

God and Morality: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion.

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August 28, 2019

The Bible has this consistent moral instruction: Hate what is evil, and love what is good. Both are important. As for hating what is evil, it is wise to deal with the evil in yourself first, then deal with the evil in the world around us. As someone said, “Beware the person who wants to change the world but is uninterested in changing themselves.” As for loving what is good, we cherish and enlarge what is good in ourselves and in the world around us.

Today I want us to focus on loving what is good. As Paul urged,

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatsoever is true, whatsoever is honorable, whatsoever is just, whatsoever is pure, whatsoever is lovely, whatsoever is of good report, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise think on these things (Philippians 4:8).

In a nation of increasingly dangerous divisions which divide families, relationships, churches and communities, we need to find ways to engage more constructively across partisan divisions. Such is the purpose and hope of this sermon.

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One of the most helpful books I have read toward this end is Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Haidt is a moral psychologist who has done extensive research using moral philosophy, moral psychology, anthropology and evolutionary psychology. Here are some of his conclusions.

There are six moral foundations. Some people operate with one set of these foundations, while others gravitate toward another set of these moral foundations. A problem arises when we think our set of moral values is superior to others'.

The six moral foundations, Haidt says, are *care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity* and *liberty*. Let's look at each of the six.

The first is Care, or Care versus Harm. It has to do with caring for the young and vulnerable and protecting them from harm. Compassion is the foundational virtue, and when this value is violated what we feel is moral outrage.

The second moral foundation is Fairness, or Fairness versus Cheating. Both conservatives and liberals value fairness, but they define it differently. Liberals tend to define fairness as *equality*. Conservatives tend to define fairness as *proportionality*, that is, you should get what you've worked to deserve, and you reap what you sow. The key virtue of this moral foundation is justice.

The third is Loyalty, or Loyalty versus Betrayal. It has to do with loyalty in friendships, marriage, and community. Group unity is important and betrayal is the chief vice.

The fourth is Authority, or Authority versus Subversion. It values respect for those in authority. It honors the good of social hierarchies. It values law and order. Its virtues are loyalty, self-sacrifice, and with regard to the nation, patriotism. The good of institutions is emphasized.

The fifth is Sanctity, or Sanctity versus Degradation. Arising from religion it defines what is sacred and what is degradation. When we see what we value as sacred being violated what we feel is disgust, and disgust goes deeper than reason. It values a sanctity for life, though how that is defined varies greatly.

The sixth moral foundation is Liberty, or Liberty versus Oppression. Individual and political freedom is the highest value. Here again, liberals and conservatives tend to gravitate to different kinds of liberty. For liberals, it is the fight against all forms of oppression, authoritarianism, racism, sexism and all the other “isms” which someone quipped should be “was’ms”. They fight for the victims of social oppression. Conservatives tend to fight government intrusion. Their slogan is “Don’t Tread on Me”. They thus favor small government.

Now here is a second conclusion: Liberals tend to gravitate toward one set of moral foundations, Care, Fairness and Liberty. Conservatives while paying

attention to all six, tend to gravitate toward Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity and Liberty. Again, the problem comes when we elevate our set of moral convictions and dismiss other moral foundations as inferior.

Haidt's book and this sermon are a call to recognize the validity of all six moral foundations, and to grow in respect of those with whom we differ. A community and nation need all six to prosper and grow.

Hardt uses the analogy of the taste buds on our tongues which have five taste receptors: Sweet, sour, bitter, salty and umami, or meat flavors. As human taste buds have five kinds of taste receptors, we human moral creatures have six moral taste buds. We differ on the ones we tend to activate.

A good restaurant skillfully uses all tastes to create a delicious meal. Who wants to go to an all-sweet restaurant, or an all-salt restaurant? (Don't answer that!) So the good society makes use of all six moral foundations.

For example, all by itself the value of liberty leads in extreme to the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest. And the value of equality all by itself in the extreme leads to the enforced equality of communism and the stifling of human creativity and achievement.

A third conclusion of the book is about human nature. The moral mind is divided. We are a rider on an elephant, and the rider tends to serve the elephant. Translated, the elephant part of us is our moral intuitions which are

deeper than the reasoning part of us. They can be as deep as our genes and millennia of evolutionary experience. The rider is the reasoning part of us, but the elephant tends to determine where we go.

Reason rarely changes the course of the elephant. Sadly, most often our reasoning faculties are used to justify our moral intuitions and to rationalize their superiority.

Sometimes reason leads us to a higher form of morality, but most often it is used to defend our position. Philosophers have been debating for centuries the roles of reason, emotions and instinct in human behavior. Haidt argues that reason is weak in comparison with our deeper moral intuitions. As Jewish philosopher Woody Allen once said, “The brain is the most overrated organ in the body. Nothing worth knowing can be understood.”

We, then often fail in our attempts to talk meaningfully across the political and religious divides because we are arguing with the rider rather than talking to the elephant. *We need to be elephant-whisperers rather than talking heads.*

So, take time to get to know people across the divides. Ask them what is important to them, what they value. Discover the places of commonality. There may be more than you think. Become morally curious about what makes others tick.

Another conclusion of the research is this: *Morality Binds and Blinds*. Our common shared values can bind us together in community, but they can also blind us to the truth and goodness in those different from us. Jesus warned us of this when he said:

Judge not, lest you be judged.... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye" while a 2x4 is lodged in your own eye? (from Matthew 7:1-4)

We all suffer to one degree or another with "plank-in-eye" disease. And morality binds and blinds.

Jesus' words are not a call to suspend all moral judgements about good and evil, healthy and unhealthy. They are a caution against spending our energy judging what is wrong with others while refusing to see what is wrong with ourselves.

The importance of prayers of confession in weekly worship is that they help us work on our "plank-in-eye" disease. A healthy community emphasizes the good that binds us and works to dismantle that which blinds us.

The author also talks about the dangers of what he calls "the partisan mind", or what I'd call the "hyper-partisan" mind. The brain produces an addictively pleasurable chemical which it releases under certain conditions.

Addiction is the craving for the release of this chemical. The hyper-partisan mind is easily set in motion and craves the pleasure of being right and of clobbering those whom it opposes. It produces a rush of pleasure. Hate brings with it a horrible pleasurable. The hyper-partisan mind can be utterly destructive of relationships, communities and societies. Anger leads to contempt which takes us over. It divides us into camps. In our day social media helps excite the hyper-partisan mind. We now know that in 2016 Russia filled social media with images and messages designed to divide us. And there are Americans who are devoted to using social media for division and the inflaming of partisan passions.

So we must become better stewards of social media. Turn it off more often so that we spend less time *reacting* and more time *reflecting*. Add more silence to your life; it is good for your soul and mind.

When the British Broadcasting Company began in 1931, this was what was engraved above the portals:

This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God....It is [the founders'] prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness.

Doesn't that seem a long time ago? As to social media, Jesus' instruction bears repeating: "Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves."

So, in conclusion:

1) Let us learn to appreciate what is valid in other persons' moral foundations.
2) Beware of those who would hijack our highest moral values in order to divide us.

3) Let us recognize that these six moral foundations are at their best when they are *working together* to build better communities and a good society. For example, we need to balance the well-being of the individual and the community. Obedience to authority is a moral good, but it must be balanced with other moral goods lest it turn into authoritarianism. Loyalty is a moral good, but should a wife who is abused by her husband choose loyalty over life? Love of one's nation is a moral good, but the American flag can be used to promote values that are opposite of what the flag stands for.

Reverence for sacred things is a moral good, but terrible things have been done in the name of religion because the other values are not honored. As Pascal said centuries ago, "Humankind never does evil so completely and so cheerfully as from religious conviction".

All of which is to say, we need each other and all the moral values to build a better community and nation.

Paul pictures the church as the body of Christ in which every part of the body was important. You wouldn't want the body to be all eye-ball, or all hand, or all stomach. And he urged us to take special care of those less honored, sometimes despised parts of the body. This applies to the set of moral values each of us brings to the community.

God calls us to be passionate about our moral convictions and to act upon them. But at the same time we must recognize and respect the moral convictions of others.

As for Jesus, and every sermon must eventually get to him, even if it is the last sentence, the *foundation and fulfilment of all morality is love*. Which is why near the end of his life he said to his disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you love one another.

This is, he said, how people will know whom we follow.