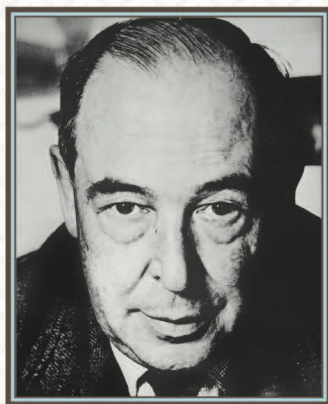


DISCUSSING MERE CHRISTIANITY



Exploring the
History, Meaning, & Relevance

— *of* —
C.S. Lewis's Greatest Book

DEVIN BROWN



1

OUR SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG



Reading Assignment

In preparation for Session 1, read the following from *Mere Christianity*:

- ◇ The Preface
- ◇ Book 1, Chapter 1: “The Law of Human Nature”
- ◇ Book 1, Chapter 2: “Some Objections”



Watch Video: *Our Sense of Right and Wrong*

Play the video segment for Session 1. As you watch, take any notes that might be helpful to you, using the space provided below.

Notes

Video Discussion

As Eric Metaxas explains in the video, *Mere Christianity* was written because James Welch happened to read one of C. S. Lewis's books and decided to write him a letter with a surprising invitation. What about you? Have you experienced an event in your life which may have seemed coincidental at the time but later felt as though the hand of God was behind it? Maybe just the right book came to you at just the right time. Maybe a job opened up right when you needed one. Maybe you just happened to meet someone who went on to play a key role in your life.

Question 1. The poet William Cowper wrote, "God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform." Describe a time when God worked in a mysterious way in your life. How did you know only God could have orchestrated it?

Lewis's Preface to *Mere Christianity*

Near the start of the Preface, Lewis lays out the central approach he will take for the rest of the book. He tells us that his purpose is *not* to offer help to readers who are trying to decide which Christian denomination to join. "You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic," he writes (viii). Instead, Lewis's goal is to explain and defend what he calls *mere Christianity*, the core beliefs shared by all Christians at all times.

Lewis goes on to claim that discussions—we might say battles—about the denominational issues that divide Christians are more likely to deter outsiders than bring them into the fold. With the rise of ecumenism, it may be hard for us to understand just how radical *Mere Christianity* was in its time. It wasn't uncommon for each Christian denomination to promote its own distinctives and superiority over other denominations. Lewis sidestepped that approach, choosing instead to write about the most common and unifying Christian beliefs. This is also remarkable when we consider that Lewis was born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where the conflict between the Protestants and Catholics was especially intense.

Question 2. Discuss one or more of the following:

- Describe one or more of the specific issues that Christians often fight about.
- Do you agree with Lewis that when talking with non-Christians it is better to focus on those things all Christians believe? Why or why not?
- Why do you think many Christians focus their energies on what divides believers rather than on what unites them?

Book 1, Chapter 1: The Law of Human Nature

Everyone has heard people quarreling.

These are the very first words that went out over the air in Lewis's first BBC talk, as well as the opening words to chapter one of *Mere Christianity*. Rather than beginning with a discussion of the doctrines of Christianity—complex topics

such as sin, atonement, salvation, the deity of Christ, or the Trinity—Lewis begins with a subject that people all over the world, believers or not, can relate to.

Everyone has heard people quarreling.

Lewis opens chapter one, “The Law of Human Nature,” by describing how when one person tries to convince another that they should or should not have done something, he is not merely saying that the second person’s behavior did not happen to please him. Instead the first person is saying that there is a standard of right and wrong behavior which the second person has violated—and the first person expects the second to know about and accept this standard.

The accused person, in turn, makes the case that he or she has *not* done anything wrong, or that there was justification or extenuating circumstances in committing this wrong. Lewis’s point is that there would be no reason to try to do this *unless both people have a shared understanding of what right and wrong are*. Quarreling between two people suggests that there is some kind of objective right and wrong that exists beyond our own personal wants and wishes. Lewis calls this sense of right and wrong “The Law of Human Nature.”

Question 3. Lewis claims that disputes between people mean there must be a higher authority to whom they are appealing. Do you find his argument convincing? Why or why not?

Lewis himself had many colleagues at Oxford who claimed to be *moral relativists*, people who believed that the standards of right and wrong were simply rules society had made up—like the law about which side of the road people are supposed to drive on. Toward the end of chapter one, Lewis comments that whenever we find someone who says he does not believe in a real right and wrong, we find the same person going back on this a moment later. As soon as this person thinks someone else has done him wrong, he complains about it as though there was a real external standard by which actions ought to be judged.

Tim Keller, who was greatly influenced by the writings of C. S. Lewis, addresses this issue in his book *The Reason for God*. Keller writes:

Conservative writers and speakers are constantly complaining that the young people of our culture are relativistic and amoral. As a pastor in Manhattan I have been neck-deep in sophisticated twen-tysomethings for almost two decades, and I have not found this to be the case. The secular, young adults I have known have a very finely honed sense of right and wrong. There are many things happening in the world that evoke their moral outrage. There is a problem with their moral outlook, however.

These young people whom Keller describes *claim* to believe that all moral values are relative and that one person should not impose his or her values on someone else. At the same time they also believe that there is a moral standard by which all people should abide. For example, they might view crimes like rape and genocide as absolute wrongs for everyone everywhere, whether or not other people from other cultures agree or not.

Question 4. In the video, Alister McGrath refers to those who believe that morality is “just about me doing what I think is right.” Briefly describe what someone who believes right and wrong are personal preferences might say to someone who, like Lewis, claimed there is a real standard of right and wrong. Does this person live according to their beliefs? If not, where is the contradiction?

Book 1, Chapter 2: Some Objections

In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis commented, “One gets funny letters after broadcasting—some from lunatics who sign themselves ‘Jehovah’ or begin ‘Dear Mr. Lewis, I was married at the age of 20 to a man I didn’t love’—but many from serious inquirers whom it was a duty to answer fully.”

Here in chapter two, Lewis replies to objections he had received. One of these objections was to his claim that there is a moral absolute. The listeners asserted that all morality is merely a *social convention* which “human beings have made up for themselves and might have made different if they had liked” (12). As evidence for this claim, Lewis’s objectors pointed to the fact that there have been differences between the moral ideas of one time and another time or between one country and another.

Lewis reminds readers that when there are differences, these differences are not nearly as great as his objectors imagined. And when we find discernable differences between

cultures, Lewis observed, we all agree that some moralities are better than others. In fact, if it was not possible for one set of moral ideas to be better or truer than any other, Lewis argues, then there would be “no sense in preferring civilized morality to savage morality or Christian morality to Nazi morality” (13). And, of course, as soon as we say that one set of moral values can be seen as better than another, we are actually measuring both sets by an independent standard and saying one set conforms more nearly to that standard than the other. Moral ideas, however, are different from social conventions.

Social conventions are the rules a society creates for itself to accommodate specific needs and demands. One example already mentioned is driving on the left side of the road—a perfect illustration, since in many parts of the world people are taught to drive on the right side. Another example of a social convention is how we greet our friends. In some places people shake hands. In others they may hug, bow, kiss one another on the cheek, or not touch each other at all. While we can easily conceive of how driving on the opposite side of the road would be perfectly acceptable, we find it very hard to conceive of how murder or theft could be viewed as being good instead of evil.

Question 5. In the video, Alister McGrath says that *right* is not something that we humans invent or arbitrate—it is already there. Can you think of more examples which illustrate the difference between moral absolutes and social conventions?

To avoid the charge that Lewis is misrepresenting those who believe that all morality is subjective, here it might be helpful to allow a secular philosopher to speak for himself. In an essay titled “Science and Ethics,” Bertrand Russell puts forth his belief that all moral values are subjective. Russell writes:

The theory which I have been advocating is a form of the doctrine which is called the “subjectivity” of values. This doctrine consists in maintaining that, if two men differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference of taste. If one man says “oysters are good” and another says “*I* think they are bad,” we recognize that there is nothing to argue about. The theory in question holds that all differences as to values are of this sort . . . The difference is one of tastes, not one as to any objective truth.

The consequences of this doctrine are considerable. In the first place, there can be no such thing as “sin” in any absolute sense; what one man calls “sin” another may call “virtue.”

Most people have heard a version of the argument Russell makes here—that what one person may see as good, another person may see as bad, and so there can be no such thing as objective or universal moral values.

At the end of chapter two, Lewis comes to the opposite conclusion. Lewis maintains that though differences between people’s ideas of what constitutes decent behavior might make us suspect there no is real natural law of behavior, the things we think about these differences “really prove just the opposite” (14). Lewis points to the differences between the English moral principles and those of the Nazis. No one listening to his radio broadcast would have said, “What was right for the Nazis was right for them. Who are we to say that their exterminating the Jews or their invading another sovereign country is wrong?”

Question 6. Can you point to an example in today's world of a culture or group of people with a radically different view of what is accepted as decent behavior? Does this difference mean there is no real right or wrong?

Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember

Complete this activity on your own.

- ◇ Briefly review the readings and any notes you took.
- ◇ In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session—from your reading, video content, or discussion material.

What I want to remember from this session . . .

Closing Prayer

Close your time together in prayer.



Session 1 Personal Study

Reflect further by exploring additional material from *Mere Christianity* and Scripture.

At the end of the Preface of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis presents a now famous image where he describes mere Christianity as a large hallway in a house and the various denominations of Christianity as the rooms that branch off this hall. Lewis's hope, he tells us, is to help people come to believe these central beliefs shared by all Christians, to help bring them into the hall. But the journey is not meant to end in the hallway; it is meant to continue on to a specific church. The hall, Lewis explains, is a place to wait in, where a person can “try the various doors”—not a place where anyone should permanently live (xv).

Lewis was critical of the church-shopping which took place in his day (and continues today). In deciding which door to go through, which church to attend, he urges readers not to focus on the “paint and paneling” or any of the external aspects (xvi), but on whether the doctrines are true and if there is an emphasis on holiness. As is fitting, given his focus on the shared beliefs that unite all Christians, Lewis ends the Preface with a plea for compassion, as he calls for his readers to “be kind to those who have chosen different doors” (xvi).

In the six decades since Lewis first came up with his image of the hallway of the house with many rooms branching off, there has—in parts of the world—been an increased emphasis on the beliefs that unite all Christians and a rise in non-denominational congregations.

Question 1. Do you agree with Lewis that the mere Christianity of the hallway is not a place where Christians should live? Does Lewis's image still fit? Why or why not?

In the very first pages of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis establishes the approach he will use for the entire book. He does not ask us to shut down our minds and simply accept something by faith. Nor does he ask us to believe merely because we feel it is right. Instead of asking us to think less, Lewis actually pushes us to think more than we normally do, to think more carefully, more deeply, and with less prejudice than we may have in the past. In a later chapter, titled "Faith," Lewis states, "I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of the evidence is against it" (140). Throughout *Mere Christianity* Lewis invites us to use not just our reason but our best reasoning.

Question 2. Why do you think some Christians are reluctant to use their minds when it comes to faith? Why are various people of faith opposed to or suspicious of reason?

Question 3. This session explored the idea that humans have an inner sense of right and wrong which Lewis refers to as the Law of Human Nature. What does the following passage from Romans say about our inner sense of right and wrong? Can you think of other Scripture passages that might also be relevant?

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

Romans 2:14–15

Reading Assignment

In preparation for Session 2, read the following from *Mere Christianity*:

- ◇ Book 1, Chapter 4: “What Lies Behind the Law”
- ◇ Book 1, Chapter 5: “We Have Cause to Be Uneasy”