

Morality and Ethics: “How should we discern good from bad in the ‘Digital World’ – and how can we use it as a force for good?”

The 2021 theme for the 3rd quarter at BELIEVES around morality and ethics wrapped up on Sept. 14th with an engaging discussion featuring Jonah Lynch, author of *The Scent of Lemons. Technology and Human Relationships in the Age of Facebook*. While the session title – “How should we discern good from bad in the ‘Digital World’ – and how can we use it as a force for good?” – begins with discerning good from bad, Lynch chose to start the session with a focus on the 2nd half of the question in the title.



“I would like to start with the 2nd half of the question,” commented Lynch. “How can we use power to do good work?” He added, “The way I want to frame this is: what is the good work according to God in the Bible – living as human with God.”

Lynch went on to add that when Jesus came, He gave us examples: Truth, Justice, and Love.

“When God came, we might expect he’d ‘fix this,’ but that leads us to a contradiction because after Jesus came there is still injustice,” said Lynch. “I think this presents us with a choice:

- God could have forced us towards justice, or
- God could invite us to choose to walk towards goodness through love.”

Lynch believes these two roads are mutually exclusive.

“The cross is reflective of that,” Lynch stated. “A wonderful example is in John 8 where Jesus writes in the dirt. Jesus prefers freedom instead of coercion. He invites us to love instead of forcing us to do good.”

While Lynch acknowledged that this opening perspective may seem theological, he believes the second question is important to frame the first question.

“What’s more important – outcomes or people? Good results, or results from the free choice of people?” he asked.

Then he added, “So I say this to say that the problem of freedom is central to technology.”

When we step back to observe what goes on in business, Lynch shared that dreaming up systems where we don’t need to be good is perennially the effort of business.

“There’s a T.S. Elliot quote that I believe reflects this,” he stated.

*“Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is will shadow
The man that pretends to be.”*

“The man that is will shadow the man that pretends to be,” Lynch restated after reading the quote aloud.

With this background and perspective, Lynch steered his remarks to the first question in the session’s title.

“This question gets at the heart of wisdom (discerning good from bad),” he commented. “Proverbs 8 speaks to wisdom being the order with which God created. It creates everything but it’s also like a sprite that’s rejoicing and playing, like a girl delighting in God’s creation.”

As for what aspects of wisdom pertain to technology, Lynch believes there are four.

“First, wisdom is lovely,” he said. “We must ask for wisdom. It is not a fear-based version focused on where are the lines, nor a pollyannish version.”

The second aspect, according to Lynch, is that perfect systems don’t exist.

“Again, the man that is will shadow the man that pretends to be,” he reiterated.

The third aspect?

“Always place persons before results,” said Lynch. “Persons are more important and can surprise us. We can look for the virtue in people and see how it can surprise.”

And finally, the fourth aspect of wisdom that pertains to technology is the need to pay attention to the results of your actions.

“Make a feedback loop,” he said succinctly. “I believe this is essentially the same as prayer: asking to become aware of the impact of your choices.”

After sharing these four aspects of wisdom that pertain to technology, CTK parishioner Charles Jones asked Lynch how he thought artificial intelligence would play into this.

“Quality of data in algorithm situations can be very high and you can do things like make efficient decisions, look for patterns, and things like that,” responded Lynch. “I really don’t like the term artificial intelligence because we’re not talking about intelligence. It’s much harder to measure a human being because humans have freedom and humans can change and learn.”

Lynch also felt it was important to speak a bit about the “black box” element of artificial intelligence.

“Artificial intelligence may be how it is now, but it doesn’t have to be that same way in the future. We could be able to look at the decision matrix being used, create feedback loops, and evolve.”

Another CTK parishioner in attendance then asked Lynch for his thoughts on how banks are trying to control things on a moral perspective versus the brute masses of human desires.

“We’re witnessing an epic struggle of governments losing power,” he answered. “Tech business had been ahead, but now governments are catching up. Businesses are wielding their power by choosing to associate with social issues.”

He added, “There are large scale problems that don’t have large scale solutions, such as Dresden being bombed in World War II, or the destruction of the environment.”

Building off the most recent question asked, another attendee commented that she feels like the Internet opens up roads for communication and pondered the impact of that.

“What is the map to the territory is the big question,” Lynch replied. “The maps are very bad right now.”

When it comes to the “digital world” being used as a force for good, are the bad maps what Lynch wrestles with the most, or something else?

He responded, “Power is what surfaces to the top. It’s most intriguing. I have been programming since I was 7 years old and I love it. What relationship do I want to have with power is the big question.”

Transitioning this personal reflection to a more organizational setting, Lynch commented that, in his opinion, trust is the hallmark of the most resilient organizations.

Furthermore, he stated that in organizations that apply an agile methodology to operate, the approach can be a humble one.

“However, failure in such a situation is centered on not asking the question – *What relationship do I want to have with power and how we can use power to do good work?*”

Finally, to invite Lynch to unplug and step away from the digital world a bit, he was asked how prayer exists for him personally each day to wrap up the discussion.

“Typically, my go-to’s are:

- Singing a psalm or hymn,
- Saying The Our Father,
- Saying the angel of God prayer when going to bed, and
- Go for a walk to see the beauty of the created world.”

On this last go-to, Lynch said he does this to see that the real thing is much better than the app.