

## Wonder

Volume: 2 Number: 4 Theme: **Christianity and Partisan Politics**

Title: **On the Essence of True Morality** Author: **Archbishop Lazar [Puhalo]**

True morality consists far more in how well we care for one another than in what kind of external behavior we wish to force on other people. Too often, moralism is confused with morality, but they are far from being the same. The moralistic notion that Christianity has a duty to try to force one or another denomination's understanding of biblical morality on any nation or community is quite destructive and usually leads to persecutions and violence. People with such ideas will usually ignore the Gospel itself and rummage through the Old Testament seeking a bludgeon to use against someone or some group. Another construct that appears to be problematic is focusing the whole concept of morality on sexual matters, often to the exclusion of other very serious issues. One of the greatest moral problems in our era is the destruction of the environment, and this is rooted in egoism and self-centredness. These two, egoism and self-centredness (or "self-love") are the very bases of all that is genuinely immoral, and moralism itself is a form of egoism and self-focus.

Let us look, for a moment, at the usually misunderstood creation narrative in Genesis and see what this story actually teaches us about the human condition and the true meaning of morality.

The creation narrative is not a scientific treatise; it does not actually tell us any of the details about the creation of the universe, only that it was the work of God. The moral idea of the creation narrative is its most important aspect. We are told that God created mankind from pure love. This means that He gave man freedom, for love given without freedom is obsession but it is not love, and love demanded without freedom is a psychosis; it is not love. So God created us with love and gave to us that other factor which is essential to love – trust. If there is to be freedom then there also must be choice.

The story of the two trees in the garden is essentially a prophecy about the Cross of Christ, but in this narrative they also signify a choice and the choice was whether or not to love God and trust Him. The story about the temptation is important because it was a test of the sincerity of love, for love without trust cannot be sincere. We are told that Adam and Eve were created in God's image and they also had the grace of immortality through unity with God. Satan tempts mankind by offering him a counterfeit of something that he already has. In essence he says "Do not trust God; disobey Him and you will become like God." Adam and Eve accepted the counterfeit and this was the beginning of egoism and self love: "You will have special knowledge and you will become like God." The fall of mankind was a fall from an atmosphere of unselfish love and harmony into egoism, self-centredness and self-love.

The real moral issue for mankind is precisely this condition of egoism and self-centredness. Every normal emotion that races out of control into a destructive passion– every offense, every explosion of anger, every murder and every war– is rooted in our egoism and self-centredness. The real moral struggle, therefore, is against these deficits and an ascent to an unselfish love which blossoms into a co-suffering love. Since the real meaning of sin is the misuse of our energies, and this is driven by our egoism and self-focus, unselfish love is the key to true

morality. Did Christ really say anything different when He told us that the entire law and the prophets are condensed into this one thing: that we love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves? The only way we can love our neighbor as ourselves is through a genuine empathy. There is no other way to defeat Satan in our lives, the lives of our parishes and the world around us except through the power of co-suffering love, the kind of love that Christ Himself revealed to us in His life, His earthly ministry and the Cross. In order to do this we must see the foremost order of morality as a transformation of the heart, and not in the enforcement of a legalistic code of external behavior.

The efforts of some religious bodies to manipulate the civil government in order to have it legislate their doctrines and moral concepts into civil law is nothing else but sinful egoism, self-centredness and self-love. It is therefore the very opposite of true morality and it has no place for Orthodox Christians. Our greatest moral obligation is to develop an unselfish love for God, our neighbor, and the realization that all of mankind is our neighbor and each one of those human beings is the image and likeness of the living God. If we cannot love the *image and likeness* of God how shall we learn to love God Himself? Moralism involves fantasies of a “more Christian past,” and is filled with judgment and condemnation, yet Christ ” came not to condemn the world, but that the world, through Him, might be saved.” Moralism does not use the language of healing, but the language of fire, the rhetoric of self-righteousness and often of hate and violence. Let us think back on two instances from Christ’s own example and one of His parables. The woman taken in adultery was brought before Christ and accused. “According to the law, she ought to be stoned to death!” With a few simple words, Christ sent the arrogant legalists slinking away in shame. To the woman herself, however, He made no word of accusation. But let us think about this: if the fear of the horrible death by stoning and the shame before the whole community could not deliver this woman from the bondage of her passion, how could the simple words of Christ, “go and sin no more,” accomplish this? It could do so because at the same time, Christ penetrated into her heart with the power of His co-suffering love. Nor did our Savior speak a single hurtful or critical word to the Samaritan woman who had lived with several different men. Rather, He likewise healed her heart with that ultimate healing ointment: the balm of co-suffering love. In the parable of the prodigal son, is it not clear that the father’s forgiveness did not come into being when he saw the son returning home; rather the father’s forgiveness followed him the very day that he left home, and it was always there waiting for him when he turned around to face it and entered back into the father’s arms and home. Such are the images of true morality and true faith which our Lord Jesus Christ has imparted to us. We are in this world to strive to be spiritual healers, not to be prosecuting attorneys.

If you desire to be a truly moral person then above all else struggle to conform yourself to the image of the unselfish, co-suffering love of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. Strive to escape the temptation to judge and condemn, and become a spiritual healer through unselfish love, even while you are striving to find healing for yourself. True righteousness consists in nothing else but a pure, Christ-like unselfish love; true holiness consists in a heart transformed by the power of a co-suffering love that radiates out from that heart with the light of Christ.

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**Discussion Questions:**

How do you reconcile this article with accounts of Christ condemning money changers in the Temple and instructing many to “sin no more”?

What are the larger implications of the author’s argument that “The creation narrative is not a scientific treatise”?

Do you agree that efforts of religious institutions to influence legislative policy in our democracy is sinful egoism? Why or why not?

How would you define Christian morality? How does scripture define it?