# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Morality's Foundation

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*Introduction*

1. The first question I considered in preparing this sermon was how to best illustrate the need for it. Since people are people and bad news sells papers (or generates clicks), examples from the news are always readily available.

2. But, as much as our *world* needs to hear teaching about morality, the *church* is the audience for these sermons. Of course, we too have our moral failings, but can take some comfort in the knowledge that, generally speaking, we are not where the world is. Then again:
   a. There was the church family member my wife and I were behind in line at the receptionist's window in an ER waiting room one Sunday evening. We were there to check on one of our teens who had been involved in an accident. When the receptionist told the woman in front of us that only family members were permitted to go back to the room, she replied, "I'm their sister." Spiritually, she was their sister, but of course that's not what the receptionist meant. So, it didn't really surprise me a few months later when, in a church auditorium Bible class, the woman and her husband rather forcefully defended the idea that lying is sometimes not only okay, it's expected.
   b. Other experiences give evidence that the above case is not an isolated example of church members adopting an "elastic" approach to truth-telling.[1]

3. Have we failed to understand more than we think? Perhaps these insights from a high school student I once taught—the daughter of a local preacher—will enlighten us. In answer to a test question asking whether morality is absolute, she wrote the following:

   > I do not think that there can be an absolute moral standard. I believe morality is relative. Absolute means that whatever the standard is, that's what you do and the standard will always be right. Relative has to do with subjective ethics. The standard is within the person or group.… Not everyone can agree on the same standards, so therefore, morality is relative.[2]

4. At the very least, these and other examples I could cite inform us that we should not make assumptions about what "every Christian understands" about the foundation of ethics or how to work out the specifics of morality in practice.
   a. We need to think about the source or reason for ethics, not just particular behaviors that are the outcome of the principles.
   b. We need to realize that, "Sloganeering and dogmatizing settle nothing, nor do emotional tirades and protests really help us sort things through in a thoughtful, biblical fashion. If

we are to find our way and play a constructive role in the dialog of our times, we need to understand the theoretical foundations of current views and to develop a Christian ethic that can be applied to current concerns" (Holmes 1984, 9–10).

c. As Erwin Lutzer wrote, "We must be willing to set aside temporarily the questions of what actions are right or wrong to focus on a more basic question: what makes an action right or wrong?" (Lutzer 1981, 14).

*Body*

I. True, but Incomplete.

A. Some answer the question, "why be a moral person?" by saying, "the Bible says so."
1. For many, this answer is sufficient.
2. Others, especially at a time when many find untenable the idea that there is just one right way, need more.[3]
3. The good news is that we can offer more.

B. To elaborate, we live at a time when it is not uncommon for people to want to know why our book should be accepted over every other book or code.
1. As already noted, more people today, including some professing Christians, do not accept that there is any definite, specific, always-true authority or standard.
2. In some cases, even where the Bible is accepted to some extent, that acceptance is weakened by the view that, because it was written thousands of years ago, it is old fashioned and out of touch with today's concerns.

C. "The Bible says so" is true, but without additional elaboration, it is an incomplete statement of the truth.
1. *Why* does the Bible have the right to say so?
2. *How* does the Bible say so? Some affirm that it does, but fail to understand or show how it applies to circumstances not specifically addressed in its pages.[4]
3. If we are serious about encouraging morality, we ought to think about these questions, especially since we are called to give a reason for why we believe as we do (cf. 1 Pet 3.15).

II. The Bible's Claim: Not Just Another Book.

A. First Corinthians 2.6–13 represents the teaching of several passages which show why the Bible is the source we should consult for moral guidance.
1. The wisdom Paul revealed did not originate with this world (cf. Gal. 1.10–12).
2. It is a secret and formerly hidden wisdom that has now been revealed by God.
3. God's Spirit, who knows his thoughts, revealed them in understandable words.
4. Paul passed on that wisdom so people can know God's expectations and where they stand in relation to them.

B. In short, God does not have authority because the Bible is a holy book, the Bible is a holy book because it is the authoritative statement of God (cf. Matt 28.18–20).

III. God as the Moral Standard.

A. In other words, morality does not exist as it does because God is arbitrary, but because the right way reflects his holy character.[5]

B. Because God is holy, wise, and loving, he can give moral direction; because he has revealed that direction in the Bible, we consult it for moral answers.
   1. Its principles govern every situation in which we might find ourselves.
   2. Its moral statements reflect reality about the right way to live in a way that provides fulness of life for us and protects us from the things that harm us.

*Conclusion*

1. If asked to recommend materials for a school curriculum, I would urge including the requirement that every high school student read Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons* which dramatizes the story of Sir Thomas More, adviser to King Henry VIII. More was executed for resisting the desires of the King concerning his marriages and establishment of the Church of England. Thus, his words carry weight: "The times are never so bad that a good man cannot live in them" (cited in Kreeft 1990, 1).

2. Let us make the case for morality in the way the Bible itself presents it. Let us do what we can to show and convince others that we do not behave as we do merely because of a list of arbitrary rules we happen to prefer, but because of our confidence in and relationship with the loving and wise God who wants us to share his holiness (cf. Heb 12.10).

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## Works Cited

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Holmes, Arthur F. 1984. *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions.* Contours of Christian Philosophy. ed. C. Stephen Evans. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Kreeft, Peter. 1990. *Making Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books.

Lutzer, Erwin W. 1981. *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes*. With a response by Mark M. Hanna. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

## Notes

[1] Examples include: (1) a preacher who was asked by a church member to sign a form affirming a family's faithful membership in his congregation that would allow them to receive a tuition discount at the local Christian school, even though that family had never attended, let alone become members of, that congregation; (2) a Christian who purchased a decorative item for a church event, never intending to keep it, and then returned it after the event; (3) a Christian who used a non-profit's tax exemption to buy personal items for a discount.

[2] The young lady was answering a question on a test in the Ethics course I was teaching. Her assessment of the difference between an absolute and relative ethical standard is correct. What I found interesting is her affirmation that morality *must* be relative. I do not share her answer to indict her or her preacher father. I appreciated her honesty and suspected her response was more indicative of the influence of a cultural view than representative of what her parents or church family believed.

[3] Bear in mind that we live in a world that has been immersed in the postmodern philosophy, an outlook that contends no universal, absolute truth exists. This paragraph from Os Guinness's *Time for Truth* is informative as this relates to ethics: "'Grey is the color of truth,' George McBundy wrote in defense of the Vietnam War. Only a few decades later the grey has deepened to near-black. Today many people feel that trying to navigate the moral confusion of modern society is like driving through London or New York without a map and with all the traffic lights turned off." (Guinness 2000, 27–28)

[4] For example, a newer Christian I knew many years ago believed the command "Do not steal," but did apply it to what was then new technology that allowed him to watch premium cable TV channels without paying the extra fee he was supposed to pay. He did call to ask the company about it, but at the time, the laws had not caught up with the technology and so the company told him that, while they hoped he would not do what he was doing, they could not prosecute him for it. Mistaken on at least two levels—he misunderstood the principle of stealing and [apparently] assumed that what was not "against the law" was permissible—he did not see that he was in fact taking what was not rightfully his (i.e., stealing) as surely as he would have been had he robbed the company's office.

[5] I am merely introducing this point here and will elaborate it more later in this series. But note just a couple of examples of what I mean. Relative to the issue of honesty, lying is wrong because it violates the essential nature of God, not because he just decided he didn't like lying (cf. Heb 6.18; Tit 1.2). (The Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια [*alētheia*], refers to genuineness or authenticity as much as to saying things which correspond to reality. Cf. John 14.6.) Note further that sin, comprehensively defined, is "falling short of God's glory," missing a standard of character, nor merely a violation of laws or rules (cf. Rom 3.23).