

2 February 2020

Moral Truth and True Compassion

James 1:27; Amos 2:6-8

Our first scripture this morning comes from the Book of James, just one verse. We read James 1:27:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Sure, it's just a single verse, but it claims to present a summary description of pure religion, so it's probably worth looking at in some depth. First of all, notice that James says that he's describing pure "religion," not "true Christianity" or "the essence of Judaism." He's describing the larger category: the religious impulse in humanity. Then notice that his description is active. Pure and undefiled religion is not something you believe; it's something that you do. And what is that? What actions constitute religion? Two things. First, *to care for orphans and widows in their distress*. That is, to help the helpless, protect the defenseless, love those who have no one else to love them. And then, part two, *keep yourself unstained by the world*. That is, avoid evil influences and maintain your own integrity and purity.

Does it strike anyone else that those two demands might sometimes be sort of at odds with each other? Helping the helpless is, let's face it, a messy business. It means getting involved in people at the most vulnerable times in their lives, when they are most on edge, and it occasionally happens that some of the people in need of help may be in situations that are not morally edifying. Meanwhile the second instruction is about maintaining your purity so as not to be led astray by such bad examples. To genuinely help the helpless, you pretty much have to suspend judgment and take people as they are; but maintaining purity requires restraint, the exercise of good judgment, and may even require that you physically remove yourself from bad influence. Helping the helpless breaks down walls; maintaining purity establishes healthy boundaries. Helping the helpless makes compassion to others the prime directive, the priority; maintaining purity prioritizes faithfulness to moral standards. Helping widows and orphans puts the person first, even if it means bending rules; keeping yourself unstained by the world means respecting rules and conforming to them. Two quite different mindsets.

Last week I said in passing that one of the vestiges of the image of God in humanity is that we alone of all God's creatures appear to be moral beings. That is, we believe that there are some things that should be done just because they are right, even if doing them does not benefit us, or even is painful for us. In addition, there are other things that just should *not* be done, even if they would be pleasurable, even if no one would ever find out. We seldom, if ever, live up to our own ideals, but at least we have them. In that sense, at least, we are moral beings. And yet there is a Great Moral Divide among us. In broad terms we have two different ways of defining right and wrong actions. On the one hand, we have the Purity people: those who define morality as avoiding wrongdoing, often defined for them by a list of rules. These people seek to overcome the darkness within the human heart, and they see the world as a dangerous place, a place of corruption and wickedness that must be rejected. In James's terms, these people try to keep

themselves unstained by the world. On the other hand, there are the Compassion people: who define morality as doing acts of mercy for others. These people see themselves as potential agents for God and the world as a place of need, a place of broken-hearted people whose distress we can lighten, a place of cruelty and indifference that is not to be rejected but resisted. In their best expressions, Purity people are men and women of unimpeachable integrity and Compassion people are Mother Theresa. In their worst expressions, Purity people are pedantic legalists and Compassion people are vapid sentimentalists.

An important side note here. This moral divide I'm describing has no necessary connection to whether someone is theologically conservative or liberal. Liberals sometimes pretend that conservatives are legalists and liberals are compassionate, but it ain't necessarily so. I have an acquaintance whose black-and-white, rigidly conservative theology is like fingernails on a chalkboard to me, but who, a few years ago, donated one of her kidneys to a stranger. On the other hand, some who share my liberal theological bent are some of the most rigid legalists I know. They're just legalistic about liberal stuff, like recycling or pronoun usage, and, please Lord, don't let them ever find out that I sometimes shop at Walmart.

Okay, back to my two different paths to moral truth. At this point, I'm guessing, a problem has occurred to you. I've described the paths of Purity and Compassion as if they were polar opposites. But our verse from James calls us to both. Which is a pain. And you know what's worse? It isn't just James. It's the whole inconvenient Bible. We have the towering figure of Moses telling us to obey God's laws, and we have the life and ministry of Jesus teaching us to care first for the needs of people (even if it *is* on the Sabbath!). But it's not that simple: the Law of Moses commands us to care for the helpless, and Jesus tells us that he did not come to abolish the law. Indeed most passages of the Bible point in both directions. Here's one example, chosen from among many possibilities.

We read from the prophet Amos, chapter 2, verses 6-8:

*⁶ Thus says the Lord:
For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
⁷ they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.*

Amos begins by condemning Israel's oppression of the poor and the afflicted, calling for compassion for others, and then, without even taking a breath, condemns Israel's sexual

promiscuity an issue of individual morality, then switches back to condemning predatory lending practices that prey on the poor and back from that to getting drunk in the house of God with the wine they bought with their profits. Is this about compassion for the helpless? Yes. About following God's rules for personal morality and religious piety? You bet. As we seek to understand morality, this conviction that there are things that should be done just because they are *right*, there are two paths to understanding that morality, and both are scriptural. We can define morality as purity and seek to be unstained by a sinful world, or we can define it as mercy to those in trouble and seek to grow in compassion. Either way, we have the Bible behind us. So what do we make of that? What do we do? Here are a few tentative observations of my own.

First of all, while the Bible itself goes back and forth between these two paths, most people don't. Most of us feel strongly pulled in one direction or the other. For this reason, we tend to self-segregate into communities of others like us. That's part of why I left the Baptists and joined the Methodists. Baptists tend toward a rule-based morality of individual purity, and I was drawn to a morality of mercy instead, which I have found in Methodism. This same divide might help to explain the coming split within Methodism – with people who start with external moral standards on one side and people who start with compassion on the other. But at the same time, even as we follow our own truth in understanding moral behavior, the Bible does not permit us to simply dismiss the other perspective and those who take it. I will happily argue that the Compassion perspective that I take is closest to the heart of God – after all, it's based primarily on the life of Christ! You got a problem with Jesus? Do you, punk? – but I also know that there are no arguments that will ever change my mind on this, which tells me that my perspective is based more on my own personality and background and experience than on reason or biblical study. This is not what I believe as much as it is who I am. If that's so for me, it's probably true for those who define moral truth differently than I do. They could no more change the way they think than I could. So my task in regards to people whose touchstone for morality is different from mine is not to fix them, but to appreciate their different path.

And in the end, if the Bible is to be taken seriously, we need both types of morality. We may all gravitate toward one or the other, but all that means is that we need to be especially intentional about exercising our weak side. Those of us who are drawn to the path of compassion need to remember that personal purity and integrity does in fact matter. Those who are by nature drawn to the path of purity need to be just as intentional about feeding their compassionate side, getting involved in the lives of those who struggle. We may have “competing truths” here, but neither is complete by itself. Each has much to learn from the other.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks harshly to those who, as the King James translation puts it, *eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily*. Now, what that passage is talking about is people who come to Holy Communion in an unworthy manner – there were some in Corinth who were getting drunk on the Communion wine, for instance (Ha! We're Methodists! Check mate!) – but in the Baptist churches of my childhood, this passage was understood to refer to personal purity. That is, don't take Communion if you're not morally worthy of it that day. I remember at least one deacon who would serve the bread and cup but, sometimes, would decline to partake himself. I'm not sure what this accomplished other than to make people wonder,

“What’s Chuck been up to?” but let me make one thing clear. This bread and cup represents God’s love and grace, which is offered for all. None of us are any more worthy of it than anyone else, but all are invited anyway. It doesn’t matter how good you are or whether you are a part of this church or any church. You are welcome to Christ, and we invite you to this table.

Sacrament of Holy Communion

A final word: At least four different times in the Book of Leviticus, God says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Now there’s a fairly strong vote for personal purity. And in Luke 6:36, Jesus adds this, “Be merciful, for your Father is merciful.” Go ye therefore and do likewise. Ideally, both. Amen