

# teens and morality

BEING REAL

Teen Life and Christ  
Teens and Spirituality  
Teens and Relationships  
Teens and Morality  
Teens and Society  
Teens and the Future

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JERRY SHEPHERD

BEING REAL

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# CONTENTS

Preface 7

Why Be Good? 11

    Goodness 13

Laws and Legalisms 16

    The Extremes of the Law 16

    Legalism 17

    Anarchy 18

    Christ and the Law 19

    The Natural Law 21

    The Ten Commandments 23

Moral Actor, Moral Acts 28

    Thinking Life Through 29

    Going to Sunday Mass 33

    Free Will and Responsibility 35

    Christ and Freedom 39

    Freedom's Purpose: Serving God and Others 41

    Passions 45

    In Summary . . . 48

Paths of Glory: Virtues 51

    To Be Like Christ 51

    Improving Our Selves 53

    Good Judgment 56

    Against Prudence 59

    Fortitude 61

    Justice 63

Christian Obedience	65
Temperance: Unreal Restraints?	68
Sexual Realism	73
Living Temperance	80
Scaling the Depths	82
Rejoice Always!	85
Helping Others	87

**Moral Heroes** 89

**Acknowledgments** 92

## PREFACE

This book is one in a series of six books about teenagers for teenagers by a non-teenager, so most teenagers will be immediately suspicious of it. After all, many adults talk to teenagers as though they were a foreign species, far beneath the adult's normal sphere of experience. And no one of any age enjoys being talked down to. You can handle a lot of that patronizing when you're a little kid, but the adult pose wears thin as you get older and realize that adults do some pretty stupid and childish things themselves. In fact, the adults who do the dumbest things are often the ones who enjoy lecturing you the most.

I do hope that I'll avoid such talking down in these pages. The fact is, having worked as an educator among teenagers for many years and still having some very clear, often painful memories of my own teen years many eons ago, I really don't feel that superior. I want to talk with you person to person, as an equal, as a friend, as one who has known, respected, and learned from many young people.

But, the teen radar counters, what are you selling? Adults are always trying to get teens to fulfill adult expectations, to conform to what adults propose, to be nice little boys and girls who don't ruffle any feathers. Adults seem to want teens to stay under their thumbs and dependent for as long as possible.

True as this motivation may be in some cases, I hope it's not true for me. Obviously, I have a vision of life that I'm anxious to share with you. My credentials are simply that I have experienced more than most teenagers have just by living longer and that I have had the good fortune to know many teenagers rather well over the years. Such experience doesn't necessarily make me any wiser, but I hope it has given me some perspective on life. It is simply this perspective I want to share with you in these pages. My aim is that you become more

independent and free-spirited. You can buy some or none of what follows. I certainly can't force you. Even if I could, I wouldn't, because then the vision would be of no value to you. You have to decide yourself whether to buy into it.

This book is also suspect because it is about religion and the teenager, and, for many teenagers, it is simply not cool to show interest in organized religion. Though many teens are interested in spiritual matters, they often believe that religion is something that's not quite real. At least, it's not as real as everyday experiences like family, friends, foes, school, parties, love, hate, anger, desire, and frustration. But I have called the series *Being Real* because the main perspective I hope to persuade you to accept is that Catholicism provides the most real understanding and evaluation of our daily experience as teenagers or at any age.

To appreciate this claim, we need the willingness to take a longer view of things. Otherwise, immediate events flood our minds completely. What I mean is this: see if you can now recall the occurrence that seemed the biggest catastrophe in your life, not in the very recent past but within the last year or two. Perhaps you failed an important exam or a course and thus blew a reward your parents had promised you. Or you got grounded for a month for doing something stupid. Maybe you missed an important shot or messed up your solo, ended up with a boring date for the school formal, smashed up the car after spending all your savings on insurance for it, got rejected by a college, or didn't get the job. When such events occur, they seem tragedies whose effects will never be effaced, the most real of real happenings in our lives.

But with time, with perspective, minor tragedies fade from our memories and become potholes in the overall course of our lives. A former student of mine once was grounded for two months and kept from playing on the basketball team because he brought beer to a party. Naturally, as a sixteen-year-old, he thought it was the end of the world. In his case, the incident also proved to be the spark for a vast



improvement in his studies. A year or so later, I reminded him of it. “Gee,” he said, “I’d forgotten all about that.” This kind of standing back from our immediate lives to gain an important sense of perspective and proportion is what I try to help you do throughout this book.

Some of you have experienced tragedy and suffering in your lives on a larger scale than the examples I’ve given, and the vision I share in this book can help you find meaning and companionship in those kinds of tough times. I try in this series to show how the Catholic faith puts teenage life into a perspective that is both realistic and idealistic, one that satisfies the best of our human and spiritual desires and meets our deepest needs. The key to this vision of life is a real person: Jesus Christ. Christian commitment is, finally, a commitment of the heart and mind to Christ, who alone deserves that degree of commitment. We only dare claim that the Church is the most real of realists because the Church is the continuing visible presence of Christ, the most real of people, the pattern and power for all “being real.” And it is Christ, who, despite knowing us through and through, challenges teens today, as he once challenged his followers in Galilee, to become more real.

Allow me to add two practical points. First, many quotations in the text are from the New Testament. I feel that the most effective way of getting to know and love the person of Jesus Christ is through an intelligent reading of the reliable written records of those first Christians who either knew him or knew others who knew him.

If you do not own a copy of the New Testament, I’d encourage you to buy or borrow one so you can see for yourself what it contains. If you are unfamiliar with the way of referring to parts of the New Testament, allow me to explain it briefly. You’ll see in your New Testament that each book is divided into chapters and verses so that each bit of text has its own number. This numbering system was invented so that people using different editions of the New Testament in the same or different languages could refer easily to the same text. Pages

wouldn't work because the same quotation number would appear on different pages in different editions.

The first part of a reference to a particular place in the New Testament names the book because the Bible is really a collection of what were once separate books. The first number after the name refers to the chapter or chapters of the book, and the second number, which follows the colon, refers to the verse or verses. Thus "John 14:16" means that the quotation comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 16. "Mark 2:1–12" means that you'll find an example of Christ's claiming the power to forgive sins in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12. Check out that one now to make sure I haven't made a mistake.

Second, I have generally not quoted other sources in order to avoid clutter and slowing the reader down. But any idea you find valuable or useful in this book is not original; it comes from my study and readings in the Catholic Tradition of the past 2,000 years. That said, whatever you find confusing or "unreal" probably arises from my own limitations of thought and expression.

# WHY BE GOOD?

Why be good? Why am I told to behave in certain ways when my feelings go against those ways, when all the others are doing what they want and enjoying themselves, when the very people correcting me—my parents, teachers, priests—don't always agree and often act against their own advice? I mean, some adults warn me constantly about drinking, but then they go and get wasted at their parties. Doesn't that just mean they don't really believe the warnings themselves?

Why be good? Seems like there's nothing in it for me. So-called good people are unhappy losers. They don't go anywhere, don't do anything. They don't drink or smoke or go on dates. They never have any fun. Besides, I've tried to be good sometimes, and I can't do it. Maybe other people, more religious types can, but I can't. The rules are just there to frustrate me.

If you find yourself thinking this way, I have the following advice: **STOP KIDDING YOURSELF. STOP WHINING. START ACTING LIKE A REAL MAN OR WOMAN.** I know this sounds harsh, but I'll admit I want to shake you up a bit. I will explain these objections to being good later. But if you don't set them aside at least temporarily from the outset, you'll miss the overriding issue at hand: How can I become a better person? Wouldn't you like to become a better person if possible? The moral law enables us to do so and applies to you, to me, and to everyone—whether we like it or not—just the same as gravity—except moral falls maim us much worse than physical falls. The moral law is not a hypocritical plot of adults to keep you under their thumbs. It is a pathway to true goodness and enduring happiness. Adults have to struggle as hard as you do to stay on it.

Oh, I know. Hundreds of voices—advertising, media, friends—are telling you morality—especially sexual morality but, really, every other type, too—is out of date. Your own experience seems to say the same. If you could get in trouble, tell a lie. If someone's not just like you and your group, mock him or her for a laugh. If someone is showing off a prized possession, steal it, destroy it.

But those voices—aren't they a little suspicious? Advertising has one purpose: to get you to buy. Peers who urge you to do wrong have one purpose: to use you, to provide companionship for their projects. Adults who tell you to do what feels good, to try out new “lifestyles,” have one purpose: to try to ease their own consciences by getting others to imitate them. None of these people has your best interests in mind.

“But I know people who do supposedly immoral things, and they seem pretty happy,” you may say.

The key word here is *seem*. Scratch the surface a bit, catch them without their public pose, and you'll see some real unhappiness. Tune in on their lives later or at the end, and see how happy self-indulgence in the things of this earth has made them.

Sometimes we deliberately forget about God and morals and goodness, and we commit a particular serious sin and—nothing happens. The sky doesn't fall, no bolts of lightning pierce us, nobody gets on our case, nothing but that irritating little voice that keeps accusing us—which we can, thank God (thank who?), ignore. So we may think, “See, it's not true that sin hurts me.”

But breaking the moral law has consequences as real as those that occur when we break a physical law. If you run full speed into a brick wall to show your defiance of material structure, chances are you will crack some bones. If you deliberately detour off the roadway of the moral law, attracted, perhaps, by an apparent shortcut to self-fulfillment or some pleasant looking grove, you will definitely crack some spiritual bones. Some breaks are just more obvious than others—at first. You get drunk, you suffer a hangover. You give some-

one a hard time, and they give it right back to you. You steal something, you're teaching others to steal from you. But even if you don't always recognize consequences right off, they exist as losses in your own self-respect and inner peace, in your interior relations with others—especially God. Cancer, too, spreads quietly and unfelt—until often it's too late.

“But some of the bad things I've done have been enjoyable.”

Of course. God made the world good, nothing in it is bad. If things weren't good, they wouldn't attract us. It's our misuse of them that makes our action wrong. A teenage boy once asked me, “Why did God make women so beautiful?” He was struggling with purity. But we're supposed to admire beauty in people—they reflect God's beauty. We're supposed to be attracted to the other sex—otherwise, friendships, marriages, and babies would never be made. The problem is when we allow ourselves to lust after others, seeing them as objects of our own pleasure, not as human beings with dignity and worth. What lasting effect have you gotten from your indulgences so far? Have they satisfied your desire for good things? Have they made you happy? Have they made you a more loving person? Isn't the heart of them selfish self-seeking? Have you harmed or used someone else for your pleasure?

## Goodness

Think more about your experience. What is goodness? What does it mean to be good at a game, a sport, or anything? First, it means there is at least one right way and at least one wrong way to do the thing. There's a correct way to shoot a jump shot so it gets over the defender and through the hoop. And there's a way of falling forward and pushing the ball that guarantees failure. If there weren't right and wrong ways of playing a sport, how could we say that someone is a bad player and someone else is a good player? Goodness implies an

accepted standard that anyone who is serious about a game, a job, or a skill will try to live up to.

Second, to be good at something must take an effort. Given our fallen human nature, if something can be done in a right way and an easier, sloppier, wrong way, our laziness will tend to opt for the second. But if we really want to play the violin, we'll need to practice and practice what seems awkward fingering and bow movements until they become second nature. Only then will we be good violinists.

If we can talk about moral goodness at all, it means that there must be a right way and a wrong way to live our life day to day. Otherwise, how can we say that one person is good and another bad? How can we distinguish morally between Hitler and Mother Teresa? How can we say that when Sarah spread that untrue rumor, she acted badly, but when Paula stuck up for us, she acted well? Morality is about behavior. So moral goodness means that there is a right way and a wrong way to behave. And we'd expect, once again, that this goodness would not come easily or completely naturally, and that we'd often have to make a conscious effort to practice it.

Of course, for a Christian, the answer to questions about goodness should be clear. As we've seen in other books in this series, Christ, the most real person, tells us how to be real people and that following the moral law is part of it. We also realized that Christ was not a "goody-goody" and that he doesn't want us to be, "goody-goodies". He wants us to be good because, in the long run, we will be more real and happy and will have more attractive personalities. We fulfill our true destinies, become most ourselves, by willfully channeling our fallen minds, drives, and desires in positive ways.

Our struggle to imitate Christ includes following his moral teaching and life. Morality is the first path to happiness—the spiritual life calls us beyond morality but builds on and grows along with it. In fact, we can live the moral life fully only when we have God's grace. The spiritual life and moral life become really one in practice—like

dance partners who merge to perform beautiful patterns. When we try to live the fourth commandment better and be more respectful of our parents, we can also do it for love of God and offer God the self-denial involved. Such acts for us are not just good in themselves but draw us closer to Christ.

But we can think about moral life separately from the spiritual life. People always have been and always will be concerned about right and wrong behavior, even if they never hear of Christ. Philosophers, even godless ones, have argued for centuries about what makes a good person and a good life. First, people could be and were aware of right and wrong before God's revelation. Today, we can still discuss moral issues—at least, those in the daily papers—with people from other faiths or with no faith.

Considering morality separately in these pages can also help us focus more directly on the issues behind the critical teen attitudes expressed at the beginning of this section. I try to do so in three chapters. The first, "Laws and Legalisms," considers the nature and role of law, especially the natural law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. The second, "Moral Actors, Moral Acts," reminds us of the facts about the human psyche, the role of the mind, will, and feelings in moral life, and what makes an action good or bad. The third, "Paths of Glory," discusses the virtues, the specific trails we must follow to become real men and women, especially those that may be particularly difficult in the teen years, such as chastity, sobriety, and joy. A very brief fourth section urges us to moral heroism. As usual in this series, I rely on both experience and the person and teaching of Christ to guide our thinking.

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The quotation on page 91 is from “Message of the Holy Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XVI World Youth Day,” [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/youth/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20010215\\_xvi-world-youth-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010215_xvi-world-youth-day_en.html), accessed September 8, 2004.

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**Endnote Cited in Quotation from *Catechism of the Catholic Church***

1. Cf. *Mk* 3:5–6; *Lk* 16:19–31.