

Sermon – Knowing Right from Wrong Sunday January 16, 2011

In ancient times, a king would set-up statues of himself throughout his kingdom. Keep in mind, this was before cars, CNN and iPhones. There would be many people living in remote places who might not even know what their king looked like.

So the point of this statue was to serve as a reminder. Whenever anyone looked at it, they would see the image of the king. This image was meant to evoke reverence and allegiance. This image was meant to remind them there was something bigger than themselves, that they were living in a kingdom. This image was meant to remind them that they were under the rule of this king.

In the book of Genesis, we read.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26-27

In Genesis 2, the writer gives us some more detail.

⁷ Then the LORD God formed a man^[e] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

We were made in the image of God. It says in the text that God literally breathed his life in us. His life in us is what sustains us. His life in us is rooted in his character. This means part of what it means to be made in God’s image is that **we were created to reflect the character of God**. In fact, it means that we are most alive, we are most fully human when we reflect God’s moral attributes.

Now maybe this idea of being made in God’s image seems a little strange. Isn’t God against the idea of making images of Him? Yet God chooses to create humanity in His image. Out of all creation, He chooses to express something about who He really is in ordinary people like you and me.

God's purpose was that whether you're in Markham or Nicaragua or wherever you are in the world. Whenever you see parents loving their children, husbands and wives nurturing their marriage, the poor being cared for, groups being reconciled, people sacrificing to serve others, men and women honouring their commitments, people with the courage to live out their God-given dreams. Whenever you see God's character in the hearts of his people.

This is meant to evoke wonder and awe. This is meant to remind you that there's something bigger in this world than just your life and mine. This is meant to remind you that you and I are part of a kingdom. And this kingdom has a ruler and that ruler is God.

We're continuing in our series Made in His Image. This morning, we're going to unpack what it means to be created to reflect God's character and moral qualities in our lives. What does that look like? What does that mean?

One pastor defines character as: **“Character is the will to do what is right as God defines right, regardless of the cost.”** (Andy Stanley)

God reveals to us his standard for our character in his moral law. This morning, I'm going to start by talking a bit about God's moral law and sharing three characteristics.

In the book of Genesis, God gives Adam a command:

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” Genesis 2:16-17

The first thing we see about **God's moral law is that it is absolute**. Morality is rooted in God's character. He's the one who defines right and wrong. For us then, doing right means obeying God. Doing wrong means rejecting His commands.

In a survey conducted by the Barna group, interviewers asked a group of people, Is moral truth absolute? Amazingly, 66 percent of the people responded that they believe that **“there is no such thing as an absolute morality; different people can define what is moral in conflicting ways and still be correct.”** Doesn't that sound odd?

We live in a culture that says, everyone has a right to define what is right and wrong. “There are no absolutes.” (Anyone see the flaw in that argument?)

The problem is that if there are no absolutes in society and everyone is free to define right and wrong, then what is it that becomes absolute? It's society.

Basic human nature dictates that when an individual is left to make moral decisions without reference to some standard above him or herself, he or she invariably makes those choices on the basis of self-interest. Charles Colson

Anyone think that could be pretty dangerous?

But the Bible teaches that there is a standard of morality. And this standard is grounded in the one who created the universe. It's grounded in who God is.

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
⁹ He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.

Psalm 25:8-9

This standard is absolute because God's nature doesn't change. God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And that's good news for you and me. Because it means that if our moral commands are grounded in God. If they're based on the One who created the universe. That means that **God's moral law is in fact a statement of how reality really is, how life really works.**

One writer says: "Jesus' teachings aren't to be followed because they are a nice way to live a moral life. They are to be followed because they are the best possible insight into how the world really works. They teach us how they are." (Rob Bell)

The second characteristic of God's moral law is that it's expressed in relational terms.

In the Old Testament, how did God reveal His standard of morality to the Israelites? Through the Ten Commandments. These commandments formed the basis of Israel's covenant relationship with God. What would make them special and distinct from all other nations would be their obedience to God's commands.

These laws spelled out how God's people were to live in relationship. The first 4 commandments deal with their relationship with God and the last 6 deal with their relationships with each other.

In fact when Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment,

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”^[c] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[d] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

God’s moral law is expressed in relational terms. It’s expressed in terms of how we relate with God and others. Why? Because being made in the image of the Triune God also means that we are relational beings. We’re designed for relationships. And each person we’re in relationship with is also made in the image of God.

This idea is so important that we’ll be unpacking it in the following two Sundays.

The third characteristic about God’s moral law is that there are consequences to breaking it.

Even within the past year, we’ve seen devastating consequences of what happens when we transgress certain limits. We’ve seen what happens to our bodies when we break basic health laws. How much should we really be eating? Is stuffing bacon, melted cheese and special sauce between two chicken fillets prepared with the Colonel’s secret 11 herbs and spices recipe really a good idea? We’ve seen what happens to our economy when we disregard economic laws. How much should banks be lending? How much should we really be spending? We’ve seen what happens to our environment when we ignore the ecological limits of our planet and its natural resources.

In a culture that has consumed the most and enjoyed the most opportunity in the history of the world. Have all our resources and technology helped us to avoid the consequences of our actions? Obesity is a critical health concern in North America. Entire economies all over the world have collapsed. Our environment is in crisis. Anyone here this morning not affected by these issues?

Now what do you think happens to a society when God’s moral laws are ignored?

What happened when Adam and Eve disobeyed God?

⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Up until this point, Adam and Eve were both naked and felt no shame. But now shame enters history. And Adam and Eve try to cover things up.

Anyone here this morning feel ashamed? Shame over something you've done, regret about something you haven't done? Why don't you turn to the person next to you and tell them the thing you're most ashamed of... no don't do that.

We've all felt shame. We know about trying to cover up our vulnerability with performance. We know about wanting to make ourselves look better than we actually are.

And we know we've done wrong. As moral beings, God has given us a conscience to know when we've done wrong.

They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them...
Romans 2:15

And what do we tend to do when we know we've messed up? Just like Adam and Eve, we hide.

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

¹⁰ He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

Remember, human beings had never known fear before either.

¹¹ And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

And as Adam reflects on the importance of taking personal responsibility for his actions, he summons up his courage and says "it was the woman..." Not just the woman... "it was the woman You gave me." Whose idea was that woman? It wasn't my idea? I was fine when it was just me and the animals. "It was the woman You gave me." And now blaming enters human history.

Think they'll be the last married couple ever to blame each other? There's a T-shirt you can get that says, "I didn't say it was your fault. I said I was going to blame you." So if you're looking for an anniversary gift...

This is such a rich passage we could do a whole series unpacking all the consequences of the Fall. But there's just one more I want to talk about. In the fall, something happened to human nature. The word often used to describe it is "depravity".

It means that the human heart isn't working well anymore. Our character has been compromised. Like glass is predisposed to shatter, like women are predisposed to obsess over shoes, **I am predisposed to do the wrong thing.**

When I think it's necessary for me to get what I want to get or avoid what I want to avoid, I will lie, gossip, cheat, slander, lust, covet and hate. And I can't fix this about myself.

Most of the problems in this world are because of this depravity.

As one author puts it: "When we lose the character of God, we lose the life of God in us." (Erwin McManus)

Maybe for some of us this morning, there's an addiction in our lives, maybe there's an anger problem. Maybe there's a relationship that's not right, maybe we have a problem with how we spend our money or use our time. Maybe there's an issue that we can't seem to trust God with.

We're missing out on the life of God because we fail to seek the character of God in our lives.

Character is the will to do what is right, as God defines right regardless of the cost.

And I wonder this morning if your problem and my problem is that we're afraid that doing what is right will mean that we lose control? Wasn't that part of the temptation? That we wanted to be like God?

The irony of it all is that we were actually created to be like God. We weren't created to be in control of the world. But we were created to reflect God's character. We were created to obey God. God would take care of the universe.

But when we disobeyed, we reversed this. Instead of taking personal responsibility we blame, we rationalize, we minimize. We play God and try to control everything around us instead of taking responsibility for the only thing we can control - ourselves. Any married people here? You know what I'm talking about?

Like Adam and Eve, **we've believed the lie that true life is found in experiencing what God has forbidden.** That true freedom is freedom *from* God, freedom to do what I want, freedom to define what I think is right.

One pastor writes:

“...[Adam and Eve] bought into [Satan's] lie, ‘God doesn't want you to be free. Look at the terrible prison He created for you. Quick, break out while you can! Run free before He sees you! And oops! I forgot to mention, this path of freedom leads only to your enslavement.’ This would be the equivalent of the grizzly thinking to itself, ‘If I could just get my paw right in the middle of that trap, I would be free.’” (Erwin McManus)

What makes the Christian's approach to morality different from any other approach to moral living? Is it what we identify as vices? Is it what we identify as virtues? Most people would probably agree with these things anyway. But what truly sets our faith apart is that we have insight into reality. And what we know is that the human heart lacks the capacity to carry out these moral requirements. We simply lack the desire. We lack power.

The reality of human nature is that you and I are not truly free. We can't love others the way we really want to love them. We can't live the life of courage and generosity and faith we truly desire. Our hearts are predisposed to do wrong.

But then Jesus comes onto the scene. He enters human history and takes on the nature of a human being. As a man, he lives a perfect life, fully obedient to God. And he teaches that **true freedom isn't freedom *from* God it's freedom *in* God.**

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching... [in other words, if you obey me, if you do what is right as I define right] ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-32, 36)

The Apostle Paul wrote:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Because Jesus took on the nature of a human being, he was able to mediate between God and humanity. And on the cross, Jesus makes it possible to reverse the consequences of Adam's disobedience.

¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:19

And the Bible says that now you and I can share in God's nature. You and I can once again reflect the character of God.

you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 Peter 1:4

And throughout the New Testament, we see that **this path to true freedom is a journey of character transformation.** It's a process in which we are being re-created into the image of Jesus.

“And we... are being transformed into [Jesus'] image with ever-increasing glory...”

(2 Cor 3:18)

The Apostle Paul uses a number of images to describe this character transformation process.

One of the images he uses is the idea of changing our clothing. It's a process where the Apostle Paul says to discard or

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col. 3:5-10)

In its place Paul says:

clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)

Because of Jesus, you and I no longer have to live a self-centred, self-absorbed, self-seeking miserable life. We are now free. We can be free to love, free to forgive, free to be compassionate and generous, free to be the man, the woman and together, the people God created us to be. Free to be God's image bearing people in the world so that the world would know that there is a kingdom, and this kingdom has a ruler, and that ruler is God.

That's the good news of Jesus.