



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE INEVITABLE SURMISE"

Sunday Morning, January 21, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Isaiah 5:20; John 18:28-38

Modern day preaching has become pretty much a one-way communication. The "pulpit monologue" is almost never directly challenged, and all too infrequently is there a specific response. Now this condition may be ideal in terms of dignity, but it leaves much to be desired in terms of clarity. I for one am interested, not only in what I say, but how it is heard and the reactions to it. Nothing pleases me more than a specific comment on some aspect of the sermon. A friend of mine who preaches in New Jersey got this one morning when a teen-ager came out of the service and said to him: "Man! What a blast!" Maybe even this was a little general, but at least it was direct.

I think the most vigorous response I ever received came in a letter from a college student. He had been visiting in the community where I served, and had heard me preach one Sunday night. In this particular message I had affirmed my belief in the existence of certain moral absolutes. I had said that the difference between right and wrong was rooted in the nature of reality, and was not simply a matter of subjective opinion. No comment was made that night, but when this young man got back to the campus he wrote me a stinging rebuttal. He began by expressing amazement that someone as young as I was could be so far behind the times. He asserted that no intelligent person of today believes in absolutes of any kind. "Truth is subjective, and morals are relative," he said. He pointed out the divergent practices of different cultures, and defied me to say which was "right" or better than another. He suggested I join the twentieth century by reading someone like Bertrand Russell who understood the relative nature of life. Then he closed with these words: "It is patently wrong for someone like you to get up before hundreds of people and so mislead them."

You may be surprised to know that I welcomed such a response. Instead of taking it personally or becoming defensive, I looked on it as a significant challenge in a crucial area. Here was one who felt very deeply about something that had far-reaching implications, and I seized it as an opportunity both to share more fully with him and to sharpen my own thinking on the subject. And it occurred to me that many of you might have encountered this problem about right and wrong and would like to think it through with me. Therefore, let us consider together this morning the matter of ethical relativism and what can be said about it.

In structuring a reply to my friend, I tried to establish two points. The first had to do with the nature of his position. I asked him to re-examine the foundation of his argument and see if it did not involve a subtle contradiction.

The very letter that he had written was evidence of this. Notice carefully what he had done: in one sentence he denied the existence of moral absolutes, but then in the next sentence he said I was "patently wrong" for teaching such. Now if you will ponder these assertions for a moment, you will realize that they cannot exist side by side: each one precludes the other. You see, if the first statement is true, why did he bother to protest? If right and wrong are merely private judgments, then why was he so upset by my opinion? If there is no ultimate point of reference, then I am just as entitled to my belief as he is to his disbelief. On the other hand, if the second statement is true, then he has assumed the falsehood of the first. If it is "wrong" to say that moral absolutes exist, then one appeals to the very framework he is trying to eliminate. This is one of the oldest problems of human thought, and relativists from the time of Protagoras have tried to overcome it. But the contradiction is always there. Every attempt to abolish right and wrong ends up presupposing the very structure. Here was a young man who thought his position was superior to another, and this was no personal whim. He was "absolute" in saying there were no absolutes; he spoke of "wrong" in affirming there was no such thing. It is like my uttering the sentence: "I cannot talk." The very act itself undermines the assertion. One of the best tests of truth is self-consistency, and an argument that destroys its own basis is certainly suspect. Therefore, this young man's attitude was really at war with his argument; his letter was proof of the very thing he was trying to deny.

But the contradiction was not exclusively on the logical plane; the way he lived also betrayed his contention. Just the day before this sermon I had talked to him about the racial problems in the South. He was passionately involved in the fight of the Negro for equal rights. He, along with some other college students, had been arrested in a "sit-in" demonstration as they tried to do something about the problem. As we had talked, he was quite critical of the church in this whole area, and felt that by her silence and inactivity she had defaulted her role of leadership. As I wrote to him, I reminded him of this conversation, and tried to relate it to the problem we were discussing. Actually, if his contention were true, the church by doing nothing had been consistent and he had been a stupid fool. I asked him: "Why get so excited about social issues if they are actually only personal preferences? If there is no objective right or wrong, then segregation and exploitation are just as valid as justice." Here he was in practice, a true prophetic figure; yet he was holding an intellectual position that rendered all of this meaningless.

And the very same thing could be said for the man he recommended as a twentieth century authority. The truth was I had read some of Bertrand Russell's work. I was familiar with his assertion that there is no way to prove intrinsic value and therefore all moral judgments are a matter of taste and not objective truth. But I also had observed his actions, and would have to say that for all his learning and influence Mr. Russell is a baffling enigma. He has been one of the most radical crusaders of the twentieth century. His book, Why I Am Not a Christian, is filled with decisive value judgments. Just recently he has been in jail for his vigorous protest of nuclear testing. Quite obviously he lives by certain values whether he will concede their existence or not. In actuality he is not willing to let certain issues be a matter of "taste"; he does not want to embrace Christianity or see the bomb developed, and in his argument for these he assumes a moral framework.

Therefore, the very nature of this whole case is basically contradictory. We are dealing here with the mysterious "given" of life. That is why I entitled the sermon "The Inevitable Surmise." I readily admit you cannot prove these moral absolutes, and in this sense it is "surmise." But it is the sort of thing that is

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inevitably assumed when you try to examine it. Man has certain instinctive beliefs that you cannot "get behind." He must assume that he can know and that his distinctions are real before he can do anything. This is the fact that the superficial cynicism of our day must be made to encounter. It seems quite sophisticated to say we cannot know anything for certain or make any ethical value judgments, but we are really arguing against ourselves. For the statement "we cannot know" is a type of knowledge, and the assertion that "we should not make value judgment" is itself a value judgment. This is "the inevitable surmise" basic to all life: there is a real difference between right and wrong, and man is so created that he is obliged to make distinctions. All the differing moral opinions do not obviate the fact that there is an objective point of reference.

Having dealt with the nature of the problem, let us go on to consider why it has been advocated so widely. As I told this young man, I firmly believe it is for other reasons than intellectual honesty. It is actually an escape from one of the most difficult areas of life. Look what happens once you deny the existence of moral absolutes: you no longer have to grapple with perplexing questions of what is right and wrong, neither are you obliged to live under "a sense of oughtness." This is "cutting the Gordian knot," quite obviously. It solves one of mankind's greatest problems by saying it does not exist. There is great relief here, both intellectually and morally, and I have an idea this goes a long way toward explaining its popularity. We are always looking for "an easy way out," and I fear this may be why many have adopted it.

Time and time again men have turned to ethical cynicism in order to evade a costly moral dilemma. A classic example is the man Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor during the days of Jesus. When he was awakened one morning by a Jewish mob and handed over an accused prisoner a painful decision was laid before him. One look at Jesus was enough to convince Pilate that He was not guilty of the charges. He bore no resemblance to the usual Jewish insurrectionist. He did not have a wild look of hatred or struggle against the soldiers or spit on the floor. In His quiet submission He appeared to be anything but a national incendiary. Then, too, Pilate knew the accusers too well to put any stock in their charges. These Jews hated Rome with a passion, and they were just living for the day that a rebel leader would arise. If Jesus had been what they said, Pilate realized he would have been the last to know about it. The underground would hardly have "squealed" on its long awaited Messiah. Thus Pilate knew, and said in so many words, "I find no fault in Him" (John 18:38). And his sense of Roman justice told him what to do in such a case. The accused was not guilty and should be set free without delay. All this took shape within his heart, but there were conflicting pressures. You see, Pilate was a proud but insecure man. He had married into the emperor's family and had gotten this appointment by preference. For the sake of his own pride he was determined to make good, but so far he had failed. The Jews were a troublesome people, and at least three times before he had clashed with them and been beaten. Once he had been reprimanded by the emperor himself, and he was now more or less on probation to see if he could control things. He knew if he let Jesus go, there would be a riot and he would probably lose his job. So there he stood: caught between what he knew was right and what was personally expedient. Like a trapped animal, he frantically sought to bargain with the Jews - "let me scourge Him," "let me release a Passover prisoner" - but nothing would work. So finally he gave in to the pressure, and handed Jesus over to be crucified, but not before he escaped into moral relativism. When Jesus spoke of truth Pilate must have flinched, but he growled cynically, "What is truth?" As Francis Bacon comments, "He did not even wait for an answer." Here was a way out of the dilemma;

he could silence his conscience by saying there was no such thing as truth or right or justice. Under this guise he made his decision, but the effect was short-lived. No sooner had he acted than a sense of justice reappeared, and he made a feeble gesture to it by trying to wash his hands of the guilt. Here you see the basic explanation of ethical relativism. Why do so many embrace it? Not so much for what it is as what it does - releases one from the agony of painful choice.

This is what I said to the charge that all values are relative. It is basically a contradiction and usually an escape. Like it or not, there is "the inevitable surmise" beneath all responsible existence. That right and wrong exist - that I can know the difference - yea, that I must choose between them - this is the point where we have to start. To deny is to assume it; to evade it is to be crushed by it, like Pilate.

Several months after I wrote that letter I saw this young man again, and he said it helped. This morning, I could hope the same for you!