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## “The Parable of the Narrow-Minded Zoning Board”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Matthew 7:24-27*

Sunday, July 22, 2007©

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Build your house upon the rock of Jesus Christ. Let us pray.

*Father God, we thank you that you are our Rock and our Redeemer, our Savior and Friend. We ask this morning that you would fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we might be forever transformed and renewed through the hearing of your Word. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

On Friday, Tony Gonzalez, the Kansas City Chiefs' future Hall of Fame Tight End, had what he called a “formal commitment ceremony” rather than a wedding. He did not get married but he did pledge his love to his girlfriend. This is how Tony described the ceremony in the Kansas City Star, “We’re not signing any papers, but I wanted the world to know that I love her and want to spend my life with her. I did it the best way for me.”<sup>1</sup> I don’t say this to beat up on Tony or to even necessarily say he is wrong. He’s been an excellent member of our community. I wish him well in his new commitment. This week any ball player who isn’t dog fighting seems pretty good.

But I was struck by his statement, “I did it the best way for me.” “I did it the best way for me,” may be one of the most concise statements of ethics in our society. Ernest Hemingway said that “what is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.”<sup>2</sup> A few years ago I took some church youth on a ski trip and one of them said during a small group session, “If I really believe something, then how can I be wrong?” A 2002 survey taken by George Barna, whose firm specializes in surveying American religious and

moral beliefs, found that by more than a three to one margin—64% to 22%—people said that there are no moral absolutes. Only 6% of teenagers surveyed by Barna said that moral absolutes exist.<sup>3</sup>

The question which I want to explore this morning is simply, “Is there any such thing as moral absolutes?” It shows just how much this country has changed in the last few decades that for some of you, especially those of you over fifty, this question is a no-brainer. “Of course there are absolutes,” you say. And for some who will hear this message, especially those who are under 35, you may be offended that someone would speak of such a thing. The chances are that if you went to college after the mid 1980’s you were taught there that moral absolutes did not exist.

So, is there any such thing as moral absolutes? First of all, let’s define what we’re talking about. Moral absolutes are things which are true everywhere for everyone at all times. What is true for me today in Overland Park, Kansas, is true for Lindsey Lohan and Britney Spears living in Los Angeles, Yamada Yoji living in Japan, and is also true for Julius Caesar living 2,100 years ago in Rome. Moral absolutes mean that there is an absolute standard by which human beings are judged, regardless of who we are or what our circumstances might be. Moral absolutism teaches that there is good and there is evil and that we can know the difference.

Let me begin to answer this question by saying that Jesus Christ believed in and taught moral absolutes. This is one meaning of the parable this morning. Jesus told the brief story of a man who built his

house on the rock and another man who built his house on the sand. When the wind and the rain and the floods came, the house which was built on the rock held fast and stood against the torrent. When the wind and the rain and the floods fell upon the house built upon the sand, it fell and Jesus tells us, *“And great was the crash of it.”* *Matthew 7:27* Before He took up Messiah work full-time, Jesus, as most of you know, made His living as a carpenter. So, he knew a thing or two about building houses, and it would be a pretty good bet that living his entire life in alternately sandy and rocky Palestine, a land prone to sudden bouts of strong weather, he saw this real-life scenario play out a couple of times.

But to what does Jesus compare these two building plans? *Matthew 7:24* *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”* *Matthew 7:26* *“And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.”*

These are two striking sentences, for they are at once very broad and very intensely specific. Jesus began each claim here with the phrase *“Everyone.”* He did not say, *“Some people,”* or *“Those for whom this feels good,”* or *“Those who attend Church regularly every Sunday morning.”* Jesus said, *“Everyone.”* Or in the King James version, *“Whosoever.”* That is the very broad part of His statement. The very narrow part of His statement is just what Jesus says *“everyone”* should do. *“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock and everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.”* Jesus teaches us here that our ability, our willingness to hear His teachings and live them, is of the utmost importance. This is an exceptionally narrow statement and qualifies into today’s parlance as not very politically correct. Jesus’ basic assertion is, *“Do what I tell you to do and live a strong, stable and healthy life. Don’t do what I tell you to do and watch everything come crashing down around you. It’s my way or the highway.”* There may be no sentiment more out of step with our pluralistic, broad-minded, freedom of choice, *“I did it the best way for me,”* culture.

Those who don’t know Jesus Christ very well may be shocked that someone so loving as Jesus, someone who gave up His blameless life on the cross so that others may live, someone about whom we are taught that His love is perfect, would not be more lenient, more easygoing, more indulgent in allowing people to simply do whatever they believe is best for them. But it is because Christ loves us that He has a specific moral vision for our lives. It is because God so loved the world that He made an absolute moral law to guide us. It is because of God’s great love that His best plan for our life is not for us to do what simply works for us. *Deuteronomy 8:5-9* teaches us, *“Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and revering him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing.”* Knowing Christ’s plan for our life and doing it is walking into that good land which the Lord has given us. We have somehow turned obedience to God into oppression, living by His plan for our life rather than ours into a burden, and separated duty from delight.

There is, of course, a danger in believing in moral absolutes. The Church has tended to apply the label of moral absolutes to things which simply are not. This is a dangerous practice. And this was one of the first debates in the Church. Should the Church create obligations and moral absolutes where the Word of God did not create any? The answer which came back from the First Jerusalem Council around 50AD was that we are saved by grace and should not create moral absolutes where Christ Himself didn’t see fit to create any. John Calvin once put it this way, *“Where the Scripture speaks, we should speak. But where Scripture is silent, we should remain silent.”*<sup>4</sup>

On Friday morning, Jen was planning to go for a run. She took a step outside and came back in saying, *“I’m just going to for a walk. It’s too hot out.”* I told her, *“It’s not that hot. I was just out there.”* Wanting to prove my point, I looked up the temperature and it was 77 degrees. That was a bit warmer than I

thought, but still, well within what I thought was good running weather. Having learned a little about being married over the last five years, I didn't push the issue much further. We both knew the facts, but interpreted them differently. I couldn't tell her how she should feel, just as she couldn't tell me. This is often the better part of grace.

I have attended Churches where I have been told it was morally wrong to go to the movies, listen to rock music, wear shorts or play video games. We in the Church have attempted to place moral absolutes on the way we worship God, what Church committees should exist, the car the pastor should drive, tattoos, what political party we vote for, who can come in the building, reading Harry Potter, even what race Adam and Eve were. I know of a Church which once split over the light fixtures in the sanctuary. This is all known as legalism. And it kills the presence of the Holy Spirit. *Galatians 5:1* teaches us, "*For freedom Christ has set us free, therefore do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.*"

Finally, how can we know moral absolutes and how does living by them change our life? We know moral absolutes through knowing God's heart and we know God's heart through inviting Him to live in ours and through listening to His word. Jesus believed and taught that not only was His teaching absolute truth, but that He himself, His person, was the absolute truth. The people who spent all day listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount immediately knew what they had heard, *Matthew 7:28-29* "*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*" The authority which he taught them shone through and they were convicted by it.

Jesus taught with authority because He knew Himself to be the absolute truth. In *John 14:6* Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" Jesus did not say I am "a" way or "one" truth or even a "nice option if you can't find anything better." He said "*I am the way and the truth.*" "The" is what is known in grammar circles as the determinative article, which means it is singular, the only one, absolute.

In saying that there are no moral absolutes we are saying we do not absolutely need Jesus Christ. If nothing is really immoral, if everything simply boils down to doing "what is best for me," Jesus ceases to become Savior and Lord and just becomes a good idea or a helpful guide, something like a spiritual maitre'd.

Christ also tells us that we can know moral absolutes from the way in which they work out in our life. If we follow His teaching, then we will be like a house which is built upon the rock—the winds and the rains and the floods will simply beat against us with little effect. But if we do not live by Christ's teachings, we will be like a house built upon the sand, brought down by the storms of life and great will be the crash.

We started off this sermon with a quote from Ernest Hemingway, "Morality is what you feel good after. Immorality is what you feel bad after." I enjoy his books immensely, but by most accounts Ernest Hemingway lived a very miserable life. A combination of depression, alcoholism, paranoia, and a long list of personal injuries and illness robbed him of much of his wonderful ability to write prose by the age of 40. At the age of 61 he committed suicide.

Bertrand Russell, the father of atheism, famously wrote the atheist's creed, "We do not believe in God. But we believe in the power of humanity." In the last thing Russell ever published, he wondered aloud if he had contributed anything to the world at all and predicted that the human race would be exterminated in the near future.<sup>5</sup>

Madelyn Murray O'Hair, who founded the American Atheists, was most likely murdered by one of her employees after she publicly excoriated him. Her son, William, became a Christian as a young man. He wrote of her, "My mother was an evil person—not for removing prayer from America's schools—no—She was just evil. She stole huge amounts of money. She misused the trust of people. She cheated children out of their parents' inheritance. She cheated on her taxes and even stole from her own organizations."<sup>6</sup>

In fact it is widely believed that she stole millions of dollars from her own supporters, squirreling them away in Swiss bank accounts.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian preacher, Ichabod Spencer, tells of sitting by the deathbed of a young man who lived his life as a proud disbeliever in God. As he lay dying he cried out, “God’s time of vengeance has come! I have had my time and lost it! It is all gone! I have loved the world only and now I must leave it! Fool! Fool! I have been a fool all my days!”<sup>7</sup>

Great is the crash for those who place their faith in the things of this world rather than in Jesus Christ. For when the storms of life blow against them, they have no sure foundation.

On the other hand, those who build their house upon the rock of Jesus Christ, who place their absolute hope in the absolute truth that He is the way, the truth and the life, will stand firm even when the storms of life pound against them. When we stand for an absolute truth, the truth is we can stand absolutely anything.

It is reported that John Knox’s last words were, “Live in Christ, live in Christ and the flesh need not fear death.”

Live in Christ and we need not fear death. I want to end the sermon today with a challenge. Jesus’ parable we have studied this morning is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. When He said everyone “*who hears these words of mine and does them,*” He was talking about that sermon. I challenge myself and I challenge all of you to take one—or two or three—of his teachings and really focus on living by it this week. It could be anything from *Matthew Chapter 5,6, or 7*. It could be “*love your enemies and pray for*

*those who persecute you.*” It could be to take seriously that we are the salt and light of the world. It could be “*blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.*” Just take one or two, and through living them out, live in Christ. Build your house upon the Rock, our firm foundation, and see how absolutely right at every place and every time our Lord and Savior is.

Would you pray with me?

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<sup>1</sup>*The Kansas City Star*, “Tony Gonzalez Ready to Make Commitment,” by Jeffery Flanagan, June 27, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>Source unknown but believed to be accurate.

<sup>3</sup>Statistics taken from Barna.com

<sup>4</sup>John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960) p. 923. This is not a direct quote from Calvin but more or less a summary of the point which he makes upon using Scripture only to speak upon predestination. The closest quote is, “Let this, therefore, first of all be before our eyes: to seek any other knowledge of predestination than what the Word of God discloses is not less insane than if one should purpose to walk in a pathless waste or see darkness. And let us not be ashamed to be ignorant of something in this matter, wherein there is a certain learned ignorance.”

<sup>5</sup>Bertrand Russell, “Last Essay” 1967 found at <http://russell.mcmaster.ca/bressay.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>From Wikipedia.com, Madelyn Murray O’ Hair entry

<sup>7</sup>Ichabod Spencer, *A Pastor’s Sketches*, Volume 1 (Vestavia Hills, Alabama: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2001) p. 270.