

GOD IS GOOD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 8, 2018
based on Psalm 25:8–10; Psalm 100; I Peter 3:8–11***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe.” Currently we are journeying through the classic “proofs for God,” which are a series of arguments designed to demonstrate the reality of God for those who are skeptics or who have doubts. Each of these arguments starts with some fundamental observation and reasons to the existence of God. The arguments have very different starting places, but they all, in the end, point to God.

The ontological argument starts with human ideas and specifically the idea of God that appears universally among human beings everywhere across the millennia; and it argues that the idea itself is a reflection of the reality of God. The cosmological argument starts with the natural world and notes that this incredible universe must have had a Cause, which itself was not caused by anything else, and it points to God as that First Cause who is the origin of all things. The teleological argument also starts with the natural world but especially observes the design and artistry in all things, and argues that there must be a Master Artist or Designer who crafted this world which evokes in us such a sense of wonder. The argument from religious experience, which was our focus last week, starts with the broad religious experience of humanity, and notes that when so many people at so many different places and times all testify that they have had an experience of Something, namely God, it follows that that Something actually exists. Today our focus is the so-called moral argument. This begins with human morality and asks why we have a notion of “the good.” {prayer}

Why do you think that some actions are good or right and some actions are wrong or bad? People universally have a sense of morality, but why is this so? Wild animals have no such moral sense—like the groundhogs who eat my flowers (whatever the rabbits do not eat)—they have no sense of right or wrong, of goodness or evil. They simply do what is necessary to survive. Why then do human beings have an idea of “the good”? In the idea of right and wrong, people are drawing on something else—some sort of moral Authority—which is giving us a sense of what is good or evil.

Sometimes it is argued that people in their moral thinking are just following cultural patterns. Thus your ideas of right and wrong would stem simply from your family or your society. But if that is the case, then you would think that people in very different places and times would have very different ideas about right and wrong, and some people would have no such ideas at all.

Yet in fact, human beings in all times and places have not only had a basic idea of “the good”—that certain kinds of actions are morally right and the opposing actions are morally wrong—but the specific ideas of what is right or wrong are remarkably similar

across every culture, particularly when you are looking at the core values in any society. For people in every place and time, stealing is wrong, untruthfulness is wrong, and murder is wrong, while generosity is good, honesty is good, and lovingkindness is good. Sometimes these values have been applied only to one's own group, so that it was considered perfectly OK to kill and steal from the tribe over the hill, but at least within one's own tribe or clan, there has been in every age a basic "moral law"—a conviction that certain things are right, and certain things are wrong—and this moral law, in its broad scope, has been the very much same across the globe and across the millennia.

One major example of this is the fact that there is some form of the "Golden Rule" in every major religion. In Hinduism there is the teaching, "Treat others as you treat yourself."ⁱ Buddhism teaches, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."ⁱⁱ Confucianism has the teaching, "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."ⁱⁱⁱ The list goes on and on. The Bible expresses this principle in positive terms, in Leviticus 19:18, which says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and in the teaching of Jesus, who brought the "Golden Rule" to its clearest positive statement when he said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12)

This kind of consistency can be found across numerous moral teachings in all different cultures. There seems to be a Universal Moral Law—a basic concept of what is morally right and wrong that is found in all human beings. From where does this come? Why would people in disconnected cultures and times have the same basic moral values? There must be a common Source of morality.

Moreover, why do people universally have the idea that certain values are *objectively good*—that is, certain actions are to be considered "good" not because of a cultural or personal preference but because these actions are just, somehow, inherently good. For example, to treat others with kindness, the moral value that is at the heart of the Golden Rule, is considered by everyone everywhere to be objectively good. It is not a value that is debatable or open to question, as though treating people with cruelty might be just as good a value. People universally have a sense that everyone *ought* to treat others with kindness, even if they don't feel like it or fall short of the value. But this notion that there is an objective morality—that what is good or evil is not a matter of my preference but depends on a higher moral law—requires that there must be an absolute Moral Authority. There must be an ultimate principle or force for Goodness in the universe, which has established that moral law and imparted a corresponding sense of morality to human beings. In short, the existence of a Universal Moral Law points to the necessary existence of God.

This basic line of argument, which reasons from human morality to the conclusion that there must be a God who is the source of that morality, is called the *moral argument* for the existence of God. Historically, the argument came to particular expression in Immanuel Kant, who observed that human beings strive for the greatest good, and that

the only way to account for this drive for goodness is by acknowledging the existence of God.^{iv} Biblically, the moral argument is strongly represented throughout the Scriptures. The Old Testament repeatedly declares that God is good (Psalm 136:1; Psalm 100:5), and that God imparts goodness to human beings. As that passage we heard from Psalm 25 put it, “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore God instructs sinners [those who otherwise would not be good] in the way, and leads the humble in what is right.” (Psalm 25:8–9) The Bible goes on to speak of God providing moral instruction in many forms—giving the commandments, for example, in Old Testament times, and giving further moral inspiration through Jesus’ teachings and through the New Testament writings such as we heard from I Peter, where we are admonished to “turn away from evil and do good.” (I Peter 3:11) Moreover, there is an understanding, expressed in Romans in a passage we heard earlier in this sermon series, that God has given to everyone a basic awareness of what is true and good, so that, as Paul says, “they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20) if they do wrong, because everyone has an innate, God-given sense of morality.

Today, of course, some people want to say that they can be good without God, that belief in God is not necessary for morality. But the moral argument is not that people have to *believe* in God in order to be moral. It is rather that the Spirit of God is the source of the basic sense of morality that exists in all human beings, whether they believe in God or not. The fact that some individuals can follow moral principles without affirming belief in God does nothing to undercut the moral argument—which is that the universal human idea of morality has to come from an ultimate moral Authority.

It is very interesting that the person who says, “I can be good without God,” will still typically insist that certain things are objectively right or wrong—that slaughtering innocent people is “wrong,” for example, or that helping the needy is “good.” But this thinking plays right into the moral argument, because why in fact is it wrong to slaughter innocent people? If there is no god, if we are just material creatures in a survival-of-the-fittest universe, then there is no reason to claim that there is something wrong with slaughtering innocent people. The only way to claim that there are objective moral values is to affirm that there is a moral Authority above and beyond us, namely, God.

The essence of the moral argument is that the nature of human morality requires that there is a spiritual Source of that morality. This is precisely what the Bible proclaims, as it declares that God is good, and that the reason that human beings have an idea of the good, and a desire to do the good, is because of the working of God.

Those who wish to deny God must therefore try to come up with some way to account for the morality that is observed in human beings without reference to God. One line of argument that you may hear from time to time is the suggestion that moral values are the result of practical measures to ensure that a community can function. Nothing works very well if everyone is dishonest, for example, and thus honesty becomes a generally approved value. In this scenario, our “values” are essentially self-serving,

bringing benefit to oneself. People will practice the value of politeness, for example, because it generally moves other people to be polite in return.

But this line of argument does not actually explain morality. It explains civility—the customs that people adopt to function nicely with each other. Morality goes much further into areas that are not self-serving at all. The highest moral behavior is the practice of *altruism*—the willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests in order to bring benefit to others. Altruism is celebrated across human cultures as the pinnacle of morally good behavior. But if there is no God, and human beings are simply the result of a dog eat dog struggle for survival, then altruism makes no sense at all. Human beings should not even think about sacrificing themselves for the sake of others; they should want only to dominate others.

In recent years, some atheists have tried to counter this problem by arguing that natural selection would have worked in favor of altruism, in that altruism would advance the “gene pool” in which the altruistic individual was situated. The behavior of sacrificing self for the sake of the colony would advance the colony and thus the genes that supported altruistic behavior. This actually does quite nicely explain the kind of apparent “altruism” that one observes among animals—the fact that parent animals will put themselves at risk to defend their young, for example, or that worker bees or ants will sacrifice themselves for the sake of the colony. But the argument that altruism in the clan advances the clan—while it explains the apparent altruism in animals—does not at all explain the sort of altruism that one observes in human beings, which is of an entirely different order; because the highest form of altruism among people is to give oneself for the sake of those *beyond* one’s own circle. The belief that it is good to help the stranger, and to show care to the outsider, is found across world religions and comes to its peak expression in Jesus, who taught people to “love their enemy” and who sacrificed his own life for the sake of those who hated and opposed him.

If human beings are the result only of a struggle for the survival of the fittest, then the kind of values exhibited by Jesus should make no sense to anyone. In a godless, mechanistic universe, everyone should just be propelled by a basic concern for self and a drive to triumph over the other. It should not be a value that the strong should help the weak; in a survival-of-the fittest world, the only reasonable course is for the strong to eliminate the weak! It should not be a value that anyone would be shown mercy; and it should seem absolutely preposterous to “love one’s enemy.” Why then do people universally recognize Jesus as the embodiment of what is supremely good? Even those who do not affirm that Jesus is the Son of God will agree that he displayed the most praiseworthy values in helping the weak, in showing mercy, and in being willing to sacrifice the self, even for the outsider. There is no explanation for why people would affirm such values unless they are inspired by a transcendent source of morality, namely God.

In the end, human morality—the universal sense that there is an objective moral law, which calls us beyond ourselves to live by higher values—points to the necessary existence of an ultimate Lawgiver. What the Bible affirms is what makes sense—our moral awareness, which far transcends anything in the natural world, comes from God, who has created us in God’s image, which is why the goodness of God is now reflected in our hearts.

It will always be possible for people to be good or to do good without believing in God. All they have to do is to follow the prompting of the inner moral conscience that God has given to them, and ride the wave of the general moral awareness in the culture around them. It will also always be possible for people to choose against goodness and do evil, but in that case their actions will be recognized as evil by all the people around them. The central question, which is at the core of the moral argument, is the question as to the source of that moral sense, which is within all human beings and across every culture. The only coherent explanation for the human idea of the Good is what the Psalms declare: that God is Good, and God has imparted a basic moral consciousness to you and me and to every human being. And God gives us a basic calling—to not only know the good, but to do it.

ⁱ Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva 167:9.

ⁱⁱ Udanavarga 5:18

ⁱⁱⁱ Confucius, Analects, XV, 24,

^{iv} Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason.