

Pastor's Note

Hello

Human beings have wrestled with questions of meaning and purpose and where's history headed and where do we come from and how do we know what's right and what's wrong since we were created. We are most human when we're wrestling with these big questions. And there are three reasons why these ultimate questions, matter.

A. They shape how we live.

What we value and what we treasure, walks out of our lives. Ideas have consequences. And there are no bigger ideas than questions about the meaning of life, questions about right and wrong, and questions about the source of moral authority. These big questions in life matter because they shape how we live.

B. They are unavoidable.

You may not want to ask these questions but you do answer them in how you live. You can't choose not to wrestle with morality because we make moral decisions. We can't choose not to wrestle with meaning because we live lives based on meaning. The questions are unavoidable.

C. They are connected.

How you answer these questions impacts how you answer another. If there's no purpose behind creation how can there be purpose for our lives? If you live, you die, and that's it, if that's true, then who's there to keep your morality in check? Ideas have consequences. These questions shape how we live, they're unavoidable and they're connected. As we look at the biblical picture of moral authority Micah 6:8 (ESV) sums up God's moral expectations and the moral design for the world. *"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* He has told us. Not we have told him. So there you have the direction morality goes from the Biblical perspective; God's moral claim on our lives breaks down into four parts; creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration.

1. Creation

This world belongs to God. The creation story of the Bible assumes that the world belongs to God. In the beginning God created. God's in charge. And that includes the moral authority over the creation and everything in it. Creation says there is a God that gives us moral obligation. And being disconnected from God is what has caused all of the moral decay that now exists on planet earth.

2. The Fall

The fall of man happened when we failed to keep the moral obligations that God's holiness requires. Adam and Eve kicked it off for us when they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and you and I and every other human being, except Jesus, have followed suit ever since. The Bible is not up in the air on the status of humanity. God's holiness requires our righteousness. We just can't manage it on our own. The Fall causes sin; the mistakes we make and wrongs we do in life. It doesn't mince words at all. Paul says it in Romans 3:23(NASB) *"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* All of us have fallen short of these moral obligations. And in Romans 6:23 (NCV) Paul says, *"When people sin, they earn what sin pays-death."* In Ephesians 2:5 (NCV) he says this, *"...we were spiritually dead because of the things we did..."* In other words, until you have been saved by God's grace, you're not okay. We don't like to hear that.

In his book *The Road to Character*, New York Times columnist, David Brooks makes the point that instead of avoiding talking about sin, we need to talk straight about sin. He said *"Sin is a necessary piece of our mental furniture because it reminds us that life is a moral affair. No matter how hard we try to reduce everything to deterministic brain chemistry, no matter how hard we try to reduce behavior to herd instinct that we can capture in big data, no matter how hard we strive to replace sin with non-moral words like mistake or error or weakness, the most essential parts of life are matters of individual responsibility and moral choice. Like whether to be brave or cowardly, honest or deceitful, compassionate or callous. Whether to be faithful or to be disloyal. When modern culture tries to replace sin with ideas like error or insensitivity or they try to banish words like virtue, character, evil, and vice, that doesn't make life any less moral. It just means we have obscured the inescapable moral core of life with shallow language. It just means we think and talk about these choices less clearly and thus become increasingly blind to the moral stakes of everyday life."*

That's powerful isn't it? We need straight talk about sin. What happens when we don't talk straight? What if we give up on God as the moral authority? If God isn't the moral authority and we haven't fallen short of that moral authority then what we embrace is what you might call moral evolution. And moral evolution is exactly what it implies. That we are getting better and better morally. We're becoming more just. We're becoming more virtuous. We're becoming more caring and more tolerant. We're naturally better than our ancestors were in the moral category. Is that true? Are we better? This is a very real phenomenon, this idea of moral authority or moral evolution. Have you seen any of the videos that reveal what Planned Parenthood does behind closed doors to unborn children? Are we really becoming more moral? Are we really becoming more virtuous? What happens when we embrace this moral evolution as individuals? As cultures we then embrace what we might call utopian fantasies. If we give up on the idea of moral norms and we think we're okay, there's nothing wrong with us, then what you have is utopianism. The twentieth century is the century of utopian vision. It's no accident that the twentieth century comes after the nineteenth century and not just mathematically. Because the nineteenth century was the age where secularism took over across western civilization.

The idea is, we can explain the universe without God. God isn't the Creator. Darwin has given us the explanation. Going into the nineteenth century you had a bunch of thinkers saying we can finally move forward as a society. We now have the church off our back. We have God off our back. We can bring about a perfect society. Two examples: Karl Marx thought we can have a perfect society through economics. If everyone just had all the stuff that they wanted everyone would be happy. Did that work? Then you had Margaret Sanger and others give us eugenics. If we could just breed humans like we breed animals. If we could keep this race and this economic class from repopulating the world and we could populate the world with better people, namely my race, we'll be able to bring about a perfect society. They were promising utopia.

Which of these utopian fantasies worked? Which of them even made the world a better place? That's the thing. When you deny the existence of God who has moral obligations and you deny the fact that as human beings we're not okay, we are born into sin, then you set up a fantasy world that runs against reality itself. Ideas have consequences. Ideas have victims. That's the thing about these consequences, these big questions. They don't stay in our own lives. They walk out and they create victims.

3. Redemption

The third part of the biblical story is redemption. Creation says God has moral obligations. The Fall says we have failed those moral obligations. Redemption gives us great news. Jesus Christ

has met God's moral obligations on your behalf. Scripture says you now have an offer. An offer of an exchange. Trust me, it is the best deal that you will ever get on anything in your entire life. You'd better take this deal. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NCV) says, "*Christ had no sin, but God made him become sin so that in Christ we could become right with God.*" That's your deal. You'd better take it. We have God, whose holiness requires some moral obligations on our lives. We have failed those moral obligations. Jesus Christ has met those moral obligations and has offered to exchange them for our failures. And if we don't take that exchange, if we deny God's moral obligations, if we deny we've done anything wrong, and if we deny we need an exchange, Scripture says in Romans 1:25 (NASB) "*For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie...*"

In our culture we've given up on the concept of truth and instead planted all of our plants in the bed of tolerance. We've exchanged truth for tolerance. Tolerance is a wonderful word. It's just been really poorly defined. Tolerance at its best means this: You're made in the image of God and I'm made in the image of God and I respect you as a person, I honor your inherent dignity and worth even if we disagree, even if we're of different ages, genders, races, heights, weights or whatever else. That you're valuable and I'm valuable. Even if we believe different things we should be tolerant of the individual.

But because we think there are no moral obligations, our culture now uses tolerance to mean all ideas are equally valid. When we say tolerant, be tolerant of a person, what we mean is be tolerant of any idea that they believe or embrace. As if all ideas are inherently equal. As if some ideas aren't better than others. As if some cultures aren't better than others. Nazi culture was a bad idea. Whether you were a Nazi or a Jew, it was still a bad culture. It wasn't just bad because you were on the wrong side or right side of the gas tank. It was just wrong. It was bad. Ravi Zacharias said, "*Cultures that love their neighbors are better than cultures that eat their neighbors.*" We've replaced truth with tolerance. Here's another thing we've replaced. We've replaced freedom with autonomy. Os Guinness, in his book, *A Free People's Suicide*, said this, "*The greatest enemy of freedom is freedom.*" Isn't that ironic? Why? Because when we live free without virtue, freedom turns into license and license actually enslaves us.

Recent studies show that Americans today have higher addiction levels than previous generations. And if you think about it, it makes sense. What does it mean to be an addict? Are addicts really free? No. Addicts are slaves. Isn't it ironic that our definition of freedom has turned us into slaves? When you say there are no moral norms, there's no designer, there's no God who has expectations on your life then freedom is to do whatever you want. But you're not most free when you do whatever you want. You're most free when you are who you were created to be. Real freedom comes in a relationship with our designer.

4. Restoration

The fourth part of the biblical story is redemption. Creation says God has moral obligations. The Fall says we have failed those moral obligations. Redemption says Christ meets those moral obligations for us. Restoration is what happens. Where is the world headed when Christ comes back and makes all things new? Here's what we have. Christ's obedience means that he has been given the moral authority over the universe. Paul tells us in Philippians 2:8-11 (NASB) "*He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

So God has moral expectations. We have failed those moral expectations. Christ meets those moral expectations. He's been given the authority. And what is that going to look like? In the new heavens and new earth what we realize is all the brokenness and all the relational carnage that we have created because we have not met God's moral obligations, all of those things are going to be undone. Everything that's broken is going to be restored. Everything sad is going to be made untrue. All those lies are going to be exposed. And everything that was wrong is going to be made right again. That's the end of the story. Things are made right again.

So how do we live? That's the question. How do we live? If you say, where are we in this story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration? We live in between redemption and restoration. Christ has accomplished redemption. Maybe you haven't accepted it and embraced it in your life, this exchange, but in the story of the world we live between redemption and restoration. What does it mean to live now in a world in which out here are moral obligations and those moral obligations are consistently broken? What does it mean? From a Christian perspective here's what it means. We don't stay in our safe warm environment and lob sanctimonious hypocritical pharisaical Bible verse bombs at those people who are way worse than us outside the church. That's not how it works. But sometimes that's what we think? They're so bad out there. Look what they're doing to our country and our culture.

Listen, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. If we have found bread as the beggar, then we tell other beggars where to find it. We don't play like we're holier than thou because we've been given a supply. So what do we do? What does it mean to live between redemption and restoration? Restoration is all about reconciliation or putting things back together. Our relationship with God, our relationship with our children, our spouses, our coworkers, our friends, our family. Our relationship with the world. We try to make the world a better place. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (NCV) *"All this is from God. Through Christ, God made peace between us and himself, and God gave us the work of telling everyone about the peace we can have with him. God was in Christ, making peace between the world and himself. In Christ, God did not hold the world guilty of its sins. And he gave us this message of peace."*

If you've been reconciled to God you have been given the ministry of reconciliation. How do we live between redemption and restoration? We go into a world where there's broken people and there's broken systems and there's broken ideas and there's broken cultures and there's broken programs and what we do is we go in and we put things back together. Through the power of Christ, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we take the message of reconciliation to a broken world. There are Christians all over the world doing amazing reconciling work through the power of the Gospel? That's what we do. We live between redemption and restoration by being reconcilers. It's one thing to know the right thing. It's another thing to do the right thing. So what do we have at our disposal? What's in our tool kit to help us put this into place? Three things.

a. Accept God's gift of repentance. Repentance is something that's offered to people who are God's people and people who are not yet God's people. If you've never taken that great deal that Christ offers you to give you his righteousness and swap it for your unrighteousness, God offers you repentance. Repentance is not proof that God is mad at you. Repentance is proof that God is kind. If you're headed to the moral abyss in a world in which real moral obligations exist, the best way forward is to turn around and accept the gift of repentance, whether you're a Christ follower or not yet a Christ follower, you have the opportunity to be made whole again.

b. Watch over your heart. Proverbs 4:23(NASB) *"Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life."* We live in a culture that goes after our moral heart. It goes after what we think is right and wrong. It's usually not through ideas. Most people do not become

skeptics because they've intellectually wrestled their way out of believing in God or believing in morality. We don't reject God and start to sin. We start to sin and reject God to justify our desires. What's leading your beliefs about these big questions of origin and meaning and morality is not just your thoughts. It's your decisions. How do you live? There are a lot of people whose hearts are drawn out. Blaise Pascal said, "*We have a God shaped hole in our hearts.*" Living in our culture will soon convince you that we don't have a God shaped hole in our heart. You watch enough commercials and you start to think, I've got a Gulfstream shaped hole in my heart and it will be fulfilled if only I get one. Right? Watch over your heart.

c. Be immersed in the Word. We live in a culture in which we're immersed with thinking and teaching about morality and the temptation is to see the Bible in light of the culture. There's this tendency happening right now to think that the entire teaching of Scripture for the last 3400 years should be re-understood in light of cultural morality. It's very tempting to be immersed in a culture where there's definitions of right and wrong. And to reinterpret Scripture based on that, instead of interpreting culture based on Scripture. So as much as we're immersed in the culture, we've got to be immersed in the Word of God. It is how God communicates to us the moral obligations we're responsible for and for which Christ has redeemed us.

Blessings,

Scott

