

The Path of Life

Moral

Which is the proper path that a man should choose for himself? Whatever is a credit to himself and earns him the esteem of fellow men.

- Ethics of the Fathers. Ch. 2, par. 1

Analysis

The greatest gift humans have is the ability to choose. You can choose what and when to eat, and how you want to physically appear to the rest of the world. In a similar fashion, you can choose how you wish to behave.

Each day, you are presented an array of moral dilemmas. Many of them may tempt you to act in an incorrect fashion. When faced with such problems, the proper way to act is clearly stated in this moral. Choose the path that is appropriate for your own character.

How do you know what is “appropriate?” One method is to view yourself in the mirror. Pretend that you are somebody else who would be meeting you for the first time. What would you think of yourself, now? Would you make a worthy, respectful first impression? Would you be able to associate with yourself as a friend or as a business partner?

You can dye your hair, slim your body, and have the perfect physique. But, if your behavior is unbecoming, your internal physique can instantaneously ruin your external impression. As a famous expression states, “You can’t fool all the people all the time.”

Respect and prestige cannot be demanded from others. It must be earned by your own visible example of proper ethical behavior. If you always choose the path that is estimable for you, others who become acquainted with you will, inevitably respect both your character as well as your actions.

Parable

Recently, I saw a one-panel newspaper cartoon that depicted the concept of this choice of life. It showed a man walking on a road in the middle of a desert. He is facing a sign at the intersection. The sign pointing to the right says, “Morally Correct.” The one pointing to the left says, “Legally Correct.”

After seeing this, I thought that it's too bad that these two signs couldn't point in the same direction, so no one would have to make this choice. Shouldn't morality be law? So many people think that if they don't get caught doing something they know is wrong, then they can do the wrong thing. Suddenly, the illegal not only becomes legal, but it becomes morally correct, in the mindset of that person.

Thought Questions

While walking on the street, you find a wallet containing money. Would you attempt to return the wallet intact (i.e., without taking the money) with no conditions, whatsoever? Would any of the scenarios below change your mind? If so, why?

1. The wallet has no ID card and there is no way to easily determine the owner. Perhaps, if you bring it to a police station, the owner may go there and reclaim the wallet.
2. Would the amount of money influence your decision? What if there was enough money for you to pay all your bills, mortgage, and other debts as well as buy your "dream" house?
3. You need the money immediately. Would you "borrow" the money with the intention to return the money and the wallet to the owner later?

Moral Exercises

1. When you awaken in the morning, look at yourself in the mirror for two minutes. Do this before you fix your external appearance. Imagine someone important were now meeting you for the first time. He or she would be unimpressed by your external appearance. What would you say that would earn this person's respect long enough to deal with you further and give you another opportunity?
2. Before going to bed at night, look in the mirror, again, for two minutes. Imagine yourself as that same person you thought of in the morning, except, now, you know each other, better. What parts of your character or behaviors did you demonstrate to gain or lose that person's esteem? What do you plan to do differently, tomorrow?