

"Moral Mixup"

There was a Sunday School teacher who always pointed out the moral in every lesson. One day she was sick, and wasn't there, and a substitute teacher led the class. One of the little boys in the class came home and told his mother that they had a different teacher. The mom asked him how he liked her. He replied, "I liked her fine, but she didn't have any morals."

Have you ever thought, "Do people have any morals today? Some of the stuff that goes on?"

Traditional moral values have been cast aside, questioned, or even ridiculed. In today's American culture marriage is no longer just between a man and a woman; living together, even having children, and then (perhaps some day) getting married, has become the norm; gangs of looters and shoplifters go unpunished, so that even big stores like Walmart and Target decide to close and move out of that community; those who take out student loans argue that they shouldn't have to pay them back.

Things that were considered wrong not too many years ago are now regarded by many as being acceptable. Time-tested values once revered are now cast aside in the name of "progress". In some ways, what was once regarded as right is no longer right, and what was regarded as wrong is no longer wrong.

But you know what? All of this is nothing new. Centuries ago the prophet Isaiah spoke to his generation, and particularly to God's own covenant people, and saw *them* in a sea of moral confusion. They couldn't tell the difference between right and wrong. They were mixed up morally! God spoke through Isaiah, and said this: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" (Isaiah 5:20). The Common English Bible has it, "*Doom* to those who call evil good and good evil." Doom! That can't be good!

I preached a sermon on this text 30 years ago. As I began that sermon I said this: "Many people today are shaking their heads and wondering whether our generation has any morals. There's a great deal of confusion over what's right and what's wrong. Some things that 30 years ago, even 10 years ago, were considered wrong are commonplace today...do moral values change? Is one old fashioned and out of touch to hang on to yesterday's standards and values?" Then, in that sermon, I mentioned how I had recently had a conversation with a lady, and she was talking about the young people she knows, who think nothing of sleeping with one another. She said, "Maybe I'm just old-fashioned, but I just don't believe in that." Then she went on to ask, "What do you think?" How did I answer her? I said, "Yes, I believe this is wrong, too."

I said back then to the congregation I told this lady I thought it was wrong, even at the risk of people thinking I'm just old-fashioned, or I'm against sex – I'm all for sex in marriage! Now, 30 years later, to say that it's wrong to have sex before marriage, it's like, "Man, you are *really* out of touch!" If things were kind of crazy back in 1982, what about now! "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

Are there things that are inherently right and things that are inherently wrong? Yes, I think so. Now I realize that many ethical decisions can be complex and many faceted, with a lot of "gray"

areas. And I don't think I'm ethically naïve – I've studied situation ethics and contextualism. And I'm certainly not saying that *everything* is bad about today's morals: we've made progress in many areas: human rights, racial and gender equality, voting rights, environmental concerns, and more. But there are moral laws that transcend time and culture. And life tends to fall apart when we do what's wrong, and life tends to hold together when we do what's right.

Some years ago there was a lot of focus on what was called the "New Morality". It was a popular subject when I was in theological seminary. During that time United Methodist bishop, Gerald Kennedy, gave a series of lectures on evangelism, with one lecture entitled "Morality". Bishop Kennedy began that lecture with these words: "I want to talk about the gospel and morality. I would talk about the 'new morality' if I understood it, but I will just stay with morality in general, which I do not think is either new or old but eternal."

Who, if anyone, sets the standards of morality? Are there moral laws that transcend whatever ethics a culture develops or laws we may put on the books?

Scripture says that God our Creator has built into the fabric of life a sense of right and wrong. In Romans, chapters 1 and 2, the Apostle Paul relates how human nature has become corrupted and we have been alienated from God. God has shown something of His nature through His creation, but we didn't honor God: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened" (Romans 1:18-21).

Even before the Law was given to the Jews, people instinctively knew the difference between good and evil, right and wrong. "When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do *instinctively* what the law requires, these, though not have the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is *written on their hearts*, to which *their own conscience* bears witness" (Romans 2:14-15a). Notice, "written on their hearts", "their own conscience". In other words, there are fixed moral laws that God has built into life, and people instinctively sense this. Isn't there something that tells us instinctively that to walk up to someone and just take what belongs to them is wrong? To deliberately lie to someone is wrong? To kill someone just because you're angry at them is wrong?

Now, as individuals, or collectively – as a culture, or nation – we can choose to ignore these divine laws, and set our own rules for life. I keep coming back to a verse in the Book of Judges – the last verse of that Old Testament Book – that describes a certain time in Israel's history: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). And if you read what happened in that time of moral confusion, when people decided for themselves what was right and what was wrong, horrible things took place, and people did awful things to one another.

I am concerned that as our American culture becomes more secular, and drifts (or races) further and further away from traditional moral values, that the words of the prophet Isaiah will be fulfilled: "Woe to those (doom to those) who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

Isaiah continues His message to God's people. Later on, in Isaiah, chapter 5, the prophet puts his finger on the problem. God's people have "rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 5:24).

Any individual or society can find healing and hope when we honor the divine laws God has built into life. A good place to start is the Ten Commandments. Donald Coggin, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, said, "A sick society can become healthy only when it starts living by some rules again. There's a lot to be said for the Ten Commandments."

"Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). God's intention for us is to honor parents. In some states, or school districts, if a boy wishes to be called by a girl's name, or a girl wants to be called by a boy's name, a teacher must do that, but cannot tell their parents. Children are allowed to have gender changing surgery, without notifying their parents. I'm thinking if this had happened to our sons or daughter when they were in school, my level of anger would have soared off the charts!

"You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). A divine law to preserve the wholeness and integrity of marriage and sexuality. Justin Ruppel was a contestant on America's Got Talent. He is a voice impressionist. But he also (kind of proudly) revealed that he is "Poly-Amorous". He and his wife of 15 years met another woman, and they "fell in love" with their partner Clair, and the three of them have been living together for 4 years. The camera focused on these two smiling women, and *the audience clapped*. Movie actress, Jacqueline Bisset, once received praise instead of criticism when she said, "I don't know anyone who has been faithful. In fact, I don't know anyone who wants to be faithful."

Who determines right from wrong? Jacqueline Bisset? Justin Ruppel and his two lovers? Those in the America's Got Talent audience? Or the Lord God Almighty?

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Don't lie. Be truthful. In one town I served, a neighbor (also a church member) told me a way to get premium channels on cable without having to pay. (Cable companies have since found a way to detect this). He was doing it. I tried, and it worked. I continued it for a while. But I knew it was wrong. Ashamed of myself, I stopped it.

We can go on with the Ten Commandments, but you get the point. *And even more to the point, we have the words and life of Jesus against which to measure what is right, what is wrong.* The prophet Amos had a vision of God, holding a plumb line: "And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel'" (Amos 7:8). A plumb line is a string or cord with a weight, to indicate vertical straightness. There is an accurate, divine standard against which all

our laws and rules and conduct is measured. There are certain things that are morally right, no matter what an individual or society or legislature or court may say.

A United Methodist publication called *Inquiry, A Search for Faith*, lists certain things considered sinful acts of disobedience against God. This list includes: injustice to the poor and the oppressed, bribery in the courts, special privileges for the rich and rulers, sexual immoralities of all varieties, idolatries (worshiping things), deceitful behavior, superficial worship divorced from honest living. It goes on: "The entire Bible is very consistent in specifying these areas as displeasing to God. They are more than human errors of judgment or squeamish legalisms but are drastic sins against God and result in a serious dislocation of our relationship to God and man."

This is another one of those sermons that is not easy to preach! But we are living in a time - at least in our American culture - when traditional values are not only being abandoned, they are being mocked and ridiculed. There is a tremendous need for people to have the courage to stand up for the time-tested, divinely inspired laws that bring wholeness to life and society. To not be intimidated. To let our voice be heard. We need *leaders* who have the courage to do the same!

Pope John Paul II once made a comment that husbands must not lust after their wives. He was bombarded with criticism from many sides. A syndicated religious columnist at the time, George Plagenz, wrote about the Pope's comment: "I agree...the pope should not have made that remark. But I do not agree with those who land hard on John Paul II for what they call his 'hopelessly outdated views on American lifestyles.' Are we really looking for a spiritual leader who will endorse our current lifestyles which include sexual permissiveness and bargain-basement divorces? My feeling is that what we need – and ought to want – is somebody we can look up to who will tell us what we surely must already be starting to suspect – that the substitutes we have found for the old-fashioned morality are not making us any happier, and in many cases are making us (and our children) miserable."

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Community United Methodist Church
May 21, 2023

