we have an incredible program here. Now I want to warn you, though, it's a rigorous program. If you don't have training in philosophy you can come, but you need to be prepared to work. The program is not a 2 year conference. It's not a Sunday school class. It's very rigorous. But if you know young minds that want to study philosophy for the cause of Christ. Who're interested in doing more work in apologetics, where ethics from professors that are publishing in secular journals, but who love Jesus Christ, and are teaching students about prayer and caring spiritually, as well. We have an incredibly exciting program here. And some of you asked about that. It is a genuine graduate program. It's not just giving simple answers. It's getting at a fairly deep level. So if you have people that are interested in that, pass them onto me or have them call the school.

Let's go to lunch and we'll come back for one more session. What do we do here? Do you want, are you going to give us a word of?
Announcer:

The way lunch will work is [cut off].