

Preaching Morality in an Amoral Age

How can you blow the whistle when people don't believe there are rules?

An article by Timothy Keller

I was in the midst of a series on the Seven Deadly Sins, and today it was time to talk about Lust. This is a difficult subject for any pastor, but preaching in my milieu, the middle of Manhattan, to a group composed roughly equally of non-Christians, new Christians, and renewing Christians, poses an even greater problem.

Although we meet in a large auditorium, certain faces were easy to pick out. There was Phoebe, whose red-rimmed eyes still bore testimony to her week of crying. Her boyfriend had broken up with her when he discovered she had been sleeping with another man and another woman, in a *ménage à trois*. She told me, "But what we have is so beautiful. How can it be wrong?"

Laurel's face was a complete contrast—a new Christian, she was eager as a puppy dog. This week she and her husband had brought her former lesbian lover and the woman's current partner to church, promising, "It's really different—you'll see!"

Further back was Fred. He had been brought up attending church and Christian schools, but he moved to New York to get away from family and friends. "I couldn't breathe with all their rules and expectations about how I should live, who I should date, whether I could go to an R-rated movie or not. I had to get away somewhere where no one knew me and I could live however I wanted." Fred's freedom hadn't turned out as well as he had hoped, however, and now he was depressed and angry.

They had all been in my office that week, and now their eyes were turned expectantly toward me. What could I say that would be helpful, compassionate, and, above all, faithful to the Word of God?

Understanding our amoral age

The contemporary preacher of orthodox Christianity faces an unprecedented dilemma. Despite what you would think from a casual perusal of any video store, bookstore, or magazine rack, we do not live in an immoral society—one in which right and wrong are clearly understood and wrong behavior is chosen. We live in an amoral society—one in which "right" and "wrong" are categories with no universal meaning, and everyone "does what is right in his or her own eyes."

Whether things are worse today than in other periods from an objective point of view—more sins committed, more laws broken—is debatable. But an amoral age presents a problem for preachers who want to expound faithfully God's Word on ethics, morality, and behavior.

In the early twentieth century, skeptics rejected Christianity because it wasn't true—"miracles cannot be." Today, skeptics reject Christianity because it even claims to be true—"absolutes cannot be." Modernity (the mindset of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) said that moral absolutes could be discovered only by human reason and research. Postmodernity now says there are no moral absolutes to

discover.

How did we get to this? In the fifties and sixties, the existentialism of Camus and Sartre began to collapse confidence in human reason and progress by teaching that truth and morality were completely relative and individually constructed. Today's postmodernity (also led by French thinkers, such as Derrida and Foucault) teaches that truth and morality are socially constructed by groups. In short: "No set of cultural beliefs can claim logical superiority over another set because all such beliefs are motivated by subjective interests."

In this view, all "truths" and "facts" are now in quotation marks. Claims of objective truth are really just a cover-up for a power play. Those who claim to have a story true for all are really just trying to get power for their group over other groups.

In the past, Christian moral absolutes were seen as simply narrow or old-fashioned. But today they are seen as oppressive and even violent.

In America this amoral society is only now arriving in its fullness. Baby boomers were supposedly the first relativistic generation, but most boomers were raised in traditional religion. The next generation is making the sea change. Their understanding is the new hard relativism of identity politics.

In such a new and confusing situation, what is a Christian preacher to say?

Truth, not pragmatism

I have found we must guide our preaching between two dangers—pragmatism and moralism—if the radical and fresh Christian message is to be understandable to today's hearers.

The first danger is pragmatism.

I think of Joseph, one of our first and most enthusiastic new converts. Joe announced his new allegiance to Christ to his employees and decreed that henceforth the company's business practices would conform to Christian morality. At a Madison Avenue advertising agency, this was a courageous and potentially suicidal choice. No more lying to clients or the public, no billing of hours not actually worked, no shirking responsibility or blameshifting for failure—it was a recipe for disaster.

To Joe's delight (and the surprise of us watching this experiment in obedience), his business prospered. Clients who were ready to drop the firm for bigger agencies were delighted with the straight talk they got. One angry client, who had been ready to sue, was so flabbergasted by Joe's honest confession of failure that he reversed his decision and gave him two new accounts. Revenues hit and then passed the \$1 million mark. Joe began bringing employees to church, telling them, "You know it's true, because it works."

But when romance with a married woman became a possibility, Joe abandoned his profession of faith. "I know I'm doing something you think is wrong," he said, "but I want to be happy, and that's that. Love is more important than your version of morality."

Joe's early embracing of Christianity shows why pragmatism can tempt a preacher. It

reaps quick returns. People are delighted by the practical help they're getting for saving their marriages, raising their children, overcoming bad habits, and fighting off midlife depression. They come back and bring their friends. But without the painstaking work of establishing a changed worldview, their commitment to Christianity will be only as deep as their commitment to any other helpful "product." Allegiance to something that makes their lives easier to manage should not be confused with genuine conversion, which has at its heart surrender to the Creator-God of the universe.

So we must be careful. We can say that morality "works" but only because it corresponds to reality. And we must preach that sometimes Christian morality "works" only in the long run. Looking at life from eternity, it will be obvious that it works to be honest, unselfish, chaste, and humble. But in the short run, practicing chastity may keep a person alone for many years. Practicing honesty may be an impediment to career advancement. This must be made clear to the contemporary listener.

Today's preacher must argue against the self-serving pragmatism of postmodernity. The gospel does say that through it you find your life, but that first you must lose your life. I must say to people, "Christ will 'work' for you only if you are true to him whether he works for you or not. You must not come to him because he is fulfilling (though he is) but because he is true. If you seek to meet him in order to get your needs met, you will not meet him or get your needs met. To become a Christian is not to get help for your agenda, but to take on a whole new agenda—the will of God. You must obey him because you owe him your life, because he is your Creator and Redeemer."

This is a critical and difficult balance for the Christian preacher. Every message and point must demonstrate relevance or the listener will mentally "channel surf." But once you have drawn in people with the amazing relevance and practical wisdom of the gospel, you must confront them with the most pragmatic issue of all—the claim of Christ to be absolute Lord of life.

Earlier in my ministry, I often preached about sexual issues with baptized pragmatism. In a sermon fifteen or twenty years ago, I declared, "Emotionally, pre-marital and extra-marital sex destroy your ability to trust and commit to others. Socially, sex outside of marriage leads to family and social breakdown. 'Do not be deceived; God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows.'"

Nothing about this paragraph is untrue. But it overemphasizes the practical benefits of Christian morality. (It also assumes a respect for Scripture not present in our culture now.) Today, I approach the same theme differently:

"Some people say, 'I reject Christianity because its views on sex don't fit me—they are too narrow for me.' But if a doctor prescribes an unpleasant medicine, what do you do? If you are truly sick, then you take it. It is just as wrong-headed to taste-test Christianity as to taste-test medicines. How silly to evaluate Christianity on its sex ethic!

"The real question is, 'Is Jesus really the Son of God?' Is he really who he said he is—your Way, Truth, and Life? Has he really died for you because you are a sinner? If he is and has, who cares what he asks you to do or not to do? You should do it! In a sense, the gospel does not let you talk about anything else first. It says, 'I won't talk

to you about sexuality or gender roles or suffering or anything else until you determine what you will do with him. Who he is determines everything else.'

"You see, until you decide if there is a God, if Jesus is the Son, and other matters, how can you make an intelligent decision about what is right and wrong about sex? Christians believe what they do about sex not because they are old-fashioned, or because they are prudish, but because Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

This newer approach takes longer. But it comes closer to my goal to preach truth instead of pragmatism. Christian morality is not true because it works; it works because it's true. But why emphasize truth-as-truth to people who don't believe in standards at all?

First, we do it to be clear. If we argue too pragmatically, we unwittingly confirm the basic postmodern person's view that truth is whatever works; they won't see how radically you are challenging their thinking and life approach. Second, we do it to be penetrating, to get to people's deepest heart. Pascal said, "We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome." What is that? In post-modern people, the knowledge of God sleeps deeper than in previous generations, but it is still there (Rom. 1:18 -21).

In Duke Law Journal, Arthur Leff, a contemporary nonbeliever, put the postmodern tension perfectly: "What we want, heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free." Only by preaching truth as truth will we throw this inner tension into relief and show that there is a truth that liberates.

Grace, not moralism

Deep weariness etched every line of Joan's face and body. "I just can't do it any more," she said. "I can't live up to what a Christian is supposed to be. All my life I've had people telling me I had to be this or do that in order to be accepted. I thought Christ was supposed to bring me freedom from that, but instead God turns out to be just one more demanding taskmaster—in fact, he's the worst of them all!"

That conversation underscored for me that Christian moral teaching is both similar to, and very different from, that of other moral and ethical systems.

At the end of *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis demonstrates how the major religions agree on certain moral absolutes. Christians find that in today's culture wars, they often are on the same side with believing Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. The Christian preacher seems to be saying, "Be moral," along with exponents of other philosophies.

But when we ask, "Why be moral?" the other systems say, "In order to find God," while Christianity says, "Because God has found you." The Christian gospel is that we are not saved by moral living, we are saved for it. We are saved by grace alone, but that grace will inevitably issue in a moral life.

Many sermons tell people to say no to immorality. Often the reasons are "it is against the Bible" or "it will hurt your self-esteem" or "it's against our Christian principles," or "your sins will find you out." Those things are true, but they are inadequate and secondary motives. Only the grace of God, Titus says, "teaches" us to say no. It argues with us: "You are not living as though you are loved! As his child! It is not because he will abandon you that you should be holy, but because at inestimable cost

he has said he won't ever abandon you! How can you live in the very sin that he was ripped to pieces to deliver you from?"

See the grace of God argument? It is the only argument that cannot be answered.

Earlier in my ministry, I did not rely on it as I could have. When I preached on 1 Corinthians 6:9, I argued, "Sex is a sacred gift of God, and misusing it or tampering with it puts you in the gravest spiritual danger... . Though today many seek to blur these moral lines, the Bible is most definite and crystal clear about the matters before us."

This statement is true, but sounds implausible in a sexually permissive age. This kind of appeal doesn't explain the why behind every biblical command—the gospel.

Today, I approach it this way: "When Paul lays down the biblical rules for marriage, he says. This is all really about Christ's love for us' (Eph. 5:32). In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul hints that the monstrosity of extramarital sex lies in that we become 'one' physically with someone, but we are not 'one' socially, economically, or legally with them. In other words, we have gotten sexual intimacy without becoming radically vulnerable to the other person by making a permanent, exclusive, total commitment.

"When it comes to sex, 'this is a great mystery, but we are talking of Christ and the church.' You must not 'use' God by seeking his intimacy without making a total commitment. You must not use another human being by doing the same thing. Why? Because of his grace, his radical self-giving to you. 'Love one another even as I have loved you.'"

Instead of obeying to make God indebted to them, Christians obey because they are indebted to him. The difference between these two ways of morality could not be greater. I want to preach that Christian morality is a response to grace, not a means to grace.

But why emphasize grace to people who don't believe in guilt?

Postmodern people rightly fear an authority that oppresses and crushes; they long for one that frees. Only the gospel of grace shows how the truth can become a liberating power. Pascal said that every human philosophy or religion will lead either to human pride or to human despair, but only the gospel of grace can deal with both. Some religions use "self-esteem" and independence as motives for obedience, but that makes people proud and selfish, or proud and cruel.

Other religions use humility and control, but that leads to guilt and despair. Yet the gospel shows us a Law that must be fulfilled (destroying our pride) and a Savior that fulfills it completely for us (destroying our despair).

"The Christian religion alone has been able to cure these twin vices," wrote Pascal, "not by using one to expel the other... but by expelling both through the simplicity of the Gospel." Preaching morality cannot be the first item on the agenda for any Christian preacher, but it cannot be shirked, either. We have to make the necessary assaults on the underlying anti-absolute presuppositions of our postmodern audience. Men and women need to be convinced that there is a God who has spoken in nonnegotiable absolutes; this God is also our Redeemer. He has paid the price of our failure. Only in this context does the preaching of morality make sense. Today, only in

this context can it be heard at all.

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