

“Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World”
“How Should We Live? The Ethics of Jesus.”

Today we continue in our series of sermons, "Seeing Gray – Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World." Much of this message series was inspired by a book that came out this Spring by Rev. Adam Hamilton of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection with the same title as this series. I'd encourage you to buy the book if you'd like to go deeper.

During this message series, we have been recognizing that not everything can be seen in black and white—as much as we want it to be that way. Yes, there are simple issues where there are clearly defined answers. Those issues can be seen in black-and-white. But for many issues, that are more complex, the world is not always black-and-white, and instead has more gray to it.

When it comes to all kinds of issues I often find myself standing in the center and realizing there is truth on both sides and I wonder, "Why can't somebody bring these two truths together?" That's what we try to do here at Saint Paul's. Many times we try to be a bridge where we can bring people together as opposed to having people shout at one another, or demonizing one another. We try to acknowledge that there is truth on both sides: In the area of faith and theology. In the area of morality and ethics. In the area of politics.

We began the series by looking at the areas of faith and politics, last week Mark had us looking at the culture wars in the 60's and 70's that lead to a great deal of our black-and-white thinking. But today we turn our attention to morality.

What is morality? **Morality is the accepted standards by which you determine what is right and wrong.** You have some standard in your mind for what is right, or moral, and you try to live up to that standard. If you fail to live up to that standard then you are living immorally. When we think of the word morality we also think of ethics. These two really go a hand-in-hand.

I want to ask you this question today. "How do **you** determine what is right and wrong?" What is the basis of your moral decision-making for your own personal life? How do you decide what is right and what is wrong in how you conduct business, in how you treat your neighbors, relatives, people you like, people you don't like?

We're in the midst of a presidential election season and there are key issues our nation is facing. When you look at those issues, how do you decide what is right or what is wrong? Sometimes it seems like there isn't much connection between the things that Jesus taught and how we decide these issues.

What we see is that there's a wide spectrum on how people decide what's right and wrong. This is the ethics spectrum. And the question is "How should we live?" **On one side of the spectrum some people are rules-based.** "Tell me the rules and I will try to follow them." In that rules-based ethic we decide what is right and wrong based upon a set of rules that an authority figure has given us. As people of faith, we say the authority figure is God. We determine what is right and wrong based on what God has told us is right and wrong.

And that works pretty well to a point. People know from the rules what they should and should not do. For example, God gave us 10 commandments to live by. Ten rules to tell us right from wrong and it would seem like 10 rules should be pretty simple to live by. But here's the problem: In a rules-based ethic, rules tend to generate more rules. As a teenager my parents tried to cover every situation with rules, but I'd look for the loophole. Then my parents would get all mad, and I'd say something like, "You never told me not to do that." They'd say, "Do we have to tell you everything?" And of course the answer is "yes you do" if you have a rules-based ethic. Rules are good guides and they work to a degree, but then problems arise.

Let's just take the fourth commandment for instance. The fourth commandment says this. **“Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. You shall not work on the Sabbath day—neither you nor your servants nor your beasts.”** That seems pretty straightforward doesn't it? Or is it really straightforward?

What happens when you are living a rule-based ethic is you have to know the answer to a bunch of questions when it comes to this commandment. First of all, when exactly does the Sabbath begin? And when exactly does it end so I can go back to work? You create rules. And what is the definition of work? The Jews had to come up with all kinds of rules about what constitutes work. You are not allowed to walk more than so many steps on the Sabbath because if you walk further than that then it becomes work. You can't cook on the Sabbath because that is working on the Sabbath. If you are a tailor you can't carry your needle on the Sabbath because that would be working. Rules generating more rules.

I've been told that if you go to the Holy Land of Israel today, you will find that on the Sabbath the elevators are pre-programmed to stop on every floor because to push a button on the elevator is considered work. That's another rule. I've also been told that in public restrooms on the Sabbath the toilet paper is often torn off and folded up on the back of the toilet so you don't actually tear off the toilet paper because that would be work on the Sabbath.

In a rules-based ethic, where you're deciding what's right or wrong based on rules, pretty soon it begins to get so cumbersome, so many rules, and everybody's looking for the loophole, so more rules are generated to close the loopholes. So here's what happened to our spiritual ancestors: 10 simple commandments given by God eventually became 613 laws in the Old Testament, which became thousands of more rules in the Talmud.

All the rules-based people in his day drove Jesus crazy. Now be careful here. He didn't dismiss the idea of rules. But Jesus was continually getting into trouble with the Pharisees because he was breaking their rules. He didn't wash ceremonially before he ate his meals. He violated the Sabbath rules all the time—you were not to work on the Sabbath. Jesus plucked grain and ate it on the Sabbath. He healed constantly on the Sabbath.

When they'd come to him and get irritated with Jesus he would finally get frustrated and say, "Wait a minute! I don't care about your Sabbath rules! The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. So if somebody is sick and hurting on the Sabbath then I'm going to heal them, because this is really about helping people and not about following all the rules." You see how Jesus looked at this. He did not throw out the rules. He didn't say, "Don't observe the Sabbath." What he did say was, "Let's be reasonable here. The guiding principle is love."

So again the question is "How should we live?" Some people answer that by saying, "Here are the rules. Follow the rules and you'll be OK." That's one side of the spectrum and it's good in some ways, and bad in others. **The other side of the spectrum is an outcome-based ethic.** This is deciding what's right and wrong based on the end result of our actions. In one situation a certain action might hurt people and therefore it's wrong. But in another situation that same action might help people so it's right. It's not about rules, it's about the outcome.

According to this view, the ends justify the means. You've heard that before. The end result is what's important, no matter what you have to do to get there. But I'm guessing that most of you would say, "That's not right all the time." There are some means that are so evil that it doesn't matter how good the end result is, you still can't do it because it's just wrong.

For example, if we could save a thousand people by simply taking the body parts and blood out of just one of you, would that be right? Let me pick one of you. Right now we're going to take you and use all of your body parts and your blood to save everyone else in this room. How would you respond?

My guess is that most of you would say, "Pastor Aaron that's not right! That's immoral. You can't do that, even though there is a greater good that happens as a result of that one person's life being taken." In this case the end doesn't justify the means. So outcome-based ethics are good in some ways, and bad in others.

What's interesting is that Jesus seemed to draw from both of these perspectives when he was applying his set of ethics to different situations. He seemed to stand somewhere in between. He didn't give up the rules but he also looked at the outcomes. He seemed to find a balance and we talk about that area as being gray.

"The Ethics of Jesus" The ethics of Jesus are interesting because when he is teaching people he is talking to everyday, ordinary people. He's talking mostly to fishermen and carpenters, mothers and fathers. They don't have degrees in ethics or philosophy. They just want to know the answer to the question, "How should we live Jesus?"

When it comes to deciding what's right and wrong, our aim is to try to live the way that he wants us to live. **"As Christians our central ethical principle is Jesus Christ."** Every morning when I get up I spend some time in prayer and say, "Jesus, help me to follow you today. Help me to honor you and to live for you. Help me to please you and live the way you want me to live. I offer my life to you once more today."

That's what we invite you to do as followers of Jesus Christ. The challenge is that a lot of times we don't really link what we believe about the big issues with the things that Jesus said. Instead a lot of the time our own views are shaped by our favorite talk show host. Maybe our views are shaped by our favorite newspaper columnist, or maybe what our parents said, or some great movie we saw. But listen, our task is to have our views shaped by Jesus.

So what did Jesus say? Well, Jesus gave us two simple rules to live by. **“Following One Person and Two Rules.”** Jesus said that these two rules summarize everything else. He did not expect the people who gathered around him, who are common folks, to memorize 10 Commandments, plus 613 laws, plus another couple thousand rules. He said, "The law and the prophets can be summarized in these two things." What is the first one? **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.”**

What does **that** mean when it comes to morality and ethics? It means that in everything I do, I would like to honor God. It means that I would like my life, the actions I take and the conversations I have, to express the love of God and my love for God. With each of these two rules comes a question I would like you to write down and try to remember. The first one is this. **Question: Will this honor God?**

The words that are about to come out of my mouth, will they honor God? The thoughts I'm thinking? The images I'm looking at? The actions I'm taking? Does this honor God? When it comes to big national policies which I might be interested in, I'm going to ask this question. If I were to support this particular issue, would pursuing this course of action be a reflection of my love for God? Will this honor God?

The second great commandment Jesus gave us, the second rule, was this, **“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”** This is the central ethical statement of Jesus' own teachings. He's constantly teaching us the same thing over and over. We are to let the world know we are his disciples by the love that we have for one another, and even for our enemies. He said that, **“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13, TNIV).** He said, **“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28, NIV).**

Love was the organizing principle of Jesus' ethics. He clarified that even more when he taught what we call the Golden Rule. **“In everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you—for this sums up the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).** In other words, love makes me put myself on the receiving end of my own actions. It puts me in the other person's shoes. What does that feel like? If I were to buy the used car I'm selling? If I'm on the receiving end of the words I say to my spouse or kids? If I'm my neighbor? If I live in another country affected by my decisions? The question then becomes, **Question: “What is the loving thing to do?”**

“In this conversation what is the loving thing to do? In this business transaction, what is the loving thing to do? Dealing with my employees, what is the loving thing to do? On this national scale, what is the loving policy that we might pursue?”

So we have these two rules and these two questions: “Does this honor God?” And, “What is the loving thing to do?” These questions are very good questions when it comes to forming our own sense of what is right and what is wrong, and what is moral or immoral. The problem is that WE are still the ones coming up with the answers and we fall short. That's why we become students of scripture, and that's why we learn about our spiritual ancestors and how they navigated these waters, and that's why we listen to the Holy Spirit in times of quiet and solitude, and that's why we use our brains to reason through things. So we're not starting from scratch every time we're trying to answer the questions.

When Jesus was teaching these principles he realized that people might not even remember these simple questions, but what they would remember was stories. So Jesus told a lot of stories. On one occasion there was a lawyer who came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, tell me what must I do to inherit eternal life?" What he is asking is this: "What does the moral life look like? What do I need to do to be good and to end up with God forever? How should I live?"

Jesus said, "What do you think?" The man said, "I think I should love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and love my neighbor as myself." Jesus said, "You have answered well. Do these things and you will live."

Now this man is a lawyer and he is clearly a rules-based person. Being a rules-based person he really wanted to nail this down. So he comes back and he asks this question. "Yes Jesus, but who is my neighbor?" What's he really asking here? What he's really asking is, "Who **don't** I have to love? Who can I **not** apply this to?"

Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story..." And he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is traveling down a lonely stretch of road and is attacked, robbed, stripped, and left for dead. Later on two professional religious types, a Priest and a Levite, are going down the same road, they see the man, and walk on by. But a hated Samaritan stops, bandages the man up, puts him on his donkey, takes him to the nearest inn and pays for clothes, lodging and medical care.

Jesus tells the story and then asks, "Which of these was the neighbor to the man who'd been robbed?" The lawyer answered correctly, "The one who helped him." Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." This is how to live.

It's easy to bash the Priest and the Levite, but we can be just like them. If you were one of them, a religious professional, you would have known that if you went over to that man and touched him and he was dead, you'd be unclean for 7 days. You'd have to cancel all your appointments for a week. Would you do it? What about the fear that the man is faking it and has friends nearby that will jump out and attack you?

But what if you take all those risks and realize that if the man's alive now you're going to have to put him on your donkey which means you **walk** to Jericho. How are your knees and hips today? And the man's got no money, no clothes, he's in need of medical care and you'll have to pay for it. Two day's wages. In Joplin that'd be about \$160 or up to \$600.

What would you do? That question is actually the basis of an ABC News segment on ethics. What ordinary people do in a given situation. I watched a bunch of these last week. They set the stage with actors. In this case an old man and a group of teenagers are the actors. The teenagers taunt and beat the old man in public, what do people do?

The good news here was that people rallied to help the man in amazing ways. But in other scenarios that were less dangerous, people were more likely to walk right on by.

In the story of the Good Samaritan and in this video we're challenged. This is what love looks like. It's not the question, "What will happen to me if I help this man?" Instead, the loving question becomes, "What will happen to this man if I don't help him?" What will honor God and what is the loving thing to do? According to the ethic of Jesus, this is how we decide what's right and wrong. According to the ethic of Jesus this is how we answer the question, "How should I live?" And it's a gray area. It's not black and white. It's not just rules, or the absence of rules. It's about love.

And I have failed at this. I have failed the Good Samaritan test. And it's burned into my mind. My last trip to Nicaragua we were coming back from our adopted village to the city where our hotel was. There's always a sense of urgency to get back before dark so we were in a little hurry. There's a van load of us and on the way back, on a lonely stretch of road, there was man lying down in the middle of the road. He had not been beaten, but he was clearly drunk and that's where he passed out. We slowed down and asked our guides and interpreters what to do and they said to keep going, he'd be fine, let him sleep it off. We didn't move him off the road. We didn't even stop. And I didn't push it. The image will probably be with me the rest of my life.

If my ethics are based on love, in that moment, I was unethical. If my morals are based on love, in that moment I was immoral. If we are followers of Jesus, our ethics, our morals, are based on one relationship and two rules and I blew it.

But when any of us strive to live this way, we're going to fail at times. And in those times we fall on the grace of God, we fall on the forgiveness given through Jesus, we fall on the mercy he offers so freely. God's grace is sufficient, not only for me, but for that man I left behind.

Saint Paul's and those of you who are visitors to this church today, I want to challenge you. I would like for this to be a place where we are serious about living out our faith—where we take it to the streets. I want this to be a place where every single day we are asking the questions: **Will this honor God? Is this the loving thing to do towards other people?**

I would like for people to look at this congregation and look at you and say, "Those people are trying to change the world. Those people look like Jesus. Those people are serious about their faith." That is my hope and my prayer for us. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his book Seeing Gray and his message series on this topic.