

Jesus is Holy

A couple of months ago, I remember watching an episode of Band of Brothers. For those of you who don't know what that is, it's an HBO miniseries that followed the soldiers of Easy Company and their lives as they fought in World War 2. I never got a chance to watch it when it was originally on TV, but I was able to borrow the DVD box set from my brother.

Anyway, there was one episode in particular called "Why we fight" that really hit me, especially since it was based on real events. In that episode, a patrol unit made a horrific discovery, an abandoned Nazi concentration camp (Landsberg) which I believe later turned out to be a satellite of the Dachau camp where as many as 238,000 prisoners died. In it they found numerous prisoners that were starving, diseased, and inhumanly treated, and of course many who had already died. In fact, they also made a discovery of an abandoned train car that was filled with decomposing bodies.

When I watched those images, it was difficult not to be moved by the thought of what human beings are capable of doing. It brings up within us a desire for justice, that those who inflicted such torturous conditions on fellow human beings would pay the penalty for their crimes by being brought before a court of law. That same desire for justice springs up when you hear of crimes today, and I think especially so when the crime is exceptionally heinous, like when it is committed against children or others who cannot defend themselves. After all, what good, moral person could be indifferent to such crimes if they were to witness it?

Of course not everybody's moral compass points in the same direction. There were those who actively participated in these Nazi death camps. Some enjoyed their work and simply justified their actions as being their duty. There were others still like those in the nearby town that weren't active participants in these crimes, but accepted it or showed indifference to it while they lived out their own lives. There were others still who were shocked and disgusted by what they saw, some who even risked their own lives to fight it. We can see three very distinct moral views on the same situation... but which one is right? I'd like to think the answer is obvious, but to some it isn't. The reason I say that is because our society claims that there is no absolute truth or morality. It is up to each individual, or perhaps society itself to deem what is and is not moral. That's also why it changes all the time.

With that in mind, let me pose a question. What makes more sense from a logical perspective: To have relative truth and morality, or absolute and unchanging truth and morality? Most people will say relative is the way to go, even though in practice most people live at some level by absolutes. It's relative truth when you want to decide if pirating software is right or wrong, but you want absolute truth if somebody steals your car and you want justice.

Let me go back to the image of the holocaust to try to make my point clearer. When we see events like the holocaust, we know that evil exists. If we understand that evil exists, then that means good must also exist in order to make a distinction. That means there must be a method of measuring good and evil. There must be a moral law in order to have a reference for measurement. But if a moral law exists, it must be true at all times regardless of whether you or I believe it or not. After all, relative truth and morality essentially means there is no truth or morality because it is up to the individual to decide right from wrong, and it can differ from one person to the next or one society to the next. If we're willing to accept that, we need to be willing to accept events like the holocaust, because in the minds of the Nazis, they were doing what was right.

I think events like the holocaust only prove that human beings fail miserably at establishing what is and is not moral. Even when we're certain we're right, somebody else will invariably say we're wrong. But if logic tells us there must be an absolute moral code somewhere out there to form a reference point for good and evil, who can establish it if not us? Who's qualified enough, since human beings can't seem to come to a consensus? I believe the answer to that question is God alone because He is the only one who never changes. As a result, His standards of morality remain fixed and eternal. He created the universe and He is the one who set the standard by which we all are judged. People criticize Christians all the time by saying their beliefs are too absolute and rigid. They say the church should change with the times. That's an attitude of relative truth and morality. What people don't understand is that Christians struggle with moral issues like everybody else, but ultimately they recognize that they must submit to the moral code that God established and clearly laid out in His Word, the Bible. It's not a standard we create, but one we have been given. To simply change our beliefs as society changes would make our faith meaningless and weak.

Now if you recall my last devotional, I talked about the fact that Jesus claimed to be nothing less than God in human form. I described some of the evidence that supported his claim to deity, and I challenged everybody to study the evidence and see whether or not the Bible was a book of fact or fiction. What I didn't describe was the response we must have if we ultimately conclude that the evidence shows the Bible to be the truth. If we accept that the evidence is compelling that Jesus is God and that the Bible is reliable, we need to accept the moral teachings found in it and recognize that we are all subject to be judged according to God's law and that we all, without exception fail to meet it and will face the consequences for it.

At this point, people usually question this whole concept of judgment. If God is a God of love, why would He judge and punish people for their sins? The answer is that claiming God is love only provides an incomplete image of who He really is. God also requires Justice and is by nature Holy and perfectly moral. To give you a quick analogy, if our society were willing to allow a Hitler or a Paul Bernardo do as they wish without consequence in the name of loving that person, would it be considered a good and moral society? In the same way, a God who tolerated injustice and allowed it to go unpunished would not be worthy to be called a good and moral God.

Now we may just sit back at this point and say, “of course, serial killers, mass murders, and child molesters, they all deserve whatever punishment God can dish out, but I’ve never done any of those things.” In our own minds, we’re good moral people. I’m sure the Nazis felt the same way about themselves... but as I said before, it’s not by our standards we are judged, but by God’s... and God’s standard is absolute moral perfection and nothing less. That’s part of being a perfectly Holy God; He can’t accept what isn’t holy. That’s why Romans 3:23 says “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” The reality is none of us measure up to God’s moral standards, not even close. In fact, the Bible indicates that there isn’t even one person who is good. In Romans 3:12 it says:

¹²*All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.*

This really does show that there is no concept in the Christian faith that the good in our lives make up for the bad. Just look at Isaiah 64:6:

⁶*All of us have become like one who is unclean, **and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags**; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

Even the things we do that we think are good and righteous are filthy rags to God because they still don’t meet up to His perfect standard unless they are done for the sake of glorifying Him. If even the things we think are good don’t measure up, how can it possibly pay for any of the bad we’ve done? In fact, if you really think about it, the concept of the good outweighing the bad in our lives doesn’t even work in our own society. If a man intentionally kills somebody and it takes 20 years for the police to catch him, does it really matter if during those 20 years this man did everything society would deem as admirable? Maybe he gave of his time and money to a variety of charities, cared for seniors, and served in his local church. None of this would matter if the evidence showed he intentionally murdered somebody and showed no sign of remorse. He would face the full measure of the law both here on earth and before God because he showed no remorse. In the same way, we can’t cover up the magnitude of our crimes by attempting to do good things. Justice still needs to be served and we need to pay for our transgressions.

In Matthew chapters 5-7 we have the famous Sermon on the Mount given by Jesus. In it, he describes what all Christians are meant to strive to be like, and describes the standard of morality that he expects from us. He tells us that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgment, but indicates that even anger towards somebody is subject to that judgment. When he talks about adultery, he indicates that a person who has even lusted in their minds is guilty of adultery. The standard is obviously higher than any of us can possibly achieve, Christian and non-Christian alike. In fact, the best way to summarize God’s expectation for us is found in Matthew 5:48 when Jesus says:

⁴⁸*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Why is such a high standard of morality required? It's because God is Holy and cannot tolerate sin in His presence. To accept sin would mean He would no longer be Holy. The Bible often uses the analogy of light and darkness. Where there is light, there is no darkness and vice versa. It's like binary; it's either a one or zero. In the same way, God, being light cannot be in the presence of darkness. They just don't mix. It's like oil and water... they must be completely separate from one another. When we choose to live a life of unrepentant sin, we choose to live in darkness and choose to live without God. Unless we too are light, we cannot have a relationship with God. It's a decision on our part. I like the way C.S. Lewis put it in his book, Mere Christianity:

God shows much more of himself to some people than to others, not because he has favorites, but because it is impossible for him to show himself to a person whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition. Sunlight, though it has no favorites, cannot be reflected in a dusty mirror as clearly as in a clean one.

God requires that we be holy just as He is Holy, but He also makes it clear that there is nothing we can do to achieve this. So what hope is there? If at this point we recognize and regret our rebellion against God through sin, we can begin to understand what God's love truly means. God's perfect sense of justice requires that sin be punished, but His incredible love and compassion could not bear to simply see us perish. For that reason Jesus willingly suffered and died for us. He took the full wrath and punishment of God for the sins of mankind and placed it on himself. Being fully God and fully human meant that Jesus was the only one worthy to pay for our sins because he alone fulfilled the requirement of being Holy.

The Sermon on the Mount that described God's moral standard was not given to show us that human beings have no hope, but rather that our hope is found in Jesus Christ alone. It's not about doing good works to save ourselves, but about recognizing that our good works are meaningless on their own and can do nothing to save us from the punishment of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). It makes us realize that everything we do is sinful unless we first accept the righteousness of God's Son by accepting His gift of grace. We must recognize that we have sinned and ask God for mercy. We must recognize that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ alone. By doing that, God looks at us through His perfect son and deems us righteous because of His righteousness. Only then can we be made holy in the eyes of God. Only then can we have a rich and personal relationship with God Himself.

Ultimately this is a decision that each individual must make. Although God has offered mercy and love, it is up to you to accept this gift or not. To illustrate this point, I'd like to leave you with one last story from the pages of history. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a postal clerk by the name of George Wilson robbed a federal payroll from a train and killed a guard in the process. He was convicted for his crimes and sentenced to hang. However, due to a growing public sentiment against capital punishment, President Andrew Jackson gave him a presidential pardon to spare his life. What made George Wilson stand out in history is the fact that he refused that pardon. Ultimately, because Wilson refused the mercy of the President, the Supreme Court had to rule on whether or not a person could refuse a presidential pardon. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall responded by saying "The value of the pardon depends upon its acceptance. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must hang"... and so he was. The conclusion of the Supreme Court was that a pardon must not only be granted, but accepted as well.

The decision is yours, and you are responsible for it. If you've never come to a personal decision to recognize your sin and accept God's gift of grace, then I strongly urge you to think about it. If you have questions or doubts, at the very least, seek out answers before you make a final conclusion. You have nothing to lose by seeking these answers, but everything to gain if you discover the truth.