



# Cultural Effects in Ethical Decisions

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**Our culture and heritage affect every ethical decision we will make.** This cultural identity is sometimes called tribalism -- behaviors and attitudes that come from strong loyalty to one's own tribe or social group.

Tribalism is something Jesus dealt with throughout his lifetime, yet He showed us we must be moved beyond it to a point of including others. That tribalism is strongly shown in a passage in Luke when Jesus returns to his hometown. Luke 4:14-30 says,

“Then Jesus came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. As was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. And when He stood up to read, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

Then He rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on Him, and He began by saying, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’

All spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that came from His lips. ‘Isn’t this the son of Joseph?’ they asked.

Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to Me: “Physician, heal yourself!” Do here in Your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’

Then He added, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. But I tell you truthfully that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and great famine swept over all the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet. Yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.’

On hearing this, all the people in the synagogue were enraged. They got up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him over the cliff. But Jesus passed through the crowd and went on His way.”

There are many remarkable things about this passage, and one is that people from Jesus’ hometown were so eager to kill a man they had known since he was a child. These people knew his parents and ancestors – they raised their children with him or grew up with him as a playmate. And yet their thoughts turned to murder when his words didn’t fit in with their expectations. It’s amazing how quickly one’s own family or tribe can turn on you. I’ve seen this in places like Indonesia where military personnel come to Christ and their own family tries to kill them for converting to Christianity.

At the time Jesus returned to his hometown, Galilee was a culturally diverse area with many ethnic tensions. There were Israelites, Greeks, Romans, and others living together in close proximity with each other.

Jesus's words were initially well-received, even when he claimed he was the Messiah (vs 21). His audience in the synagogue would have known the verses he was quoting from Isaiah 61 were messianic verses, prophesying the coming Messiah. When Jesus said that he came to fulfill those verses, they would have immediately known that he was saying he was the Messiah. After he made this proclamation, they praised him – "all spoke well of him."

One of the ways we know he's claiming that he is the Messiah, and they understand that, is found in their response: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" The citizens of Galilee knew that Joseph's ancestral line meant his children had a right to the throne.

When verse 15 says, "everyone praised him," this means they gave his words a strong endorsement. The Greek word here means "glory," which glorifies Jesus as Messiah.

One reason his hometown people may have been happy for Jesus to be the Messiah had to do with the cultural expectations they would hold onto as the hometown of the coming king. There was a cultural concept that people from the tribe of the ruler had access to more privileges and blessings. This is seen when James and John's mother in Matthew 20:21, said to Jesus, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

With Jesus as their Messiah and coming king, the people of Galilee would expect to become well-known, rich, and powerful. Yet Jesus' reaction to their expectation upsets them: "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" Jesus goes on to tell them no prophet is accepted in his own town.

This is the moment when his hometown people become furious. They wanted special treatment, yet Jesus had a plan that transcended tribal loyalty and extended to people in other parts of the country and world. This was threatening to them.

Samuel P. Huntington, in "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order", wrote, "People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and at the broadest levels, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against."

This quote gives insight into how Jesus upset the people in his hometown -- people know who they are when they know who they are against, and these were against the Greeks and Romans and any outsiders. They had a strong cultural identity, and their view of the Messiah was to affirm that identity. When Jesus indicated his kingdom would go beyond their tribe, their region, and that identity to embrace those they were against, they had to turn against Jesus as well. They could not accept Jesus' vision of embracing people outside their cultural identity.

**Jesus gave us an antidote to tribalism. We have to decide who we are and are not, and a good passage to understand who we are in Christ is found in Galatians 3:28:** "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

There are many identities listed in that verse, but ultimately our identity in Christ transcends every other identity. That doesn't mean other identities aren't important. Mathematicians explain the concept of infinity by saying it is so big that everything else becomes zero compared to infinity. The same is true of our identity in Christ – that identity is grounded in infinity, in eternity, and everything else becomes near zero in comparison.

Matthew 24:14 states, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” The term “all nations” in Greek means “to all tribes.” Even as he states this, Jesus lives in an area where there is intense tribal loyalty. But he states that the Gospel is for every tribe in the whole world. In the U.S., we interact with people outside our “tribe” routinely – army vs. navy personnel, Republican vs Democrat, and people of different religions and cultures. Yet Jesus is over every group.

**Communication with people who are different from us – outside of our “tribe” -- must be founded in two components of our identity: who we are in Christ, and that Christ’s Kingdom is for others from every tribe, culture, identity, and nation.**

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**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you see tribalism in your work place, your church, and your community? How is tribalism a force for good? How can it be a force for evil?
2. In your experiences with other cultures, what are some notable differences you’ve seen from your own culture?
3. How do you live out your identity in Christ in the various areas of your life – in your career, in your family, among your friends, etc.? Are there areas in which you want to improve in living out your Christian identity?

**Conversational Prayer:** Spend time in conversational prayer, using your own words and speaking to Christ as not only as your Redeemer, but your friend. Ask Him which lessons from this devotional you most need to learn and apply in your own life.