

## Against and for morality<sup>1</sup>

St. Brandon's

Ps 15; James 1:17-end; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

29 August 2021

Last week, Alison had the unenviable task of tackling spiritual warfare – how we need to battle against the powers of evil or darkness – which, as she said, we often feel very uncomfortable about. She concluded that we should underestimate neither the powers of darkness, nor the power of God.

Well today we're on much safer ground – personal morality. It's something we all know plenty about, even if we're also occasionally a little uncomfortable with it. And we all know, don't we, that Jesus went out preaching so that we should get ourselves into good moral order, so that we are able to participate in a Kingdom, both here and beyond this life, which is only for those who have got themselves into such good moral order. As our Psalm says, "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?", in other words, who can be right with God? And the answer couldn't be clearer: "Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart", and so on.

And we also know that this will involve a bit of hard work on our part. As the letter of James puts it, "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness", "bridle your tongue", and then turn to doing good: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers ...". "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world".

And Jesus backs up the hard work of personal morality when He lists all the things, the "evil intentions" that come from within us, from the human heart: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly". Wow! What a list. You may be familiar with some of these(!) But the implication is clear, isn't it, that we are to become and then to be people who, hard as it is, have overcome all these deficiencies. Christianity is all about personal morality, about seeking moral perfection if you like, in who we are and what we do, isn't it?

Well ... I want to suggest that Christianity has almost nothing to do with personal morality. *Almost* nothing – so not nothing at all, but not much, and not nearly as much as we often think. How so?

The first problem with personal morality is that it can easily become a checklist approach to religion. In a sense, that's what Jesus was criticising in the Pharisees and the Jews. They had apparently reduced religion to a series of rituals to do with cleanliness, so that they didn't have "defiled hands". So wash everything including cups, pots, bronze kettles and, according to other ancient authorities, beds! I hope you've not only changed the sheets recently, but given the mattress and bedframe a good clean! What would you say to St Peter at the pearly gates when faced with the accusation of a dusty bedframe?

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to a lecture given on 4 February 20202, by Rev Dr Giles Fraser, Prokhorov / God and the Good Lecture, "Christianity and morality", available at [Giles Fraser, Prokhorov / God and the Good Lecture "Christianity and morality" - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyvXzgjwQHc)

But that's exactly the problem, isn't it? That we think we could approach St Peter with a list, perhaps quite a long checklist, of all the good things we've done, and bad things we haven't, and demand to be let in. And St Peter would have no choice – "Tick, tick, tick – ooh! Churchyard tidy up; very good; tick, tick. OK, pity you didn't have one more go on the technology rota, or two on the coffee rota, or you'd have got a merit! But you've passed, so in you go". You can see the ridiculousness of this approach.

But consider this. Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." And again, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew, 5:21-22; 27-30). Really? Are we take this literally? And if so, what chance do any of us have of walking blamelessly and doing what is right?

But that's precisely the point that Jesus is trying to get across – and, as so often, exaggerating wildly to make us stop and think. And Jesus' point is that moral perfection is impossible – we are congenitally incapable of it. How many asylum seekers do you have staying with you in your house? Why do you buy your children or grandchildren presents when the money would clearly be better spent saving another child from hunger or death? If you want to be perfect, have you sold your possessions, and given the money to the poor, so that you will have treasure in heaven, as Jesus required of the rich young man (Matthew 19:21)? We can't do it. It's what is sometimes known as a crisis of capacity – we don't have the capacity to be morally perfect. But, and here's the point, God already knows and, in one sense, it doesn't matter.

Let's go back to the beginning of our reading from James: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." And a little later: "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save you". It doesn't start or depend on us. It starts and depends on God who has given us new birth by the word of truth which He has implanted in us. And He shows no variation, so he will not change His mind about this – about you, or about me. or about anyone else.

If personal morality helps at all, it does so by showing us the unvarnished truth of human failure, that far from being in good moral order, we are moral failures. Not only do we find the good hard to do, but we are also faced with the "evil intentions" that come from within us, from the human heart, as Jesus pointed out. Christianity is, if nothing else, a religion of those who have come to know that we are congenitally incapable of moral perfection, and perfectly capable of moral degeneracy. But Christianity is also a religion that says categorically that we are forgiven, and loved, and wanted simply because of who we are, not because of what we have or haven't done. It all depends on God,

not on us – thank God. So, as last week, we shouldn't underestimate the powers of darkness – but this time the powers of darkness, the evil intentions in us – but nor should we underestimate the power of God.

So where does personal morality fit into all of this? And surely it comes purely as response. If God, who is love, has chosen to forgive us and love us, then it behoves us to love ourselves and others. And morality springs from that source, and not as a means of earning our salvation.

Let me give you one, slightly personal example, for which I do have permission(!) For many years Alison was a relationship counsellor. She was by all accounts (or at least from what I could glean from her account) very good at it. But measured against the vast sea of human misery in the world, so what? What could one person do? And her answer to that was roughly this, “I am doing what I can, where I am, with the gifts and resources I have, to try to make some positive difference”.

And in response to the forgiveness and love of God for us, while always alert to what more and what else we might do, that, I would suggest, is what personal morality requires of us: to do what we can, where we are, with the gifts and resources we have, to try to make a positive difference.

Amen