

Fighting the Currents of Relativism Part Two

Matt. 7:24-27

The Wexner Center for the Performing Arts in Ohio State University was designed to make an architectural statement about life. Featuring stairways that lead nowhere, pillars that hang from the ceiling without purpose, and strangely angled surfaces meant to give people a sense of vertigo, the architect says he designed the building to reflect life itself - senseless and incoherent - and express the fickle and unpredictable rules that built the world we live in. When the purpose of the architectural design was explained to Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias, he had just one question: *did he do the same with the foundation?*

Foundations need to be solid. We can get cute with stairways and windows and pillars, but we can't play around with foundations. Jesus tells us that the most important thing about our lives is our foundation; what we build our lives on. Two homes can look equally nice and equally sturdy but when the storms and winds and waves come, it's the foundation that's going to determine if the house stands or falls. Jesus is making an absolute and authoritative claim here: the life built on his word will stand even in the fiercest storm. The life built on anything else will eventually lead to a life falling apart. It may be sudden, it may take a long time, but eventually it's coming down.

We are continuing a series called *Riding the Rapids: Navigating the Whitewater of Today's Culture*. Last week we began to look at a philosophy that has had tremendous influence in Western thinking and is prevalent among young people in America today - a philosophy is called *relativism*. We may not be familiar with the term but the philosophy is all around us and woven deeply into our culture. Relativism is the belief that there is no such thing as absolute truth or absolute morals. Truth and morals are relative: what's true for you might not be true for me. What's right for you might not be right for me. There is no absolute right or wrong or truth, and anyone who tries to say that there are absolutes is arrogant, narrow-minded, and judgmental. Life is ultimately senseless and meaningless. If you want to build a stairway that you call truth, that's fine for you, but it goes nowhere. If you feel better having a pillar you call meaning hanging uselessly in your life, knock yourself out. Just don't force your morals (or beliefs or truths) on me.

Relativism has become the prominent thinking in America. A study showed that, even among those who say they believe in God, only 1 in 4 adults believe there is such a thing as absolute truth, and only 1 in 10 young people believe that anything is absolutely true.

The problem with relativism is that no matter how hard we try to deny absolutes, we live in a world that keeps slamming us up against absolutes. Last week we looked at two fatal flaws in relativism:

- It's unworkable in real life - as one book title indicates, relativists have their feet planted firmly in mid-air. The primary tenets of relativism are self-contradicting. Statements like, *there are no absolutes, all truth is relative* and *no one can know the truth* are all absolute truth claims that contradict themselves. They can't be true...if they're true.
- The second fatal flaw is that it's arrogant superiority and hypocrisy dressed up to look humble and fair-minded. They believe that all view points are equally valid...and you'd better agree with them or you're a small-minded, intolerant, and arrogant person! Relativists are worst than

Congress at exempting themselves from every rule they insist on. In the name of humble fairness, they demand that everyone capitulate to their "superior" perspective of life.

This morning we'll spend a little time looking at a third fatal flaw, but before we do, I think it's worth asking, how did it become such a popular philosophy among young people today? The origins of this philosophy can be traced back to thinkers who, in different ways, cut us loose from absolute truths and from THE absolute truth: God. Men like David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Darwin, Frederick Nietzsche and Aldous Huxley.

But the truth is just saying these guys names causes eyes to glaze over and people to fall asleep. Some of you are beginning to doze off right now. The only place their books would be hot sellers is at an insomniac convention. I honestly doubt that 9 out of 10 young people today are deeply influenced by relativism because they've been brushing up on their Hume and Nietzsche. Someone might say, they're learning it when they go to college. That is partially true, but as Professor Allan Bloom points out in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, most students entering a university *already* believe that truth is relative.

So if not through philosophy books and not through university classes, how has relativism gained such a foothold in modern thinking? I think to a great degree it's been through popular media. In a million subtle ways the world view of relativism is slickly packaged to look wise and cool. The one thing that marketers and propagandists know is that the most effective way to get people to think a certain way doesn't begin with thought...it begins with feelings.

In 1941 a German film called *Ick Klage* (I Accuse) was released. Beautifully produced and well acted, it was about a beautiful, young, full of life woman who discovers she has multiple sclerosis. She begs her doctor to take her life before she begins to suffer, but he refuses. Her loving husband fulfills her wish and administers a fatal overdose to her, only to be accused of murdering the wife he loved so much. As he is forced to stand trial for the murder of his wife, and argues that they are the ones being cruel not to let her die, the audience is emotionally moved to see that it's the husband who loved with a higher, nobler love. And 20 million Germans left the theaters *feeling* like euthanasia can be a good and noble thing, done with the highest good of the disabled and suffering person in mind.

But unknown to the audiences, this movie had been produced with a dark agenda in mind. The Nazis wanted to gin up civilian support for a program called Action T4. Action T4 was implemented for the systematic extermination of elderly and disabled people, including babies and children who were malformed, diseased, or disabled in any way. Historians estimate that over 200K weak and undesirable people were taken to special hospitals and labs in order that their weak genes be forever "removed" from society. By manipulating their emotions with a slickly produced movie, a nation was moved to accept a widespread program of murdering those the government deemed undesirable. The most effective way to get people to think a certain way, doesn't begin with thought...it begins with feelings.

Media today holds tremendous sway over what young people believe and think. Not because media is provoking young people to think deeply about issues, but because media inspires people to *feel* deeply about issues. Movies, TV shows, music, blogs, and other media outlets influence people to feel a certain way about really big life issues, because the producers, artists, directors, writers, and others have agendas that they want to promote. I'm not saying that there's a monolithic philosophy in Hollywood, but

there are a lot of subtle and not so subtle anti-biblical messages being transmitted constantly through slickly produced arts.

Recently I heard a song on the radio that caught my attention. It was a slickly produced song with a catchy melody and a powerful build up. But it was the words that caught my attention. It was a young girl singing love me like you do, touch me like you do, and then this verse is what really bothered me: *I'll let you set the pace cause I'm not thinking straight, what are you waiting for?*

I thought, man that's exactly the wrong message - when a young girl isn't thinking straight that's NOT when she should let the young man set the pace. It didn't surprise me to learn that it was a song from the movie Fifty Shades of Grey. That song and so many others like it, have the power to move young people emotionally to believe and act on things that feel good in the moment but lead to long term sorrow and regret.

Be aware that when a movie portrays the guy who believes in absolute moral standards as an uptight, hypocritical, arrogant jerk that *nobody* would ever want to be like, and the guy (or gal) who is cool with just about anything as the good-looking, rebellious renegade who ends up being the hero we all admire, that you're being played. Your emotions are being manipulated to feel something is true and slowly, over time, if you don't counteract it with truth, you will begin to think it is true. The most effective way to get people to think a certain way, doesn't begin with thought...it begins with feelings.

As Christians, I don't know that we can isolate ourselves, or our children, from all points of view that we disagree with, or that we'd even want to. But God calls us to think and examine everything according to His truth, His word. We want to build our lives - including what we believe - on the firm foundation of His word rather than being manipulated to build our lives on the shifting sands of moral relativism promoted through today's media.

All right, let's finish up by looking at a third fatal flaw in relativism

Fatal flaw #3: Relativism destroys all basis for any morals at all

I'm not saying that all relativists are immoral - not at all, but it is to say that whatever they base their moral standards on is arbitrary and cannot be required or enforced of anyone else. The philosophy of relativism gives no basis or foundation for any morals at all. A relativist can choose to be moral, but it won't be because of their belief system. In fact, thought out to its logical conclusion, relativists have no foundation to even assess something as moral or immoral.

Morals are things that we say "ought" to be done, or "ought not" to be done. But there has to be a basis for that "ought". If I said, "you ought to root for the Giants to win tomorrow night" you might say, "why should I?" If you're an Eagle's fan, you would probably throw something at me. An ought needs a foundation to be built on. If there are no absolute truths or absolute morals, then what possible foundation can a relativist come up with?

William Graham Sumner writes: *every attempt to win an outside standpoint from which to reduce the whole to an absolute philosophy of truth and right, based on an unalterable principle, is delusion.* What he's saying is that any attempt to claim there is an absolute standard of truth or morals is a delusion. Nevermind that he is claiming an absolute standard of truth and morals: his (once again, a relativist

exempting himself from his own rules, once again able to see clearly from their superior vantage point what all the rest of us deluded people can't), nevertheless taken to its logical conclusion it leaves us with no standard that can be applied to anyone. "Don't force your morals on me" can answer any outside standard or morals. You are building firmly in mid-air. No foundation: no good, no bad. Cause there's no absolute standard. You can't even rightly call something evil because evil requires a form of measurement. But, according to Sumner, any outside imposed measurement is a delusion.

Now many (but not all) relativists know they can't live with that. So they try to find a relative measurement to anchor their morals in.

Society/Culture dictates morality

Some relativists have tried to anchor a moral system in their culture and societies accepted standards. Society dictates what you "ought to do" and "ought not to do". Morality isn't an absolute, but different cultures come up with different standards of morality and we "ought" to obey our cultural standards of morality.

A friend of mine recently facebooked a picture I had never seen before (show picture). It's a crowd of thousands saluting Hitler, and one man refusing to salute. If the foundation of morals is what our culture and society says is right, this man is immoral and doing wrong. He is refusing to accept the morals that his culture has developed, symbolized in his act of rebellion. Yet deep in our hearts we know that he is the only one acting on a higher moral principle. During the Nuremberg trials, many Nazis accused of war crimes defended their actions as being the law of the land. Cruelly killing millions of Jews was the law of the land and therefore...moral? No, we know that's not right. There is a moral standard that transcends any and all people. Morals aren't a matter of majority rule.

Recently a Syrian woman was gang-raped by a gang, and then brutally murdered by her father and brothers - on orders of her mother - for being made unclean by the rape. In their culture this is an "honor-killing". Yet it offends our sense of what honor is in every way. Is it possible that it is right and moral to them because their culture says it is? Or is it wrong and their cultural values in this are wrong?

When morals are founded on the culture and society, morality will look a lot like cowardice. Whatever the group is doing, that's what I'm going to do. Out goes courage, the nobility of standing against the crowd for what's right. The coward is the good guy. The one guy willing to stand for what they believe is the bad guy. What kind of world would this lead to?

What's good for the individual/group dictates morality

Others try to anchor a moral system in an overriding principle of what's good for the individual or society as a whole. Borrowing from an evolutionistic concept of survival being interwoven into our fabric, they propose that there are inherent and intuitive morals based on what's good for our species (or families, or lives).

If you've ever watched a nature show, when a big cat is hunting game and they begin to chase down a herd, what are they looking for? They're looking for the weak. Often it's the young calf that can't keep up and gets cut off from the herd that the cat brings down. We feel bad for the young calf, but we don't assign any moral evil to the lion or leopard. We don't think, boy, that cat is immoral. What an evil thing to

do! What a coward, it should have gone for the fastest, biggest, strongest of the herd. It's just doing what it needs to do to survive. It's good for it and for its pride.

But when someone advances their selfish interests by taking advantage of the weak, we do assign a moral evil to that. That's why Action T4 horrifies us so. To rip an imperfect baby from his or her mother's arms and kill it because it's weak or disabled is the worst kind of evil. Our morals demand us to protect and cherish the weak, to care for them, to help them live full and productive lives, to offer them dignity and respect because they are precious children of God made in His image. But that can only be built on a foundation of absolutes and an absolute God.

Young people need a foundation for morals or they will discard morals completely. Several years ago two young girls were taking a shortcut home after a party when they came upon a small group of gang members meeting in the woods. The girls were found dead the next day having been brutally savaged. The day before this tragedy one of the gang members appeared on a local TV show and hoisting up a beer said, "human life means nothing." He was living out his belief system that life is meaningless to the crushing, devastating sorrow of these girls' parents and loved ones. God's word says we are made in His image and every life - every life - is sacred and precious. Those girl's lives meant more than anything to their parents, and their lives are precious and sacred in God's sight. Human life means so much, is worth so much, because God created us in His image.

The relativist might feel just as strongly about these things as I do. But what they need to honestly admit is, they are borrowing their foundation for that kind of moral judgment from the belief in absolute truth and absolute morality. They might have a stairway going nowhere, but they need to build that crazy stairway on something solid. Ought's need to be built on something.

Jesus makes the audacious and authoritative claim that, not only our belief system, but our very lives, should be built on the solid rock of hearing and obeying his teaching. There is an absolute God, and He is absolutely holy, and He absolutely loves us! We are absolutely sinners in need of a Savior and Jesus absolutely went to the cross to die for our sins so that we might be saved, forgiven of our sins, and adopted as children of God. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Savior who gave his life so that, by believing in him, we might be saved for eternity. He's our firm foundation, firm in the good weather, and firm in the fiercest storm.

Let's pray.