

# Truth or Tolerance in an Age of Moral Relativism

## Stark Road Gospel Hall 2003 Summer Series

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Readings: Isaiah 5:20; Romans 12:2

### 1. Is Relativism Relevant?

- a. Are people in the street moral relativist or are they only found on college campuses, in the media and in Hollywood? What does working middle class America believe about truth and morality? Relativism is the default way of thinking today.
  - i. 66% of the population believe there is no such thing as absolute truth<sup>1</sup>
  - ii. Another poll estimated that 72% of the population between 18 and 25 rejected the notion of absolutes<sup>2</sup>
  - iii. Another poll states that 88% of evangelical Christians claim that the Bible is the Word of God and is totally accurate in all it teaches, and yet 53% believe that there are no absolutes<sup>3</sup>
  - iv. Three out of three people I surveyed at work told me without hesitation that morality is relative not absolute. It is culturally based. We shouldn't judge other cultures. Morality changes over time with changing levels of education.
- b. Several notions are prevalent in peoples thinking today
  - i. God can be approached and worshiped in a variety of ways (many paths to God) and that any claim that there is One Way is being bigoted, closed minded and intolerant
  - ii. No right to make moral judgments about people's personal or private behavior, or what people do with their own bodies.
  - iii. God does not play a part in determining or establishing right and wrong.

### 2. The Crux of the Issue

- a. Do morality (right and wrong) and religion (approach to God) fit into the category of objective truth?
  - i. True whether I believe it or not
    1. Like  $2+2=4$ , or the world is round not flat, or the U.S military toppled Sadaam's regime
  - ii. True whether it is legal or not
    1. Abortion is legal but it is wrong
    2. Capital punishment may be illegal in some states but morally right
- b. Or is truth subjective?
  - i. It's true for me but maybe not for you
  - ii. It's true for this culture but not for that culture
  - iii. It was true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but not for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - iv. It's a matter of preference, taste, opinion, culture, or time
    1. Lillian is prettier than Lucy
    2. Grand Canyon is more awesome than the Niagara falls
    3. Buddies pizza is better than Dominos.
- c. If morality and religion are merely subjective ideas, making a moral judgment about a behavior has no meaning
  - i. Saying 'homosexuality is wrong' has no more meaning than saying "the color pink is wrong."
  - ii. Stating that 'Christ is the only way to God' has no more meaning than saying 'a Chevy Venture is the only van you should drive'
- d. The underlying rationale for the cry for "tolerance" today is relativism (truth is subjective) and pluralism (religion is subjective). If truth then is relative what right do

I have to make moral judgments about people and their lifestyles? If truth is subjective what right do I have to try to convert the Hindu, Jew, Muslim or Catholic?

### 3. Some Definitions: Relativism, Pluralism, Absolutes

- a. **Relativism** –“This world-view begins with the presupposition that there is no God and, as a result, no "outside" agent imposing upon us a standard of right and wrong. As a result, there is no objective right and wrong. Morality and truth all depend upon the person and the circumstances. To say that you think something is right or wrong does not say anything about the essential action, only your feelings about that action.”<sup>4</sup>
- b. **Pluralism** –Existence of diverse religions within a society with equal rights to exist before the law. U.S is a pluralistic society. There are many religions and they all have a right to exist before the law. Iran on the other hand is not a pluralistic society. Islam would be the only recognized religion. More recently it has come to imply that all religious belief systems are equally valid, or equally true. Therefore people should not make exclusive claims to truth
- c. **Absolute Truth**- Absolutes cannot exist without God. God has revealed right and wrong to us. He has revealed it through His Word –the Bible. He has also written right and wrong on the human heart, *“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”* (Rom. 2:14, 15). Right and wrong is not arbitrary. It reflects the character of God and thus is does not change.

### 4. The Weakness of Relativism

- a. **It’s adherents contradict themselves**
  - i. There are no absolutes except that there are no absolutes. To state that there are no absolutes is stating an absolute about reality, and is therefore self-contradictory.
  - ii. The language of relativists is inconsistent with their philosophy. You will frequently hear strong moral judgments in their statements
    1. “You shouldn’t judge other people’s behavior”
    2. “We ought to be accepting of other people’s beliefs”
    3. “I have a right to do what I want with my own body”
    4. “Your just too closed minded”Each of these statements implies that there is a Standard we are obligated to adhere to. However, if truth is relative then what is right for you may not be right for me. So to tell me what I ought to do is just your opinion and carries no real authority.
- b. **The most vocal relativists are often the most intolerant**
  - i. Consider the pressure for “politically correct” speech in public life. For a public figure to make moral judgments regarding abortion, homosexuality, feminism, or religion incurs outrage among those who would claim truth is relative. If truth is relative why aren’t they tolerant of people who view these things differently than they do? Relativist should tolerate bigots racists and religious fanatics
- c. **It’s hard to live as a relativist**
  - i. Most relativists momentarily abandon their philosophy when they are wronged. The man who is robbed and beaten will feel he has been wronged. He will not say, “I do not like what was done to me but maybe my assailant felt he was right in attacking me”

- ii. The story is told of a philosophy student who wrote a research paper arguing that there are no objective or absolute moral principles. It was an “A” paper from the standpoint of style, documentation, punctuation, and flow. However, the professor gave it an “F”. Outraged the student stormed into the professors office demanding an explanation. The professor told him that he doesn’t like blue covers. “That’s not fair, I shouldn’t be graded on the color of the paper but on the content” The professor asked if he was referring to the paper in which he argued that there was no such thing as absolute truth such as fairness or justice. “Yes that’s the one” the student replied. “It will remain an F, I don’t like blue covers” said the professor. It dawned on the student that he actually did believe in the objective moral principle of fairness and he expected it to be applied to him.<sup>5</sup>
  - iii. Few people would say that what the Nazi’s did to the Jews and Gypsies was morally justifiable because it was part of their culture. Few people would say that the acts of terrorism on 9/11 were justifiable because they were just acting on their religious beliefs. Yet most of the population in the U.S. would claim that truth is relative.
- d. **Relativism has just swapped out old absolutes (real ones) for new ones that are man made.** When pressed, most people would admit that there are some absolutes: murder, rape, stealing etc.... These are things done to other people – social ethics. They want to hold on to some social ethics as being absolute because they wouldn’t want these crimes to be done to them. But they want complete freedom to do what they want to do with their own body –the right to “privacy”. However, morality is not a buffet where you can pick and choose what is absolute and what is relative. God decides that. Even those who are the most vocal advocates of relativism (what’s right for you is not necessarily right for me so don’t judge me) are still absolutist in practice and have just abandoned traditional absolutes for new absolutes. For, example the relativist has abandoned the absolute of sexual purity –sex only within marriage, for a new absolute called “the right to privacy”. The “right to privacy” has come to mean I can do whatever I want with my body or with a consenting adult. I can fill it with drugs or alcohol, engage in any kind of sexual activity, and even kill it. It’s my body. This is exactly the thinking of the wicked in Ps. 12:4 *“With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?”* What is the difference between real absolutes, and these “new” absolutes? Real absolutes are come from God. “New” absolutes such as, “I can do whatever I want with my own body” is from man. In other words a true absolute has divine authority behind it. It has been revealed by God and written on the human heart. The “new” absolutes are man-made.
- e. **No basis for right and wrong without God.** The Lord Jesus alluded to this fact in the parable of the unjust judge, Luke 18:1-8. The judge wouldn’t grant justice upon moral grounds, *“Though I do not fear God”*. Nor would he grant justice on altruistic grounds, *“nor regard man”*. Rather he granted justice to the widow because she pestered him. He granted her justice only because it happened to align with his self interest which was to be freed of this annoying widow. If there is no God, or if God has not spoken, then there is no compelling reason for man to be moral. He may act morally because he happens to like humanity and therefore treats others as he would like to be treated. Or, he may act morally because it is convenient for him. It is in his self-interest to act in a moral way. The famous Russian Novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky said, “without God everything is permissible”

## 5. God’s Truth is Absolute

- a. Absolutes are not arbitrary but a reflection of the character of God, *“Be holy, for I am holy”* (1Peter 1:16)
  - i. When God says don’t lie it’s because He doesn’t lie
  - ii. When God says divorce is wrong it’s because He keeps His promises

- iii. Morality originates from God. God is not subject to some Higher law or principle outside of Himself. God reveals principles and precepts (commands) consistent with His own character.
  - b. Absolutes don't change because God doesn't change, "*For I am the LORD I change not*" (Mal 3:6).
  - c. Absolutes don't become outdated because God is Eternal (Rev 1:8). Nothing today has taken God by surprise.
  - d. Absolutes are universal. God holds all men accountable (Romans 1:20; 2:12-16; 3:19). God would not judge all men if His moral laws did not apply to them.
  - e. Absolutes are for our good. "*And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul. To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?*" (Deut. 10:12, 13). See also Ps. 19:7-9.
  - f. Absolutes are written on the human heart, "*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them*" (Rom. 2:14, 15).
- There is a general common understanding of right and wrong across all cultures with only minor variations
- i. In what culture is being a coward honored?
  - ii. In what culture is hypocrisy praised?
  - iii. In what culture is it a good thing to lie, steal, cheat and steal among your own?

## 6. In an Age of Tolerance Should We Speak Out Against Sin?

- a. **Distinction between judging people who sin within the assembly and unbelievers without.**

*"I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."* (1Cor. 5:9-13)

It is the responsibility of the assembly to discipline by public rebuke (1 Tim 5:19-22), silencing (Titus 1:9-14;), separation (Rom 16:17; Titus 3:10) or excommunication (1 Cor 5) those who commit certain sins within the assembly. The discipline needs to be appropriate for the nature of the sin. There are times moral judgments must be made and action taken. The Lord rebuked Thyatira because they tolerated that woman Jezebel (Rev 2:20). The Assembly is God's dwelling place and the moral standards are high

- b. **How do we treat the immoral unbeliever? We need to follow the example of Christ**

- i. The Lord Jesus was a friend to sinners
  - 1. "*And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them*" (Luke 15:2)
  - 2. "*Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?*" (Luke 5:30)

3. *"The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!"* (Luke 7:34)
  4. *"And when they saw [it], they all murmured, saying, that he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner."* (Luke 19:7)
  5. *"And when the Pharisees saw [it], they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?"* (Matt 9:11)
- ii. The Lord Jesus was approachable by sinners
    1. *"Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him"* (Luke 15:1)
    2. *"And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them."* (Luke 5:29)
    3. We need to guard against the attitude expressed by the self righteous in Isaiah's day, *"Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou"* (Isa 65:5)
  - iii. Jesus loved the sinner but hated his sin. He never compromised truth.
    1. *"They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* (Mark 2:17). He didn't say "come to me and we just won't worry about your sin". He called sinners to repentance.
    2. Christ loved righteousness and hated sin (Ps. 45:7)
    3. *"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good."* (Rom 12:9). *Speaking the truth in love* (Eph 4:15).
  - iv. Jesus was full of grace and truth.
    1. Christ is our example to follow in showing the right balance of truth and love in his dealing with the woman at the well in John 4. Here is a woman who has led an immoral life and was presently living in sin. She follows a religion that has serious error. He doesn't start the conversation by saying "go call your husband" nor does He start by saying "you [Samaritans] worship what you do not know". In other words He doesn't start off by pointing a condemning finger at her. He starts the conversation by just asking for a drink of water. He then uses that as a springboard to introduce Living Water – something that will satisfy her spiritual thirst. It is only after her interest is peaked that He then confronts her with her sin, "go call your husband". Even in these words we can see His tack and gentleness. He exposes her sin because she needs to take sides with God against her sin in order to receive the Living Water.
    2. The Lord's emphasis of grace versus truth depended largely on the attitude of the listener. The immoral people who came to him didn't make any pretense of being righteous. They weren't saying that sin didn't matter. They knew they were sinners and were tired of it and wanted rid of it. To these people the Lord spoke words of grace. On the other hand, people who came to him with their self righteousness received truth in a very direct way, *"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape the damnation of Hell"* (Matt 23:33).

**c. We shouldn't just be just moralist we need to be full of grace and truth and speak the truth in love.**

<sup>1</sup> Scott Scruggs, Truth or Tolerance (Internet)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> A.H. Higgins, So Many Kinds of Voices –Moral Relativism (Truth and Tidings)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Horner, *The Truth Behind Tolerance* (Internet)