ET-659 Understanding Moral Blinders: Why Good People Make Bad Decisions

Winter/Spring 2011  Dr. Michael Rion

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Course Syllabus

Brief Course Description

“What were they thinking?” It’s what we often ask ourselves when people do something obviously wrong and obviously self-defeating. Examples abound in public life from politicians to financial officers to disgraced leaders of major nonprofits to failed religious leaders. Why do people who ought to know better do the wrong thing and, in many cases, fail to recognize fully what and that they did wrong? Why do people make bad decisions? Can we learn to avoid their mistakes? The answers to these questions are the focus of the course. One theological answer is self-deception that epitomizes the problem of sin. We will look at a variety of specific ways we stumble into self-deception including rationalization, indifference, arrogance, misplaced loyalty and unchallenged organizational/cultural assumptions. A combination of readings from a variety of disciplines (e.g., ethics, theology, cognitive science, organizational leadership, etc.) along with numerous examples (including those of the class participants) will inform lively class discussion as we work together to sharpen our recognition of blinders and consider how to help others and ourselves to avoid them.

Learning Goals

1. Recognize the rich variety of mechanisms that lead people in public and private life to act in ethically irresponsible ways.
2. Assess these mechanisms from a variety of perspectives in order to deepen your understanding of how these blinders may affect your own actions and those of your congregation members.
3. Identify specific ways that we can overcome moral blinders and reflect on how you might incorporate these strategies into your own ministry.
Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments

(NOTE: Articles and Rion manuscript are available on the course website.)

January 25: Course Introduction, Examples of Moral Blinders

Read IN ADVANCE OF THE FIRST CLASS either

Titan (biography of John D. Rockefeller) by Ron Chernow (New York: Random House, 1998), at least the following selections: pages xix-xxii, 3-13, 48-117, 129-155, 249-269, 455-479, 553-559, 567-570, 663-676

OR


AND

Chapter 1 “Introduction,” Rion manuscript “What Were They Thinking? Understanding Moral Blinders”

February 15 Self Deception and Rationalization


Rion manuscript, chapters 2 and 7.
March 8  Indifference and Hubris


Rion manuscript, chapters 3 and 4.

March 29  Misplaced Loyalty and Unchallenged Assumptions


Rion manuscript chapters 5 and 6.

April 26  Positive Disciplines: Breaking Through the Blinders


Rion manuscript, review chapter 7 and read chapter 8.
Requirements and Assessment

1. Complete all reading assignments
2. Participate actively in class discussion
3. For the **March 8** class, come prepared to share one example of moral blinders in the biblical tradition or from other sacred texts
4. Volunteer for one class to present a brief example of moral blinders from recent news events
5. Develop a course project in consultation with the instructor, e.g., a paper exploring in more depth one of the moral blinders, a sermon and adult education module appropriate to your setting, etc. We will schedule the planning of this early in the course and each student will be expected to share her/his project during the last class (this may be a preliminary summary). The completed project will be due no later than **May 10**.

Attendance Policy

With only 5 classes, missing even one session poses challenges to your learning and to meeting the course requirements. If you must miss a class due to extenuating circumstances, please let me know as soon as possible. We will work out a “make-up” assignment or session. If you miss more than one class, you and I will meet with the Dean to determine if you can fulfill the requirements of the course.

Office Hours

I will always be available before class by appointment and after class as needed. In addition, you can contact me at any time by email to ask questions or to arrange a telephone conversation or face-to-face appointment at a mutually convenient time. My email is **michael.rion@sbcglobal.net**.