



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

JEREMIAH 9:23-24

NOVEMBER 2014

Beyond Mere Morality

We are experiencing a collective angst regarding the perceived loss of a previous moral culture that we remember as being better than today. In any culture, the morality standards are set by the values that the particular society celebrates.

So, technically, we have a moral culture, but we are not satisfied that it is a *good* moral culture. Some would say that the culture is somewhat more moral in that now some minority groups have recognition that previously didn't. Others would decry the shift as sliding down the slippery slope toward destruction. They remember a culture that made room for the Bible, prayer in public, laws that reflected biblical values, etc.

What does it require to return to a better moral culture? What does that look like?

The great temptation is to take a short-cut and focus on conforming behavior, but morality doesn't start with behavior. Morality includes behavior on the way to something even better. A major problem with our approach is the focus on getting better in the realm of behavior. C.S. Lewis wrote the classic, *Mere Christianity*, which should be read multiple times by every

Christian. If someone in today's Christian culture wrote a descriptive book, it would be *Mere Morality*. No one should read that. We want a better culture, and so we try to be better and get others to be better the same way we do. But when life is defined in "mere morality" terms, real Christianity is lost. However, when we move beyond mere morality, we move from being good to being loved. That really is better.

In his book *Is Sunday School Destroying Our Kids?*, Samuel Williamson references Mack Stile's *Marks of Messenger* in demonstrating "how the gospel is lost:

1. The gospel is **Accepted**
2. The gospel is **Assumed**
3. The gospel is **Confused**
4. The gospel is **Lost.**"¹

Quoting further from Williamson, "Stiles continues, 'For any generation to lose the gospel is tragic. But the generation that

(continued next page)

assumes the gospel . . . is most responsible for the loss of the gospel.”¹ We have lived and are living in a generation that assumes the gospel and now we are grieving its loss.

Mere morality is **expensive**. It will **rob** the Christian of the kind of **joy** that only **being loved** can produce.

I was being interviewed on TV some years ago. During the interview, I asked the host to tell me his own story. “I accepted Christ at a young age, but then slipped into rebellion for 15 years until someone confronted me and helped me to begin the journey of knowing Jesus,” he said. Then he asked for my story. I decided to use his parallel and said, “I too accepted Christ at an early age, but I slipped into religion for 15 years until someone helped me get onto the path of knowing Jesus.” I could have said “morality” instead of religion. Actually, immorality and morality can come out of the same heart. We all want desperately to matter. We were made that way. God created us in his image and we have value based on his creative design. When sin entered the picture, our sense of value was perverted, and since then, we have been on a ceaseless crusade to

.....
¹ Samuel Williamson, *Is Sunday School Destroying Our Kids? How Moralism Suffocates Grace* (Ann Arbor, MI: Beliefs of the Heart Press, 2013) p. 8, quoting Mack Stiles, *Marks of the Messenger: Knowing, Living, and Speaking the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010) p. 40.

find how we matter. The immoral person refuses to accept boundaries that limit his or her autonomy. He or she demands to be the final arbiter in his or her own life. The moral person wants to matter to those who matter in his or her life. In my case, the family and small community in which I grew up valued good boys. I wanted to be good to be validated by them. Had I grown up in the streets of a big city where being bad was valued, I probably would have conformed to that morality. Oswald Chambers writes, “The nature of sin is not immorality and wrong doing, but the nature of self realization which leads us to say, ‘I am my own god.’ This nature may express itself in morality or immorality, but it always has a common basis: my claim to my right to myself.”²

Mere morality is expensive. It will rob the Christian of the kind of joy that only being loved can produce. It sets impossible goals—to be better. But who decides? And how much better is enough? The standard continues to rise. And when we are conscious that we are better, we are inevitably bound to measure others without necessary mercy. In fact, the person who claims to be better probably is not. He has swapped his awareness of weakness for his awareness of his own righteousness. We are better when we aren’t aware of keeping score. Oh, there is a scorecard, but the one who lived in our place and died for our sins has

.....
² Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* for October 5 (<http://utmost.org/the-nature-of-degeneration/>).

already filled it out. What a drab life trying to make points with one who is not keeping score. Those who are consumed with the one who captured them with love are not paying attention to the score. But since the love of God has captured them, they now can't stop loving, and that is better. Love produces better behavior than trying to be better does.

That is not the only cost of mere morality. It inevitably adopts a delayed hope. After all, we can't expect the big blessings from God until we get our score up. He blesses obedience, and when our obedience batting average is low, we can't expect him to bless us. We are sure that one day we will qualify, however; and we devise different strategies to get there. Age and determination will surely enable us to get over the hump. I might mention that the Pharisees of Jesus' day thought like that. They would not accept Jesus as the blessed one, primarily because they knew their nation had not sufficiently repented. The kingdom would not come until they met the conditions of the covenant. When Jesus announced that the kingdom was in their midst, they bolted, and determined that he was a blaspheming heretic. But God had acted in love toward them when they didn't deserve it. In Jesus, he was living according to the covenant, and in his death, he canceled the curse of their broken promises. He performed when they hadn't and couldn't. They would wait for another Messiah. He never came.

Mere morality will misread the Scriptures. The Bible becomes a book of morals,

principles, rules, and instructions about being better. We see the actors in the narrative as moral heroes. We hold Abraham up as model of faithfulness and imply that if we will be faithful like him we can have land and camels. In fact, he was an idol-worshipping polytheist who even after being captured by God, lied about his wife and exposed her to the advances of a monarch. He was a coward and fearful for his own life. He is not my hero. His God is. What a God who can take such a man and capture him with love and utilize him to play a vital role in the narrative of redemption. What about Joseph? Are we to model after the spoiled young narcissist who bragged to his brothers and father that they would one day bow to him? Most of us would have joined his brothers and thrown him into the nearest pit we could find. God is the hero. He chose Joseph, and captured him with his love using him to save his family

Mere morality also repels **needy** people. These are the ones **Jesus** came for.

and affect the whole story of redemption. And David? He committed adultery and murder even after being blessed as God's choice king. God was not disillusioned with David. He never had any illusions in the first place. He was a needy man whom God loved and used to take Israel to its highest pinnacle while foreshadowing the ultimate king: Jesus, who sits on the throne of the

kingdom. All the heroes of the Bible would boast of one thing only: their weaknesses being an occasion for God's strong love.

Mere morality also repels needy people. These are the ones Jesus came for. Too often the church house is so full of good people that bad people don't want to show up. Good people flock to church. Bad people feel more comfortable at home or at a bar, or at the club. Sadly, some good people, in trying to make bad people feel welcome, have tried to make the church house look more like a bar or a club. It wasn't the décor that repelled them. It was the façade of morality. They were looking for people like them who might be loved into faith. Real love and transparency are attractive to needy people. Jesus paid a high price to forgive

It isn't merely **good people** God is trying to produce. It is **loved people**.

us, and he wants that forgiveness preached and practiced. If we project that we don't need forgiveness, the guilty will conclude that they aren't qualified to be forgiven. They will stay away so we can continue to focus on being better at whatever we are trying to get better at.

In his book, *Three Free Sins*, Dr. Steve Brown writes about the story of Billy who in the first grade while doing his work under stress noticed the embarrassing puddle under his desk. He was petrified. The teacher was coming down the row towards him.

Soon he would be the laughing stock of the class. Sally was coming by his desk with a fish bowl full of water that she dropped and covered Billy and his puddle. The teacher and the class joined to clean up the spill, never knowing about the first puddle.

Later that day at the bus stop, Billy saw Sally and quietly said to her, "You did that on purpose, didn't you? That wasn't an accident, was it?" "No," she said, "it wasn't an accident." "Why did you do that?" She smiled and said, "It happened to me once."³

If we aren't fully aware that it happened to us once, we can't identify with sinners, and we have traded true joy away for mere morality.

It isn't merely good people God is trying to produce. It is loved people. When we are continually captured by his incomprehensible love, some really good things will happen, but we won't be counting.

.....
³ Steve Brown, *Three Free Sins: God's Not Mad At You* (New York: Howard Books, 2012)



P.O. Box 101
Euless, TX 76039
(817) 267-9224
Fax: (817) 354-5522
Email: mail@kerygmaventures.com
www.KerygmaVentures.com