New Inventions: What is Morality? Memory Verse: Romans 1:25

May 14th 2023 Scripture Reading: Luke 6:27-36

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

We have been talking about worldviews for the last few weeks.  We took a break last week as Pastor Cassi led us through our confirmation Sunday where we had three students confirmed! We pray God’s blessing on them! Before that we defined a worldview as our commitment to certain assumptions about reality.  I have been making an argument that the best of all worldviews, the one that makes the most sense and answers the most questions is, in fact, a biblical worldview.

**SLIDE 2: Morality: What is right and wrong?**

Today, we are going to address the idea of morality. What is right and wrong? In order to truly discuss such an important topic, we need to speak about in very real terms. So as we talk about right and wrong today, I am going to take some real life examples from our culture. These examples may come across as controversial or argumentative. I do not mean them to be, rather I am simply looking at our recent history and noting some very large shifts in the public perception of morality. I do not wish to offend or push any buttons, but I do wish to be forthright and clear when it comes to the way in which we determine morality. As I bring up some difficult topics, I kindly ask for you to extend grace and to bear with me even as God extends his grace to each of us. We can all agree that we live in a broken world, a world whose only hope is found in the never-ending love of God. In him we find our beginning and our end. Amen?

So what is morality?  How do we know what is right and what is wrong?  This is one of the basic questions we need to ask of a worldview or any belief system.  And, as Christians, our answer is very different from that of the world.

But as I was trying to come up with a good illustration to help this discussion, I found myself thinking about a story that I saw shared by a comedian named Nate Bargatze.  So I thought I would just have him tell it, but as you watch this clip, keep in mind this question about morality.

WATCH CLIP 19:48-22:13

So there are a few things in this story that I would like to address. And the first is Nate’s quip about having less fun as a child than Jesus.  The implication is that Christianity means no fun.  No parties, no drunkenness, no rated-R movies.  And if we go even further back, it usually meant no dancing and no cards either right?  So the impression is that Christians sort of stand with the un-fun option.  Nate also mentions that he was naïve…he had not thought before about lying to his parents.  We would say that 12-year-old Nate had a strong sense of morality.  He had an idea of what was right and wrong and where did he get such an idea? From his very Christian parents. And his friend with the rated R movies got his sense of right and wrong from his much more permissive parents.  And the same is true for you and I.  Our family of origin bestows upon us our initial sense of right and wrong. That’s part of what we acknowledge on a day like Mother’s Day. The power of a loving caring adult in a kid’s life is unparalleled! When we are willing to invest time into a child’s life, we help to influence their understanding of right and wrong, and if don’t exercise our influence, you can be guaranteed someone else will.   Because there is another force here beyond parents that we must also take into account…our culture.

**SLIDE 4: Our ideas come from 1. Family and 2. Culture**

Now, a generation or two ago, our culture reflected many tenants of a biblical worldview.  It was, more or less, pretty easy to do the right thing and fit in.  However, in more recent times, there has been more and more push back against this understanding.  Our culture's understanding of God has greatly diminished, and with it, any remnants a biblical grounding.  Those who might want to adhere to a biblical worldview are pushed to the side in the cultural conversation.  But there is a purposeful process to the way in which ideas gain popularity and eventually moral buy-in.

**SLIDE 5: How Do fringe ideas become mainstream?**

There is a general pathway that results in a fringe idea becoming mainstream. Author Natasha Crain helps to bring an understanding to this phenomena.  She points out how this process happens. It begins with redefinition.

**SLIDE 6: Redefinition, Normalization, and Celebration**

The term “tolerance” for example, no longer means hearing out those who have differing viewpoints, but it now means affirming and accepting what the culture currently finds to be morally correct. Tolerance had a sort of “agree-to-disagree” vibe to it, but now full acceptance and affirmation is the requirement. “Phobia” is another term that has been re-defined. If I find something to be objectionable while the culture overall affirms it, then I must be somehow afraid of that thing.

The next step is to normalize.  If people perceive that something is pervasive or common, if everyone is doing it, then they are more likely to deem it morally acceptable. That makes sense to us. It’s what peer pressure is all about. We have seen the trend of co-habiting before marriage become the acceptable norm. Everyone does it, it is completely normal and so it is deemed appropriate. We are currently seeing this happen with transgenderism. Transgenderism used to be something we never talked about and probably never thought about, but it has come into the forefront of our cultural conversations. Something that used to be considered a form of mental health concern is now classified as right and good…it’s more or less normal. A good example of this normalization goes back to the not-so-distant future when, in 2015, Caitlin Jenner, formally known as gold medalist Bruce Jenner was named Glamour magazine’s Woman of the Year and since that time there has been a massive explosion in transgender surgeries in adults and in children.  There are more and more examples of biological males competing in sporting events with females. All if these instances lead into normalizing what once was a very fringe idea to most people.

The shift in this cultural buy-in is finally complete when people begin to celebrate the issue in question as morally right and good.  An example of this celebration is the Shout your Abortion movement.  This official group has an official website that says right at the top, “We will aid and abet abortions.”  They declare that they are normalizing abortions.  And they do so through the means of celebration.  Women are encouraged to share how great it is to have freedom from unwanted children and how powerful their choice is. Instead of being a tragic, heartbreaking decision, that sorrow is being redefined as happiness. It is being normalized and celebrated as a social good. God’s input on the matter does not apply.  I actually remember the old mantra for pro-choice advocates from the past, “Abortion should be safe, legal and rare.” Yet years down the road, there are those shouting about it in approval.

There is a point to all of this. We don’t just gather together to complain about our culture and point out all it’s faults.  The point is, our culture deems things as right and wrong based on majority opinion.  And as such, that opinion can change.  Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and especially Joe Biden were all against same-sex marriage as a legal practice.  But through this process as I described, by redefining the term “marriage”, by normalizing gay relationships in TV and popular culture, eventually we get to a place where same sex marriages not only have to be tolerated, they must be celebrated. Again, God’s input on the matter does not apply.  What once was seen as errant is now right…all it takes is a change of tide in the culture.

Well, I simply want to argue that that is not how morality works.  Morality is based on the character and revelation of God.  And that sounds old fashioned because it is!  God’s character does not change, and his word does not change, and therefore morality does not change either.  And that brings be back to Nate and his sleepover story. He knew it would be wrong to watch that horror movie.  He knew it should not happen. He was willing to stand alone for what he thought was right in front of his friends…even in front of his friend’s parents. And that right there my dear brothers and sisters, is us.  If we are going to stand for morality as the bible describes it, we will, very often, stand alone.

**SLIDE 7: We may have to stand alone.**

We will be embarrassed.  We will be made to feel less than.  We will be ostracized and shouted down.  And we will be in good company.

Jesus tells his disciples at the beginning to the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:10,

**SLIDE 8: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake.  Rejoice and be very glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in this manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

Now notice, we are blessed when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Not when we are persecuted because we are being a pain in the neck know-it-all, or because we are constantly lecturing people or because we have taken it upon ourselves to set everyone straight.  We all know those Christians who give Christianity a bad name.  But Jesus says blessed are you when you pursue righteousness in the face of a culture that thinks your pretty stupid for doing so. Blessed are you when you pursue righteousness in the face of a culture that thinks your pretty hateful for doing so. Because we disagree with the cultural stance on certain issues, we might have to endure some name calling. We might be accused of causing harm. And to be honest, that attitude is not all that surprising coming from the average stranger, but it gets a lit harder when it comes from colleagues or family members.  It hurts to stand alone…it’s so hard, and yet we have conviction that right and wrong is not just a surface level popularity contest.  It is not something that can be put to a vote and decided by the majority.

Everyone knows it goes much deeper than that.  When Jesus expresses the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” our response it sort of like yeah, obviously.  It’s kind of nice of you Jesus to put it in such a succinct way, but it really is not all that mind-blowing. We all understand that taking someone’s lunch is wrong because we would not like it if someone took ours.  This principle of right and wrong is universal, it applies to every human everywhere. C.S. Lewis calls it the Law of Nature…humanity cannot escape it. But Jesus takes this principle we somehow have implanted inside of us and he gives us a reason to be kind to others In Luke 6:36 Jesus says the reason we are to be compassionate is because God is compassionate! God himself is the grounding for our thoughts on morality. Paul expounds on this natural law in Romans 1:20- 25 READ

**SLIDE 9: Romans 1:20-25 Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse. Although they knew God, they didn’t honor God as God or thank him. Instead, their reasoning became pointless, and their foolish hearts were darkened. While they were claiming to be wise, they made fools of themselves. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images that look like mortal humans: birds, animals, and reptiles. So God abandoned them to their hearts’ desires, which led to the moral corruption of degrading their own bodies with each other. They traded God’s truth for a lie, and they worshipped and served the creation instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.**

So we can come to know God, even though he is invisible, through what he has made.  Paul contends that creation clearly reveals God's nature.  Humans can understand at least some things about God to the point that we are without excuse. If we are pulled over for speeding, we can’t claim to be unaware of the speed limit because the signs are posted right on the side of the road. We are unable to play dumb...we cannot claim that we didn't know. The signs have been posted, so to speak. Through this Natural Law, this sense inside of us all, God has made himself known.  But despite this knowledge, Paul says that we humans, instead of glorifying and thanking God for his goodness, we exchanged what we know for a lie.  We gave up on the truth in favor of idols.  And when this happens, when we choose to live in unreality, our thinking becomes muddled, and we eventually lose touch with what we once knew was real.  We become deceived and we end up claiming the falsities as true. That chapter closes with a long list of sins and evil actions and then Paul says in verse 31: "Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death (the wage of sin), they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." How is it that Paul can nail our current culture with such specificity? He calls out these three steps here.  We begin by redefining lies as truth.  This sets the course then for us to normalize this new understanding.  And once these lies become normal, we then approve of them, or celebrate them in ourselves and others.  Paul understood 2,000 years ago what is happening today.  And we will succumb to these trends if we do not maintain and stand strong in the worldview that is set forth by the bible.  So many of my friends and even my colleagues have departed from a God given morality, and have accepted as true a rubric of right and wrong based on cultural majority.

Of course, questions of what is right and wrong are not always simple.  Real life has a way of serving up situations that are not cut and dried. But thank God there is grace. Thank God my failures are not final. But, once again, that is why it is so important to look to principles and guidance that comes from beyond ourselves.

**SLIDE 10: Christian morality begins and ends with God.**

Ours is a worldview that declares that morality begins and ends with God.  It is not cultural; it is not even personal. Morality comes to us from Someone who is beyond us.  Further, the fact that everyone has the Golden Rule stuck in their consciences shows as well that we cannot simply be a product of nature.  We cannot be the result of random atoms somehow finding sentience.  Something that is random has absolutely no basis to claim something is right or wrong in the first place. A naturalistic worldview must say “whatever is, is right.” Even the possibility of having the idea of morality comes to us by virtue of the fact that we are created beings who reflect, however dimply, the light and love of God.  In order to best reflect the light of his truth, we have got to be familiar with his word.

**SLIDE 11: We must be familiar with God’s word.**

We have to know what it says, and trust that what it says is going to be a better option than what we can come up with either personally or as a society.  The more we understand what God’s word says, the more aware we will be of this world's attempt to get us to redefine lies, to normalize sin and to celebrate the invention of a new morality.

We must, by God’s grace, stand strong in a cultural whirlwind that wants to blow us away. We have each other. We have the Holy Spirit. We also have a broken and misguided world that we are called to love. We don’t withhold love from people until they clean-up their act or until they sufficiently agree with us. No! We meet people right where they are, right in the midst of our culture’s worldview and we show them, with gentleness and kindness, God’s way is the better way. May we be a graceful presence in the lives of others just as we know God has extended grace toward us. Amen.