

Sermon Text for January 21, 2018

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Isaiah 11:1-5, Romans 12:1-2

“Christian ethics”

What do you use as a guide for what you feel is right or wrong? How do you judge for yourself if something that you have done is a good thing or a bad thing? Do you get out a list of rules or thumb through the Bible. Do you take the ten commandments and make them apply to every area of your life? We all have some gauge that tells us if we have acted ethically or morally.

Sometimes when we try to justify our actions even when we know that we did the wrong thing we might say things like: I'm only human, or we all make mistakes, or boys will be boys, or nothing personal...it's just business, the ends justify the means, or locker room talk. We say things to try to normalize that which we feel guilty about or that which we know is wrong. And for the most part it works. The reason why it works is that people understand when you say those things that they are in no position to judge you because, after all, they are just human too. So you end up with a whole mish mash of relative morality which looks nothing like Christian ethics.

What do you use to gauge if physically you are healthy and ok or is something right or wrong with your body? Your body may tell you something is wrong, you just feel it, but you're not sure why, so you go to your doctor and she tells you what and why. If you have a heart-attack you immediately go to the doctor, you run there.

Where do you go if you feel that morally you are just off base, but you're not sure why. Those moments when you know you've really messed up, who do you run to fix the moral ethical morass in which you find yourself. I think many of us try to handle our sin, our moral failures on our own and that is not good or healthy. There is no spiritual condition that is terminal, our moral lifestyles can always be changed.

Today, Paul tells his listeners, tells us, that what we believe really shapes how we live our lives. If you believe that Jesus Christ has a plan for you, how blessed your marriage and your promises in that marriage are sealed by Christ then you are going to have a different approach than someone who sees no connection between their marriage and their faith. Our actions all have moral implications, and who Jesus Christ is shapes our actions and dictates the morality we are going to have.

Paul beseeches, he begs his people to not accept the world's standards, but only God's. Our morals should not be based upon that which our culture considers to be moral but rather that which is God's understanding of morality. Today, our premise is that knowing and loving God is the mechanism of choice for forming excellent characters and promoting genuine happiness.

READ SCRITURE

Since we are on the topic of morality I think I need to address what is happening in our culture as woman after woman is telling their story of how they have been harassed and molested as they were growing up, or on the workforce, or in their everyday life. From Nasser the sick gymnastics doctor who molested dozens of little girls, to celebrities coming out and sharing their stories of molestation, to you with whom I have had spontaneous conversations and you have shared with me how you were approached, harassed, and even molested. It almost seems like there are a different set of rules for men and for women. Men are supposed to be gross and sexually more forward and so when they cross the line, well, that's just the way things are. I don't know who made that standard, but it certainly does persist. As more women speak out I am grateful that we are moving closer to the standard that is closer to the biblical standard than what it has been up to now.

Paul addresses this issue of morality in a way that he basically states that without God we are liable to float aimlessly at the mercy of volatile emotions and hormones. That is the best case scenario. Worst case is what we have been hearing which is that we target and obsess to the point where lives are destroyed because of our sinful actions.

I was at a conference some years ago and a pastor from Kenya came to me and said: are American Christians bored? I asked what he meant. Well, he said, in my country whenever we meet we talk where our food and shelter is going to come from. How are we going to provide for our members who are the most vulnerable and need the most help to not only make ends meet, but to actually survive. I figured since you already have the food and shelter covered you must be bored. In fact, he said, almost every conference that I go to here in the states you spend a vast amount of time talking about sex. You must be bored if that is all you can find to spend your time talking about.

Well, he had a point there. Where has the focus of our attention shifted and why has it shifted from Isaiah 11 where we read that the poor and the meek shall be judged with equity and given priority over our discussions. To issues that our culture and society

direct. Why do we spend so much time on the issues of sexuality and so little time on the feeding of those without.

The Apostle Paul tries to refocus our direction today, although we are going to spend a lot of time, and we already have, about sex and how our morality in our culture is so dictated by this very powerful desire. Paul tries to take us away from what the world wants us to talk about and live out and move us to where Scripture wants us to spend our time, back in Isaiah 11.

Paul begins by, and can you imagine him getting on his knees and saying, I beseech you, I beg you, listen to what I am saying to you, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. I know we got it wrong from the very beginning, from when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and make up their own moral compass. Today in this church we have a combination of people who know and love Jesus Christ and are really trying to live for him but we also have seekers, people who aren't really sure what this is all about. Paul here is writing to committed Christians from the church in Rome.

It is important to make that distinction because to a seeker the Bible can be seen as a nagging book whose sole purpose is to tell us what we can and can't do and that is a drag. It isn't seen as a breath of fresh air, a comfort in sorrow, hope in hopelessness, confidence in times of doubt. But just a list of rules to follow.

You see, an understanding of God's grace, as Paul mentions here, has to come first in order to order your life in a moral direction toward Christ. One of the most damning accusations we hear is that at times Christians act less than Christians than non-Christians. Youth are always telling me that they are sickened by kids in youth groups who claim to love Christ and yet live in the world worse than non-believers.

The same is true for Christians. Paul says, I beg you, present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. Do not be conformed to this world. Knowing God does not automatically translate to moral living. Loving God does. For those who are seekers, Paul is sickened by the hypocrisy in the churches as we all should be.

Paul's address to the believers is that who we are and how we act is all due to the grace of God. Our bodies are God's temple as Paul tells us in I Corinthians 3:16-17, they are to be holy and presentable. Even more powerful Paul, again, states in I Corinthians 6:19-20. What are we doing in our culture that views the body not as God's temple but

rather as a temple to be enjoyed by the opposite sex. Or the body is a vehicle to gratification through substance abuse with pain killers and alcohol etc.

I don't usually get stuck on this type of moralizing in my sermons. I find it very dangerous because I am just as immoral as the next person. Sex is good, don't get me wrong, but there is way too much sex taking place outside of marriage and that scares me. And it is not just the sex, it is the abuse that is so rampant against women which scares me even more because I have three daughters. I think that it has taken me these many years to notice the epidemic of danger that this poses to our society and to our church. It is nothing new, but it is being accepted by culture as the norm and usually the norm is considered okay. Paul tells us that how we treat our bodies is part of our worship of God. We worship in a sense by how we live. If others treat us and our bodies without respect it changes our approach as well.

Paul is saying here that confessing Christ and joining the church and being a part of a Christian community is not enough. Your love for Christ must be reflected by what you do to and with your body and with whom. It also means that if you think it is normal for a man to speak to women in a certain way or try to get a freebie, then you are stuck in sin. This is a very different type of sermon for me. Maybe Freud was right that what we do is always shaped by our sexual desires, but what Paul says here is that what we ought to be shaped by our response to the grace of God. I think there is a big difference, but I don't see a big difference in the lives of those in the church, and those outside of the church in this area, and that disturbs me and bothers me.

I long for the day that we are able to focus on issues of morality that deal not with sex and abuse but with Isaiah 11, issues of justice and reconciliation. Jesus Christ in his ministry very rarely talked about adultery, or divorce, but did often speak to the abuse of power that happens and how that abuse leads us constantly away from God. He constantly talked about the poor and the oppressed. I think if we spend more time in the soup kitchens, on the streets, helping out those who are in need, we would spend less time having to talk about what the culture wants us to talk about, or get involved in actions and in lifestyles and ways of thinking that many think are normal and inevitable.

Amen.