

But – if you can get away with it
Romans 6:1-2,14-18, 22-23 October 9, 2011

I. So here's a few scenarios:

- A. Your “pain in the rear” neighbor who doesn't take care of their yard, is always complaining about your kids making too much noise and has a dog that barks constantly, has broken his leg and can't get out.
He has no family and is so obnoxious and mean that he has no friends.
Do you offer to shop and cook for him?**
- B. Scene 2: There has just been a horrible hurricane that has hit Haiti and all normal supplies of food and water are out.
You have \$400 that you were going to spend on a new flat screen for your bedroom.
The TV is normally \$700, but is on sale for \$400 for just one more week.
What do you do with the \$400?**
- C. Scene 3: One day you find a diamond ring laying on the ground with one giant diamond in it.
The next day in the paper there is a story about a woman who had lost a ring that had been in her family for centuries and it matched exactly the description of the ring you found.**

The article also notes that the ring is worth about 15K.

No one will ever know you found it and in a couple years when the story dies down you can sell it and be \$15K richer.

Should you return it to her?

D. Do you help the mean neighbor, feed the hurricane victims, return the ring?

What you do is **not** a sign of your moral maturity as much as **why** you do what you do.

E. Which brings us to another of the instant sermon questions from a few weeks back which asked:

“If we can't earn our way into heaven, why is it important for us to do good deeds for others?”

II. “If we can't earn our way into heaven, why is it important for us to do good deeds for others?”

Or in the Apostle Paul's words,
“Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

A. Well, as I said our level of moral and our faith development is revealed not so much in the answer we give to the scenarios we

looked at, but in the motivation behind our answer.

Why did we make that decision?

B. There are a good number of reasons people would give for their decisions and most of these reasons have been categorized by a man named Lawrence Kohlberg in his studies on moral development.

1. Kohlberg found that there are basically three levels of moral development:
 - a) Pre-conventional
 - b) Conventional
 - c) Post-conventional
2. You've got to go through one to work your way into the next level.
 - a) So at some point we all reason at a pre-conventional level.
 - b) Research finds that about 80% of adults reason at the conventional level.
 - c) And a small percentage make it to the post-conventional level.

III. Let's take a quick look at the markers of these levels of moral development.

- A. The ***pre-conventional*** level of reasoning is usually found in children but many adults never move beyond this level of moral reasoning, especially if they have never been challenged to move beyond it.
1. At this level we find that a person's motivation for doing something is simply to avoid punishment.
 - a) On a practical level a child will want to avoid an angry response from their parent or avoid a punishment that always seems to correspond to a particular behavior.
 - b) On a religious level, a person's only motivation for their behavior is to avoid hell.
 2. Progressing a bit, but still at the Pre-conventional level is the rational that one acts in certain ways in order to get a reward.
 - a) For the child certain behaviors draw a positive response from their parents and maybe some ice cream and so they repeat those behaviors.
 - b) On a religious level one's behavior is determined by their hope for reward in the form of heaven.
 - c) You may unfortunately notice that this is where a lot of religious folk still remain in their moral development.

- d) Now presumably a person that has moved beyond the pre-conventional level could still believe in heaven and hell, but their motivation for behavior has moved beyond the simple punishment avoidance or gratification level.

B. The ***conventional level*** is the stage of moral development that most adults mature into.

It is the level that the Apostle Paul in our scripture today was encouraging the folks in the church of Rome to move into.

Apparently, many of the folks in Rome were thinking that if they were saved by grace rather than by their deeds, then it didn't matter what they did and they might want to take advantage of that to their own benefit. But Paul appeals with them to move beyond that level of reasoning and instead do what they know is right, what is generally understood by the faithful to be righteous behavior.

To quote Paul again,

“But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

1. So what are the tell tale marks of conventional reasoning?
Well there are two sub-levels of conventional reasoning.
 - a) The level of being good
 - b) Then the level of adherence to authority and the law, both of which provide order in life and society.

2. So beyond the reasoning of acting in order to simply avoid punishment or to receive a reward, folks begin to have a notion of what social, or peer relations are acceptable and preferred – that is -- what is good.
 - a) A person at this level wants to be good.
 - b) But at this level, good is often determined by individual authority figures or peer pressure.
 - c) It's a time in fact when peer pressure may have the most force in determining behavior.

3. At the next sub level the individual still wants to do what they see as good, but good is now defined by what is legal.
 - a) The law is the final authority as to what is right behavior.
 - b) You are bad if you break the law and you are good if you keep the law.

- c) There is no appeal yet to notions of good coming from social contract or ethical principles, but simply adherence to the law.
- d) There is no good excuse for breaking the law.
- e) It is not that you don't break the law in order to avoid punishment, but rather there is an awareness that the law is necessary for keeping order and any violation to the law is a threat to that order – and thus wrong.

4. So in our scripture today we see Paul encouraging folks to do what is “right.” That is to be good and obey the laws that are written on the heart. And in other writings Paul tells his readers to obey the authorities, because they have been ordained by God. So why didn't Paul encourage them to move right into a Post-Conventional level of thinking? I suppose one answer would be that Paul himself was stuck in the conventional level of reasoning. However, many of his other writings would indicate otherwise. So why only encourage these readers to move to the level of Conventional thinking? Well because as I mentioned you can't jump stages and the problem he was addressing clearly showed that these folks were still reasoning at a

pre-conventional level.

Paul must have had some sense that in this instance with folk still functioning on a level that prescribed behavior based on reward and punishment, they never would have understood the reasoning at a post-conventional level -- which we will now look at.

C. So post-conventional moral reasoning would prescribe behavior based on principles that supersede or over-ride the law.

Now many folk at the conventional reasoning level may have glimpses of this next level and kind of understand post-conventional reasoning but their behavior and decisions are not based on it.

1. So like with the other two levels, the Post-Conventional level also has two sub-levels.
 - a) Social Contract
 - b) Ethical Principles
2. So when that person at the conventional level of reasoning who gives ultimate authority to the law begins to ask “why” – why is a law good, or what makes a law good; then they are beginning to move into the Post-Conventional level of moral reasoning based on Social Contract.
 - a) There is a recognition that laws aren't good in and of themselves, but that there are some underlying principles that make

a law good.

AND

- b) That these laws have authority, not merely because they are laws, but because *We the People*, have entered into a social contract to recognize these laws as the best way to achieve those underlying principles I just referred to.
- c) One of the most important underlying principles of a law, or of determining one's behavior that may violate the law, is whether a law or a specific behavior provides for what is beneficial for the most people.
- d) So the law and personal behavior should be based upon what will bring the greatest good for the greatest number of people; and some may want to expand that to the idea of what will bring the greatest good for all of creation (not just people).
- e) An example of this comes to us when Jesus states that, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." [Mark 2:27]
- f) And when Jesus would violate the sabbath laws (laws believed to be from God, mind you) in order to heal, or

liberate a person, he was operating out of our next level of moral reasoning.

3. This is a level of moral reasoning that prescribes behavior by referring to superseding principles; such as the principle of life or freedom.
 - a) Another way of looking at this is -- when one makes a moral judgment based on "what is the greatest good, for the greatest number of people;" they are also concerned with what is the definition of 'good' in that phrase? And is there ever a case where an appeal to over-riding principles may find that the rights of the individual may over-ride or superseded what is good for the greatest number of people?
 - b) So the Sabbath laws were good and valuable and did meet the test of what was good for the greatest number of people but Jesus saw that the rights of an individual to be healed, to be given life, to be liberated from oppression, superseded the social contract.
 - c) At this level of moral reasoning there is also the awareness that responsibility for moral choice resides with the individual and the individual alone.
 - d) It is rather hard to be clear about this level of moral reasoning, because most

often those writing about it and those hearing about it are not using it. They ain't there yet.

- e) People who get put into this group of people who used post-conventional reasoning are folks like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa and of course Jesus.
- f) Now some of us may have some understanding of this level of reasoning, but very few regularly make their moral decisions based on this level of moral reasoning.

IV. So now a reset for all of you who have begun to dose off.

If there is one thing I want you all to get from this last 10 minutes of looking at the levels of moral reasoning, it is that there are a good number of reasons to do what is right other than to avoid punishment [hell] or to reap rewards [heaven].

- A. Such reasons start with having the moral integrity just to do what is good.
- B. Then seeing the value of doing what would bring order to our lives.

- C. Beyond that is seeing the need and affects of having a social contract and doing what is best for the most people.
- D. And finally acting out of adherence not to peers, not to the law, not to the principles that establish the law, but to the over-riding principles that define goodness itself – a level of true moral self-integration.

V. Now I want to dump all that.

Dump it.

Forget about it, because Kohlberg's scheme is just one way of looking at the question of "if we can't earn our way into heaven then why be good."

A. Interestingly, the kids in the *Kid's Time* last week gave a perfectly wonderful and functional reason for why we should be "good."

B. Do you remember their answer to why we should help other people?

1. It wasn't because -- if we don't we'll be punished.
2. Carissa even asked, "Well is it to get a reward of some kind."
And amazingly the all responded, "No."

3. Well why then?
Their answer was that it made the other person feel good.
 4. I was impressed.
 5. We do good things to make others feel good.
 6. Love is acting in a way that enhances the value of another person.
- C. Now this doesn't really fit into Kohlberg's scheme anywhere, but as the kids seemed to have intuited;
we don't love other people so that we can go to heaven, but because we want to enhance the value of their lives.
- D. It sounds a bit circular but we love other's, because we love them.
- E. We enhance the value of other's lives because we want to see the value of their lives enhanced.
- F. And that goes for God too.
- G. We act lovingly towards God because we want to enhance God's value.
- H. Our motivation for doing good, may not be to avoid punishment, or to receive reward, or to just be good or law abiding, or to uphold the social contract – but simply to be

loving.

When a child see's one of their parents sad and comes up and hugs them to make them feel better – it's not to go to heaven – it's because they love them.

VI. If we can't earn our way into heaven, why is it important for us to do good deeds for others?

Because that's what love is all about.

AMEN.