

The Dangers of Thinking the Rules Don't Apply to Us

The Wired Word for the Week of May 1, 2022

In the News

In Akron, Ohio, recently, a driver apparently decided that a "road closed" sign didn't apply to him (or her; news reports did not identify the motorist) and drove around the barriers only to end up stuck in a large patch of freshly poured concrete. Workers were able to extract the car and repair the roadway, but they advised the driver to get the concrete off the wheels and the underside of the car before it hardened. Police responded to the scene, but whether charges were filed has not been reported.

This is not big news, but it provides a ... uh ... *concrete* example of the human tendency to consider oneself not bound by the rules that apply to everyone else.

In this instance, the results are almost humorous, but a far darker example comes from Ukraine where some Russian troops have committed atrocities, murdering innocent civilians in cold blood, as though the rules of humanity -- and even of war -- don't apply to them.

Commenting on these war crimes, theologian and ethicist Russell Moore, who leads the Public Theology Project at *Christianity Today*, wrote in that publication, "The world should watch what these criminals are doing -- to call it what it is and hold them to account whenever the time comes. But Christians in particular should watch and recognize something we often want to ignore: how the human heart can justify great evil."

Moore went on to say that while most people have not committed war crimes, "every one of us has grappled with our conscience -- and in many cases, we have followed the same path, even when the sins are not as heinous and the stakes not as high."

Moore then spoke of ways in which we excuse ourselves from the rules of decent behavior.

"One of the first steps is to emphasize power over morality," Moore said. "An easy way to do this is to characterize the situation as an emergency, requiring a dispensing of the ordinary norms of behavior. ... Acting within the bounds of conscience is painted as a luxury, for times that are not as dire as these."

Moore noted that "the most dangerous form of lying is not the propaganda people give to others but the lies [we] tell [our]selves -- to quiet [our] consciences."

He said that this can happen in matters that fall far short of war crimes. "People can wall off certain categories of sin and refuse to view them as such -- placing the blame for the sin not on themselves but on those who would label it sin." As an example, Moore said we can "define sin merely in social terms: 'As long as I don't seem to be hurting anyone else in any kind of public way, then why is it anyone's business what I do in my private life?' Or one can do the opposite and define sin as merely personal, acting as though questions of social injustice are of no moral consequence."

Moore also said that sometimes an evil is too great to ignore altogether. "The conscience must reckon with it, but it does so by projecting that evil onto some other person or group. Rather than grappling with the indictment of one's own sense of right and wrong, one can short-circuit the blame by locating it elsewhere. This is how, for instance, Russian war criminals -- while carrying out the very same tactics as Nazi storm troopers -- can claim that they are fighting to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine," he said.

"Our consciences work by pointing our psyches to ultimate accountability," Moore said. "The apostle Paul wrote that the conscience bears witness to the day 'when God judges people's secrets through

Christ Jesus' (Romans 2:16). One cannot bear the weight of that. Either we convince ourselves that such a reckoning will never come, or we find some authority -- maybe even a spiritual one -- to reassure us that we will never be found out."

As an example, Moore pointed to the "Butcher of Bucha," a Russian commanding officer of a unit that massacred civilians in Ukraine. This officer "allegedly spoke of his mission as a kind of spiritual warfare in which he was fighting on the side of God," Moore said.

"Perhaps the most dangerous step of all," said Moore, "is when the conscience gives up altogether and begins to say that this is just the way the world is. It shifts to saying depravity is realistic, while morality is not. We can see this in the smirk behind Putin's words and in the throat-clearing whataboutism of his Western defenders. This is all rooted in the idea that accountability will never arrive," he said.

But, of course, it will. According to the Bible, there is a day of judgment.

In conclusion, Moore said, "We were born into this century, this moment in history, and we have a responsibility to do everything that we can to stand against the murder and genocide of innocent people. We have a responsibility to call evil what it is," he said.

"We also have a responsibility to take warning -- to recognize the ways in which we excuse or reassure ourselves in the same way, while not to the same degree, as the most vicious war criminal," Moore said.

And that's about as concrete as it gets.

The Big Questions

1. What are some common excuses you've heard when a Christian sidesteps a biblical or ethical norm? Did you ever challenge someone on using a strained excuse involving Christianity to justify such behavior? If so, what happened?
2. When have you been aware that you were seeking to justify or excuse non-righteous behavior or attitudes? How did that realization affect how you proceeded?
3. What do you think is happening in your soul when you give yourself permission to violate the very principles and values you espouse as a Christian?
4. Are Christian ethics meant for all occasions? Are there special circumstances where we can be safely excused from following some of them? How would we know? What information do we need to make such judgments? What spiritual condition do we need to be in to make such judgments?
5. How may we sustain spiritual alertness? What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41)? When have you given in to temptation because you felt too tired to battle it? What help is there for that? Has your faith ever been truly tested?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse -- who can understand it? (For context, read [Jeremiah 17:5-13](#).)

Genesis 3:2-4

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die ..." (For context, read [Genesis 3:1-19](#).)

Romans 1:25

... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... (For context, read [Romans 1:18-25](#).)

Ephesians 6:13-17

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (For context, read [Ephesians 6:10-20](#).)

1 John 2:1-2

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (For context, read [1 John 1:5--2:2](#).)