

SINFUL THINGS PEOPLE DO

A Critique of *Ten Stupid Things Women Do* and *How Could You Do That?!* by Dr. Laura Schlessinger

Many people today, including a host of conservative Christians, are rightly troubled by the prevailing "victim mentality" of our culture. Led by men like John Bradshaw, the "victim" status has reached epidemic proportions, such that no one is responsible for anything anymore. It's deeply troubling, and it hasn't solved any problems. Child abuse is a real and pressing problem, but victim counseling hasn't improved the situation. Someone must speak up! Someone must take a stand for morality and responsibility. Someone is, and millions are listening. Unbelievers are listening, and Christians are listening. The radio voice of Dr. Laura Schlessinger fills homes and offices every afternoon. She has a message, loud and clear, for those who have been seeing themselves as victims. She knows it won't be welcomed by everyone:

"This book is going to be difficult for you to read--and maybe even hurtful to you--and you may get angry. There are ten million exceptions to everything I say. Nonetheless, EVERYTHING I SAY IS TRUE!" (xv, *Ten Stupid Things*)

Yes, sometimes truth is difficult to receive. But this claim to absolute truth, infallibility, and authority, from a fallible human being, should raise a red flag to the discerning Christian. What we find in Schlessinger's writings is the extreme opposite of John Bradshaw's victim mentality. That victim mentality is highly unbiblical, because man is responsible before God for his actions--even if he has been grievously sinned against by his parents. But is Schlessinger's message grounded in God's truth? No! Her message is an extreme reaction that exalts the powers of *self* and leads ultimately to despair, not hope.

Consider the message of the gospel. We have all sinned and gone astray, each to his own way. There is none righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10-18). Our culpability for sin is fully established in the sight of God, whose standards are holy, righteous, and true. As sovereign Creator, He has the authority and right to determine such standards. Our own righteousness is as "filthy rags" in His sight (Isaiah 64:6), and we are powerless to save ourselves from His righteous wrath. Yet although we are fully responsible for our sin, and at the same time unable to save ourselves from its power and consequences, God has initiated and completed His gracious plan of salvation. He is rich in mercy,

and because of His abundant love, He sent Christ to be our penal substitute *while we were yet sinners* (Romans 5:6-8). Our salvation and sanctification depend on *His* love, *His* mercy, *His* grace, *His* power, *His* initiative. It is to the praise of *His* glory that we are saved. We do not save ourselves! The message of the gospel is one of full responsibility for sin, yet full dependence on God's grace for salvation from that sin.

The message of modern psychology turns the gospel on its head. Instead of a responsible sinner, man is viewed as a victim of the sins of others. "Salvation" rests either with a highly paid "professional," or on the efforts of self. Schlessinger opts primarily for the latter (while strongly endorsing therapy). In her system, man must be his own savior. The message is brutal, and it isn't true. We must indeed react to the victim mentality that has invaded both society *and the church*, through the misguided efforts of Minirth-Meier, David Seamands, and others. But we must react with equal conviction to any system where man must save himself, apart from the grace of God. With this in mind, we will consider the two books recently released by Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Our hearts must break as the church embraces the twisted messages of modern psychology, whether it be the gospel of the victimization or the gospel of self-salvation.

A Review of *Ten Stupid Things Women Do*

Schlessinger says that *Ten Stupid Things* is "not a self-help book, but it will help women help themselves" (xvii). Although denying this to be "double-talk," that's exactly what it is. People do need to face their responsibilities *before God*, but His gracious enabling is what gives believers the ability to obey and grow in godliness. The Christian life is *never* a "self-help" program.

Schlessinger doesn't totally abandon the victim mentality. She agrees that:

"We are motivated by unrealistic drives and primal needs related to yearnings for a paradise-never-visited in childhood." (xvii)

But she goes on to evaluate women in general as *stupid*, particularly in their relations with men. The broad category of stupidity, along with "laziness, immaturity, cowardice, selfishness," replaces *sin*. (Actually, Scripture cites sloth, cowardice, and selfishness as examples of *sin*.) The bottom line is self, because according to Schlessinger:

"The ultimate stupidity is withholding from yourself the respect you deserve. Bottom line: If you want a higher self-esteem, there's only one, admittedly old-fashioned, way to get it: Earn it!" (xix)

Compare to the biblical view: The ultimate *sin* is withholding from *God* the glory *He* deserves (Romans 1:18-25). We are exhorted to esteem others *ahead of self* and to live for God rather than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). We are already off on the wrong track!

This book is focused almost exclusively on how women relate to the men in their lives, and Schlessinger admits that she is "woman-bashing" (xx). Everything is left to *self*, including the choice of whether to "grow" by heeding Schlessinger's brutal advice, or to spend your life in "recovery" (xx). Here's her basic challenge:

"Women, rebel! Don't fall for yet another slick explanation of the pathetic yet understandable motivation for your weak-kneed behavior. My book was written to encourage you to show yourself what you're made of. And when you do, I guarantee you, you'll be impressed!" (xx)

Such a challenge is diametrically opposed to the biblical view of how a *godly* woman is to respond to others. As we move along, we'll consider some key passages that give specific instruction to women in difficult circumstances. The situations addressed by Schlessinger generally concern behaviors that are ungodly and sinful. Her counsel frequently opposes Scripture.

1. "Stupid Attachment": Is a woman just a wo- wo- wo- on a man?

This chapter is specifically written for:

"Women...who use an entire arsenal of excuses to avoid facing the fact that they define themselves and their role in the world exclusively through men--and it almost 'don't' matter what 'kinda' man!" (5)

Schlessinger believes that women have wrongly defined themselves in terms of *men* rather than *self*:

"Since women do not typically define self-esteem and purpose in terms of personal accomplishment, the ways they have gone about getting some sense of identity, value, and meaning in their lives have been primarily through relationships. That has been disappointing and destructive." (7)

"There are young women for whom the very possibility that there is life separate from attachment to some guy comes as a revelation." (8)

Schlessinger assumes that self-esteem is a worthy goal, but that it is "forged from your efforts" rather than resting on "air" (10). Yet Scripture is clear that believers are to seek God's glory, not self-esteem, self-worth, or self-love.

The motivation for "stupid attachment" is assumed to be a "short-circuit" to purpose, "by martyring yourself on the altar of someone else's pain or need" (18), hoping the man will become dependent and remain.

Biblically, we need to return to the account of creation. Both male and female were created in the image of God. The woman was created out of the side of man, a helper and companion. Marriage results in a one-flesh union of male and female. Both are to serve and honor God, to "define themselves" in terms of service and relationship to *Him*, not self or other fallible humans. The norm for *most* people is marriage, while a few are gifted for a single lifestyle that enables them to serve the Lord. Either way, being Christ-centered is the prime concern, not building self-esteem either around a relationship or personal accomplishments.

2. "Stupid Courtship": "I finally found someone I could attach to" and other stupid ideas about dating.

Here's how Schlessinger describes the basic problem in dating:

"Far too many women behave more like beggars than choosers in the dating game. For them, dating is a process of hoping-to-be-selected rather than an opportunity to select." (29)

Here are signs, according to Schlessinger, that you've chosen an "inappropriate man":

"...relief that you're no longer alone, leading to gratitude that he's selected you and panic when he's out of your sight." (31)

Schlessinger says that:

"It's a case of women being driven to attach to men for identity, affirmation, approval, purpose, safety, and

security--values that can really only come from within ourselves." (34)

Again, we are faced with a perspective that exalts *self*. *Self* replaces God in this scheme. In addition, these are not values that Scripture exhorts believers to seek for their own sake.

In addition, the choice Schlessinger offers is really between two *idols*, either a man, or *self*. She indicates that excessive dependence on a man is to "attribute...godlike powers" to him (36). Instead, she wishes to attribute such "godlike powers" to oneself, which is equally idolatrous. She advocates trust in *self* (42), saying nothing of trust in *God*, His Word and His standards for selecting a husband.

The believer is to marry *in the Lord* and is not to be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). Husband and wife serve Christ together. Schlessinger's standards say nothing about God's standards for godly marriages.

3. "Stupid Devotion": "But I love him" and more stupid romantic stuff.

Schlessinger believes that the term love has "become synonymous with attachment" in our culture, and that women remain in obviously self-defeating situations as a result (46).

"I feel certain that what many women call love, under so many obviously ugly, hurtful, and sometimes downright dangerous situations, is more about passion and promise and fantasies and desperate dependencies and fears about taking on alternatives." (54)

She states that the phrase "I love him" is all too often the justification for bad choices of male partners (46). She sees women as often "overly tolerant of grossly negative qualities in exchange for what may be only moments of happiness or peace" (50). The underlying problem, she claims is "you haven't come to believe in yourself!" (51). One section asks: "Why can't you put yourself first?" (55). At the same time, Schlessinger believes that "low self-esteem" is increasingly an excuse for inaction (56). Her remedy is to build self-worth through free will and personal accomplishment, taking risks and growing in autonomy (56-57). She states that:

"A lack of self-esteem and a lack of courageous, independent, creative effort on your own behalf will reinforce each other-forever." (57)

Self is on the throne here, not God: "You are ultimately the architect of your life" (58). Such is the lie first heard in the Garden, perpetuated over centuries of sinfulness.

Self-esteem is not a biblical goal. You are *not* the architect of your life. *God* is the Creator and architect. It is *His* gracious work in the life of the believer that counts, although at the same time Christians are responsible for their obedience. Sinful devotion to man must be replaced by godly devotion to Christ, as the believer thankfully remembers His sacrifice on the cross, and appropriate love between husbands and wives.

According to Schlessinger, a long-term commitment requires more than love:

"Love is not enough. There are issues of honor, respect, mutuality, sacrifice, acceptance, supportiveness, similarity of life values and morality, to name only a few." (68)

But what we're missing here is a *biblical* definition of love. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25). The situations described by Schlessinger almost always involve gross *sin*, and normally they are pre-marital. The believer needs to consider godly qualities in the choice of a partner, then follow biblical principles after the marriage is consummated. *Love* must be defined by Scripture, not human emotions or other criteria.

4. "Stupid Passions": "Ohhh, ahhh, we're breathing so hard....it must mean love."

This chapter doesn't concern stupidity, but rather sexual *sin* as defined by God's standards. Although Schlessinger seems conservative--almost biblical--in her standards about premarital sex, she fails to bring out the issue of obedience to God. Instead, she remains focused on the pragmatic, on what is most pleasing to *self* in the long run.

Despite her appearance of morality, Schlessinger gives no indication that her morals are grounded in Scripture. In fact, she says that:

"I am not saying women should do a virgin-till-death act to make a man see them as pure, good, or a prize to be won. That would produce the desired effect only with a man who has an inferiority complex. However, a man who is heavily indoctrinated in a fundamentalist mentality would require a mate in kind--perhaps a better plan than the sexual chaos we have now." (72)

Christians, most likely, are among those "heavily indoctrinated in a fundamentalist mentality." This approach is pragmatic, not biblical, focused on producing the "desired effect." Schlessinger is a strong advocate of talking about sex prior to doing it, yet not a word as to whether it's within marriage or not:

"I think women have to cut out the romantic fantasy and talk turkey before they get into bed. Because if we don't clarify what it is we're doing before we do it, we can't complain about being misunderstood or used." (77)

She also says that:

"Sex never works as a hoped-for cure or anesthesia for feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, shame, loneliness, fearfulness, self-disgust, and more." (79)

Perhaps not, but again we have pragmatism, not God's standards for sexuality. Schlessinger only warns against "sex too soon" (by her timing), not sex within a godly marital relationship.

The term "sexual addiction" has been frequently used in recent years to describe sexual immorality. Schlessinger rejects the label, but again, not for biblical reasons:

"But I say you are not sick--all you are doing is trying to get a high instead of dealing with personal empowerment and self-control." (83)

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit in the life of Christians. "Personal empowerment" isn't a biblical value at all.

This chapter never mentions God's standards. However, it describes some of the serious consequences of sexual sin. Unfortunately, those consequences are largely seen in terms of psychological (but unbiblical) values such as self-esteem (90). Although Schlessinger's answers may appear morally conservative, they are superficial and unsatisfying. Apart from Christ's redeeming, sanctifying love, there are no answers to the problem of sin, sexual or otherwise.

5. "Stupid Cohabitation": The ultimate female self-delusion.

The matter of sexual sin is continued in this chapter, but again, biblical standards are absent. Schlessinger is more interested in statistics, such as the fact that live-in couples who marry have a higher divorce rate (91). As believers, we can quickly see that violation of God's standards has consequences. This is simply one of them. Schlessinger recommends against live-

in arrangements because of certain consequences, rather than because fornication is declared by God to be sin. She believes living in to be rooted in a "desperate need to heal the hurts of the past" (93), and she notes the high divorce rate along with the damage to children (108). Her approach is pragmatic rather than biblical. As Christians, we don't need the pragmatic approach of an unbeliever to recognize sin as sin. The results may be superficially similar to Scripture, but the formula doesn't always work. What we need is God's sufficient Word.

6. "Stupid Expectations": First you commit to him, then you hate him!?

This chapter is addressed to women who have married out of "unmet needs and frustrated yearnings," then come to experience disappointment in the marriage "due to their own ancient emotional black holes" (110). Schlessinger hasn't altogether abandoned the "victim mentality"! In fact, she speaks of "the underlying, perhaps even unconscious, mechanism we have for attaching to repair early childhood hurts" (112). Much of this chapter is about the impact of childhood hurts. But Schlessinger insists that:

"The disappointment may be a great opportunity for personal growth and emotional healing of childhood hurts--if you are ready to assume personal responsibility and endure the discomforts of change." (111)

Actually, the goal promoted throughout the chapter, the answer to "childhood hurts," is self-esteem (or self-worth), which Schlessinger believes should be earned through personal accomplishments rather than dependence on a man. She suggests that "when you marry and hate him, look inside yourself first for the source of that hate" (131). Her analysis of such hatred repeatedly centers on childhood issues and self-esteem, rather than any reference to biblical love.

7. "Stupid Conception": Making babies for the worst reasons.

Schlessinger begins by noting that her title leaves her with "the arrogant task of detailing what I presume to be the best reasons for having a baby" (133). Here is her answer:

"You and another adult, committed partner (i.e., spouse) have the interest, intent, ability, and means to make the necessary sacrifices of time, attention, and resources to give that child the nurturing, security, support, love, and education he or she needs!" (134)

Schlessinger expresses concern with the interests of the child rather than the gratification of the parents. However, she leaves God out of the picture. At creation, God gave the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). He is concerned with godly offspring. Parents *do* have responsibilities to consider the welfare of their children, but these responsibilities are specifically *before God*.

Schlessinger speaks loudly about the responsibilities of women, railing against the victim status so often accorded to them:

"So at this point in my life, after spending the late sixties and part of the seventies angry at men, I firmly believe that women--through their own intelligent and courageous personal, one-at-a-time efforts--can ensure and/or improve the lot of their own lives. And I am sick, sick, sick of using society or upbringing or anything else to excuse women's stupid behavior. Women must first help themselves, then aid other women, in rising above societal limitations--or there will be no progress." (138)

But again, nothing is said about the biblical responsibilities that *God* has given to both men and women. Blame shifting is unbiblical, yet so is the extreme female autonomy promoted in this book. The "responsibility" outlined by Schlessinger revolves around "safe sex" precautions, such as the use of a condom, rather than obedience to God's standards of sexuality. There is, as well, an emphasis on the problems of single parenting, including poverty and "a pretty flaky self-image" in the child (144-145). It sounds good to Christians, who would agree that a two-parent home is best. However, Schlessinger has no conception of following *God's* plan for families, and of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Much attention is given in this chapter to having babies in order to hold on to a man. Of course, such behavior is sinful, since such relationships (as described in the book) normally involve people who are not married to one another. Once again, biblical standards of sexuality are omitted from the discussion.

Schlessinger's lack of biblical morality emerges clearly from time to time:

"The sexual revolution said we could do *it* anytime we wanted because it no longer meant we were bad girls and because we were entitled to the same pleasures and sexual freedoms as men. So far, so good." (146)

Good?! By what standards?! If you were thinking that Schlessinger's program promoted biblical values, highlight this one and think again. Here's another one:

"If all that intercourse brought were orgasms, no children, no venereal disease, and no distortions of passion interpreted as love, this chapter would not even be necessary. As long as there are serious consequences, we women must act as adults and not as helpless, swept-away fairy princesses. The price is obviously too great for that." (148)

This is strictly pragmatic, not biblical. God designed intercourse, within the context of marital commitment, to produce offspring and consummate the marital relationship. Schlessinger apparently would be glad to do what "feels good" if there were no consequences. Her morality is not grounded in God's commands.

8. "Stupid Subjugation": Letting him hurt your babies.

This chapter begins by noting the ferociously defensive behaviors of animal mothers whose babies are threatened. Then:

"Human beings are the most highly evolved of animals--who have retained only a few instinctive or reflex actions. With our highly evolved cerebral cortex, we can rise above instinct and make choices. That is our glory. And sometimes our shame." (155)

The reason human beings make moral choices has nothing to do with a high level of evolution! Rather, man is *created* (not evolved) in the image of God. It is because of *sin* that man's choices so often do not honor his Creator.

Schlessinger demands that a mother's first priority, even *above her husband*, be her children. Of course, if children are being violently abused, a mother (or father) ought to take immediate action. However, her comments are clearly grounded in emotion, in a woman's natural nurture of her children--rather than biblical principles. Biblically, it is the husband-wife one-flesh relationship that takes precedence over the children. Certainly, that never means that children should be deliberately hurt in the process. A Christian in the unfortunate circumstance of being married to an abuser must seek assistance within the body of Christ, and deal with the matter as *sin*.

9. "Stupid Helplessness": "Oh, I always whine and whimper when I'm angry."

Here's what Schlessinger believes happens when adult women face a situation that calls for "righteous anger":

"...mostly self-doubt, whining, whimpering, self-blame, depression, confusion, and lots of other stuff, which has nothing to do with taking on the problem with any objectivity or courage." (174)

Women, she claims, express hurt when they are really angry (175). That hurt, supposedly, leads to powerlessness (176). It also may lead to depression, which Schlessinger calls "the absence of self-defense":

"In depression we simply come to accept a situation in a passive-submissive way. It is far healthier to rise up against the injustice and demand redress or change. It is far healthier to walk out in the face of prolonged lack of redress or change." (176)

This counsel is followed by an account where seriously unbiblical advice is given. It involves a woman who has confronted her father with his abuse of her as a child, and her husband's continued contact with him despite her insistence that all connections be severed (177). Schlessinger's counsel is to give the husband an ultimatum to choose between her and her father (178). This violates biblical principles of confronting those who have sinned, biblical basis for divorce (or the lack thereof), and the biblical view of honoring parents. True, this woman's father has sinned against her. Perhaps the husband's contact with the father has been for sinful reasons. Nevertheless, what Schlessinger exalts is expression of anger, even if it means divorcing a husband for reasons that are unscriptural. This is one of many such examples.

This whole chapter is about anger, some of it "righteous" (by Schlessinger's standards, not God's Word), some inappropriate, some "wasted." There are absolutely *no* biblical principles about handling anger here, only standards that reflect modern psychology's perpetual focus on self. To top it off, we should note that Schlessinger really hasn't left the world of victimization after all:

"Our early childhood attachments, love, and nurturing experiences will teach that we are lovable and that emotional attachments are generally safe and rewarding--or the opposite. If it is the opposite, then we come to expect such

things as hurt, loss, betrayal. When we are in that mode, it is amazing how history seems to repeat itself with future adult relationships. And we are constantly hurt. The anger that might have seemed so appropriate to the situation is squelched by the incredible self-doubts, which lead us to feel we have no right to anger--we just aren't worth it." (195)

Is this really so different from the constant victimization diet we have been fed by so many other psychologists? Not really. Schlessinger's self-salvation program is equally unsatisfying and unbiblical:

"Yet the only way to become worth it in our own lives is to believe in some kind of universal inalienable right to respect, honor, commitment, caring, and love--and then to earn it in our own minds by our courageous efforts in our own behalf in just about every aspect of our lives." (196)

How much more we have as Christians--knowing that we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, assured of our eternal inheritance. The psychological substitute is nauseating.

10. "Stupid Forgiving": "I know he's adulterous, addicted, controlling, insensitive, and violent...but other than that..."

Forgiveness is a key Christian concept. But what does Schlessinger have to say about it? First, she compares the human female to a motionless praying mantis, calling her one who:

"...will invent millions of excuses to avoid getting out of the way of an oncoming bad relationship or permanently escaping from one in which she's already ensconced." (197)

Once more we are faced with evidence that Schlessinger hasn't abandoned the victim mentality:

"If you can make a connection between your need to be controlled and childhood trauma in a therapeutic context, it could be the key to understanding and conquering misplaced shame and guilt." (204)

Any relationship or relevance to *forgiveness* is missing from this chapter. It seems like Schlessinger equates "forgiveness" with remaining in a bad relationship, and blaming oneself for the problems, on the basis of childhood hurts. It would help if some

other term were chosen! This chapter is definitely *not* about any sort of biblical forgiveness. Not even close.

The cases described in this chapter involve tangled relationships where women remain for the wrong reasons (by Schlessinger's standards), particularly excessive dependency and fear. The counsel given is to sever the relationship, *whether or not* there is a marital bond. Biblically, there are serious problems. When there *isn't* a marriage, the individual should flee sexual immorality if it's a factor. But when there *is* a marriage, Christian wives have scriptural admonitions and cannot simply exit the relationship. Sexual immorality is generally the only biblical basis for divorce (Matthew 19:9). At the same time, 1 Corinthians 7:13-16 instructs the Christian wife who is married to an unbeliever. She is to remain married as long as he is willing to stay, but must allow him to leave if he wishes to do so. Similarly, 1 Peter 3:1-6 instructs such wives to witness through their godly lives, without a word. *Nothing* of this emerges in all of Schlessinger's writing.

A Review of How Could You Do That?

This volume seeks to address the lack of integrity and moral courage in the behavior of many people today. Here's how the author introduces it:

"I don't wonder that so many people search blindly for the 'meaning of life.' What they don't seem to understand is that life does not have meaning through mere existence or acquisition or fun. The meaning of life is inherent in the connections we make to others through honor and obligation."
(after Acknowledgments, no page number)

Sadly, what Schlessinger apparently doesn't know is that *God gives meaning to life*. Yes, there is meaning in relationships to others, and in honoring our obligations. But it is God who establishes those obligations, and it is God who created those others in His image. Apart from Him, the very concepts of "honor" and "obligation" would be meaningless.

At the very *end* of the book, in her postscript, Schlessinger finally makes brief mention of God, saying that:

"The concept of maintaining personal integrity even in the face of external insult, disappointment, rejection, or hurt is even dealt with in the Bible (Genesis 4:6-7)." (269)

Even in the Bible? Does it come as such a surprise to Schlessinger that her Creator would have something to say about

personal integrity? He is the only one who can *define* integrity and pour meaning into the concept.

After discussing God's confrontation of Cain, following the murder of his brother Abel, Schlessinger concludes that:

"It seems to me that God is teaching us that joy comes from doing 'right,' in spite of the reaction from or input by others, including God. God also reassures us that we do have the capacity to rise above circumstance and attain mastery over our weaker selves, attaining the nobility that has become *human* beings." (269)

The first sentence raises huge theological problems. God defines *right*. No one does what is biblically right "in spite of" God's reaction. Furthermore, we have no capacity to rise above anything at all apart from God's gracious intervention. Human beings are fallen, sinful. "Nobility," or rather glory, belongs to God alone. Humans are created in His image, but that image has been marred by sin. Schlessinger either ignores or rejects God's revealed plan of salvation, a plan which includes the glorious restoration of His image in fallen--or rather *redeemed*--man.

When Schlessinger introduces her latest book, she provides a description of sinful humanity:

"I know what you'd like. Be honest. Generally, you'd like to get your own way, get whatever you want, get back at anyone whom you perceive as having crossed you, get your dreams and fantasies to come true right now, get ahead with less sacrifice and effort, and get away with murder (figuratively, I hope)--all without any consequences or regrets. Such power." (1)

She goes on to say that such a life, lacking all concern for others, wouldn't really be so enjoyable, yet it's what many of us pursue (1). Meanwhile, much popular modern psychology, as well as her own clinical training, provides a neat set of excuses for a vast array of selfish behavior (2). Indeed it does, and it needs a solid critique. Schlessinger, however, needs a biblical view of human nature in order to provide an *accurate* critique. This she lacks. Her reaction disintegrates into an approach of "truth" without mercy or compassion. *Christians* must minister *God's* truth to one another, yet with humility, gentleness, kindness, mercy, and compassion because we're *all* sinners who have come short of the glory of God (Galatians 6:1-5). We *all* need His grace, His redemption provided in Christ. Responsibility is *before God*, and the ability to obey is graciously provided by Him through His sufficient Word and Spirit. Schlessinger's attitude is anything

but merciful, tender, or compassionate according to biblical standards.

With all this in mind, let us review how Schlessinger confronts "the challenges of Character, Courage, and Conscience" (6).

1. Character

In her call to morality, Schlessinger wants you to "elevate yourself to being truly human" (22), "a moral human, a special kind of animal who takes unique pride in elevating him/herself above the termites" (18). She emphatically rejects the "I'm only human" line that is often used as a protest against full responsibility:

"I see being 'human' as the unique opportunity to use our mind and will to act in ways that elevate us above the animal kingdom." (9)

Most of her callers, Schlessinger says, are hoping to avoid the consequences of their admittedly wrong actions (7), using various feelings as the excuse for their failures. Meanwhile, she laments the fact that popular psychology has elevated feelings to the level of "sacred ground," such that "nobody is acknowledged to have free will or responsibility anymore" (8). Giving in to emotions is equated with being "only human." Schlessinger speaks forcefully against the common tendency to seek gratification and pleasure at the expense of others, noting that "irresponsible freedom" leads actually to the *loss* of freedom (21).

Although believers would share this concern for personal responsibility and would agree that bondage results from self-centered living, we need to note here Schlessinger's unbiblical view of man as a product of evolution rather than having been created by a special act of God in His image. She claims that "natural selection did shape our minds and feeling," that "self-advancement and self-indulgence are powerful innate drives for personal status and pleasure" (9). Yet in spite of all that, she maintains there is "something extra special about the human mind" such that people are capable of decisions beyond "survival of the fittest" or "survival of the me" (9). There *is* something different about human beings. *Very* different! *Only man is the image of God, and only man has fallen into sin*, although that sin has consequences that impact the entire creation. Schlessinger has no *foundation* for her call to morality when she buys into the evolutionary worldview. That is one of her fundamental problems, though by no means the only one.

Character is defined by Schlessinger as "what you are when no one else is looking" (10). She claims that "it's profoundly satisfying to forgo immediate pleasures and benefit another person at some expense of the self," that "the acceptance and affection of others" is gained by doing so, in addition to satisfaction (10). As Christians, we must recognize this is a profoundly flawed motivation. *We live to glorify God, not to seek pleasure, acceptance, affection from either self or others.* Furthermore, there is never a time when "no one is looking," because God is always looking. In fact, He knows our hearts far better than we will ever know them ourselves (Jeremiah 17:10; Hebrews 4:12).

Schlessinger does note that character, integrity, and honesty do not always bring immediate rewards, and that immorality sometimes does bring fleeting rewards (12). Therefore, she concludes that "morality must be its own reward" (12). In Psalms 37 and 73, believers note that sometimes godless men prosper for awhile, and that faithfulness to God isn't necessarily rewarded right away in this life. But morality isn't "its own reward." Moral standards are given by God; they do not exist independently of Him as Schlessinger's conclusion would imply. *God* is personally faithful to His promises and to those who trust and love Him. The reward of intimacy with Him, both now and in eternity, infinitely surpasses the "morality is its own reward" offered by Schlessinger.

We need to recognize that Schlessinger has entered the realm of *religion* in her books and talk shows. She speaks of distinctly *religious* issues such as guilt, conscience (next section), and shame. In doing so she *competes* with Christianity, with *God*. Let's consider her definitions and see how they compare with Scripture.

Guilt is defined as "internal pain from the disappointment in self" (15). Biblically, guilt is defined by reference to God's standards, and the violation of them is called sin. Schlessinger omits God and leaves herself wide open because she has no *foundation* for defining guilt except in reference to self. Not a solid foundation! Internally defined standards vary widely due to man's sin.

Shame is supposedly "public awareness of our transgressions with the threat of condemnation and punishment" (15). In Scripture, it isn't "public awareness" before other *people*, but rather *before God*, that brings about shame. We see that clearly in the sin of the first man and woman.

What does Scripture have to say about **character**? There is hardly a better place to turn than the beginning of Romans 5. Once we are right with God through faith in Christ, He uses our trials to produce perseverance, which in turn produces *character*, which then leads to *hope*. How wonderfully superior that *hope* is

to the basically self-centered, do-it-yourself-for-yourself alternative promoted by Schlessinger!

2. Conscience

Schlessinger again appeals to the difference between human beings and other creatures:

"We are elevated above all other creatures because we have a moral sense: a notion of right and wrong and a determination to bring significance to our lives beyond mere existence and survival, by actions that are selfless and generous." (26)

Nevertheless, the author can't abandon her evolutionary view of man, believing that:

"Our animal instinct provides a powerful impetus toward both self-preservation and immediate gratification." (26)

Has Schlessinger really removed herself from the victimization culture she claims to hate? She can't consistently oppose it without admitting that man is created in the image of God for His glory, but fallen into sin.

Conscience in Schlessinger's terms is "our capacity to judge ourselves in moral terms and to conform to those standards and values that we make a part of our inner being" (15). Motivation supposedly includes "good feelings such as pride" (15). For children, conscience is "our internalized fear of losing our parents' love and support," for adults, "something we impose on ourselves in order to become complete human beings" (17). Again, there is no reference to God. Schlessinger's definition allows for any sort of self-imposed, individualized morality that sinful man may wish to invent. She has no basis for criticizing the moral values of her callers! This is a critical point. Not only is her lack of compassion abominable; so is her total lack of any basis for criticism. She's merely imposing *her* fallible moral standards onto the lives of others, based on the consequences rather than on faithfulness to God the Creator. Consider what she has to say about the judgment of others:

"This not judging others really gets me going. If, indeed, there shalt be no judging, then where do we get laws and basic rules of conduct upon which we can all be free and upon which we can count on each other?" (61)

Where indeed? Christians *know* the source of moral values. God is the ultimate Judge, the Judge of all the earth according to

Scripture. Where does Schlessinger come off imposing *her* standards (which don't happen to coincide with Scripture) on her callers? It is the height of arrogance to impose moral judgment on others based on one's own human, fallible moral standards. God *does* expect us to examine and evaluate behavior, but according to *His* standards. As Creator, He has the authority to determine right and wrong. We judge and respond in *humility* according to these divinely ordained standards, having compassion on others because we have *all* sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Interestingly, Schlessinger admits the following:

"Ironically, excuses by their very existence betray an awareness and acceptance of right and wrong." (26)

The implication here is that a standard of right and wrong does exist. Indeed it does! But once again, Schlessinger herself *has no basis for such a standard* within an evolutionary worldview where the God of Scripture is never given credit for establishing universal moral absolutes.

Actually, God's standards are far *higher* than those of Schlessinger. She considers a "basically good person" to be one whose wrong actions are followed by regret and remorse, while a "bad person" denies his wrongdoing and follows it with even more wrong (62). But God is *absolutely* righteous and holy. His standard is one that no sinful man can meet. Thankfully, however, Christ has satisfied divine justice on the cross and His righteousness is imputed to believers so that they are reckoned blameless in God's sight. This is much better news than the self-help program offered by Schlessinger!

Self-esteem is highlighted again, in contrast to biblical standards and motivations. Schlessinger rejects the notion that lack of self-esteem justifies irresponsible behavior. True, but she claims that "doing what you know to be morally correct right now" will lead to "a long-term positive feeling about the self" (28). Self-esteem is still the goal, and biblically it's the wrong one. We were created for the glory of God, not the glory of self. Self-esteem isn't the great goal of humanity.

Schlessinger doesn't buy *confusion* as a reason for being in a dilemma about what to do. She claims: "I think we always know the right thing to do" (29). Although there is *some* God-given sense of right and wrong, even in unbelievers (Romans 2:14-15), God's revelation (Scripture) about right and wrong is necessary for fallen man. Sometimes, so is godly instruction about how that revelation is to be applied to specific situations. At times, of course, a person may sinfully refuse to follow the instruction.

However, people do not have innate infallible knowledge of moral absolutes.

For Christians, it should be alarming to see how Schlessinger responded to a Christian caller, one entangled in a maze of sexual sin and overcome with guilt (33). She queried him as to *why* his religion did not condone sex outside marriage, and he answered (rightly) that it's *sin*. Schlessinger admittedly wasn't impressed, wishing that more pulpits would challenge their people "about their personal behaviors in the context of moral choices, which ultimately give dignity to fundamentally animal behaviors" (33). She *also* states that "no one these days is worried about...everlasting fire and brimstone" (33). Wait a minute! Schlessinger clearly has no concept of the *gospel*. There is everlasting destruction for those who reject it, but the *Christian* has assurance of everlasting life. This caller needed to be pointed back to his salvation, and to the hope and help God has graciously provided for him. *But even more tragic than Schlessinger's response is the fact that a Christian would be calling her in the first place!* Christians have largely abandoned mutual care and counsel within the church, sending people away to the unbiblical counsel of highly compensated "professionals." Let's hope and pray that this man eventually found a brother in Christ who could help him handle his sin--yes, he had the right word--biblically. Christians have *hope* and *answers* for sin. Schlessinger does not!

Another Christian caller, according to Schlessinger, couldn't face her "sexual orientation" as a homosexual, now about to be married and afraid to inform her fiancé about her past (39). Schlessinger insists that her homosexuality might become an issue in the future, stating that "there's no religion in the world that can protect you from you" (39). As Christians, we can agree that this woman should be honest with her future husband. However, the *gospel* does give hope for radical change, even for such sins as homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Again, this woman should be receiving godly counsel within the body of Christ. It is tragic that she would have to telephone an unbeliever to receive answers for questions that are fundamentally religious in nature.

The discussion deteriorates, and we see the true foundation of Schlessinger's morality, when she says that:

"Giving up on your values to hold on to somebody is truly a sin against the self." (45)

Self replaces God! It's *your* values here, not God's values, and it's sin against *self*, not sin against *God*, that Schlessinger condemns. So much for any biblical definition of conscience.

New Age openings. Schlessinger doesn't abandon "needs for personal security and comfort" as the wrong goals, but believes that too often they "serve as motivations for doing and tolerating wrong" (46). Believers need to question the legitimacy of these goals! Meanwhile, Schlessinger goes on to say:

"...if we don't get these needs met in healthy ways, we dig ourselves into an ever deepening ethical hole. Nor am I dismissing the intensity of emotional pain, but it is astonishing to me how little tolerance contemporary American has for enduring it. *This is where meditative or Eastern philosophies have a lot to offer.*" (46, emphasis added)

Make no mistake about it, this is a direct line into New Age religion. Note carefully, again, that we're in a *religious* arena. It isn't possible to talk about ethics, guilt, conscience, or character in a religiously neutral context. The Bible has much to say about human suffering and trials--God's purposes and how we can respond in a manner that glorifies Him. The Christian can respond to grievous trials with joy (see 1 Peter 1:6-9). Eastern religious techniques may dull the pain temporarily (but not eternally!), but such answers pale in comparison to the eternal joy of those who follow Christ. Schlessinger's option here is simply another cop-out, not so very different from the ones she condemns while claiming her own brand of moral excellence.

Scripture is by no means silent in the area of conscience. Romans 2:14-16 indicates that God has given man a conscience such that some minimum knowledge of His standards is inescapable. Believers are exhorted to maintain a clean conscience so that when others slander and revile them for their good behavior in Christ, they will be ashamed (1 Peter 3:16). The conscience may be seared by continued practice of sin (1 Timothy 4:2). In view of the coming resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, believers are to keep to a clear conscience *before God* (Acts 24:16). Schlessinger offers nothing better than a clear conscience *before self*, which can be utterly deceptive.

3. Courage

This important attribute, courage, is defined by Schlessinger as follows:

"Courage is...what gives values vibrancy. So many people espouse values about sex, abortion, honesty, etc., until the dilemma is theirs. Then, because of their particular circumstances, selfish needs, and uncomfortable feelings, the values become optional." (13)

Schlessinger distinguishes between the "best" way and the "right" way, the latter requiring greater sacrifice while the former may offer a compromise that leaves room for personal gratification (63). Meanwhile, what about *God's* way? Nothing said!

"Courage," for Schlessinger, may mean abandoning a *marriage* to someone who abuses drugs (64-66):

"When such foolishness is rationalized as right behavior, be aware it is most usually a way to hide from reality, from life, from your courageous self.... In leaving and being alone with yourself, you may discover a frightening truth: you didn't stay with the drug user/alcohol abuser/abuser/philanderer out of love or compassion. You stayed because those challenging realities seemed more difficult and painful to confront than the suffering over the user/abuser. Imagine that." (66)

Scriptural principles about divorce are evidently irrelevant to her. Sometimes it *is* right to remain married in such circumstances (see discussion on page 12 under "stupid forgiving").

Schlessinger cries out against making excuses for wrong behavior, saying that "right shouldn't need wrong's forgiveness," yet frequently "good people" seek excuses to explain away the behavior of those who hurt them (74). She argues for accountability and consequences, regardless of past or present circumstances (75). In a certain sense, we Christians can agree. Man is "without excuse" before God (Romans 1:20). This indictment includes Laura Schlessinger! We are all, every last one of us, responsible before God for our sin. But Schlessinger's message has no *grace*. God's message, the *gospel*, spells out the grim reality of sin but immediately follows with the glorious reality of the gospel, a message of pure *grace* for those who don't deserve it. Without excuse--but believers are reconciled, justified, reckoned righteous due to God's mercy and the awesome work of Christ. No wonder Schlessinger's message is so brutal. God's message is anything *but*!

Original sin. Schlessinger follows much aberrant modern theology when she gives this account of man's fall as the beginning of a courageous journey into moral freedom:

"When Adam and Eve were in the Garden they were not fully human because they made no choices between right and wrong, no value judgments, no issues of ethics or morality. Leaving Eden, though, meant becoming fully human, now having the capacity to choose to deny certain drives and cravings that

are deemed improper or inappropriate. Having the power to choose between good and evil is what makes human beings truly free." (93)

Schlessinger considers herself an orthodox Jew, but this quotation turns the Genesis account of the fall *upside down*. She echoes the teachings of atheist Erich Fromm,¹ who openly sides with the serpent and sees the exit from Eden as the beginning of man's radical freedom. Adam and Eve *did* make moral choices in that Garden! The biggest ethical issue of all time, the most significant choice between right and wrong, took place right there. The choice was sinful, and the results catastrophic for mankind. Man didn't gain freedom in his exit from Eden, he *lost* it, being enslaved to sinful choices in the centuries to come. Man's sinful choice has cosmic consequences for the entire creation. Only by God's gracious intervention, through the cross of Jesus Christ, is real freedom returned to those who trust Christ as Lord and Savior.

Moral courage is addressed in Scripture. The reverential fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10). God has not given us the spirit of fear, but rather of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). Believers are to trust and fear the Lord, not man (Jeremiah 17:5-8; Proverbs 29:25). They are to stand courageously for the cause of Christ, as He commanded (John 16:33). The apostles spoke boldly, even when faced with persecution, in order to declare God's mighty gospel message (Acts 4:31), and we are to do the same. Such courage far exceeds the substitute offered by Schlessinger, which finds its beginning and end in self.

Confession. The courage to confess sin (called "weakness, badness, selfishness, or evil" [95]) is a related topic that Schlessinger addresses when a former child molester calls her program. Although she is right to advocate confession, she can offer no grace, no forgiveness for the sinner. *But God does!* He assures us that when we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive *and* to cleanse us of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

4. Self-Respect vs. Feelings

Christians might be inclined to agree with Schlessinger's assessment when she says that:

"Years and years of pop psych have taught us to construct a monument to our feelings; to make them the cornerstone of our identity and choice of behaviors; to accept all feelings as

¹See Discernment's publication, "Blasphemy From Fromm."

okay and meaningful; to operate as though (inner) feelings accurately portrayed (outer) reality." (100)

However, an erroneous evolutionary view of human beings is quickly found lurking beneath the surface of her comments:

"Remember that feelings or emotions emanate from the more ancient, less evolved, lower part of the human brain, while thoughts are a product of our highly evolved, uniquely human, outer part of the brain." (101)

Biblically, the inner man (the "heart" in Scripture) encompasses thoughts *and* feelings, along with the will, desires, and other such invisible aspects. Neither the emotions nor the thoughts should be elevated. Freud exalts emotions; Ellis (Rational-Emotive Therapy) exalts the thoughts. Both are reductionistic and unbiblical. Scripture does place emphasis on sound doctrine and renewal of the *mind*, exhorting believers to act in accordance with God's commands whether or not they "feel like it." At the same time, passages such as we encounter in the Psalms reflect the *whole* person. A wide variety of emotions are attributed to *God* at many points in Scripture. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 2, admonishes the church to reaffirm love for a repentant brother so that he won't be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Emotions can be either godly or sinful. In ministry to others, there must be a biblical balance between truth and mercy, admonition and compassion. This we fail to find in Schlessinger.

One of Schlessinger's callers, in response to her attitude toward emotions, asks: "Why do I have feelings" (102). Her answer is that:

"Feelings are information that assists us, for example, in preservation as an individual (fear of a snarling bear makes you run/hide/defend self) and as a member of a group (shame makes us avoid behaviors that would lead to peer/community rejection).... Feelings are inner experiences, subjective emotional reactions, that are factored into making decisions about behaviors." (102)

Feelings do give us information...often about our sinful hearts, desires, and idols. Feelings may show us that we're serving the creation (perhaps self) rather than the Creator. Emotions are one aspect of the image of God, since God is represented in Scripture as having emotions. Because of our fallen nature, some feelings are sinful while others are godly. Feelings should neither be exalted nor ignored. Psychology tends to one extreme or the other. Schlessinger's extreme tends toward a harsh lack of

compassion, while the extreme represented by John Bradshaw enthrones feelings as the "real you."

It sounds *almost* biblical when the author tells us that emotional self-absorption hinders us from caring about others:

"When we're preoccupied with our own needs, it's inevitable that we have less time, attention, and energy for others."
(107)

"A twist on the 'no feelings before mine' is when you discount the feelings of others under your rule--that if you don't agree with their feelings, or if their feelings don't make sense to you, their feelings have no validity." (118)

We do need to examine our own hearts and motives under the powerful searchlight of Scripture. What Schlessinger omits here is any reference to God. The Bible exhorts us to *first of all* love the Lord with our whole being, *then* to love others as much as we already love ourselves (self-love being assumed here, not commanded). Only when we love and obey God is it possible to biblically love others and demonstrate concern for their welfare.

We can see Schlessinger's focus on self, which is ever as strong as those she opposes, when she identifies "the crux of the feelings issue" as self-esteem (140). She disagrees with the unconditional brand of self-esteem promoted by so many others in her profession. She also rejects a self-esteem based on qualities such as intelligence and attractiveness, because such attributes are "due to a lucky throw of the genetic dice" rather than earned through one's actions (141).

First of all, qualities such as intelligence and beauty have nothing to do with any throw of "genetic dice," but are gifts given by God, the Creator. Schlessinger fails to give God the thanks due to Him (Romans 1:21). Meanwhile, self-esteem is not a biblical goal. Rather, we are to esteem *others* ahead of self (Philippians 2:3) and live our lives for Christ, who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:15). Psychology, in its never-ending focus on self-esteem, makes one of the following two errors:

1. Self-esteem or self-worth is substituted for the biblical view of *salvation*, so that we have "self-worth" by grace, apart from works, instead of *salvation* by grace apart from works. This view is promoted by the Rapha psychiatric clinics.

2. Self-esteem is substituted for salvation in an unbiblical, works-righteous view such as Paul refutes in

Galatians. Here, self-esteem is earned through human works rather than given by God's grace. This is Schlessinger.

Neither of these views is biblical. Both are serious distortions of the Christian gospel. Salvation is a free gift of God's grace. Those who have received that free gift are to live for God's glory, according to God's standards, not for self.

Schlessinger concludes this section with the following:

"It's when you blend feelings with a major dose of courage, conscience, and rational thought that you connect to the most self-respectful aspects of your humanity." (142)

Believers need the courage to witness for Christ regardless of unjust persecution. They need to maintain a clean conscience according to God's standards of right and wrong. They are to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), being renewed in their minds (Romans 12:2). However, none of this connects to any "self-respectful aspects of your humanity." Rather, these actions all bring honor and glory to Christ our Lord. Don't be deceived by Schlessinger's moral sounding terms. What she teaches has no reference to God, but is merely a humanistic program of self-salvation. Respect for *self* replaces reverence for *God*.

5. Morals and Values

Schlessinger calls values a "blueprint for your life" (144), explaining that:

"Using 'values' to determine your next move is simply practical. Abdicating values to whim, immediate gratification, or voluntarily subjugating yourself to someone else's whim or gratification in order to stay 'attached' generally leads to destructive behaviors." (143-144)

Values are defined by Schlessinger as "principles and ideas that bring meaning to the seemingly mundane experiences of life" (145). Values are focused on "ethics, virtue, and morality," therefore bringing clarity to difficult choices (145).

Rebellion. Schlessinger calls rebellion:

"...a quick and dirty technique for standing out, as opposed to working hard at becoming someone special. It isn't really about becoming unique by efforts and commitment; it's about using the statement 'everyone else is full of it' to define yourself." (146)

The author notes that rebellion often occurs "during the transition to adulthood," a time when many "attempt to try out life without the constraints of the seemingly oppressive rules of their families, churches/temples, and society" (147).

Biblically, rebellion is at the root of man's fall into sin. Sin is man's rebellion against God. Schlessinger's definition is seriously lacking. Rebellion is *far more serious* than some psychological attempt to be unique!

Pragmatic values. Schlessinger errs in attempting to establish values apart from God, primarily for pragmatic reasons:

"Values not only make sense, they literally save people unnecessary pain....when I ask callers why they follow the rules learned from their parents or religion, I rarely get back the 'pragmatic intent' of the rule, just that they were taught the rule. Perhaps it is in teaching these rules without stressing practicality along with spirituality that some families and religious disciplines go wrong." (149)

At various points throughout her work, Schlessinger appears to view religion (Christian or otherwise) as a set of "rules" rather than a living relationship with one's Creator. The concept of grace is totally absent. It's true that obedience to God's commands results ultimately in blessing (even if not in this life), but that's never the primary biblical basis for such obedience. The Christian is united with Christ in His death and resurrection (Romans 6), set free from the power and penalty of sin. The Christian loves the Lord and wants to obey Him. Pragmatism doesn't always work out so neatly, and it certainly isn't biblical.

Values and temptations. Schlessinger quotes a couple of callers who planned to remain virgins until marriage but were struggling with that commitment. She notes that "values don't function like an automatic, invisible protective shield" but they "keep us steady through times of deep temptation" (151). Furthermore:

"Values only have the power you infuse into them with your respect for them and yourself, and your will. Values without temptations are merely lofty ideas. Expediting them is what makes you, and them, special. That requires grit, will, sacrifice, courage, and discomfort. But it is in the difficulty that both the values and you gain importance. The measure of you as a human being is how you honor the values." (152)

However, *biblical* values do not exist in a void, apart from God. God is *personal*, and He is the Creator of ultimate moral values. We honor *Him* by honoring the values *He* created. God tempts no one; rather, we are tempted by our sinful desires (James 1:13-14). However, He uses trials to test and strengthen our faith so that we might grow in godliness (James 1:2-5). The temptations that we face are common to man, but God faithfully provides the way of escape with each one (1 Corinthians 10:13). Schlessinger does not set values within the context of God's sovereignty and faithfulness.

The image of God. Schlessinger repeatedly notes the distinction between man and animals. This time, the difference is grounded on the ability to make choices:

"Whenever choices are made morality is immediately an issue. A lion kills a baby antelope because it is driven by instinct to do so. There is no choice involved, therefore there is no right and wrong about the deed. However, when human beings act it is always a moral issue: right or wrong, noble or cowardly, compassionate or selfish." (156)

A few pages later she indicates that pursuit of "rights," apart from responsibility, leads to a loss of "humanness," resulting in a drop into "animal" behavior (187).

Yes, humans *do* make moral choices, and lions do not. What Schlessinger fails to note, however, is *why*. Humans, and only humans, are created in the image of God. We honor God when we honor His image in other persons by treating them honorably, according to God's standards revealed in Scripture. When we sin, we do not cease to be human. At the fall, man retained the image of God in a sense (ability to make moral decisions, rationality), yet lost it in the sense of moral excellence. We do not drop to an "animal" level of existence when we sin. The reason that human sin is so very serious is that it dishonors God's image--something "animal" behavior can never do.

Values, judgments, and therapy. The practice of psychotherapy frequently attempts neutrality. The non-directive "client-centered" style of Carl Rogers, for example, assumes the goodness of human nature and refuses to give direction. Schlessinger rejects such an approach, clearly wanting to inject values into therapy. She states that:

"Too much inappropriate behavior is done in the name of 'psychological problems.'" (162)

She doesn't move very far from the victimization she criticizes when she claims that many destructive behaviors are "attempts to

belatedly and inappropriately deal with childhood pain" (162). Nevertheless, she believes that a good therapist should help a client acknowledge the "wrongness" of her present actions, in order to help that person out of his misery (164). That therapist, she says, ought to introduce "'principles,' i.e., values and basic morals (issues of right and wrong actions) into the therapeutic process," holding the individual accountable rather than to repeatedly "forgive them their continuing transgressions because they 'hurt'" or focusing forever on psychological explanations (164). She explains that "pain and fears are not licenses to hurt others" (163). Rather:

"True freedom from the self-imposed tyranny of the past will be to use courage to get her important, and very human, needs met in healthier, more creative ways." (163)

Notice here that Schlessinger, like those she criticizes, places a premium on psychologically perceived "needs," assuming that such "needs" are necessarily legitimate.

In addition, Schlessinger emphatically rejects the "don't-judge-others" position:

"Judgments are absolutely necessary. Without them, the issue of choice has no meaning because everything is equal." (174)

"Frankly, it never ceases to amaze me how blind some people wish to be about their actions, as though their search for happiness and comfort precluded the right of judgment against them. Interestingly, they don't seem to give up their judging of others." (175)

Schlessinger's manner of judging others is one that involves shunning those who have wronged another person (178, 180). It also involves erasure of the common distinction between the "bad person" and the "bad deed" (184), since "our actions describe our inner selves" (185).

Some of this bears a superficial similarity to biblical principles (highlight *superficial*, however). In giving godly counsel to another person, it is indeed necessary to consider issues of right and wrong--values. It is necessary to make judgments about that other person's behavior and to respond--*biblically!*--out of concern for the welfare of the other. The Rogerian non-directive approach is distinctly unbiblical. However, it is *God's* directives that must reign. *Anything else is sheer arrogance!* It is no wonder that Schlessinger's attitude is perceived as harsh. She imposes *her* standards of morality, rather than humbly upholding *God's* standards.

It is also necessary to note, biblically, that we *sin because we are sinners*. What Schlessinger cannot offer, in her "bad deed = bad person" analysis, is God's grace. Everything depends on self, on your own will and efforts, in her scheme. Biblically, however, we are saved by God's grace, and by that same grace we are enabled to live godly lives that honor our Lord. The difference is profound. Schlessinger's way leads ultimately to despair. God's way, grounded in His mercy and Christ's righteousness, gives hope and life--eternal life.

6. Integrity, Honor, and Loyalty

Schlessinger begins this section with a question that many Christians would applaud:

"Is your word your bond? Do you meet your obligations? Do you stand true to your vows?" (191)

God is faithful to *His* promises, so those who bear His name should also demonstrate faithfulness. Wedding vows are a particular example of promises to be kept. The believer, above all else, must be faithful to *God*.

Schlessinger notes that "your commitment to honor is tested daily through temptations and seductive opportunities" (192). Indeed, temptations to *sin* are commonly encountered.

A red flag is raised when we notice Schlessinger's definition:

"Honor and integrity are what you are when no one knows, no one sees, and no one hears." (229)

"Honor, or integrity, is the personal moral code you impose on yourself as a means of becoming more fully human. It is more animal to compete to win with no regard for context." (194, emphasis added)

But *God* always knows, always sees, always hears. This last quote is reminiscent of the closing words of Judges, a time period of intense moral decline in ancient Israel: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judge 21:25). Instead of calling her listeners back to *God's moral code* (in Scripture), and His graciousness in enabling believers to live by it, Schlessinger merely advocates a self-imposed moral code. In such a scenario, anything and everything may be "moral," depending on the individual and his "personal moral code"! Schlessinger defeats her own purposes here.

The author warns against expecting all your dreams to come true as the result of your integrity:

"I cannot promise you that goodness will get you your dreams. But I can assure you that integrity is its own reward if what you're seeking is spiritual peace, a quality life, and quality relationships." (194)

In fact, acting honorably may bring actually negative consequences at times. What Schlessinger promises in return for the sacrifice is self-respect (208). However, while it sounds almost biblical to say that "integrity is its own reward," seeking *self-respect* isn't a biblical goal. The believer seeks to honor *God*, not self. Faithfulness to a self-imposed morality may lead to a tentative "self-respect," but faithfulness to *God* leads to *His* glory, not ours.

Schlessinger's evolutionary view of man emerges yet again, this time in relationship to moral choices:

"The lower you go on the evolutionary scale, the less behavior is deliberate, therefore issues of morality are largely irrelevant; morality requires choice. Choice may embrace honor--*may*. It is in the quality of choices we make that we aspire to the title 'human.'" (212-213)

Once again, it is necessary to point out man's creation in the image of God. Man is not a highly evolved animal! It is because of the image of God that moral choices are so very serious, in fact much *more* serious than Schlessinger ever admits. She sees only the human, temporary consequences and promotes pragmatism. In Scripture we see the eternal consequences, particularly for unbelief. However, we also see God's gracious plan of salvation. Because of His abundant mercy, believers know He has saved them from consequences they rightly deserve for their sinful choices. Schlessinger knows nothing of God's grace.

In Scripture, *faithfulness* is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, one of the qualities that grows from abiding in Him as a believer. Even more, *God's* faithfulness and lovingkindness are eternal (Psalm 100:5). His character defines faithfulness. Schlessinger's concept of a self-imposed "moral code" falls far short of the biblical view in this important area.

7. Principles and Decisions

This final chapter culminates Schlessinger's discussion with a focus on making decisions:

"Perhaps, in a curious way, the prior chapters are but a prologue to this chapter, for ultimately all the highfalutin talk about philosophy, values, morals, and conscience is reduced to that moment of truth when you choose an action, or inaction." (233)

"Everything you do is by conscious choice. Choices are between options. All options are not equal in their potential outcomes, much less inherent value." (265)

Schlessinger emphatically rejects the increasingly popular view of man as a victim. Instead, she insists that *everyone always* "has a choice between personal and professional integrity and selling it out" (234). She recommends decisions based on "the most probable consequences" (259). Noting that "we have become a nation of excuses and victims," she summarizes her assessment of that situation:

"Understanding inequities and evils should motivate actions of rectification, but suggesting that history is destiny and that individuals are created by their pasts is an insult to the capacity of human beings to overcome. The implication is that there is no individual responsibility to overcome. I think there is. Everyone must overcome something. That simply is life." (252)

Furthermore, she expresses astonishment that so many "repetitive destructive behaviors" have been reconstructed as "disease" or "addiction" (253). Such transformation tends to feed insurance companies and relieve guilt (254), but in the meantime, pain can be a strong motivation for change (255). Schlessinger repeatedly opts for personal power to effect change:

"You can choose to try to lubricate yourself through life, skimming along on the top of a shallow pond, with food, drugs, sex, or you can choose to have a life of meaning, value, and goodness." (255)

Even though the price may be high, the internal rewards for honorable decisions are great:

"Choosing personal and professional integrity never brings with it a great internal price: shame, guilt, regret, and self-loathing." (234)

Note carefully that the focus remains on *self*. Schlessinger's counsel is faithfulness to *self*, to avoid *self-loathing* and other

"internal" consequences. Nothing here about being a faithful servant to God.

In exploring the question of why decisions are nevertheless agonizing, Schlessinger offers an explanation which is equally self-oriented. She notes, for example, "the innate need of people to belong" (235), and cites examples of how people have behaved dishonorably in view of their allegiance to a group.

On the other side of the issue, the "determination to be human...in the spiritual sense that elevates us to a plane higher than the tangibles of reward and loss" (237), is cited as the prime motivation for honorable behavior in spite of consequences and fears. Schlessinger mentions briefly "the image of God," which she defines as "qualities to emulate" (241) without elaborating on the biblical account of actual *creation*. She notes that cultures, families, and *religions* all have rules (241), and that:

"Ultimately, individuals internalize these edicts of right and good and perhaps holy. That is their conscience.... When one's conscience is ignored or bypassed...there is hell to pay both internally (guilt) and externally (shame and/or the law)." (241)

Guilt, according to Schlessinger, is an internal feeling experienced only by "good people" (241).

Biblically, conscience is *God-given*, not an internalization of a particular set of rules derived from other humans. It is because the God of Scripture exists, and sets absolute moral standards, that people created in His image have consciences. *Guilt* is not an internal emotion (contrary to modern psychology), but is a fact defined in reference to God's revealed standards. There are no "good people." All have sinned and turned away from God (Romans 3:10-18). We are fully and individually responsible for our sin, contrary to the popular victimization psychology. Yet God is gracious in sending Christ to die for our sins and reconciling believers to Himself. Furthermore, Christianity is not another set of "rules," but is a relationship with the living resurrected Lord.

Schlessinger's misguided morality is brightly highlighted in an account of a letter she received from a female homosexual. She believes that female homosexuals should not deliberately become pregnant but should be allowed to adopt children, since a two-woman home would (supposedly) be preferable to no home at all (244-245). When an angry woman retaliates in a letter, Schlessinger considers the "best interests of the child" in terms of being "condemned in the planning to not having a hands-on daddy," and lack of adequate socialization (245). She clearly

states that "this is not an anti-women or anti-lesbian statement; this is a pro-child statement" (246).

The Bible is clear that homosexuality is *sin*. (Not a sin beyond the power of Christ to redeem, however! See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.) Schlessinger is not at all clear on the issue. She implicitly allows for homosexuality as an acceptable option, but draws the line when a child is impacted. Christians would be equally concerned (actually *more* concerned!) about a child growing up in a homosexual home, but the biblical line is much sharper. Schlessinger has her own "personal moral code," and that's all. It isn't *God's* standards she advocates for her callers, but rather her own.

Scripture is clear about personal responsibility for decisions and actions. Schlessinger's views are thus appealing to many believers, particularly in a culture so saturated with victim thinking. At the same time, unbelievers are *enslaved* to sin. Their choices are *limited*. Divine intervention is absolutely necessary to set any person free from the penalty and power of sin. We need to give hope by pointing to the gracious, mighty power of God to deliver from the bondage of sin. Schlessinger offers only the power of self, not the power of *God*. There's a call to action without the *power* for action. Ultimately, her road leads to despair.

Conclusion

On the closing page, Schlessinger speaks of death, uncertainty, loss, tragedy, threat, conflict, aloneness, and rejection, claiming that none of these are "a punishment or a curse or bad luck," that "you haven't been cosmically selected" (268). These things simply "happen," and according to Schlessinger, they are a natural part of life (268).

But the Bible says something entirely different. None of these are simply "natural." Because of the sin of the first man Adam, who represented all of humanity, death entered the world and spread to all men (Romans 5:12-21). Man's sin impacted all of creation, and so does his redemption (Romans 8:22-23). Without a biblical view of sin, life can't make sense. Throughout the Scripture, we also see how God sovereignly uses even the worst of evils (note the crucifixion!) to accomplish His good purposes. He *causes* all things to work together for good in the lives of those who love Him and are called by Him according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). Bad things don't simply "happen." They can be traced to man's sin, yet are gloriously used by God for His purposes. We often don't understand exactly *how*, but we know that God is good and that He is faithful. In Christ, He has given us salvation from our sin--something not one of us deserves. The

hope we enjoy as believers infinitely surpasses the rather meaningless view of trials, and self-oriented "salvation," advocated by Schlessinger.

We must, indeed, call one another to responsibility and God-honoring action. However, we do so according to God's revealed standards in Scripture, with *humility* and gentleness, never arrogance or brutality. We are to encourage, exhort, admonish, and love one another fervently from the heart, all so that we can glorify God our Savior, who has graciously delivered us from the eternal consequences of our sin. Schlessinger can't even begin to match that hope!

© **1996, Christian Discernment Publications Ministry, Inc.**
www.christiandiscernment.com