

“Our Moral Compass: Purity”

Luke 7:36-50

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“What makes people go wrong?” In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo stumbled into this question when he conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment. You may know about it: in a two week experiment designed to see how rookies become “good cops,” half the Stanford students were arbitrarily assigned as prison guards and half as inmates. The result was stunning: within one day – *one day* – the guards devolved into brutality and abuse, and the prisoners sank into immobilizing passivity. The degradation worsened with each day. It was a breathtaking transformation of normal, healthy students into something nearly less than human. They had to halt the study after less than a week.

In the decades since this disturbing experiment, Zimbardo has dedicated himself to the study of how to strengthen moral good. In a recent book, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Zimbardo examines not only the Stanford Prison Experiment, but also the Rwandan massacres, the Jim Jones mass suicides, and the Abu Ghraib disaster. It is not light reading.

But his question is crucially important. We all *want* to be good. So what makes people go wrong? Zimbardo reaches this conclusion: It is hard to be a “good apple” in a rotten barrel. Situational factors and systemic forces shape us more than we like to think. And his work graphically reminds us that even if we do pretty well in familiar situations where we know the rules and social expectations constrain us, it is exponentially harder to hang on to our “goodness” when we are thrown into unfamiliar territory: starting college, changing jobs, moving to a new place with its peculiar protocols. As he puts it, “The old you might not work as expected when the ground rules change” (Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 6).

Imagine what happens when the ground rules are changing *everywhere at once*. These last few weeks I’ve made the case that this is exactly what’s going on with the forces of globalization. Business leaders experienced globalization’s impact first, and now it is affecting every sector of life: what values guide our national defense when we’re attacked by terrorists and not nation-states? What free-market rules apply in a financial melt-down when the world depends on our economy and other countries own massive amounts of our debt? What are our core beliefs when

we're no longer surrounded by a "WASP" society, but face a smorgasbord of faiths and ideas, some of which make a lot of sense to us? *How do we keep on the "paths of righteousness" when the landscape is changing so fast?* There's only one way I know of: we need a Global Positioning System. And that, I believe, is just what God provides us. In the next few weeks we'll be learning how to read the most basic part of our GPS: the compass, the *moral* compass, to help us find our way.

Today we'll set out to do two things: first, to get to know our moral compass better, and second, to explore one of its points in a little more depth.

Now, the first thing we need to know about our moral compass is that it has *five* points, not four. Interestingly, for a long time social scientists only knew about two points: fairness and not causing harm to others. But they began to wonder whether this definition adequately captured the moral life. Now, please forgive the graphic language that follows. By now I hope you know that I do not do this gratuitously, but because I think it's essential for the topic at hand. When University of Virginia professor Jonathan Haidt began studying morality and culture at University of Pennsylvania in the late 80s, he wondered:

"If morality is about how we treat each other, then why did so many ancient texts devote so much space to rules about [women's menstrual cycles], who can eat what, and who can have sex with whom? There is no rational or health-related way to explain these laws. (Why are grasshoppers kosher but most locusts are not?) The emotion of disgust seemed to me like a more promising explanatory principle. The book of Leviticus makes a lot more sense when you think of ancient lawgivers first sorting everything into two categories: 'disgusts me' (gay male sex, ...pigs, swarming insects) and 'disgusts me less' (gay female sex, ... cows, grasshoppers)" (<http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge256.html>).

He calls it disgust; I call it simply the "ick" factor. Lo and behold: out of the research of Haidt, anthropologist Richard Shweder and others, a more complete picture of morality emerged. When you study cultures around the world and over time, morality turns out to include not just how we treat each other (fairly and without harm) – morality also promotes group identity, social institutions, and a

noble way of living. This larger view of morality means that we are indeed wired for *fairness* and *not harming others* – but we are *also* wired with instincts for *community*, for *authority*, and for *purity*.

Now, it's important to note that every culture *interprets* these values differently. And different cultures weight each of these instincts with the varying importance. Saudi Arabia, for example, weighs purity with much higher value than say, Denmark does. Within our own country, studies have shown that conservatives place higher value on purity and authority higher than liberals do, and liberals place a higher value on fairness. But I want to make the case that no matter where we land politically, *all five* points – fairness, not harming others, community, authority, and purity – all five points are important for our moral compass.

For the next five weeks we'll hone our skills in using this essential tool. For today, let's move on to one of the compass points. We'll start with the compass point of purity.

We're familiar with the story that we read today. A sinful woman comes into a Pharisee's home, bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and in this act of contrition, silently begs for forgiveness. The Pharisee is disgusted: surely Jesus should know that this woman is sinful, that is, ritually impure, unclean, that is, in its most plain sense, "dirty." And though the Scripture doesn't tell us which particular sin, we can guess that it's about sex. She might have committed adultery; she might be a prostitute; she might have run off to marry someone her father didn't choose for her. Whatever she's done, everybody and their cousin know about it. She may as well have a scarlet letter pinned to her chest. And we recognize the Pharisee's reaction: the universal reaction to impurity: disgust, or "eww, ick."

Now, I don't know about you, but my reaction to the Pharisee is pretty much disgust in return. He is sanctimonious, judgmental, and closed-minded, right? Who is he to get on his high horse and judge? Who is he to condemn this unnamed woman, likely a victim of patriarchal society? Who is he to decide that this woman's behavior is sinful? I leap to root for Jesus who saves this innocent woman, unjustly condemned.

There's just one little problem. Jesus never says the woman isn't sinful. In fact, he says, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven." It seems that she was rightfully ashamed and remorseful, and she is deeply grateful to God for being made clean again.

Now, shame, I have come to believe, is highly underrated in our culture. Our culture's politically correct, "as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, if it feels good, do it" libertarianism demeans us all. A good society requires more than individual freedom: it requires a conscience. And though shame is profoundly uncomfortable, it serves a crucial purpose by discouraging "dirty" behavior that endangers individuals and destroys community. Bioethicist Leon Kass puts it brilliantly when he argues for the value of repugnance:

"We are repelled ... because we intuit and feel, immediately and without argument, the violation of things that we rightfully hold dear. ... In this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done ... repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder" (Leon Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance," cited by Steven Pinker, "The Moral Instinct," *The New York Times Magazine*, 1/13/08, p. 57).

Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder. And yet ... and yet there is a danger in relying on our gut reaction to just "know" when something is impure or disgusting. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker reminds us that "the shudder test" is not always reliable:

"People have shuddered at all kinds of morally irrelevant violations of purity in their culture: touching an untouchable, drinking from the same water fountain as a Negro, allowing Jewish blood to mix with Aryan blood And if our ancestors' repugnance had carried the day, we never would have had autopsies, vaccinations, blood transfusions, ... organ transplants and in vitro fertilization, all of which were denounced as immoral when they were new" (Pinker, p. 57).

So – if purity matters, but the "shudder" test or "ick factor" isn't reliable, then *how do we know what moral purity looks like?* What is real virtue and holiness,

and when are we just being biased? Now, the easy and most obvious answer is that we find our answers in the Holy Scripture. But from our recently concluded year-long study of the Bible, you should also know that Scripture isn't a cookbook – it's a conversation. If we go to Leviticus, we'll be told purity includes avoiding shellfish; if we turn to the gospels, we'll find that purity precludes divorce; if we read the letters of Paul, we're told that purity requires women to wear veils on their heads. (Yes, it's in there: check out I Corinthians 11.) There *is* no "literal" reading of purity in the Bible. So what are we to do? Close the book and call it a day? Arbitrarily pick and choose from the Bible's myriad purity laws and virtue lists? I don't think so. No, this is what we need to do: look carefully at the Bible's own conversation within itself to find our way. And Jesus gives us a clue in the Scripture passage that we read today.

When the sinful woman comes in humility, weeping and washing his feet with her tears, Jesus does not condemn her. He does not resist being touched by her, even though the encounter will render him ritually impure and socially suspect. Instead, Jesus receives her. Why? Because in Jesus' book, bodily purity is not an end in itself: it is an expression of the larger good of purity of heart. He is following the "Great Commandment": "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This is the guideline, then, by which Jesus is measuring pure and holy behavior. The woman has humbled herself, has thrown herself at Jesus' feet, and by doing so has shown her heart's desire to love the Lord her God. This is real purity. The Pharisee may have the checklist of rules down pat ... but he knows nothing of real holiness.

It's so important for us to be clear about this: when Jesus receives the sinful woman but reprimands the pious Pharisee, it isn't because purity doesn't matter, or because sanctity is passé, or because there is nothing for the woman to feel ashamed about. "Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder." No, Jesus reprimands the Pharisee because *the Pharisee is shuddering about the wrong things*. Purity matters ... but the purity God seeks begins with the aspirations of our heart: humility and gratitude to God, kindness and forgiveness toward others.

And when we grasp that, the direction of our moral compass becomes much, much clearer.

Before I close, let's test this with three brief real-life examples. The first is a conversation I had a couple of weeks ago in Beirut with a professor at a Lebanese university. I was telling her how impressed I was with the freedom women enjoy in her country. She agreed, but with a caveat. Men still believe that their honor is linked to the purity of the women in their households. In fact, husbands can still kill their wives with impunity if they believe their wife has committed adultery. You can imagine the courage it takes when this professor questions the relationship of a man's honor to his female relatives' sexual behavior. Please forgive again this graphic imagery, but this is what she tells her male students: "*Your* honor is not found in your sister's or mother's or wife's [reproductive parts]." Your honor is found in the love you show your family and household; your honor is found in your own integrity.

The second is an Op Ed piece I read recently in the *Wall Street Journal*. It described the pressure college women receive to engage in risky drinking and sexually promiscuous behavior. In a perverse twist of feminism, it is *other* college women who are egging them on. The girls who resist the pressure are ostracized ... and the girls who give in are gossiped about (Ashley Samelson, "Lipstick Jungle," *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, 9/26/08, W11). It is one sick system. What's happened here? Licentiousness is masquerading as equality. But as the apostle Paul once said, "Just because something is lawful doesn't mean it is good." The issue of purity here isn't about a double standard for young men and women. It is a question of whether behavior is edifying or demeaning... whether the motives are the upbuilding or the cheapening of one's body, one's self. This is real purity: behavior that exhibits genuine love.

The third and final incident happened decades ago – before I was born. In the heat of the Cold War, you will recall, Joseph McCarthy had made it his mission to root out all communist impurities from the United States. The McCarthy hearings infamously ruined the lives of scores of men and women across the country. Finally, with yet another young man's career and reputation on the line, on June 9, 1954, the Army's attorney, Joseph Welch, stood up to Joe McCarthy: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never gauged your cruelty or recklessness...." When

McCarthy resumed his attack, Welch interrupted him: “Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator.... You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Army-McCarthy_Hearings). McCarthy was intent on purity – and he was not wrong to seek it. But purity without love for one’s neighbor is unholy indeed. It is, in fact, indecent.

These are wild times we’re living in. I have never seen anything like it. Change is swirling around us; and the ground rules are changing at an exponential rate. Now more than ever we need God’s GPS to guide us ... and we need to use our compass well, and constantly. So let’s start here: not with the “shudder test” or any other checklist of bad behavior. Let’s start by aspiring to purity. Let’s start with the decency test, the integrity test, the humility test. Let’s start by seeking to be holy, to live lives that are noble and true. True purity cannot be found in any checklist – it starts in the aspirations of our hearts: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.