



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

God Is: What People Do By Nature

Romans 2:14-15

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Introduction

1. I suspect few, if any, of you will remember the name of Arlen D. Williams, Jr. But I have little doubt that, if you are of a certain age, once I tell you his story, many will remember the event and what he did.
2. It was January 13, 1982. A powerful snow storm had paralyzed much of the eastern half of the country. Air Florida Flight 90 took off from National Airport, situated along the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Failing to gain necessary altitude, the plane clipped a bridge; several on the bridge were killed as were several more when the plane toppled into the icy waters below.
3. Six survivors were left clinging to the plane's floating tail section. A park police helicopter hovered above and lowered a lifeline and flotation ring. Each time, they lowered it to Arlen Williams, identified at the time by the press as "the man in the water." Each time, he passed it to someone else. Rescuers reported that he was alert and in control. But each time he stayed so someone else could be lifted to safety.
4. Finally, only Williams was left. The helicopter took the fifth person to safety and returned for him. But, he was gone. The cold water had finally proved too much, claiming its final casualty that day. An essay in *Time* magazine summarized Williams's tragic heroism:

At some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He had to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment he had no choice. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.¹

5. What explains why a man would do that? Surely, he too had a survival instinct. Who would not understand had he taken the ring and flown to safety? But, he acted selflessly. And we join those who laud him for his courage and sacrifice for people he most likely did not even know.²

¹ "The Man in the Water," *Time*, 25 Jan. 1982, 86, as quoted in Rubel Shelly, *Prepare to Answer: A Defense of the Christian Faith*, 50. The story as I've told it is summarized from Shelly's account.

² President Reagan posthumously awarded him the Coast Guard's Lifesaving Medal.

6. We have said before that, though the Bible never presents a formal argument for God's existence, it does point to some clues based on the reality we experience. One of the most significant is the nature of humanity, a nature that includes rationality and an innate desire to worship something greater than ourselves. It also includes an innate sense of right and wrong.

Body

I. Explaining Humanity's Moral Sense.

- A. Nothing is more basic and useful for pointing people to the existence of God than the observation that we have within us an innate sense of how things *ought* to be.
1. C. S. Lewis called attention to the simple action of people quarreling, noting that we can learn much from things that give rise to such disputes.³
 - a) Some correct others by pointing out that *they* wouldn't like it if the same thing were done to *them*.
 - b) Some demand fair play, some reciprocal action in return for a good deed ("Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine" is how Lewis said it).
 - c) Some object to things like someone breaking into a line they're in, using language that sounds for all the world like they've been wronged.
 2. Nor is this sense of right and wrong reserved for things where we are directly involved.
 - a) Whether the example is Watergate, or some other political scandal, why do people get so worked up when a public official acts illegally or immorally, especially when his actions appear to have little direct effect on their day-to-day lives?
 - b) Why do we say that something is wrong even if it's legal?
 - (1) "On March 6, 1983, Cheryl Araujo was gang raped at Big Dan's tavern in New Bedford [MA].... The 1988 film *The Accused* was loosely based on the incident."⁴
 - (2) I remember reading a news story at the time that reviewed the fact that Ms. Araujo was assaulted in a room full of witnesses, none of whom made a move to intervene or even to call the police. The local District Attorney lamented that there was no law against witnessing, but not reporting the crime and then said, "maybe there *should* be." Based on what?
 3. Lewis made his point this way: "Quarrelling [sic] means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football" (Lewis, 3-4).
- B. Paul's explanation for this phenomenon is that the sense of right and wrong is innate to humans because we are created in God's image.
1. The context for our text begins with his lament over paganism's refusal to honor the one true God whose existence, he says, ought to be evident from nature (Romans 1:18-23).
 2. He then connects their rejection of God with their rampant immorality (1:24-32).
 3. But, all of that is merely preface to the main point he wants to make: it's not just the pagans who are accountable to "the wrath of God" (1:18).
 - a) In 2:17-3:20, 23, he convicts the Jew of also being accountable, despite the fact that he had Moses' law and the Scriptures ("wrath" is again used in 3:5).

³ See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 3ff.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Bedford,_Massachusetts#Crime. Accessed April 2009; March 16, 2018.

- b) Some think 2:1-16 is addressed to the non-Jewish moralist who is not as depraved as the pagan described in 1:18-32; whether that is the case, or these verses also have the Jews in mind, Paul argues that all are accountable before God and potentially objects of his wrath (used three times, in 2:5, 8).
 - (1) Like the pagan (1:20), everyone who condemns another for wrong is also “without excuse,” being guilty of “the same things” (2:1, 2-5).⁵
 - (2) God’s wrath and fury (v 8) will be visited on all—Jew or Greek (v 9)—who practice unrighteousness in disobedience to the truth, while those who do good—again, Jew or Greek—will be shown glory and honor (2:6-11).
 - (3) In verses 12-16, Paul argues that the issue is not who has the Law, but who lives according to its expectations; it’s just as possible for Gentiles to do that as it is for Jews (2:12-13), in part because Gentiles have within them (“by nature” - v 14) an innate sense of right and wrong (vv 14-16).

C. There must be a cause sufficient to explain humanity’s innate morality; it is more reasonable that the cause was a personal, moral mind than impersonal, non-intelligent, amoral matter.⁶

II. Answering Objections to Our Argument.

- A. Some counter our observation about humanity’s moral sense by saying that humans act this way because of instinct, much as a mother lion will fight to save her cubs.
 - 1. We do have certain instincts, strong desires or wants to act a certain way that are built in to our nature (mother love, hunger, sexual desire, etc.).
 - 2. But, upon reflection, we realize that the moral sense we observe is not the same thing.
 - a) These instincts do not explain why we sometimes feel that we *ought* to do a thing whether we want to do it or not.
 - b) Nor do instincts explain the moral dilemmas we face. “Supposing [sic] you hear a cry for help from a man in danger. You will probably feel two desires—one a desire to give help..., the other a desire to keep out of danger.... But you will find inside you ... a third thing which tells you that you ought to follow the impulse to help, and suppress the impulse to run away. Now this thing that judges between two instincts ... cannot itself be either of them” (Lewis, 8).
 - 3. Nor do instincts explain why, when facing such a dilemma, the weaker one will often overrule the stronger (e.g., the desire to help a drowning man vs. the desire for safety).
 - 4. Furthermore, how do instincts explain the sense that we ought to suppress certain other instincts to do the right thing, or even to go against them for the same reason?⁷
- B. Another objection says that what we call moral law is in fact merely social convention.
 - 1. This is a form of the view that says all morality is relative, that what is wrong for one is not necessarily wrong for another.

⁵ The adjective, ἀναπολόγητος, (*anapologētos*), “without excuse,” is used in both 1:20 and 2:1 and nowhere else in the New Testament.

⁶ Shelly, 51 briefly presents the argument. See also William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 88-90.

⁷ See, for example., San Francisco fireman Gerry Shannon who rescued Sherra Cox from the rubble of a five story house after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Knowing that smaller quakes typically follow the larger one and that the house was due to further collapse at any moment, Shannon ignored orders to leave, assured Ms. Cox he would stay with her, and remained to cut away enough debris to get her to safety. See www.therealboomers.com/archives (accessed April 16, 2009).

2. In defense of this view, some contend that moral rules are only a product of education and therefore differ from place to place because of different customs and teaching.
 - a) Some applications of right and wrong are cultural; witness people who unknowingly offend people in other countries because of different customs about what is offensive or obscene.
 - b) But, the fact that something is taught in a culture does not necessarily mean it is merely cultural. The principles of mathematics and laws of science are universal and discovered, not merely matters of social convention.
 - c) In fact, there is evidence of common morality.⁸
3. In response, we observe that, if morality is merely social custom, then we never have a right to criticize other cultures or nations for perceived wrongs (e.g., war crimes).
 - a) This was why Nazi war criminals were convicted at Nuremberg.
 - (1) The Germans' defense was that they were simply obeying orders or the law of the land; and, in fact, they were.
 - (2) But the tribunal said they were accountable to a "higher law."
 - b) Lest someone say that those trials were conducted in a different time when more people accepted the traditional view, note that we continue to criticize other societies even when their laws are obeyed.
 - (1) In 1994, American Michael P. Fay was convicted of vandalism and sentenced to 6 strokes of the cane, a conviction that "sparked a minor diplomatic crisis between Singapore and the United States. Under pressure from U. S. President Bill Clinton, Singapore's President Ong Teng Cheong reduced Fay's sentence from 6 to 4 strokes and he was caned on 5 May 1994...."⁹
 - (2) Caning was not an isolated, arbitrary punishment, nor something administered just because Fay was an American. Judicial caning had been part of Singapore law since British colonial days, was reserved for men under 50 for about 30 different offenses, and was also the punishment for men AWOL from the military.
 - (3) Of interest at the time was the widespread outcry that labeled the practice immoral.¹⁰ By what right did we do this?
 - c) The same observation can be made closer to home. Civil Rights laws were passed *because* someone deemed previous laws to be *wrong*. Where does this sense of right and wrong, this sense of a "higher law" come from?
4. These considerations point to the fundamental flaw of relativism: it "is always self-contradictory.... [I]t must assume the existence of an absolute by which other theories can be judged."¹¹
 - a) To illustrate, I once had two students challenge my contention that there is an absolute moral standard. When I pointed out the case of the Nazis, they protested that what they did was wrong because it was against German law. When I informed them that

⁸ As Lewis notes, "Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not have any woman you liked" (p. 5).

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caning_in_Singapore#Notable_cases. Accessed April 2009; March 16, 2018.

¹⁰ That had to be the concern for, as we have noted, the punishment was legal under Singapore law.

¹¹ Erwin Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes*, 62.

the Germans had in fact been *obeying* their laws, one of the students said, "Well, then, I guess we can't criticize them."

- b) Here is the flaw: the students were saying that I was *wrong* to believe and act on the implications of an absolute standard. But, in saying that, they had to be appealing to some higher standard.

Conclusion

1. My point is not that relativists and atheists are inherently immoral. Many live moral lives.¹²
2. But, we can rightly question whether they are acting consistently with their stated beliefs when they do so. Morality is personal (i.e., typical of a *person*) and, as we have seen, often runs counter to the material urges and instincts that we share with other inhabitants of this planet.
3. We believe this provides additional evidence that God exists, not just as an impersonal causative intelligence, but as a personal, rational Being who has "stamped [his likeness] upon our souls" (Shelly, 51). And if he exists, then we are accountable to him and in need of his efforts to rescue us from our failings through the saving work of Jesus (Romans 3:23-25).

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¹² And some theists who are absolutists live immoral lives.