



What Were Once Vices are Now Habits

The Bible's Answer to Cultural Decline

by Tim Kelley

In the early 1970's, an American rock band named the Doobie Brothers came out with an album entitled "What were Once Vices, are Now Habits". The album produced only one real hit ("Black Water"), but its title was intriguing and was probably inspired by what was quickly becoming a widespread "vice" of that day – the smoking of "doobies" or what's better known as marijuana cigarettes. And in fact, marijuana use has increased almost every decade since then. In a report by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, they show that after a short term decline in the late 1990's and early 2000's, marijuana use in America is again increasing to where 32% of high school seniors in America have used marijuana once in the past year, and 20.6% of seniors use it regularly¹.

This "vice" is now becoming a habit among the teenage population, and why not – two of the last three U.S. Presidents have openly admitted to using marijuana themselves.

In many cases, vices such as cigarette use, gambling, pornography, and of course - drug use, have become habits as well as part of the mainstream culture of the day. Many activities that we may have once considered outrageous, disrespectful, or obscene, are now considered the norm, and if a person were to speak out against them, he or she would – in many circles – be considered "outrageous" or "extreme" himself.

Simply because something is now considered "the norm", does that make it right? Obviously not! How many times have we heard our Mom say "If all your friends go jump off a cliff, does that mean you should do it too"? What about believers? Is it OK for a person who professes to be a child of God to go along with the norm simply because it is the norm? What if we can't find a "thou shalt not" in the Bible prohibiting a certain activity. Does that mean it is OK for the Bible believer to do?

In this two – part study I want to talk about the "cultural norm" – how we got to where we are, and what we should do about it. In Part 1, I'll discuss a number of examples of America's "cultural decay" and then ask if being a part of that culture is glorifying the God of Israel. In the next part, we'll look to see if activities that are "culturally" acceptable are also "Biblically" acceptable . . . and vice-versa.

Here's our plan for part 1. First, we will look at examples of Cultural Decay. We'll then look into the Bible for direction into determining what the Cultural Norm should be. Finally, we'll see each of us individually can begin to turn it around.

Though there are many examples of Cultural Decay in our society, I believe they can all pretty much be summed up into three categories:

1. Disrespect
2. Immorality
3. Lack of Personal Responsibility

Within each of these broad categories, there are numerous sub-categories of which we could spend hours discussing and still only scratch the surface. So for this message, we'll focus on just one category - lack of respect. Lack of respect has permeated so many areas of our society. Many of America's social ills are rooted in lack of respect, including both *Immorality* and *Lack of Personal*

¹ <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/marijuana-abuse/what-scope-marijuana-use-in-united-states>

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Responsibility. As we discuss disrespect we'll touch on those other two categories as well. Some of the examples I'll be giving will not be clearly understandable if you are no part of the "baby-boom" generation, so you may have to ask your parents and grandparents to see if they remember how it used to be to truly grasp what I'm talking about.

When a person is accused of being "disrespectful" it's often because he was disrespectful to 1) elders, 2) authority, or 3) each other. In each of these categories, it's possible to show disrespect by what we say, what we do, and how we dress.

Take, for instance, disrespect of elders, not necessarily just the elderly. Children and young people disrespect elders in a number of ways – cutting past them while going through a door, not surrendering your chair to them, etc., but the most common way to show disrespect to elders is to call them by their first name. When I was a kid every adult was either Dad or Mom, Grandma or Granddad, Aunt or Uncle, or Mister or Misses. I don't ever remember calling any adult by his or her first name. This was something that was ingrained into me by my father.

The first time I remember being referred to as Mr. Kelley was at our wedding, when after the ceremony, Angie and I were introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Kelley. As time went on my employees would address me as Mr. Kelley. Because most of my employees were roughly my age, I would (on an individual basis) ask them to address me by my first name. But that was 30 years ago. Today, only the older employees extend that honor. For the most part, the younger ones – even though they only know me as the owner of the company - call me by my first name.

If I were to ask the other adults in this room if they consider it disrespectful for a child or teenager to call them by their first name, most would probably say "no", while at the same time thinking "but it would be nice if they did" – not that we older folks looking for honor, but more so because we appreciate children who are respectful. Like it or not, most adults still consider it a sign of respect when children call them Mister or Misses.

Unfortunately, our culture no longer deems this necessary, especially on the east and "left" coasts. We're in an age where "self-esteem" is the buzzword. We're concerned that children may feel that they are of less value than an adult if they are required to use a title before the adult's name. To avoid this perception, adults and the elderly are continually made to look helpless and inept, thus lowering them to the level of the children – sort of a "mixing" of the generations. The media, of course, is a prime culprit in this attempt to make everyone look the same.

This ties in with another form of disrespect – disrespect of authority. This could be anyone in a position of authority, be it parents, teachers, policemen, or even the president of the United States. How we respect authority figures is often based on how we were taught at home, and in this case, a parent's example is the best teacher.

I remember when President Kennedy was killed. My father did not like the Kennedys even though at that time my father considered himself a democrat. Of course, the three TV networks were totally consumed in covering the assassination, and that frustrated my father who thought there were other things to report about as well. He would often come downstairs to the "den" in our small home and watch some of the reports, making occasional comments about the shortcomings of the former president (as if an 8 year old understood these things). Yet, in spite of his dislike for the former president, I don't remember my father ever calling him anything other than President Kennedy.

My father always addressed those in authority with the utmost respect, but on the other hand, he showed his disdain for those same people in other ways. As I child, I learned to do both as well. Though I was taught to never refer to a policeman as a "cop", I came to believe that many who got

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into law enforcement were power hungry, incompetent, and just wanted the opportunity to throw their weight around.

The decline of respect for authority figures has recently been accelerated by those who are actually in a position of authority. Many schools and teachers have begun promoting a more casual environment – allowing the students to call teachers by their first name. It's supposed to "take the edge off" communication between teachers and students by putting students and teachers on the same level. Could this be a reason why overall test scores continue to decline in America and why more and more teachers have been caught having intimate relationships with their students. Besides the self-induced lack of respect for teachers in public and even some private schools, a number of notable evangelists and clergymen have contributed to the cultural decline after being exposed for committing adultery or participating in pedophilia with parishioners. Even U.S. Presidents have dishonored their office through lies and indecent acts. No longer is the White House held in high esteem as it was just 50 years ago.

This lack of respect is illustrated by the commotion that was caused in 2005 when the Northwestern University's women's lacrosse team was invited to the White House after winning the National Championship. While there, they met with President Bush and had a group picture taken. In the picture, it was noted that all the women were nicely dressed, but some of them wore flip-flops instead of shoes. At that time, flip-flops were not considered "shoes", and the media quickly picked up on this and had a hey-day, pointing out the women's disrespect for the office of the President.



Then there's the area of disrespect for each other. Though there are numerous areas where we disrespect our mates and our friends, I want to focus in on an area that's seen a noticeable decline in regards to respect – and that has to do with dress.

As I mentioned just a moment ago, just 7 years ago, the media (not necessarily known for being on the cutting edge of courtesy and respect) thought it was improper for women to wear flip-flops to the White House. Just think of what would have happened if they had worn shorts or halter-tops. Today, it's quite common to dress as you please at just about any event – regardless of the sanctity of the event.

Take for instance graduations or recitals. Years ago, you would always dress nicely (usually a suit for men and a skirt or dress for women) when attending a person's graduation, his wedding, or his funeral. We would do the same even for a person's piano recital. These were considered "formal occasions" thus you dressed out of respect. But not today. Today, jeans are the norm. Granted, some guys wear jeans with a sport jacket, but in many cases, there seems to be no desire to respect those you came to honor by "dressing up". This could simply be a result of our culture changing to where we no longer feel the need to honor achievers (like accomplished pianists), nor those who have just lost a loved one, but more than likely it's just a statement that "I'll wear what I want to wear".

In recent years I've attended weddings where some of the men appear to have just gotten off their construction job, and the women look as if they're competing for the eyes of the groom. Sloppy jeans and shirt tails hanging out are not uncommon anymore. Then there's the memorial service I recently attended for an elderly woman – a "matriarch" - as some called her. I was appalled by the way some of the people

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dressed. Instead of it being an opportunity to pay their respects to the family of the deceased, it looked as if some of the people just dropped in on the way to the nightclub.

As a nation, we're not "progressing", but instead we're going backwards in regards to how we show honor and respect for others. What years ago would have gotten us sent home from school, or turned down at a job interview, is now considered the norm. Our society is drifting away from what's good and decent. What were once vices are now habits.

If the current societal drift is decaying our culture, what then should the cultural norm look like? Many of us were born after the culture in America began to change. Because we did not witness what came before, we believe that what we have today is the norm. Unless we talk with our parents or grandparents about the days of old, or read the history of what early America was like, we simply won't be able to truly comprehend how far we've veered from the paths on which our nation was founded; we won't have a good grasp on what the cultural norm should be.

Throughout the ages, the culture of most nations and societies has been driven by the leaders – oftentimes the king. As the king went, the nation went. If a nation had a moral and benevolent king, the people as a whole would prosper. On the other hand, if he was a dictator without regard to right or wrong, the people suffered. But our early American culture was different.

Our founding fathers – Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams – were historians as well as visionaries. They envisioned living in a country that was based on something more stable than a ruling family or a heartless dictator. They were aware of the fact that countries, people and cultures must be grounded in something solid and immovable. Thus they patterned our nation after ancient Israel, a nation that was based on the rule of law. They wrote a constitution that was based on God's law and their understanding of Judeo-Christian values and morality. They expected future generations to do the same, interpreting the Constitution within the framework of those same values. This is illustrated by a letter written by President John Adams to the officers of the Militia of Massachusetts. In it he wrote -

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Ancient Israel was given a law that was based on the fact that Her god was one who actually revealed Himself to His people. They actually saw Him in action – providing for them, delivering them from their enemies, bringing them peace and rest. His law was based on two foundational principles – you should love and respect your god, and should love and respect each other.

The generation that came out of Egypt obeyed these principles – for about 14 months – then they turned their backs on God. Within 40 years they were almost all dead.

For the first 180 or so years of our nation, the Bible was used as the basis for determining how our culture should look. Love and respect for God as well as for our fellow man was what bound us together as a people. Then in the 1960's our country, like ancient Israel, began to turn its back on God, and has subsequently barred Him from being a part of our society. At the same time we began to promote the notion that people have certain "inherent human rights" instead of acknowledging that all rights come from God. These perceived "human rights" have been elevated to the point that they eclipse God's law of love and respect for Him and our fellow man. Thus we've experienced a massive cultural decline. Because we have no clear basis, no common denominator from where we gain our values, we are all over the place in regards to morality, modesty, and respect. What was once considered to be bad is now good, and what was good is now bad.

Our culture needs to return to being based on God's law. We should reject the notion that people have the "right" to do as they please, to put their personal lusts and desires above the love and respect for their

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fellow man. God's word, the Bible, must be the basis from which we decide what's respectful, decent, and moral.

So what should we do? How can we get off the slippery slope of cultural decline that will eventually lead our nation to destruction? Here are three ways:

We can start by honoring our parents. A number of years ago I heard a man say something to the effect that his son had always done what his parents had told him to do, and thus God should remove the trial his son was then experiencing so he could have a long life. He quoted this verse –

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 5:16** "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

I've often meditated on this verse, wondering if that man really understood the meaning of what God was saying. Was He really saying that if we obey our parents, don't backtalk them, and simply be a good son or daughter, God would see that things go well with us? I think that might possibly be the case. But consider this as well . . .

When Moses made that statement, the people were getting ready to enter into the land of the Canaanites – cultures that YHVH had instructed them to destroy and warned them what would happen if they adopted any of the Canaanite culture. He told them that if they as a people hoped to live long in that land, they would have to "honor" their parents. The Hebrew word for "honor" is "kavad" (כָּבַד – Strong's 3513) which is a verb, thereby implying action. "Kavad" is often translated "glorify" as in –

^{NKJ} **Psalms 22:23** You who fear the LORD, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, And fear Him, all you offspring of Israel!

"Kavad" is also the root of the Hebrew noun "kavowd" (כְּבוֹד – Strong's 3519) which is often translated "glory" as in -

^{NKJ} **1 Chronicles 16:29** Give to the LORD the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!

^{NKJ} **Psalms 4:2** How long, O you sons of men, *Will you turn my glory to shame? How long will you love worthlessness And seek falsehood?*

The Septuagint (LXX) translates "kavode" with the word "doxazo" (Strong's 1392). Peter uses this word in his letter to the exiles who were returning to the Hebrew walk. He said –

^{ESV} **1 Peter 2:11-12** ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Here Peter instructs the exiles to keep their conduct "honorable", or in the Greek - "kalos" (Strong's 2570) while they are among the Gentiles. That word "kalos" means "excellent", "choice", "surpassing", "magnificent", "praiseworthy". In other words, their manner of life should not be to simply to blend in with the crowd, instead they were to rise above the crowd in what they do, what they say, and maybe even in how they dress. And by doing so, they glorify God.

Getting back to honoring father and mother, could it then be that God is telling the children that when they come into the land - a land filled with the Canaanite culture - they should conduct your lives in such a way as to bring honor and glory to their parents? And how would they do that? By not bringing shame

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upon them by adopting various parts of the Canaanite culture, things like shaving shapes in their hair, marrying the Canaanite women², or giving their children Canaanite names.

If indeed that is what God was telling the Israelites, how would we apply it today? Just think about it . . . what kind of things do teenagers and young adults do that bring shame of their parents and family? How does a daughter bring shame to her family when she goes to college? How do boys bring shame by their actions? I'm sure we could name quite a few . . . and some of them might be considered "acceptable" by our current culture. On the other hand, what makes parents the most proud of their children?

I submit that we can bring honor and glory to our parents by avoiding the current culture; by returning to the walk that our parents³ considered respectful in their day, and by avoiding the ways they consider "disrespectful".

The second thing we can do is to take to heart King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon gave this prayer while Israel was at the pinnacle of greatness. He praised God for bestowing great riches on himself and Israel as a people, but he understood that eventually Israel would turn against God and be taken captive by her enemies. In his prayer he spoke of the remnant, those who were willing to reject what had become the status quo. He said . . .

^{ESV} **1 Kings 8:47-50** . . . yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,'⁴⁸ if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name,⁴⁹ then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause⁵⁰ and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them

Solomon prophesied of a time when Israel would reject God's ways and adopt the ways of the nations, and just 300 years later, it happened – the northern tribes of Israel were taken captive. We today are the descendants of those captives. Solomon is talking about us. Are we willing to turn our hearts from the corrupt ways of the nation in which we are captives, and seek YHVH's way with all our heart? Note that Solomon is NOT saying that we are to reject those we are among. Rather, we are to pray that we can find compassion while among them.

Thirdly – we can seek the old ways. The prophet Jeremiah wrote at a time when Judah was headed down the path to destruction and captivity. They had begun to worship the god's of the nations, and observe many of their customs and traditions. They had traded their Hebrew culture for that of the pagan nations around them. In prophesying about their imminent doom he admonished them to -

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 6:16** . . . "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls . . ."

As the remnant, we should flee from the culture that we see enveloping us. We should seek the old ways, the old paths, the honorable and glorifying ways of those who gave their lives to create a culture based on the Law of God. By doing so, we can be a light to the nations, and a glory to God.

How do we define the correct culture? Does the Bible show us what's right or wrong in regards to culture? In the second part of this message, we will begin to answer these questions and more.

Shalom Alecheim

² Gen. 26:34-35; 27:46; 28:8-9

³ Obviously within the parameters of the intent of God's law.