Vision Series 2023

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Well, at the age of 16, Lance Armstrong started competing in triathlons. He became national sprint course champion in 1989 at the age of 18, two years after starting competing and again in 1990.

In 1992, he became a professional cyclist at the age of 21. He won the world championship the next year. Three years later, 1996, he was diagnosed with cancer.
He returned to cycling just two years later in 1998 and won the Tour de France. And for the next seven years, he won that race, seven years in a row.
He was a champion who beat cancer. And we love winners, particularly winners who overcome adversity. So why is he not liked anymore?
Because he cheated. Because he cheated. He broke the rules, took performance enhancing drugs. When it first was raised in his career around about 1990, 1999, he denied it and eventually came out with a public admission in 2013.
[1:17] He was stripped of all of his awards and he was given a lifetime ban from all sport. Not just from cycling, from all sport.

The judge, in declaring that, considered that he was the biggest cheat they'd ever experienced. As human beings, we don't just look at the world through the lens of what is.
We look at the world through the lens of what ought to be. We can't help but think that some things are right and some things are wrong.
But how do you decide which is right and which is wrong? There's a whole range of ethical issues. We face it every single day of our life of what's an ethical issue.
Use of plastic bags. The origin of the clothes that I wear. Cold power stations. Generosity. Immigration. Sexuality.
[2:31] Whether I'm allowed to poke little furry animals with sticks. Like, the range of issues is you're confronted with it every day. What's good?

What's bad? But specifically, on what basis do you decide what's good and what's bad? What we're seeking to do in the coming weeks is to look at Christianity.
Look at the rising tide of secularism in our society. And we're also looking at some other religions, occasions. We throw that in there.
And see which of these belief systems, and they are all belief systems, including atheism. So if you weren't here last week, go and check that one out from last week.
And work out which is the best solution to what every human being needs in order to flourish. In life. Things like meaning, the ability to face suffering, an identity solid enough to endure all the ups and downs of our personal performance.
[3:41] A basis for moral judgment, deciding on what is right and wrong, which is today. Belief systems is what provides these things, so which does it best.

And the goal in the next number of weeks is to strengthen the faith of the believer, but also to challenge the skeptic to see that the Christian faith, which is increasingly becoming rejected in our society, is both plausible, relevant, and good.
And so today we're looking at the contribution to Christianity in the issue of morality. And I want to do that by three ways.
What we're looking at is by looking at how these good and evil decisions, morality decisions used were traditionally made, how they're made in a secular culture like today, and the unique contribution of the Christian faith.
So traditional good and evil. A moral judgment is how we explain moral convictions, moral obligations, and moral motivation.

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[5:00] So every moral judgment has three elements to it. A moral conviction or a moral feeling, a moral obligation, and a moral motivation.

A moral conviction is I feel X is right and I feel Y is wrong. I feel I feel I should always do X, but I should never do Y.
And it's a moral conviction, it's a moral feeling. It's personal. A moral obligation, however, is when I say I feel X is right and you also should feel X is right.
You're obligated to feel the same way that I feel. It's moral obligation. Even if you don't feel it, you should feel it.
It's an ought. That's the difference between moral feelings and moral obligation. So what is the basis for moral obligation? That's the key that I want to really unpack today.
[6:13] What's the basis for moral obligation? Historically, all religions and traditional cultures have said that the basis for moral obligation is a sacred order that exists outside of the world in which we live.

It's transcendent. Christianity, Judaism, Islam have traditionally said, if God says it's wrong, then it's wrong. Even cultures that didn't have any concept of a personal God, such as the Greeks, still believed in a realm that existed beyond the physical material world in which we lived.
In fact, the Greeks called that realm the logos. The thing that was behind the world that gave order to the world was the logos.
The logos was the cosmic order, a set of moral absolutes that stood outside the universe. And to live a good life in this world as a Greek was to align yourself with that moral order of the logos.
Ancient Chinese, especially Confucius, had a similar idea. Confucius told people how to live, but not because he said so.
[7:43] Confucius said you must live this way because it fits with heaven's will. A wise and a virtuous life was aligned to heaven's will.

Now, of course, all the different religions and cultures have different opinions on that sacred order and therefore on what those moral absolutes were. But there is, and nevertheless, that was the basis of a rational justification for every bit of morality and moral decision.
That is, every justification for morality was linked to purpose. There's a purpose behind the universe.
And unless I obey the moral absolutes and fulfil my purpose, then I will most likely destroy my life now and also in the afterlife if that belief system had an afterlife.
Now, that's how people used to make decisions of what was good and what is not. It was linked to purpose. Telos is the Greek word for purpose. Telos, the end, the goal of life.
[9:11] Your life must align to the telos. And the other Greek word that they used, as I mentioned, was logos, which means the word, the logic, the reason for something, the purpose and the reason, the telos and the logos.

You must align your life to the telos and the logos. For instance, is this a good watch or a bad watch?
On what basis do you make that decision? Because it's black? You must first ask the question, what is the purpose of the watch?
You see, I could put this watch on and say, well, it's a, you know, I think it's a good watch. And then I decide that I'm going to hammer a nail into this brick wall with my watch.
And it breaks it and you go, bad watch. Bad, bad watch. But that's not the purpose of the watch.
What is the purpose of the watch? You cannot decide whether it's a good or a bad watch until you first understand the purpose of it.
[10:37] And that is what traditional cultures do. What are human beings made for? And the answer to that question is the basis of determining between good and evil.

Now, the secular framework for determining good and evil starts without any purpose. Secularism says all of life is an accident and it rejects any sense of the transcendent world.
A transcendent creator, a transcendent being, in his book River Out of Eden, Richard Dawkins writes this. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.
Now, let me just say here, just in case you think I'm going to head in an unhelpful direction, I believe, I think, that secular people, atheists, do good things.

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It's not a question of whether they can do good things. They can do very good things. In fact, there are many atheists who have incredibly high moral convictions, moral feelings.
[12:06] I do, however, think that there is an enormous problem for a secular society like ours on the issue of moral obligation.

A secular worldview really struggles to have a consistent, coherent argument for moral obligation. So Richard Dawkins writes that in a book.
And then the same Richard Dawkins, in the summer of 2013, when England was playing Australia in the Ashes Test, and he's a major cricket fan, accused English player Stuart Broad of cheating.
The fuming cricket fan Hawkins wrote on Twitter, Stuart Broad obviously knew perfectly well he was caught, refused to walk, what a revolting cheat.
I now want Australia to win the Ashes, and don't we all? The question is, on what basis did Hawkins make that claim?
[13:11] It's a value judgment. On what basis did he make that claim? He can only say Broad was a cheat if there is a purpose by which Broad, Hawkins, and you and I must live to.

On what basis does this secular person call for moral obligation? You must not cheat. Now, I'll mention a few of the main arguments for moral obligation in the secular world.
There's a number of them, but here's just a few of the bigger ones. First, there's the evolutionary argument. It states, Well, all organisms are engaged in a struggle to survive, and those things that help species survive are selected.
A giraffe's long neck, a cat's ability to land on its feet, nine times out of ten, or a human being's sense of morality. It's an evolved sense we have.
That is, the moral feelings we have come, have come from our ancestors, and they help us to survive. One major counter-argument against that view is that evolutionary ethics describes function, not morality.
[14:45] Natural selection has chosen the lion's pointy teeth. It's chosen the eagle's wings. It's chosen the baboon's big red butt.

Not because they're right, not because they're good, but because they work. They get the job done.
Another counter-argument is that just because ethical behavior, X, Y, Z, helped my ancestors survive, that doesn't in any way obligate me to live in exactly the same way as them.
There's no obligation to follow a feeling just because it's evolution. A further counter-argument is that if morality is a result of evolution, then you cannot logically criticize the past generations.
You cannot criticize previous decisions of other cultures because they were simply less evolved.
[15:59] In other words, what they, at their stage of evolution, determined to be good cannot now be called bad. It's like saying, my cat is a terrible cat because it cannot fill its own water bowl.

A secular person cannot in any good conscience criticize any past behavior of societies as being immoral.
It's like that. That's a difficult problem for them. In other words, marriage between a man and a woman in past generations was good.
They have to say it was good. One last counter-argument. If evolution and natural selection is the basis for moral obligation, then the strong eating the weak is natural and any feeling that I have contrary is wrong.
Genocide is natural because it's the strong eating the weak and it therefore has to be determined as good. Secondly, the pragmatic argument.
[17:30] This one is simply, if no one does good, then all we're going to get is bad and so it's in the best interest of everyone to do good. The pragmatic argument isn't saying it is wrong to let the poor starve.

They're saying it's just impractical to let the poor starve. It's impractical not to help Syria and Turkey right now. Now the danger of this argument is the definition of what is practical comes down to what's at my best interest.
The reason I should care about the environment and feed the poor is because it serves me. It's about my good. It will turn out better for me.
It sounds very self-centred. The third argument, which is the one that's really popular nowadays, and you probably see this worked out in the media a lot more, is the social consensus.
This one tends to be the most popular, I think. As a modern society, we've progressed to see that some things that were done in the past were not so good and now we're seeing them as bad and

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we need to right the bad.
[18:48] Can you see how that one conflicts with the first argument of evolution? And there is a social consensus or there soon will be that that stuff is bad and needs to be changed to the good.

If a majority says it's wrong to starve the poor, then it's wrong to starve the poor. Now, the counter argument for this is many and it's pretty straightforward.
A thousand years ago, social consensus said that slavery was fine. So was it good then? Or was it fine then?
It wasn't good then, was it? I mean, was slavery good then? In other words, has racism only just become a bad thing? Or was it bad 300 years ago?
It was wrong then too. Even though there was social consensus for it back in those days. Don't forget there was social consensus in Nazi Germany to exterminate the Jews.
[20:04] Social consensus in itself is not the basis of morality. There was social consensus in our society to effectively denigrate Aboriginal cultures.

There was social consensus to exterminate them in Tasmania. Was that good? No. There's a second sting in the tale of this one which I think that the modern progressives need to realise. Anything that is called good today, your deepest values, your treasured moral standards could well be considered bad within the next 20 years.
Depending on how society changes. Good cannot be determined by society because society shifts so quickly. It has a fickle mind.
The biggest problem with the social consensus argument is how quickly it leads to the problem of authority. And the problem of what if you are in the minority that doesn't agree.
[21:29] it could be the wealthy, the government, the newspaper editors, the school bully, the social media influence, or just simply the one who shouts the loudest.

The person with power can impose their own set of morality on others even if there's no justification for that morality whatsoever. ever heard statements like religion should have no voice in today's modern secular society when discussing ethical issues?
That's an authority argument. The counter to this is that if I have a view on an ethical issue and you have a different view but I force you to have my view isn't that called oppression?
And all we've done in our society and I want to put my hand up and I'm going to say this a little bit later the church has done that in the past it's just now becoming a minority voice there's now a majority secular voice doing exactly the same thing.
We've just changed from one oppression to another oppression. former professor of law at Yale University Arthur Leff who was best known for a series of articles examining whether there is such a thing of morality at all once said all claims of moral obligation are authority claims.
[23:09] he concluded that in the absence of God there are but two options. The secular world has got two options.

You turn every individual person into a little God of themselves able to decide good and evil for themselves but then who evaluates between them when there's a clash between the little God claims.
Who does that? How do you decide? How do we do that in our modern day? One yells louder than the other. Alternatively he says you can turn the state into God and let it determine good and evil but then might power becomes right and you end up with sheer naked brutality.
He says if you go down that route morality becomes meaningless. If you go down the personal God route morality becomes impossible. What I would add is that if the former ultimately gives the former one of every individual being gods and making their own decisions gives rise to anarchy in society and then you need the latter to solve the anarchy.
secularism has a very significant problem between determining what is good and evil for society.
[24:53] It cannot produce moral obligation by itself and so in secular society all we do is yell at one another yell and yell and yell and so the rise of social media angst yelling about who's right and who's wrong.

It's interesting that left himself an agnostic and therefore didn't think it was possible to know whether God existed at all ends his essay by pointing out that there's only one solution one solution and that would be that goodness was something bigger than us.
This is an agnostic saying this something outside of this something outside of us only then could ethics morality and law work.

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perhaps this source of goodness could also help with the question of purpose give us a clue that we are not merely cosmic accidents churned up from the genetic cauldron of chaos but instead that we were made for something we were fashioned to be something of course this raises its own problem what are the implications for us if we fall short of the transcendent source of goodness what if we discover that we are not aligned to goodness what if we discover that we're actually not good as people if goodness is not controlled by me if it's not controlled by society it may turn out that this transcendent goodness says that I'm in fact messed up that this world's messed up everyone's messed up because the whole point of a moral standard is that we all would measure up and what if we don't this is what makes the issue of what
I'm talking about this morning the issue of morality reality not simply a philosophical discussion but a highly personal one so what if we were made for something what if we were fashioned to be something and even as Christianity declares intended to know someone that's the unique contribution of Christianity to this whole discussion or if you like the unique contribution of the goodness of Jesus Christ Christianity stands with all the other great religions in declaring that there are moral absolutes that are outside of us that are the basis of our moral feelings and our moral obligation they're the basis of moral feelings and moral obligation and also behind our moral motivation having said that what we see in our society right now in this country and many places in the western world is people shedding religion and particularly in the western world shedding [28:35] Christianity because they see a self-righteousness in that Christianity they see a legalism they see a cruelty they see a hypocrisy they see a history of oppression throughout history religion and the Christian church has in my view got blood on its hands for abuse of power on moral absolutes religious institutions have in the past when they had the power yelled the most many have abandoned that therefore abandoned the Christian faith and moved towards secularism as a reaction to what they've seen in the hypocrisy of the church in the past what I've tried to do this morning is show that if that has been your move that doesn't solve your problem secularism does not solve your problem so what is the solution hopefully you remember this a little while ago I talked about the

Greeks and they believed the logos was the cosmic order behind the universe and gave it its purpose if you're connected to the logos and lived by the logos then you would be living a wise and virtuous life that is in obedience in following the logos is the way of a virtuous and wise life in this world at the beginning of the bible passage that was read out to us by noeline john chapter one we read this in the beginning was the word and the word was with god and the word was god he was with god in the beginning and through him all things were made without him nothing was made that has been made in him that is the word was life and that life was the light of all of mankind and then down into verse 14 this word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us this word who was god came and lived amongst us and we have seen his glory the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth that word there is referring to as you go through john's gospel you realize in verse 17 it makes it very clear the word is jesus christ why is he calling him the word john's writing this to greeks why is he referring to jesus what a weird thing why call him the word because in the original language the word word is logos john in writing this is using a technical greek philosophical term to say that there are moral absolutes there is a purpose it's not an abstract set of standards but the logos of the world the purpose of the world the standard of the world is not a book it's not a set of laws it's a person jesus christ there is a rational design and order behind the universe it's not a code it's a person it's jesus christ i find it remarkable quite telling in fact that when a secular person is engaging with the christian faith they pick out obscure passages from the old testament and talk about the implausibility of those passages as if it's some sort of code to be obeyed and they don't look at the person of jesus christ and pull apart him they don't pull apart his character what we discover about the logos in john's gospel is that the deepest moral obligation of every human being the ought of every human being is to know him having been asked in john six what was it that god required of people jesus responds the work of god is this to believe in the one he has sent that's the deepest moral obligation of every human being to acknowledge the son jesus christ knowing him through knowing him through a personal love relation with him we come to the heart of the universe christians believe that we are not good or saved by living up to some abstract moral code moral standards we are saved by jesus christ the logos coming into
his creation to die on a cross for for us not living up to our deepest deepest moral obligation as people and that is knowing and loving and worshipping the creator god christian declares that god

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has set the perfect moral standard and jesus christ god himself has come into this world in order to achieve it for us he lived the perfect life for us and he died the perfect death for us a christian is someone who trusts in the goodness and the grace of jesus christ and so brothers and sisters if you're a christian here at the moment to the degree that you really really understand the very heart of the faith is that jesus christ is the logos who came into this world onto this earth he died for you to cover over all of your wrongdoing all of your moral failure so that you live by grace and love is to the degree that you as a christian will in fact live by grace and love in this world the goodness of jesus what it does more than anything else it does not turn you into an oppression we're going to see this a little bit later on in this series the goodness of jesus humbles you it does not say that you are good it says that he is good it humbles you in such a way that as you pursue the moral absolutes of this bible it turns you it doesn't turn you into some self-righteous legalist who waves their finger at the rest of the world it doesn't make you an oppressor of others as you embrace the goodness of jesus it turns you into a person of goodness that's the unique contribution of the christian faith in our society right now and we need it to listen so um well well well well

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