Simple Morality

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Mark7:20-23 20 *He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. 21 For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person*.”

CJ mentioned a song last week and I thought I would learn it and wrap a talk around the idea. The idea is simple: be humble and kind. It is about our moral principles, how we act around others, and how we treat them.

Pretty simple. But as I started researching morality, I found that I was in way over my head. Generally speaking, people think of morality in two ways. The first way refers to certain codes of conduct depicting right and wrong put forward by a society, a culture, or a group - such as a religion - or a code accepted by an individual for his or her own behavior.

The second way we think of morality is how it refers to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be accepted by all rational persons. So when we are discussing morality, we may not even be in agreement as to what we mean by the concept.

Then there is the whole viewpoint as to whether God is involved with morality or if it flows from a naturalistic process. Another viewpoint requires that we determine if morality is objective or subjective. Objective morality means that moral principles are valid for all people at all times, regardless of how they think. Subjective morality refers to principles that are dependent upon situations, circumstances, and what people think.

For instance, some African cultures allow 9 year olds, either boys or girls, to be married. Child marriage is legal in 91 countries in the world. Children as young as six years old are forced to marry older men and have their childhood stripped away from them. And we are not talking just about third world nations. In the United States some States allow 12 year olds to be married.

The law may allow people to interrupt a funeral with signs and chanting and disturb the sacred service and disrespect the parted one, but is it right to do so; is it moral?

I cannot even begin to suggest solutions to any of the challenges we face as individuals or as a species. We struggle as a nation to separate morality from cultural etiquette, laws, and even religious codes of conduct.

In my research I came across a Dutch primatologist and ethologist named Dr. Frans De Waal who has discovered what he believes is morality in Elephants, Chimpanzees and other primates. His idea of morality is based upon two qualities: reciprocity and empathy. Reciprocity involves fairness, give and take, and justice. Empathy has two parts: cognitive and emotional. The cognitive aspect of empathy refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

The emotional part involves compassion and reacting with sympathy to each other. For instance: If someone relates a sad story, we react with a sad face, a sad posture, and we feel their sadness. Dogs can do this.

According to De Waal, very few animals have the cognitive ability – to understand and take the perspective of another. He has seen this sort of behavior only in apes and elephants. Of course, dolphins can probably do this, but he hasn’t studied marine mammals.

So De Waal has recognized empathy and consolation, pro-social tendencies, reciprocity and a sense of fairness in primates. He has seen similar things in elephants. These are qualities that we humans would like to claim as singularly unique to us.

But why should we be surprised? As far as we know the animals have no concept of God, yet Spirit flows through them as surely as it flows through us. Too often we are as blind to the flow of God in and through us as the animals are; but our ignorance does not negate Spirit’s presence.

I cannot get my head around the vast and profound concepts that philosophers offer. I can understand the Ten Commandments. I can understand the principle of loving God and loving each other and ourselves. I can understand the principles outlined in the Sermon on the Mount.

I am a simple man and like simple ideas. “Please and thank you”.

These are good principles. “If you haven’t got anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” Simplicity is much more powerful than a book of unintelligible thoughts that I cannot understand.

For me, the Golden Rule is my moral code. Treat others the way I would like to be treated. Philippians 2:3 says this: “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves…*”

I am not so concerned about the moral code that people have. I am more concerned about how we treat the people whose code is different than ours. Shakespeare says “This above all – to thine own self be true.” It is difficult to follow our personal moral code – to be authentic. Sometimes we are pressured by worldly influences and opinions that conflict our thinking and judgment. At times we follow the crowd in how we think about others and how we treat others.

Morality is all about getting our hearts right. Our Bible verse states that it is from within, from our hearts, come the destructive thoughts of sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

Philippians 4:8 suggests this for righting our heart: *“…brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”*

And I think it is a copout to say, “Well, Patrick, I just don’t see anything positive or praiseworthy in this world.” My suggestion to you is to look in a different direction. Stop watching the news and get outside and watch the sunset. Contemplate a flower, a child swinging, a family enjoying a picnic. Have friends over. The point is: stop succumbing to what other warring and tempestuous human beings are offering you. The world is much more beautiful than we sometimes give it credit for. Human beings are more moral, loving, and empathetic than the news portrays.

What it comes to is that the only way to become a person of great moral character is to think, speak, respond, and behave like one all the time and to accept the inevitable conflict that it may well bring you. Part of this is forgiving the irrational and immoral people of the world; for they know not what they do.

I believe that every rational and irrational person, every moral and immoral person has the Christ within them guiding them, whether they believe in Christ or not. It is my prayer that we listen to our personal guidance and follow the nudges and whispers. They are saying, “Go out and do what you know to be right. Be noble, be pure, be lovely, and be admirable. Allow the Christ to move through you so that you become the excellent and praiseworthy quality you seek. You are My Child, designed to inspire others so that they can set their hearts right.”

Let us pray….