

“Our Moral Instinct: Not to Harm”  
Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 5:38-48  
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We are nearing the end of our series on “Our Moral Compass” – our hard-wired Global Positioning System that guides us to the greater good. So far we’ve examined the instincts of purity, fairness, and authority. Next week we conclude with the instinct of community. Today we explore our compass point that leads us not to do harm to others.

The instinct not to harm others is so basic, it’s found in rhesus monkeys, who “go hungry rather than pull a chain that delivers food to them and a shock to another monkey” (Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor and Johnstone Family Professor in the

Department of Psychology at Harvard University. ... “The Moral Instinct,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2008). This “silver rule” – don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you -- the “silver rule” is at work across every culture and society. Even John Stuart Mill, patron saint of contractual utilitarianism, averred that the one and only circumstance in which societies should use constraining power is “to prevent harm to others” (Jonathan Haidt, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, citing *On Liberty*, in “The Edge”

<http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge256.html>, 9/9/08).

This seems reasonable, doesn’t it? If you don’t hurt me, I won’t hurt you– it keeps everyone in check. Well, that’s true, but it’s not the whole story. It turns out that something deeper is at work in us besides *quid pro quo* Millian utilitarianism. How do we know? Social scientists have studied it to death. Take “The Trolley Problem,” which goes like this:

“You see a trolley car hurtling down the track .... In the path of the trolley are five men working on the track, oblivious to the danger. You ... can pull a lever that will

divert the trolley onto a spur, saving the five men. Unfortunately, the trolley would then run over a single worker who is laboring on the spur. Is it permissible to throw the switch, killing one man to save five? Almost everyone says ‘yes.’

“Consider now a different scene. You are on a bridge overlooking the tracks and have spotted the runaway trolley bearing down on the five workers. Now the only way to stop the trolley is to throw a heavy object in its path. And the only heavy object within reach is a [very large] man standing next to you. Should you throw the man off the bridge? Both dilemmas present you with the option of sacrificing one life to save five, and so, by the utilitarian standard of what would result in the greatest good for the greatest number, the two dilemmas are morally equivalent. But most people don’t see it that way: though they would pull the switch in the first dilemma, they would not heave the ... man in the second” (Pinker, p. 35).

Why? Most people can’t answer -- our conscious minds don’t tell us. But M.R.I. studies are revealing. When presented with hands-off options like flipping the switch to redirect the trolley, only the rational, calculating part of the brain lit up. But when a solution required hands-on, direct intervention, three parts of the brain lit up: the rational, calculating part; *plus* the emotional, people-centered part of the frontal lobe; *plus* the region that registers the conflict between two parts of the brain. The upshot is this: “Our non-utilitarian intuitions come from the victory of an emotional impulse over a cost-benefit analysis” (Pinker, p. 35). Moral relationship, in other words, trumps mere utilitarianism.

So we’re hard-wired not to harm others ... and much more than utilitarianism is at work in us. But that raises another question: if we are universally wired not to harm others, then what could possibly possess us to overcome our instinct? This isn’t just a hypothetical question, like how many angels dance on the head of a pin. This is, why do

things like the Holocaust and Rwanda and myriad private brutalities unfold? What is it that weakens us so? And, conversely, *what can we do to strengthen our moral compass so that we don't harm other people?* Let's look at the forces that thwart our moral instinct – and how we can, by the grace of God, best overcome them.

The first threat is the deregulation of social norms -- “anomie” is what pioneering French sociologist Emile Durkheim called it. Writing in 1893, Durkheim was witnessing the upheaval caused by the Industrial Revolution; but he could just as well have been writing today. He pointed to the deregulation of society; the breakdown of rules of behavior; uncertainty and confusion of roles and expectations; impersonal relationships and a lack of social bonds. Anomie increased during periods of disruption – whether economic depression or unfettered prosperity (<http://www.hewett.norfolk.sch.uk/curric/soc/crime/anomie.htm>).

If this was true in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c., how much more is anomie at work today, following the Social Revolution of the '60s. Much of the change has brought blessings: without the civil rights movement, feminism or the Gray Panthers, Obama, Palin and McCain wouldn't be candidates. But other change has been devastating. The other day I was talking with Lake Forest College professor Lou Lombardi, who noted how affected the economy has been by the deregulation of social norms. Adam Smith had *assumed* constraints to the market. Not regulatory constraints, but the *self*-regulation of honesty and decency, civic engagement and the social good. The deregulation of the self is the first threat to our instinct not to harm.

The third and final threat is dehumanizing distance. The greater the perceived distance, the less we care whether we inflict harm. This is the flip-side of “The Trolley Problem.” We have a deep aversion to hurting another person directly. But put distance between us, and we're less bothered. We'd be killing one man either way to stop the hypothetical trolley, but *indirect* harm – flipping the switch – is not so terribly hard.

There are a thousand ways we distance ourselves from other people. Geography and ethnic identity are factors, which may be why it's harder for Americans to get worked up over ethnic cleansing in Sudan than we did over Yugoslavia. Our global economic system is another factor. It's difficult to trace the impact of our purchases: witness our naïve shock two years ago at revelations of "blood diamonds." But *perception* is another factor. Even neighbors can brutalize neighbors if we *perceive* ourselves as sufficiently distant from them. The suffering of slaves was invisible to their owners because they were seen as less than human; the Rwandan massacres took place because the Tutsis and Hutus were seen as "the other." Even if we don't actively harm our neighbor, perceived distance allows us not to intervene. The rape of Kitty Genovese was allowed to happen because no bystanders came to her rescue. I like to think we're more connected than that, but just this Friday the *Tribune* reported a woman who was shocked when her neighbor reported that her home had been burglarized in broad daylight and no one bothered to call police. As men loaded appliances and televisions into their truck, everyone thought their neighbors were moving out. No one intervened because they didn't know. This is how distant we have become, even from our neighbors. (Lisa Black, "Breaking Down Fences Makes Good Neighbors" (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-neighborsoct17,0,7144675.story>)).

The third and final threat is blind obedience. Maybe you remember the infamous Milgram experiment. Participants were instructed to shock a "learner" by pressing a lever for each mistake on a word-matching task. Each error led to a bigger shock; at 300 volts, the "learner" was screaming in pain. There wasn't really a shock, of course, and the learner was really an actor, but participants didn't know that. Milgram once asked a group of 40 psychiatrists to estimate how many Americans would go to 450 volts. They predicted less than 1 percent would be so sadistic. In reality, 65% of the volunteers did, shocking the victim over and over again in spite of desperate pleas to stop. All it took

was the researcher calmly telling them to continue (Philip Zimbardo, “When Good People Do Evil,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, January/February 2007, p. 43).

This is the same phenomenon at work in genocides. “I was only following orders,” lower level Nazis explained. One theologian explains, “Otherwise ethically upright men and women can be induced to commit all sorts of hideous acts when told they will be done in the name of a higher moral authority. [Look at] the role that ideology played in the Khmer Rouge genocide [to] see how the evils of dehumanization ... are enhanced a thousandfold when driven by distortions of higher ideals” (Rev. Curtis Webster, “Theology, Ideology and Genocide,” 1/14/08, <http://www.lucifereffect.com/theologyblog.htm?articleID=27>).

This is all pretty demoralizing, isn't it? But here's the thing: the very factors that *weaken* our moral compass give us clues to what can *strengthen* us. In our remaining time, let's look at what we can do to fortify our God-given instinct not to harm our fellow human beings.

First, social norms and positive peer pressure matter. We work hard on this with our youth -- but we need to be just as diligent in adult circles. Commenting on the Milgram experiment, psychologist Philip Zimbardo says simply, “Want resistance to authority pressures? Provide social models – peers who rebel” (“when Good People do Evil,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, January/February 2007, p. 45). When just one other participant resisted the instruction to administer a shock, people were far more likely to question authority. In “real life” it just takes one courageous leader who blows the whistle on behavior everyone else is going along with. These are the quiet heroes of our time, from the youth who doesn't drink, even though “everybody else is doing it,” to the captain of industry who resists an exorbitant bonus while hundreds of employees are being laid off, even though that pay is “the industry standard.” Role models matter.

Second, human proximity matters. Though the weight of human need can be overwhelming – compassion fatigue sets in when we try to do it all – we have more ways to bridge the distance between us and people in need than ever before. Recently, our member Dave Tolmie went to a graduation ceremony of a school for disabled kids in Tanzania – this school is his family’s passion. Cecilie Price, who directs the Boys & Girls Club, is connecting mentors to kids whose families are missing in action. Every day our church’s Prayer Chain lifts up members and strangers in need, who become real through the wonders of the Internet. We are so interconnected. We need to keep pressing ourselves to move from the hypothetical “other” to the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, next door and on the other side of the world. The world is flat.

Finally, there is the matter of obedience – our obedience to a “higher power” than our frail human leaders. Last week we talked about our need for authority – that’s hard-wired in us too. The question is how we discern and resist *unethical* authority. That’s where having an internalized alarm system comes into play. We need to cultivate our warning signals – based not on our culture’s biases or our gut level “shudder factor,” but based on the moral authority of God. The Ten Commandments are a pretty good place to start. Then there’s “What would Jesus do” -- the mantra of evangelicals. And Jesus tells us what he would do: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” If it doesn’t pass that test, then it probably shouldn’t be done.

*What can we do to strengthen our moral compass so that we don’t harm other people?* If we want to strengthen our moral compass not to harm, these three things matter: social norms, overcoming distance, and obeying our higher power. But, to borrow from Scripture, there is a “still more excellent way.” If we really want to make a difference in the world, Jesus calls us to go one step further. He calls us not just to avoid harm -- not just to love our neighbors -- but to love our enemies ... to love even

those who have harmed us. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” he tells us. And the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, shows us how this higher calling unfolds. First, support social norms of right and wrong: “hate what is evil.” Faith doesn’t call us to condone evil or overlook harm. Second, obey our higher authority. There is a higher authority than even the best human justice system: “‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’ says the Lord.” So “do not repay evil for evil.” And “love your enemy – “bless those who persecute them; bless and do not curse them.” Even those who are our enemies are human beings, children of God, and it dehumanizes us if we stoop to dehumanize them.

We are hard-wired not to harm other people. But even rhesus monkeys do the same. If we’re going to make a difference in the world – to stop the retribution, to stop the cycle of violence, to stop the poison of hate – then Christ invites us to aspire even to this: “Love your enemy.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Amen.