TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Morality: A God We Can Obey

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Introduction

1. It's hard to think of a person more associated with evil than Adolf Hitler. At the heart of his malicious policies was a commitment to push two ethical theories to their logical ends: "might makes right" and "the end justifies the means."
2. Reasons for the German people's compliance with Hitler's policies varied, but it is evident that at least some obeyed only because they believed they had no choice. What they might have rejected in theory was hard to reject in practice. Hitler's power was immense.
3. We can question their moral courage, though we should not underestimate the pressure on them. We should question the moral philosophy that they felt compelled to obey.
   a. But we should also be cautious that we are not inadvertently leaving the same impression about obedience to God.
   b. Gary Larson's "Far Side" drawing of "God at his computer," his finger poised over a button labeled "Smite," captures what some believe about the nature of the Judeo-Christian God.
4. Is that really the way God is? Are we nothing more than creatures at the mercy of his capricious control? We know the Bible teaches that we are to obey, and fear that some ignore that teaching at their peril. But what is the nature of the God we are to obey? Are we left to follow the ultimate practitioner of "might makes right" or is there better motivation to conform? What the Bible teaches us about God's nature shows a better way.

Body

I. God is Holy: He Shows What is Best.

   A. From the beginning, Christian preachers have taught that God can require obedience because he himself is morally pure; he is holy, separate from everything else.
      1. Peter begins his exhortation to moral purity by appealing to God's holiness (1 Pet 1.13–16).
      2. He begins there because "it is written"; God's character was the basis for the principles taught in the old covenant (cf. Lev 11.44, 45; 19.2; 20.7).
      3. God's perfect nature and moral character form the foundation for the Ten Commandments.

   B. A holy God's appeal is more compelling than that of a mighty, yet capricious God.

1. Living in the Roman Empire, Peter's readers would have likely taken note of the contrast between this holy God and the immoral Greco-Roman deities.
   a) As Bruce Metzger summarized it, for many, "Genuine belief in the reality of the ancient gods and goddesses of classical mythology had long since given way to widespread agnosticism. Through their plays Euripides and Aristophanes ridiculed the foibles and follies of the Olympian deities, and Euhermerus explained that the gods were originally men who had distinguished themselves either as warriors or benefactors of mankind, and who after their death were accorded divine honors from their grateful people" (Metzger 2003, 73).
   b) It's not hard to see the reason they were disillusioned: the stories that circulated about the gods showed them to be no better than the people who were to serve them, characterized by gross immoralities and petty squabbles.
      (1) For example, Zeus, ruler of Mt. Olympus, was as immoral as he was powerful. He mated with at least twelve females from among both mortals and goddesses. His first wife was his sister, Hera, called queen of Olympus. She spent most of her time trying to destroy his offspring born to his unions with other female personages. Zeus also mated with another of his sisters, Demeter, to whom was born Persephone, who was later stolen and raped by Hades, her uncle.
      (2) It would have been amazing if the people had not scorned those gods.
2. We reject the idea of such deities today, but if our depiction of God leaves the impression that he is capricious and arbitrary, a "might makes right" God, people will be no less repulsed than were the ancients by their pantheon.

C. Emphasizing God's holiness helps us avoid this pitfall.
   1. He is not the author of an ethic that says, "do as I say, not as I do."
      a) In passages where God ordered the destruction of peoples, the reason was their sin, not his caprice (cf. Lev 18.24–28; 1 Kings 21.26; 2 Kings 16.3).
      b) We also have examples of God's patience with both his people Israel and with evil nations such as Nineveh (cf. Jon 4.11).
   2. Also, as we will elaborate later in this series, when God came and lived among us (John 1.14), he exemplified the best possible morality (John 14.9; Heb 4.15).

D. But is it too good to be true? Can we trust God to guide us?

II. God is Wisdom: He Knows What is Best.

A. The Bible teaches that God is omniscient, i.e., that he knows all that can be known (cf. Isa 41.21–23; 46.9–10; Psa 147.5).

B. Prominent subjective ethical systems fail precisely at this point.
   1. Subjective ethics (e.g., situation ethics, cultural ethics) says no action is always right or wrong, but right and wrong must be determined in each situation (e.g., in situation ethics, people must choose "the loving thing to do").
   2. Utilitarianism argues that morality is determined by what brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number (often focusing on mind pleasures, not body), and insists that the intended consequences of an action are sufficient for determining its morality.

3. But our perspective is too limited for us to anticipate all the contingencies, which is why we're often left saying, "I didn't think anyone would get hurt."

C. In contrast, Scripture reveals a God who sees the contingencies and asks us to trust his knowledge for both our protection and well-being.
   1. As we saw in a previous study, this is the essential claim of 1 Cor 2.6–13, et. al.
   2. God's knowledge lets him see what we take years to discover, if we find it at all.
   3. Even when we don't understand why (like telling a small child to not play in the street), we come to see that he knows and we can trust him.
   4. But what if he knows one thing and tells us something else?

III. God is Love: He Wants What is Best.

A. It's possible to know a course is bad for someone, but urge them to follow it anyway.

B. The Bible's claim is that God's holiness (see above) and especially his nature as love (1 John 4.8) mean that he always wants what is best for us.

C. This is the significance of his appeal for us to be perfect as he is perfect (Matt 5.48).
   1. The subject in the context of verse 48 is *love* (Matt 5.43–47), the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13.8–10).
   2. We see the idea worked out in Hebrews 12 where verse 10 calls us to share his holiness.
      a) The context (12.3–11) is a discussion of the discipline that leads to strong character.
      b) The standard is high, and the choices are sometimes not as easy as we would like, but the loftiest standards in any area are met only through being strengthened as we remain steadfast.
   3. As the one who is love, God is our moral teacher who seeks what is best for us and therefore asks the best of us.

Conclusion

1. Few were privileged to see the God we can obey better than Peter. As one of Jesus' closest companions, he saw his holiness (Lev 11.44 = 1 Pet 1.15) lived perfectly (1 Pet 2.22–23).
2. In view of that insight, he appeals to Jesus' followers to imitate his holy example, in all respects (1 Pet 2.18–21, 24). Let us therefore seek to live as people who will be holy as he is holy. That is the morality of a God we can obey.

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Works Cited

Metzger, Bruce M. 2003. *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*. 3rd edition. Revised and Enlarged. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.