

The Process of Affirming Gospel Values

In the last few months I have noticed that I have spent a lot of time encouraging Christians to see that our morals and values are not based in politics or popular culture but in the consistent person and message of Jesus. It seems simple enough but there are difficulties with the assumption that this statement is easy to understand and apply. Is it meant for us only or also for others? Who's version of "the Gospel" do we believe? Isn't basing morals and values in religious belief arbitrary? What is the "Gospel" anyway? Aren't all opinions valid? Do I even have the right to advocate beliefs that are based in Jesus' moral teachings anyway? To many it seems overwhelming and difficult so it is avoided altogether. Instead, issues are examined through political positions, subjective opinions and polling data – even for the majority of Christians. Is there a better way to approach this?

This came to a head lately because of a news story. A woman who is terminally ill will be killing herself and CNN as well as other blogs, social networks, and news agencies have reported it as if it were a heroic and positive act. I somewhat expect the news and social networks to push the sensational story but what I didn't expect to hear was Christians justifying it, supporting it, and even promoting it. The real issue is deeper than whether or not someone supports assisted suicide. I am finding that the underlying issue is that people do not know how to apply Gospel principles to everyday moral events. This writing is not intended to address every issue or even fully address this one. Rather, it is intended to assist Christians in applying Gospel morals and values to issues and situations in a way that will be beneficial to them as well as others.

I firmly believe that Gospel morals and values are knowable and are beneficial to us and others. I also have noticed that much of what I have come to understand as "Gospel values and morals" are somewhat intuitive from years of thought, study, prayer, and spiritual practices. This commentary was also a good exercise for me because I had to articulate for myself how I come to moral decisions while at the same time being faithful to the Lord I know, love, and serve. So now, let's get started and we'll start at the beginning.

What Is "The Gospel"?

Most people don't understand what the Gospel is. They think it is the preachy opinions of preachers. When I refer to the Gospel I am being specific and it is more than just "preacher culture" or even "The Bible". I know that for some this might seem questionable, but let me explain and I think you will agree that in order for the Word of God to be authentic it must be understood within a larger context. Let's be honest, anyone can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say and people have used the Bible to justify every kind of evil. Therefore, when I say "Bible" I mean a consistent, historical, theological, scholarly, and culturally appropriate understanding of the Bible. When I say "Gospel" or "Word of God" I include the person of Jesus, the words and deeds of Jesus, and the consistent faith of the Church where the Bible was formed and nurtured.

The Word of God is more than a book. It is a person. It is Jesus. And how does Jesus reveal himself to us? In words and deeds. We know of these words and deeds because they have

been written down for us but we also know them because they were preserved within a context of faith that the disciples received from Jesus and then passed on in the Church. In other words, if you want to understand the Bible, you are doing a real disservice to yourself if you are reading it apart from the consistently held beliefs of the Church that received it and passed it on from the beginning. Also implied is that Word of God is understood within a context of relationship with Jesus. A scholar might know something about the Bible but they can never “know” the fullness of the Bible without knowing God because it is a book of faith, written within the context of faith, for people of faith, to be understood and applied through faith. This is why academics apart from faith can so easily make such obvious mistakes such as claiming that Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead, other “gospels” were lost, Paul made up a new form of Christianity, etc. Applying scholarly tools is beneficial but divorcing the Bible from the faith it was written within is dangerous.

To summarize, when I say “Gospel” I am including the Bible together with the received, passed down, and consistently understood faith that it came from and serves. I am also including the person of Jesus and what he did as well as what he said. These aspects serve each other and form a consistent and knowable deposit of teachings that we can draw from to know God’s ways and how they apply to us as people of faith as well as humanity as a whole. This Gospel is rooted, knowable, consistent, and pierces the biases and whims of cultures and individuals.

What Are Gospel Values?

The first point to consider is whether the Gospel is only for Christians or if it is also worthwhile for all people. Just to be clear, Jesus and the early Church always understood the Gospel as being “Good News” not only for believers but for everyone. Why is that? Isn’t that forcing religion on people to say that? What about those who don’t believe that Jesus is the Savior and Son of God? What of his message should be universally applied and what should be received as a matter of personal faith?

We need to make a distinction between revealed beliefs that can only be known by God’s revelation and beliefs that can also be known through an ingrained common sense, reason, and “natural law” (in the Thomist sense). Knowing Jesus is the Son of God comes only through supernatural revelation but knowing murder is wrong can be known through many avenues including reason, an internal sense of right and wrong, philosophy, the Bible, Church teaching, and societal norms. In other words there is a difference between a religious belief and values or morals that are known through many avenues – and are *also* confirmed and solidified by religious revelation.

When I speak of Gospel “values” or “morals”, therefore, I am speaking of those aspects of the Christian faith that are knowable outside of divine revelation even though they are also confirmed and taught explicitly in God’s Word. These values and morals are beneficial to all people and, therefore, should be promoted as a public good and not just as a subjective personal religious belief. This should not be a shocking revelation. Even if a non Christian, grounded in a different moral foundation, may not believe this, it is reasonable to expect a thoughtful Christian to do so. For a Christian, if God is the God of all and Jesus is God’s truth

revealed for all, the Gospel values and morals also carry with it a universal application whether one is religious or not. It is also understood that the Gospel “Good News” is, when properly offered, truly a liberating and beneficial way of life. However, we should understand that not everyone will immediately embrace the universal application of the Gospel and we will need to base our promotion of Gospel Values on something more than “God says so.” For now I just want to make the point that much of the Gospel message has to do with values and morals and we, as Christians, do a great service to the common good by promoting them.

Why Don't More People Promote Gospel Values?

I might be oversimplifying but I believe that the majority of Christians are afraid to promote Gospel values because they feel they don't have a right to express their moral beliefs if they also happen to be based in religious belief. I hear this in many ways. For example I still hear statements such as, “I personally believe that abortion is wrong because I am a Christian but I also believe that people should be able to choose for themselves.” What is being said implicitly is, “My values and morals which are based in what I received from the Gospel message of Jesus has no universal validity or application for others or the betterment of humanity.” Sure, maybe they wouldn't say it that way, but it is implied. If we, as Christians, believe that the Gospel is beneficial to all, let's do ourselves and others a favor and stop implicitly pretending that it isn't.

Another factor is the external societal pressure that Christians have to keep all aspects of their Christian belief and practice from being expressed in public. This is especially true in moral beliefs and politics. Granted, none of us wants laws mandating church attendance and belief in doctrinal formulas, but as we have seen above, values and morals are another matter. I also find it interesting that we are the only group that excuses and excludes itself from discussion because our belief is grounded in faith in addition to reason. Think about it, when was the last time a secular atheist said, “I personally believe in abortion because I am a secular atheist but I also believe that it shouldn't be legal.” Of course they wouldn't say that because they feel they should be free to promote their convictions even though they are based on their personal opinions and reasoning. So why are Christians so timid to promote their moral beliefs when it is based on their personal opinions, reasoning, plus thousands of years of a consistent Gospel teaching that validates it?

Finally, I think many people don't promote Gospel values and morals because they don't really know them. Many people promote what they believe to be a Gospel truth when in reality it is really more based on a shallow sound bite. It takes a lot of work, prayer, discernment, and practice to know and apply Gospel teachings. How well do we know the Bible? How well do we know Church teaching? How many times do we really pray and discern before coming to an opinion on a moral issue? How well do we reassess our convictions and weigh them against what the Gospel actually says? How often do we change our opinions in favor of the Gospel even if it means going against the cultural or political tide?

Let's be honest, we could all do better. Because we don't know the real Gospel we believe mischaracterizations of the Gospel, repeat popular substitutions for the Gospel, and rationalize our beliefs even though they run counter to Gospel principles.

How Do I Apply The Gospel?

I'm going to use the example that I mentioned earlier and one that you may have seen in social media and news sources. There is a woman who will be killing herself on November 1. The story is being used to advocate euthanasia and promote laws to make it more available. There are different arguments for and against someone doing this. On one side you have the argument that the brain tumor is slowly devastating and the potential pain is real. Why not allow someone to end it on their terms and not have to let loved ones suffer needlessly? On the other side you have the uneasiness people have with suicide, the eroding of the sacredness of life, suggestive pressures, and the implication that terminal people's lives are somehow less valuable and the dying process is without significance.

You all can guess the arguments for assisted suicide: "You can't judge until you are in the same situation!" "You should have the right to do what you want with your own life." "Isn't she courageous for sparing her family the misery." First of all, our hearts go out to her for suffering this disease, but it is not judging her place before God by evaluating the actions that she is promoting with the fuller Gospel message. If she is advocating a moral judgment based on her belief, are we not able to make a moral judgment on the greater issue of assisted suicide based on our belief as well as the Gospel teaching? How do we do that?

Most of us have seen loved ones suffer in similar ways and we know it is real. But we have to be able to evaluate assisted suicide from a moral position and judge that within the context of the Gospel teachings. Then, we should be totally comfortable saying that we love the woman, feel for her plight and family, don't condemn her personally, yet at the same time uphold and promote Gospel principles because they are not only good for her and her family, but they also are beneficial to humanity and society as a whole. So what are "Gospel principles" that apply to this situation?

The basic Gospel values and morals state that: Life is sacred. Suicide is wrong and destructive. Sick people should be cared for and loved. There is value in suffering even though you do what you can to manage and alleviate it. Human dignity continues to exist in its fullness among the sick, elderly, and disabled. If someone does kill themselves, it is not our place to condemn them but it is our place to point out that the action of suicide is wrong. Not only are these statements basic Gospel values and morals but we believe they are also universally beneficial. We also believe that people of good will can appreciate the morals and values of the Gospel teaching regardless of their religious (or lack of) persuasions.

In addition there are other other factors that are more purely religious in nature like God alone has the power to give and take life, eternal life should be considered in the decision, etc. We can also bring these aspects into our decision making process but you will notice that they are not the only reasons we believe in a particular moral point of view. In

addition just because there is a direct religious component to our values and morals does not exclude us from promoting these Gospel ideals as a matter of public policy any more than others who promote their opinions based on other philosophies or perspectives.

The skeptic will say, "You are just saying those are Gospel values and morals, but how do I know that they aren't just your opinion?" That is a good and fair question. How can I make those generalizations? Because they conform to the consistent message of scripture in context, they harmonize with the historical understanding of these issues during the faith of the Apostles, and they follow the consistent passed down teaching of those areas throughout the Church's history. They can also be prayerfully, humbly and lovingly applied. Instead of cherry picking isolated scriptural texts or "proof-texting", I am appealing to a comprehensive method. This is a multifaceted approach utilizing the words of the Scriptures, examining the context of the Scriptures, considering the historical understanding of these teachings during the time of the early Church in the Apostolic Age, and validating it with the consistent teaching of the Church throughout the ages. All of these in combination point to consistent Gospel values and morals that can easily be applied to this situation.

It is beyond the scope of this project to supply the Scriptural quotes, footnotes, historical studies, patristic sources, and Church teachings that make up this assessment, but all of these are accessible to the curious. It does bring up my final point. How can we gain access to the information necessary to be able to form solid opinions on what are Gospel values and morals? The answer to this question is easier than you might think.

Getting the tools

So often it is implied that knowing the Gospel or knowing the Bible is too difficult for the average person to attempt. I totally disagree with this spiritual snobbery. God made it accessible to the vast majority of people. The "kerygma" or basic saving message of Jesus and his teaching is not on par with theoretical calculus. It is simple enough to be learned and known. What is really lacking is the initiative one needs to take to get in there and discover it. Today more than ever we have the tools and the time at our disposal yet laziness and apathy prevail. So where do we start if we want to take the Gospel message seriously?

First of all, familiarity with the Bible is critical. We don't need to be Biblical scholars to be familiar with the overall message and teaching of the Bible. The life of Jesus and his words are a great start. Pour over the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and get to know Jesus through his words and deeds. Add to that the teaching of the early Church in the other New Testament letters. Finally, reading the Old Testament gives context to the New Testament.

Secondly, get to know the Church's historical and ongoing teaching. In the Catholic Church we have the official Catechism of the Catholic Church and the doctrinal teaching of the Church. Spend some time with it. Look at it as helping to give you a point of reference or framework for belief. This practice will help ground you and keep you from basing your

faith solely on personal speculation or ever changing cultural values. Look at it as you would a good friend who is sharing insights that bring stability and wisdom. If you are not Catholic, read the early Church fathers and come to know how the early church worshipped, believed, and practiced its faith. It will give you new insights and help keep you from getting stuck solely within a 21st century American mindset.

Thirdly, spend time in reflective and humble prayer. Prayer does many things. It connects us to our God and helps us to see things differently. It has a way of humbling us, peeling away our biases and stubbornness, and helping us to focus on the more important issues. When you have questions about some moral issue it is good to read the scriptures, know the Church teaching, and apply the Gospel morals and values, but prayer has a way of clarifying not just the issue but its application in a particular situation. It keeps us loving and charitable and gives us the insight that we need to communicate the Gospel so that it will be seen as humbly offered, loving, and helpful.

Fourthly, religious participation and practice is essential. Assuming that your church is grounded in the Gospel, you will receive instruction and help to understand things that you would not come to on your own. There is value in community as well as the challenges that come to us at church. This happens not only in the preaching on Sundays but also through the various retreats, workshops, classes, and interactions with Gospel teaching. Think about it, where else will you hear real Gospel teaching and practice and where else will you be open to hear the Gospel challenge and form your personal beliefs? Also, where else will you humbly offer yourself to the Lord and his ways in worship according to his terms? Our churches keep us centered in something greater than ourselves. It is no accident that there is a serious difference in polls between practicing and non-practicing Christians. Non-practicing Christians are far more likely to reflect the morals and values of society in general. Practicing Christians are far more likely to affirm Gospel values and morals while at the same time affirming cultural beliefs that also conform to them.

Offering the Gospel as a Remedy:

So, for the sake of argument, let's say that you have made a decision to ground your morals and values in the Gospel, you spend the time to know it and prayerfully reflect on it, and you are committed to promoting it publically as your participation in the public forum. How will this work? It will not be easy and it might mean speaking up when you are the only one doing so. I think it is helpful to keep the loving and prayerful approach in mind. Not everyone will get it and those that do it might take time. Don't get frustrated, be consistent and persistent, and don't take it personally when people don't seem to be interested in listening to you. People who need to hear it will hear it and what we do to affirm the Gospel message will have a positive effect with God's help. It is his work, not ours. We are just called not to be afraid to offer the Gospel message and promote it as a public good.

This paper is not an end of the discussion but hopefully a beginning. The process I propose is not the Gospel but a way to it. My hope is that it will help people to take it seriously and promote it for the good that Jesus intended it to be. It starts with all of us doing our part.