

The Source of Christian Morality
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What comes to your mind when someone mentions the word *morality*? Do you immediately think of a set of laws which all begin: “Thou shalt not....?” A group of old people (over thirty) sitting in a room all with self-satisfied grins marking this book and that movie unfit for young people? Your parents telling you, “No, you may not go to the weekend beach party.” A priest on Sunday afternoon television warning of the dangers of premarital sex?

For a long time now there has been in our world a tendency to think of morality in terms of laws, and most often laws which are expressed negatively: “do not do this, avoid that; keep away from....” After you have heard enough of these moral do not’s, you want to throw up your hands and scream, “I’ll do what I want. Whatever makes me feel good and happy, that’s what is moral for me.” And you are right, in a way; morality really should be concerned with your happiness.

If we were to search for a morality, one that is true and right and reflects the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, we would find just that: a way of life which He calls “abundant” and “blessed.” Just suppose then that you were living an abundant and blessed life; can you imagine that you would be unhappy? Genuine and lasting happiness is the real point of Christ’s moral program.

When then do we have this notion that morality is tied up with laws that forbid and restrict? And why does the word morality carry with it so strongly the feeling of an ancient set of standards which we cannot apply to the present day? Actually the term itself in the ancient world (the Latin *moralis*) meant simply manners or customs. Even one thousand years later in what is called Middle English the term *morale* had that broad meaning of customary behavior.

Today that same meaning in modern English lies behind our usage of the term. But it is this definition of the word moral that is the source of a problem as soon as we try to put the word “Christian” in front of it. Without further explanation the term Christian morality should mean nothing more than normal customary behavior of the Christians. But it does not mean that at all.

When Jesus Christ was teaching the people about morality in his famous “Sermon on the Mount,” He said that those who follow Him should be humble and merciful and pure in heart; they should seek peace and strive to be righteous even if they are persecuted and ridiculed – and this will make them blessed and happy. He told them that if anyone strikes them they should not strike back, no matter how difficult it may be, but rather return good to those who do evil. If anyone is sued or has something stolen from him, give the thief even more. And most strange of all, He told them to love their enemies as well as their friends, and to pray for those who hate and persecute them.

Now we must ask ourselves, where did He get such a moral program? From the manners and customs of the day? Hardly! Even the most religious people of His day did not live by such a moral code, in fact, quite the opposite. It was the religious leaders who were most filled with hatred and jealousy and pettiness and arrogance. And it was they who finally murdered Christ.

Now nearly two thousand years later, can we say that Christians live or have lived by the moral code of Jesus Christ? Only the saints, those isolated individuals who shine like comets through the bloody history of religious wars, intolerance, inquisitions, and prejudice, only they have lived morally. It would be quite an absurd thing, then to define Christian morality as the ordinary manner of Christians, unfortunately. The real source of Christian morality is something other than human behavior.

Suppose we forget Christian morality for a moment. There is a certain moral standard apart from that of the Church, reflected in the laws of the state. Every country in the world has its legal system, a part of which deals specifically with moral problems. You cannot knife your next door neighbor without some trouble with the civil authorities. Whenever this civil morality breaks down, either by mass disregard of the laws by the people (for example, the general disregard of the prohibition laws early in the last century) or by authorities themselves favoring and furthering immoral acts (such as the mass extermination of the Jews in Nazi Germany) the result is the most atrocious cruelty and horror.

Slavery, for example, in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations was an accepted form of life, and there were laws which governed it. Today we would not accept these laws because we do not accept the whole institution of slavery, or even the idea of it. Other laws of states such as those regarding murder, adultery, theft, etc., may be more universally found in nearly every civilization and in every age. Civil laws are necessary then for the smooth and harmonious life of the people. Their enforcement is always in regard to the good of the whole people and for the continuation of the state. In them there is thus a double value rolled into one: protection of the rights of individuals and the good of the nation.

Civilization, no doubt, was born the moment two cave men agreed that instead of clubbing each other, they would pool their energies and club the next mammoth that came by. Individual and group benefit at that point were wed. In any case, this civil morality does not require belief in God or anything higher than the peaceful survival of the humans involved.

Christian morality, offers something quite different. When Christ said to not strike back at anyone who strikes you, He was speaking of a type of behavior which takes men beyond mere survival, beyond even a peaceful earthly life. Actually, according to standards of the world the moral teachings of Christ make very little sense and often are not very peaceful. Is it not more than possible that offering your other cheek when one has been struck will lead to disastrous consequences for you, that humility and meekness and mercy often get you nowhere in this hard world of competition and cleverness.

You will never make a fortune in this world by being meek and generous, and you will never live in carpeted, air-conditioned luxury. But the goal of Christian morality is not fortune and luxury, it is not a life of ease and security in this world.

Christian moral life seeks a more permanent happiness, an eternal security, that “blessedness” of which Christ spoke. This security is not available at your local insurance agency, no matter how rock-like that may seem at the present. Perhaps it was this difference: an easy secure life in this world as against a difficult one for the Christian seeking happiness in another world, which Christ had in mind when He said these strange words: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matt. 10:34). And “I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled.” (Luke 12:49).

Christian meekness and mercy are not to be confused with cowardice or timidity. The moral life of the Christian, as that of its Master, raises up all kinds of opposition around it. Read the Gospel according to St. John. After nearly everything Christ said and did, there were murmurings of discontent, and most of it from the religious leaders.

There is therefore a vast difference between the practice of Christian morality and that of civic morality. That difference is best distinguished by the goals to which they are directed.