

# WEEK ONE LEADER'S GUIDE

MERE CHRISTIANITY | C.S. LEWIS

## THIS WEEK

### **Book One, Chapters 1-3**

In these first few chapters, C.S. Lewis explores the concept of morality, questioning the growing modern perception that Moral Truth is relative to culture and personal preferences. By arguing for absolute truth, he lays the foundation for his case that there is a God and he owns it.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE LAW OF HUMAN NATURE

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: 'To hell with your standard.' Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. (pg. 3)

Now this Law or Rule about Right and Wrong used to be called the Law of Nature. Nowadays, when we talk of the 'laws of nature' we usually mean things like gravitation, or heredity, or the laws of chemistry. But when the older thinkers called the Law of Right and Wrong 'the Law of Nature', they really meant the Law of Human Nature. (pg. 4)

If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. (pg. 6)

Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. (pg. 6)

If we do not believe in decent behaviour, why should we be so anxious to make excuses for not having behaved decently? The truth is, we believe in decency so much – we feel the Rule of Law pressing on us so – that we cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it, and consequently we try to shift the responsibility. For you notice that it is only for our bad behaviour that we find all these explanations. It is only our bad temper that we put down to being tired or worried or hungry; we put our good temper down to ourselves. (pg. 8)

These, then, are the two points I want to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe that we live in. (pg. 8)

## CHAPTER TWO: SOME OBJECTIONS

You probably want to be safe much more than you want to help the man who is drowning: but the Moral Law tells you to help him all the same. (pg. 10)

Think once again of a piano. It has not got two kinds of notes on it, the 'right' notes and the 'wrong' ones. Every single note is right at one time and wrong at another. The Moral Law is not any one instinct or set of instincts: it is something which makes a kind of tune (the tune we call goodness or right conduct) by directing the instincts. (pg. 11)

The most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of your own nature and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all costs. (pg. 11)

Progress means not just changing, but changing for the better. If no set of moral ideas were truer or better than any other, there would be no sense in preferring civilized morality to savage morality, or Christian morality to Nazi morality. (pg. 13)

We do believe that some of the people who tried to change the moral ideas of their own age were what we would call Reformers or Pioneers – people who understood morality better than their neighbours did. Very well then. The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other. But the standard that measures two things is something different from either. You are, in fact, comparing them both with some Real Morality, admitting that there is such a thing as a real Right, independent of what people think, and that some people's ideas get nearer to that real Right than others. (pg. 13)

## CHAPTER THREE: THE REALITY OF THE LAW

The law of gravity tells you what stones do if you drop the; but the Law of Human Nature tells you what human beings ought to do and do not. In other words, when you are dealing with humans, something else comes in above and beyond the actual facts. You have the facts (how men do behave) and you also have something else (how they ought to behave). (pg. 17)

In the same way, if a man asks what is the point of behaving decently, it is no good replying, "in order to benefit society", for trying to benefit society, in other words being unselfish (for 'society' after all only means 'other people'), is one of the things decent behaviour consists in; all you are really saying is that decent behaviour is decent behaviour. You would have said just as much if you had stopped at the statement, 'Men ought to be unselfish.' (pg. 19)

Consequently, this Rule of Right and Wrong, or Law of Human Nature, or whatever you call it, must somehow or other be a real thing – a thing that is really there, not made up by ourselves. And yet it is not a fact in the ordinary sense, in the same way as or actual behaviour is a fact. It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; that, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behaviour, and yet quite definitely real – a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us. (pg. 20)