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# Distinguishing between Right and Wrong

## Background

### Goals

Students will

- build on their ability to recognize virtues and
- practice the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong.

### Materials Needed

- *How to Live a Moral Life* workbooks
- Chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and markers
- Bible
- Poster board (optional)

### Teaching Notes

This session of the *Catholic & Capable* program seeks to introduce youth to the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong. In this session you will build on the students' ability to recognize virtues. You will introduce the concept of *VICES* and have the students practice the skills related to

distinguishing between morally objective wrongs and subjective elements such as intention and circumstances. Pay particular attention to the question in section B2 of this session: Based on the way you judged right from wrong in this activity, what virtues do you recognize as *most important to you in distinguishing right from wrong*?

You will help the students learn that human acts can be morally evaluated. You will help them see that some behaviors are morally wrong, no matter what. There are no reasons or extenuating circumstances that can justify certain actions. However, the wrongfulness of some behaviors occasionally can depend on extenuating circumstances surrounding the behavior. Your task in this session is to help the young people distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* morality. You will help them learn to recognize concrete examples of behaviors that are morally wrong regardless of personal views or extenuating circumstances. It is erroneous to consider only the intention and the circumstance when judging the morality of an act.

In this session you will also encourage the students to try to articulate a set of criteria that helps them identify those behaviors that are morally wrong—no matter what. They will learn to evaluate the goodness or wrongfulness of a human act by looking at (1) the object chosen (we will refer to this as the “act” in our presentation), (2) the intention of the person choosing the action, and (3) the circumstances of the action. This skill will help them deal with the complexities of the moral life in today’s society. It will also help them understand the errors of situational ethics and make moral decisions based on a well-informed conscience.

## Catechism Reference

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides clarity and confidence regarding the Church’s teachings. For this session, consult Part Three, “Life in Christ,” paragraph numbers 1730–1802.

# Procedure

## A. Review and Introduction (5 minutes)

1. Ask the students to
  - name the four cardinal, or moral, virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) and to explain why we as Catholics call them “cardinal.” (because all other human virtues relate to, or are connected with, these four)
  - name the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity, or love) and explain why they are called “theological.” (because they describe basic traits of our relationship to God)
  - read over privately their personal responses to questions 4 and 5 on the workbook page entitled “My Moral Life” and keep those virtues in mind as they proceed in this session.
2. Remind everyone that the moral life involves **conscience**, **character**, and **contribution**. Then emphasize that this session will focus on conscience. Point out to your students that during this session they will build on their ability to recognize virtues as they develop the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong.

## B. Virtues and Vices (10 minutes)

1. Draw a continuum on the chalkboard or newsprint. Write in large letters “Absolutely Wrong” on the left end of the continuum with the number  $-5$  below it and “Okay” on the right end with the number  $+5$  below it. In the middle of the continuum write “Neutral” with the number  $0$  below it. Your continuum should look like this:

Absolutely			
Wrong	Neutral	Okay	
$-5$	$0$	$+5$	

Explain that you are going to describe several actions and that everyone will be asked to decide where on the continuum they would place each

action. Then you will invite volunteers to briefly explain the reasoning behind their opinions about each of these actions. Simply have everyone call out their number or raise their hand when you call out the number that represents their opinion. Expect some debate and disagreements, and remind everyone of the four ground rules for discussion:

- Say anything (appropriately).
- One person speaks at a time.
- No put-downs are allowed.
- Participate, participate, participate!

Proceed with the activity by offering these actions or behaviors (or create situations of your own making) for the group's consideration:

- Your little brother or sister steals a CD from a store.
- A married celebrity has an affair.
- Your best friend makes excuses to you about not wanting to go out this Friday night because your friend doesn't want to tell you the truth: Your friend does not want to go out with you.
- Terrorists blow up a building, killing twenty-three people and injuring fifty-two.
- A tearful friend feels unfairly treated by a coach, but you don't agree with your friend. Your friend asks for your opinion and you tell the truth.
- You tell a teacher that you left your assignment at home when you really never did it.
- One student punches another in the face during an argument.
- Your date tells other classmates an "exaggerated" story of what you two did romantically last Friday night.
- Someone uses people all the time.
- You report the three students who spray-painted the cafeteria walls.

OPTIONAL: You might add some physical activity to this session by calling for a few volunteers to come forward and stand at the point along the continuum that expresses their opinion (change the group of volunteers after two or three situations). Or you can count from -5 to +5 and have everyone stand up when you call the number that reflects their opinion.

2. Continue this discussion by asking the group:

Based on the way you judged right from wrong in this activity, what virtues do you recognize as *most important to you in distinguishing right from wrong?*

Encourage the respondents to briefly explain their responses. If the young people have difficulty beginning the discussion, offer an example of a virtue and the reason for your choice.

3. This activity will reinforce recognizing virtues as a skill learned in the previous session, and it will set up one of the criteria for the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong, which will be presented later in this session.

Point out that the practice of each virtue has an opposite practice—*a vice*. Ask the group:

- What are some of the vices that are opposite to the cardinal virtue of prudence? (foolishness, impulsiveness) Of justice? (unfairness, selfishness, lawlessness) Of fortitude? (fear, cowardice) Of temperance? (obsessiveness, addiction, compulsiveness)
- What are some of the vices opposed to the theological virtue of faith? (suspiciousness, cynicism) Of hope? (depression, fear) Of charity? (greed, possessiveness)

### C. *The Effects of Circumstances* (30 minutes)

1. Divide the students into several small groups. Have everyone open their workbook to the “Do Circumstances Make a Difference?” page (page 8). Assign each small group two or three of the situations described on that page. Make sure everyone is clear about the directions: For each situation the groups are to add a detail that may change the degree to which that situation is wrong. (However, they cannot include “by reason of insanity.”) For example:

One of the situations is "Someone takes your sunglasses." One group may add, "The person who took your sunglasses wanted to give them to a friend who is suffering from an eye problem that is aggravated by sunlight. You were not around to ask if he or she could borrow them, but the person had the intention of telling you why he or she took the glasses."

Give the groups five to seven minutes to complete this activity and then have the small groups report on their work to the large group. After each small group explains how it has enhanced a particular situation, invite the large group to discuss whether that situation is now "less wrong" or even not morally wrong because of the added details. Ask such questions as, Do the added details really change whether the action is morally good or morally evil? Do not be surprised if some students express the opinion that the situation is still morally evil, regardless of the details that have been added. Continue this sort of discussion with each situation.

NOTE: While small group work provides a more intense and active learning experience for students, it can be difficult in some environments. Feel free to conduct this portion of the session in the large group if the environment is not conducive to small group work.

2. Ask the group: How can you tell if some behavior is truly morally wrong? Invite volunteers to share their responses. Write their responses on newsprint or the chalkboard.

After everyone has had the opportunity to respond to the question, invite your students to turn to the workbook pages entitled "Distinguishing Right from Wrong" (pages 9–10). Guide the students through the material, answering any questions they may have. Take your time with the important concepts behind the three "sources" of human morality: the act, the intention, the circumstances of the action.

Feel free to expand on (a) the difference between subjective and objective morality, (b) the helpfulness of keeping virtues in mind, and (c) the sincerely tough task of distinguishing between right and wrong.

The twofold goal is (a) to provide your students with specific tools, or sources, that will help them develop the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong—between actions that are morally good or morally evil—within the context of their daily lives and then (b) to have them practice using this skill.

3. Give the students an opportunity to practice applying the three sources related to the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong by returning to the situations described on the "Do Circumstances Make a Difference?" page in the workbook. Have the small groups return to the situations they were assigned earlier in the session and analyze the sentences they wrote. Then invite the groups to identify (a) whether they had added an intention or a circumstance or both an intention and a circumstance and (b) the degree to which they think the intention or the circumstance changed the nature of the action.

OPTIONAL: If time permits, give each small group a sheet of newsprint or poster board and a marker and have each group list ways to tell whether an action is right or wrong—morally good or morally evil. This activity will provide an opportunity for the students to synthesize what they have learned in this session. Give everyone about five to seven minutes to do this activity and then tape the lists around the walls of the room for everyone to review. Some teachers have kept these sheets on the walls throughout the remaining sessions of this program as a visual reminder to the students and as reference points to return to from time to time in future discussions.

#### D. Closing (5 minutes)

1. Begin by reminding everyone that while we are called to live the moral life as a person of conscience, we are *not* invited to sit in judgment of others. This topic often comes up when practicing the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong. Point out that the distinction you are making can be found in the gospel story about the woman caught in adultery.

Open your Bible to John 8 and share the story with the group:

*Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down*



and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." JOHN 8:2-11

2. Pause after the reading and then gently remind everyone that this story shows us there is such a thing as sin and there is such a thing as forgiveness. This is evident in Jesus' closing words to the woman: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

## Additional Activities

1. See how the students would handle one of the situations described on the "Handle It" page in their workbook (page 11). Ask them to name the virtue or vice related to the situation and their handling of it. You can then have the students practice recognizing the degree to which the act, intention, or circumstance affected the morality of the situation they discussed.
2. This session can easily lead to another session or discussion on sin and evil. If you decide to cover these topics, begin by having the group come up with a definition of sin and a working understanding of evil. Ask such questions as:
  - When is an act sinful? (Act must be morally evil; the person must act with knowledge and consent.)
  - When is an act evil? (Act is evil or morally wrong; intention and/or circumstances of the action are morally wrong.)

Review the connection between virtues and vices if the group needs assistance. You would find it helpful to review the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph numbers 1846–1876.

# Analyzing Society's Values and Issues

## Background

### Goal

Students will practice the skill of analyzing society's values and issues.

### Materials Needed

- *How to Live a Moral Life* workbooks
- Chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and markers
- The "Social Issues" segment of the Catholic & Capable *How to Live a Moral Life* video
- VCR and TV

### Teaching Notes

This session addresses the skill of analyzing society's values and issues within the context of religious faith. It does this by building on the students' skills of recognizing virtues and of distinguishing between right and wrong. Therefore, this session actually connects the dimension of religious faith with moral living, a point you will want to stress to your students.

The **Catholic & Capable** program invites young people to consider moral living as comprised of three components: conscience, character, and contribution. The skill of analyzing society's values and issues, which is referred to as "paying attention" in this session, pertains to developing a Catholic Christian conscience.

The young people will be watching a ten-minute video on social issues, which they will use to practice the three-step process of "paying attention" (see/judge/act). The video will elicit quite a debate among the group.

Since providing opportunities to practice a skill is the most effective way to help students develop that skill, be sure that you do not go on to the next session until the students have had adequate time to practice the three-step process of "paying attention."

OPTIONAL: You may wish to add a session after the students have viewed the video segment on social issues to give them time to practice "paying attention" to other contemporary issues of your choice. Some issues are listed at the top of the "Paying Attention" page in the student workbook.

The "SEEing TV Shows" page in the student workbook provides an additional exercise in practicing the "see" step in the process of "paying attention" when analyzing values presented in the media. In a school setting, you can assign this page as homework (and count it toward the students' academic grade).

## Catechism Reference

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides clarity and confidence regarding the Church's teachings. Of particular relevance for this session is Part Three, "Life in Christ," paragraph numbers 1878–1948, 2258–2330, and especially 2266–2267.

# Procedure

## A. Review and Introduction (5 minutes)

1. Review the skill of distinguishing between right and wrong by asking two questions:
  - a. What are the three factors involved in the morality of a situation? (act, intention, and circumstance)
  - b. What is the difference between objective and subjective morality?

Feel free at any time to reinforce skills taught in previous sessions by occasionally having the students apply a skill to one or two of the "Handle It" situations in their workbook (page 11). If you have not already done so, you can review the skills from the first two sessions by focusing on one or two "Handle It" situations at this time. Ask the group to practice recognizing the virtue needed while identifying the key act, intention, and circumstance of the "Handle It" situation.

2. Point out that the focus of this session is on developing a concrete method or process that we can use to analyze contemporary issues such as abortion, unemployment, capital punishment, immigration laws, gun control, and smoking laws. This skill of analyzing society's values and issues *applies directly to the conscience components of How to Live a Moral Life.*

Write PAYING ATTENTION in large letters across the chalkboard or newsprint and ask:

What does "paying attention" mean?

After several responses, follow up with this question:

Why do we say "paying"?

(because it means we have to "donate," "invest," or "give" some of our time and effort to a particular situation or subject)

Remind everyone that moral living involves being a person of conscience, character, and contribution. Then emphasize that "paying

attention" is *an important component* of being a person of conscience and requires that we indeed "pay," "invest," "give," or "donate" real effort.

Emphasize that by the end of this session the students will learn how to analyze society's values and issues. This skill of "paying attention," as we call it, is a skill that they can use throughout their lives to examine and analyze critical and controversial social issues in relationship to the teachings of the Church.

### *B. Video Viewing: Paying Attention (20 minutes)*

Watch the segment on social issues with the students, and remind them of the different issues that call us to practice the skill of analyzing society's values and issues in developing a Catholic Christian conscience.

Have the students discuss why we need to practice the skill of analyzing society's values and issues when evaluating such social issues as capital punishment. Facilitate the discussion by reminding everyone of the four basic ground rules for discussion that are part of the **Catholic & Capable** program:

- Say anything (appropriately).
- One person speaks at a time.
- No put-downs are allowed.
- Participate, participate, participate!

You may want to display these ground rules on a wall so that you can easily refer to them throughout the program.

### *C. Practice (20 minutes)*

1. Have everyone turn to the "Paying Attention" page in their workbook (page 12).

Explain that "paying attention" is a simple way to describe the skill of analyzing society's values and issues. Lead the students through the see/judge/act process of "paying attention." Then have the students

describe how they would use this process to help them analyze capital punishment or any other issue.

2. Several additional topics are suggested at the top of the "Paying Attention" page in the student workbook. If time allows, choose a topic and discuss how to apply the three-step process to that topic.
3. If you are in a school setting, assign the "SEEing TV Shows" page as homework (page 13). This allows the students to practice the "see" step in the process of "paying attention." Be sure to allow two or three week-nights as well as the weekend for the students to complete this assignment. This will ensure a variety in the TV shows selected. Have everyone use this worksheet to evaluate the messages and values portrayed in the shows they viewed.

#### *D. Closing Prayer (5 minutes)*

Remind everyone that using the process of paying attention to analyze society's values enables us to develop a Catholic Christian conscience.

Join with your students and pray for God's help as you and your students continue to develop a strong conscience.

### **Additional Activities**

1. Read some of the poems on the "Poet's Page" in the student workbook (page 14), and have the students identify the aspects of moral living contained in each poem: virtues, vices, sources of morality (act, intention, circumstances), paying attention, and so on. This can serve as a practice and review of the materials covered so far in this program.
2. Have the students read the essay entitled "Reading, Writing, and Racism" in their workbook (page 15) and discuss how well the author applies the three-step process of "paying attention." You can also use this essay as a springboard to discuss your students' experience of racism.