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Do Circumstances Make a Difference?

Directions: These eight situations are examples of a morally wrong action. For each action, try to add a sentence that makes the action "less wrong."

Be prepared to explain your response.

- 1.** You let two friends copy your answers on a test.

- 2.** Your parents ask you where you are going tonight and you lie—big-time.

- 3.** A person kidnaps a seven-year-old girl and then tortures and kills her.

- 4.** Someone sells drugs to a six-year-old, who becomes addicted.

- 5.** Several of your friends ridicule someone of a different race.

- 6.** Someone takes your sunglasses.

- 7.** A classmate deliberately spreads the false rumor that you and the person you are dating are having sex.

- 8.** Two seniors on your team get into a fight and break the trophy case in the school hallway. The coach suspends you and the rest of the seniors on the team until the two guilty seniors step forward, which they refuse to do.

YOUR WORD IS A LAMP TO MY FEET
AND A LIGHT TO MY PATH.
I HAVE SWORN AN OATH
AND CONFIRMED IT,
TO OBSERVE YOUR RIGHTEOUS
ORDINANCES.

PSALM 119:105-6

Human acts are either good or evil. The Catholic Church teaches that the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action or behavior depends on three things: the **act**, the **intention**, and the **circumstances**. You need to consider all three of these elements, with one element—the act—being more important than the other two.

Living a moral life involves the ability to tell when some human acts are wrong “no matter what.”

When we believe that some action of ours is wrong—no matter what, we are judging the wrongness of the act regardless of our personal intention or circumstances. This judgment is referred to as *objective* moral reasoning.

Living a moral life involves allowing ourselves to submit to a higher authority than ourselves, namely, God and God’s law. While we believe God to be understanding and compassionate, we also believe that God has revealed to us that some behaviors are objectively wrong—wrong no matter what.

The *intention* of the person committing the act is also related to the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong. Go back to the story “Our Daily Bread.” Everyone was performing a good act by serving others, yet one of the crew was serving with the intention of having it look good on college applications.

Remember? Not the same as the crew member who served with the intention of helping out. Good intentions can really help you tell right from wrong—but don’t be fooled by them. Some good intentions can’t justify an act that is objectively

wrong. Helping a friend is a good intention, but your intention—helping—can’t justify buying drugs for that person. (Remember who did that in “Our Daily Bread”?)

The same may be said about the *circumstances* that surround an act. Sometimes the circumstances can help you distinguish right from wrong—for example, taking something that belongs to someone else because you are being forced to. Yet circumstances can’t change the wrongful nature of some acts—for example, having sex with someone you aren’t married to, because the two of you “love” each other.

DISTINGUISHING RIGHT FROM WRONG

DISTINGUISHING RIGHT FROM WRONG

continued

When trying to tell the difference between right and wrong, practice examining all three elements—the **act**, the **intention**, and the **circumstances**. These three “sources” of morality will help you, but telling right from wrong is still a tough thing to do. Keep the virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, faith, hope, and charity in mind to guide you.

Learning how to tell whether an action is good or evil is at the heart of living a moral life and being a person of conscience.

We all must have a *moral code* that is shaped, in part, by the nonnegotiable teachings of Jesus and the Gospels. We must have a *moral code* that also acknowledges that forgiveness is available to each of us when we admit our morally wrong choices, confess our sins, and seek to reconcile ourselves with those we have wronged.

WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER
IS HONORABLE, WHATEVER IS
JUST, WHATEVER IS PURE,
WHATEVER IS PLEASING,
WHATEVER IS COMMENDABLE,
IF THERE IS ANY EXCELLENCE
AND IF THERE IS ANYTHING
WORTHY OF PRAISE, THINK
ABOUT THESE THINGS.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

Handle It

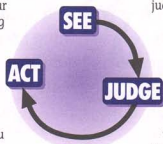
1. You are the last person to leave a party. As you rush to your car to be home before curfew, two classmates who have been drinking pull up. After hearing that the party is over, they stumble back into the car, about to drive away.
2. You and everyone else on the team are working hard during off-season practice, conditioning for next year's football season. Four teammates are bulking up with steroids. Two of them will be vying for the same position you've been trying to win for the last three years.
3. A person with a reputation for being sexually active wants to go out with you. You have met this person in class and you like this person as a friend.
4. None of your friends own a car, but you do. Your friends expect you to take them places; however, they never offer to pay for gas.
5. While waiting for class to begin, a classmate of yours describes some serious problems, begins to cry, and briefly mentions thoughts of "saying good-bye" to everyone.
6. A friend's mother has some personal problems and your friend keeps pressuring you for help. You don't want to alienate your friend, but you don't know what to do.
7. You've been helping a lady in your neighborhood pack because she is moving. She promised you five dollars an hour and you've worked ten hours. She pays you only thirty dollars.

PAYING ATTENTION

After watching the video segment on social issues, practice Analyzing Society's Values and Issues through the process of "paying attention." Then select a topic—such as capital punishment, illegal immigration, abortion, rating TV shows, teen curfew laws, handgun control—and practice applying the process of "paying attention" to the topic you selected.

The process of "paying attention," which helps us practice the skill of Analyzing Society's Values and Issues, involves three consecutive steps: See, Judge, Act.

SEE: In order to see all sides of a social issue, you must notice how people in your school or neighborhood are dealing with the issue. You must also stay current with national news related to the issue. You must be aware of the teachings of the Church and be able to see issues with eyes of faith, and relate them to the values taught by Jesus. If you limit your knowledge of an issue to only those things that directly affect you every day, you will not fully develop the skill of Analyzing Society's Values and Issues.



JUDGE: Don't judge an issue without knowing the *facts*! In order to get facts, you need to investigate—to ask questions of friends, family, teachers, and others, and to gather information about the people who are key participants in the situation or suffer from it. You need to reflect on such questions as, What do the Ten Commandments say? What does Scripture say? What does the Church teach about the issue?

Regarding capital punishment, the Church teaches:

Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfills the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people's safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behaviour and be rehabilitated. (Cf. *ibid.*)

Pope John Paul II,
The Gospel of Life,
March 25, 1995 (56)

You have to do your homework before you can judge an issue. If you don't, you'll be acting out of ignorance and look like a fool. And you'll treat others unfairly. But remember, *you have to make a judgment*. If you don't, you are copping out. Don't judge people. God expects you to judge the morality, the rightness or wrongness, of the situation or issue.

So the key is this: Make an *informed* judgment. Ask a question. Then ask another one. Get an answer. Then get another one—until you have the facts.

ACT: Do something—little thing, big thing, one-time thing, regular thing. But do something. Make a call. Write a letter. Apologize. Give a hug. Send flowers. Spend time with . . . Speak out against . . . Stand up for . . . Go out of your way to . . . After you see and judge, *do something*.



SEEing TV Shows

Directions: This exercise will help you critique society's values and issues by using the "see" step in the process of "paying attention." Watch a TV show and check the appropriate box next to each item on the checklist below. (Check N/A if an item was not portrayed at all on the show.)

Name of Program _____

Date _____

Network _____

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Does the program give a positive view of minority groups?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Is the program free of age stereotypes? For example, does it portray men and women only in traditional roles, young people as irresponsible, children as rebellious, or elderly people as forgetful?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Does the program separate fact from fantasy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does the program promote nonviolent conflict-resolution skills?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does the program reflect gospel values?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Are positive things given the same importance as negative or violent ones?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Are the attributes and qualities attributed to women limited to beauty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Are women shown at jobs other than those that merely support men?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Are fathers shown raising or spending time with children?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Do male and female characters respect each other?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Are virtues such as trustworthiness, honesty, respect, responsibility, and fairness treated as valuable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Is affection demonstrated appropriately?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The Bag Lady

by Jamie Beakes, 16

A pale, pale shaft of moonlight
filters through the dark,
hovering for a moment's time
beneath a freeway arc.

Huddled near a pillar,
by a quickly dwindling flame,
there lies an ancient woman
shiv'ring against the rain.

Her swarthy skin's like leather;
her silver hair is fine.
Her face, alert yet weary,
is spoilt by signs of time.

The broad hands, worn and
weathered,
clutch tight a massive sack,
which holds a life's possessions
to load upon her back.

This burden great and heavy
is not worldly, though, I fear.
It's oppression and sad memories
of days she held so dear.

Now days are full of sorrow
with love and care from no one.
Her only friends the pigeons,
for together they are shunned.

The worry and depression
shall surely build inside.
The begging and starvation
will surely smother pride.

Yet, still, each day she rises
with her load upon her back
to face the new day's waiting
gloom
and walk life's lonely track.

He Pleaded Insanity

by Barbara Hilton, 16

It causes him to laugh out loud
for no reason at all.
It gives him thoughts of torture,
too intense for others to imagine.
It causes him to be full of unprovoked rage,
enough to kill.

It makes him cautious of getting too close,
because the secret cannot be revealed.

Eyes covered with red veins,
like a confusing road map.
Hair coiled and out of place,
like broken springs of an ancient mattress.
An uneasy grin,
as if he is a tiger ready to pounce.

Always scheming and plotting,
for sure it is his destiny.
He has no options;
he has no peace.

Poet's Page

Roaming

by Mat Herron, 17

Here, now,
we hand ourselves
over to another day of
endless frustrations and
whatever is left of everything.
We give ourselves to the street.

My friend
you know I'm unfaithful in practice
a great judge of
everyone else's character...
except my own.

And each feeling that stumbles
across your heart,
is felt in mine as well.

In the numerous times that you have fought me
wrought me,
they give me
one more reassurance
that you don't mean the things you say.
We have this life
one road
the sun blow-torched on our faces
and time.
Can we call it forever?

The Morning After

by Melody Thurman, 17

The waves lapping upon
the shore—
The sunrise glistening over
each wave—
A terrible pain rips through
my head.
Oh, my brain, will it explode?
What happened last night?
Where was I now?

Think. Think. Think.
A party—
The blaring music—
Some drinks—
Those guys—
My head pounding—
Friends went off—
More drinks—
More guys—
It was wild.
It was fun at first,
But then,
NO!

The "walk" on the beach—
The violating—
The commands—
So rough—
So cruel—
Screams through my head—
I was all alone with these
animals.

Where were my friends?
Where had they gone?
Why had they left me?
Where was I now?
What had they done?

The questions—
The pain—
The fear—
I am all alone.

My mother—
My father—
I longed to go home—
Away from this beach—
Away from this pain.

They stole from me
What I can not get back.
Ripped from my heart
What was precious,
That I was withholding
For that someone I will love.

Stripped of my rights—
My dignity—
And my confidence.

I lie here on this deserted
beach.
Me,
My pain,
And the morning after.

Students are still writing racist comments in their yearbook quotes. There are still bus fights between black students and white students. Not only does racism still exist, but it's prevalent in the citizens of this country not even born when Martin Luther King, Jr. made his famous speech in Washington, D.C.

It's not a black thing. Not a white thing. Not a Hispanic thing, or a Chinese thing. It's a hate thing.

Racism isn't so much using derogatory terms or physically attacking someone because of the way he or she looks. It isn't the fear of another riot that keeps students awake at night and distracted in class. Any student can tell you it doesn't take that much.

"People say racist things like, 'All you black people do this,'" says Vic Bryant, an African American and a junior. "Black people do it, too. They might say, 'White people aren't as good at sports as blacks.'"

Jamie Melendez will assure you that it isn't just a black/white issue anymore. An immigrant from El Salvador, she came to the U.S. knowing very little English, which hindered her abilities to stand up for herself. Jamie now speaks more fluent English than a good number of natives. This, coupled with a few years for her peers to grow up and a change to the Catholic school system, has made racism more of a memory from her youth than a current reality. She can recall kids talking about "All you Hispanics . . ." and sometimes it was just me, or not me at all," Jamie says.

Aaron Wallace, a Caucasian senior, sees racism all over his school. "I see all kinds of racism. I see a white kid talk bad about a black kid. A black kid talks bad about a white kid. Even black kids talk bad about another black kid, or white kids talk about white kids. Most everybody, in one way or another, is racist. It's endless," he says.

So it is comments that bother students the most, but it isn't comments that appear on the

cover of the newspaper and on the six o'clock newscast. It's the events, the fights. It can give students a bad reputation, but as Vic says, "There are certain people who try to get everyone riled up." Vic can tell that these people are usually pinned with a reputation among students.

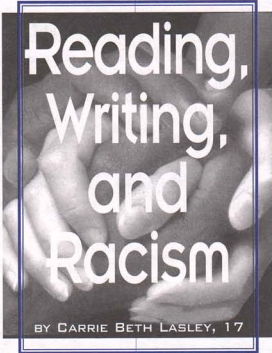
Racism affects students' performances.

Comments take their toll on students, including Aaron, who simplified the problem: "If you can't concentrate 100 percent on what

you're studying, you'll have trouble learning."

Racism is a problem. No amendment to the Constitution can make it disappear, and it seems that thirty years of equality may have only amounted to equal racism. Racism isn't going to go away because of someone's speech, and probably not because of one article, either. What miracle could make it disappear?

"All the students need to open their minds," Aaron says. "If you're closed-minded under any circumstances, you're going to be hateful. That's what racism is."



Reading, Writing, and Racism

BY CARRIE BETH LASLEY, 17