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Truth-Telling in a Time of Tragedy: September 11, 2001



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[This message was preached on September 13, 2001--two days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It is republished in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of those attacks. An extended reflection on these events from the perspective of 2011 will follow.]



Preachers are expected to speak when no one else has any idea what to say. This is not an enviable position. Standing at the graveside, the dying bedside, the scene of the accident, the preacher is supposed to know what to say, when nothing seems right to say.

Sometimes, saying nothing is best. We can be too hasty to speak, too eager to explain, too superficial in our answer, or too arrogant in our presumption. At other times, silence would be mere cowardice and the abdication of calling and responsibility. To fail to speak in these moments is to deny one's calling and to fail the supreme test of authentic ministry.

The Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is "a time to be silent and a time to speak" [Ecclesiastes 3:7b]. It is often hard to know the one from the other. In most cases, we should carefully speak and prayerfully answer and fearfully explain. This is one of those moments.

Thousands of preachers will stand in pulpits this Sunday and speak with trembling lips to congregations loaded with expectancy. It could hardly be otherwise. The pictures are replayed in our minds and on our television screens again and again and again. We are watching the unbelievable transformed into the undeniable.

Modern airliners filled with passengers fly through a beautiful sky right into two of the tallest buildings on earth. We watch transfixed, and watch over and over again. The human mind can take only so much reality at any one time. We soon saw images of a burning Pentagon building and then the unimaginable—two 110-story skyscrapers falling into the ground, reduced to a horrific mound of rubble and debris.

We knew that thousands of human beings were dying as we watched. We had seen persons jump from windows, preferring the quick death of a fall to the terror of the fire. And then we saw the collapsing towers, one by one, with disintegrating concrete, glass, and steel reduced to particles of dust and fragments of debris.

The symbolism was unavoidable. These two towers represented the might and energy of the American economy, sending a message to the world of our national power and influence. Like modern towers of Babel, they represented our ambition to build great towers that would touch the sky and defy gravity. Now, millions of pieces of paper floated through the sky like grotesque confetti.

The Pentagon is so powerful a symbol that the name needs no further explanation. The Pentagon can unleash the power of the world's greatest military force. Now, the Pentagon sits like a wounded giant on the ground. The world's last remaining superpower doesn't look so powerful through a veil of smoke.

We know that the world will never be the same after this. We do not want to exaggerate, but exaggeration seems almost impossible. There are no words adequate to convey the horror, the grief, the outrage, or the sense of disbelief.

Oddly enough, at the very same time we cannot help talking. We are glued to our televisions and computer screens, afraid to miss what may come next. We are a nation of voyeurs watching a pornography of death and destruction. It hardly seems right to watch, and it hardly seems right not to watch.

This is a crucial test for the Christian church. We must measure our words carefully. We must think biblically and seek a proper perspective into which we can put all of this. This is not easy, but authentic ministry often comes down to saying what you know to be true when people are desperate to hear it and no one seems to know where else to look.

Look with me to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, starting at verse 1:

1 Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

2 And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?

3 “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

4 “Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?

5 “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

6 And He began telling this parable: “A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any.

7 “And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’

8 “And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer;

9 and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’ ”

This is one of those hard passages of Scripture. Tragedy and theology intersect in the teaching of Jesus, and end up in a parable. The background events are genuinely tragic. The context is a call to repentance, national and individual. Most importantly, Jesus has just warned the people of the danger of missing His own messianic identity.

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?” [Luke 12:54b-56]

Now, in chapter 13, Jesus is presented with news of a tragedy—indeed an atrocity. Pontius Pilate has caused innocent Galileans to be killed apparently within the precincts of the Temple, and their blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices.

A more heinous crime in Israel could hardly be imagined. Murder is mixed with the desecration of the Temple. Jesus should be outraged, and undoubtedly He is, but He turns the issue on those who raise it. “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?”

This must have been a hard question to answer. Evidently, those who were asked the question assumed that these victims had been allowed to die because they were more sinful. Or, perhaps more to the point, the living may have assumed that they were therefore more righteous than the dead.

Jesus then turns to another tragedy. A tower had fallen in Siloam, killing eighteen men. Were these victims also more sinful than others, particularly those who live in Jerusalem? “I

tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

The Christian Gospel and the Problem of Evil

Every thoughtful person must deal with the problem of evil. Evil acts and tragic events come to us all in this vale of tears known as human life. The problem of evil and suffering is undoubtedly the greatest theological challenge we face.

Most persons face this issue only in a time of crisis. A senseless accident, a wasting disease, or an awful crime demands some explanation.

For the atheist, this is no great problem. Life is a cosmic accident, morality is an arbitrary game by which we order our lives, and meaning is non-existent. As Oxford University's Professor Richard Dawkins explains, human life is nothing more than a way for selfish genes to multiply and reproduce. There is no meaning or dignity to humanity.

For the Christian Scientist, the material world and the experience of suffering and death are illusory. In other religions suffering is part of a great circle of life or recurring incarnations of spirit.

Some Christians simply explain suffering as the consequence of sins, known or unknown. Some suffering can be directly traced to sin. What we sow, so shall we reap, and multiple millions of persons can testify to this reality. Some persons suffer innocently by the sinful acts of others.

But Jesus rejects this explanation in the two cases here recounted. We should note that the problem of evil and suffering, the theological issue of theodicy, is customarily divided into evil of two kinds, moral and natural. Both are included in this passage. The murder of the Galileans is clearly moral evil, a premeditated crime-just like the terrorist acts in New York and Washington.

Natural evil comes without a moral agent. A tower falls, an earthquake shakes, a tornado destroys, a hurricane ravages, a spider bites, a disease debilitates and kills. The world is filled with wonders mixed with dangers. Gravity can save you or gravity can kill you. When a tower falls, it kills.

People all over the world are demanding an answer to this question. It comes only to those who claim that God is mighty and that God is good. How could a good God allow this to happen? How can a God of love allow killers to kill, terrorists to terrorize, and the wicked to escape without a trace?

No superficial answer will do. Our quandary is well known, and the atheists think they have our number. As a character in Archibald MacLeish's play, J.B. asserts, "If God is God

He is not good, if God is good He is not God; take the even, take the odd” As they see it, God can be good, or He can be powerful, but He cannot be both. We will either take our stand with God’s self-revelation in the Bible, or we are left to invent a deity of our own imagination. The Bible quickly excludes two false understandings.

First, the Bible reveals that God is omnipotent and omniscient. These are unconditional and categorical attributes. The sovereignty of God is the bedrock affirmation of biblical theism. The Creator rules over all creation. Not even a sparrow falls without His knowledge. He knows the number of hairs upon our heads. God rules and reigns over all nations and principalities. Not one atom or molecule of the universe is outside His active rule.

The sovereignty of God was affirmed by King Nebuchadnezzar, who confessed that God “does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’.” [Daniel 4:36] Process theologians have attempted to cut God’s power down to size, rendering the Creator as one power among others. The evangelical revisionists pushing open theism have attempted to cut God’s omniscience down to size, rendering Him as one mind among others.

Rabbi Harold Kushner argues that God is doing the best He can under the circumstances, but He lacks the power to either kill or cure. The openness theists argue that God is always ready with Plan B when Plan A fails. He is infinitely resourceful, they stress, just not really sovereign.

These are roads we dare not take, for the God of the Bible causes the rising and falling of nations and empires, and His rule is active and universal. Limited sovereignty is no sovereignty at all.

The second great error is to ascribe evil to God. But the Bible does not allow this argument. God is absolute righteousness, love, goodness, and justice. Most errors related to this issue occur because of our human tendency to impose an external standard—a human construction—of goodness upon God. But good does not so much define God as God defines good.

How then do we speak of God’s rule and reconcile this with the reality of evil? Between these two errors the Bible points us to the radical affirmation of God’s sovereignty as the ground of our salvation and the assurance of our own good. We cannot explain why God has allowed sin, but we understand that God’s glory is more perfectly demonstrated through the victory of Christ over sin. We cannot understand why God would allow sickness and suffering, but we must affirm that even these realities are rooted in sin and its cosmic effects.

How does God exercise His rule? Does He order all events by decree, or does He allow some evil acts by His mere permission? This much we know—we cannot speak of God’s decree in a way that would imply Him to be the author of evil, and we cannot fall back to speak of His mere permission, as if this allows a denial of His sovereignty and active will.

Our confession of faith states it rightly: “God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any way to be the author or approver of sin nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures.”

God is God, and God is good. As Paul affirms for the church, God’s sovereignty is the ground of our hope, the assurance of God’s justice as the last word, and God’s loving rule in the very events of our lives: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to His purpose.” [Romans 8:28]

We dare not speak on God’s behalf to explain why He allowed these particular acts of evil to happen at this time to these persons and in this manner. Yet, at the same time, we dare not be silent when we should testify to the God of righteousness and love and justice who rules over all in omnipotence. Humility requires that we affirm all that the Bible teaches, and go no further. There is much we do not understand. As Charles Spurgeon explained, when we cannot trace God’s hand, we must simply trust His heart.

The Reality of Evil and the Impossibility of Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is one of the hallmarks of the postmodern worldview, and it has become foundational to modern academic culture. As Allan Bloom recounted in *The Closing of the American Mind*, “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”

Professor Robert L. Simon of Hamilton College has updated Dr. Bloom’s observation:

Although groups denying the reality of the Holocaust have raised controversies on some college campuses, in more than 20 years of teaching college students, I have yet to meet even one student who has expressed doubts about whether the Holocaust actually happened. However, I have recently seen an increasing number of students who, although well-meaning, hold almost as troubling a view. They accept the reality of the Holocaust, but they believe themselves unable morally to condemn it, or indeed to make any moral judgments whatsoever. Such students typically comment that they themselves deplore the Holocaust and other great evils, but then they wind up by suspending moral judgment.

This collapse of moral judgment is not only a slander against the victims of the Holocaust, but also a denial of the entire moral order. This cowardly abandonment of moral judgment, the inevitable product of the postmodern worldview, collides with reality when we see evil acts in others and in ourselves. The Apostle Paul reminds us that this law is known to all. We are quite efficient at ignoring or denying this knowledge in everyday life, but the sight of airplanes deliberately turned into missiles and flown into skyscrapers brings this knowledge into stark and undeniable sight.

We dare not lack the moral courage to call these acts what they are-murderous acts of mass terror. We dare not dignify the murderers by explaining their cause. No cause, however righteous, can justify such acts. And, no righteous cause could produce such acts.

President Bush rightly characterized these murders as “evil, despicable acts of terror.” We must call evil by its proper name and refuse to slander the victims by ascribing rationality to the terrorists’ cause. These murderers were driven by an irrational rage into diabolically rational plans for death and destruction.

Our Christian vocabulary is absolutely essential, and “sin” is an indispensable explanation. These acts of terror were not merely attacks upon individuals, or attacks upon America, or attacks upon civilization-these were attacks upon God’s dignity, God’s creatures, God’s law, and God’s glory.

Some persons seek a psychological explanation. The modern therapeutic worldview assumes that all persons are basically good, and that “antisocial” behavior is explained by environmental causes, a lack of education, persistent frustration, or inadequate socialization.

The prophet Jeremiah records God’s analysis of our human condition: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” [Jeremiah 17:9] Our heart tells lies even to ourselves. We are skillful self-deceivers. Human evil is real and it is an abomination in God’s sight.

As a matter of fact, the resolution of the sin problem can come only by God’s power, and will be found in accordance with His own righteousness. God will judge all of us, and we will bear the full wrath of His judgment except we be found in Christ, covered by His own righteousness imputed to us by faith.

Evil is real, not illusory, but evil will never have the last word. The righteous judgment of God will establish justice, and display His glory among the nations.
The Mandate of Justice and the Temptation to Vengeance

The blood of the victims and the sufferings of their loved ones call out for justice. Final justice belongs to God, but our Creator has assigned the cause of temporal justice to

earthly rulers. As Paul wrote to the Romans:

For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. [Romans 13:3-4]

Even the unbelieving ruler, who never acknowledges God, points to God's righteousness when he executes justice. The Bible reminds us that justice is not merely a goal, it is a mandate. We are to seek justice and demand punishment for evil deeds.

Any nation that would allow evildoers to go unpunished is an affront to God's dignity. The American people are right and righteous in demanding that the perpetrators of these acts be identified and justice must be executed. Those who would kill forfeit their own right to live, and those who would harbor them bring equal judgment upon themselves.

According to Romans 13, earthly rulers have not only the right but the responsibility to protect their citizens from such murderous acts, to uphold justice, and to maintain law, authority and order. Justice should be swift and order must be restored. The entire world hangs out of balance so long as such crimes are unpunished. This is no time for moral cowardice. We live in a real world of real evil and our national leaders bear full responsibility to ensure that the murderers are punished and the threat removed.

At the same time, sin can also be manifested in a desire to see others suffer as we have suffered. Justice is proportional to the crime. If a man kills the wife of another, justice does not allow the second man to kill the first man's wife in an act of revenge. Justice is directed at those who bear moral responsibility, not at other innocent parties.

Revenge is an ugly substitute for justice. Americans must not direct our hatred at an ethnic group out of which murderers have come, but we must demand justice and demand that all persons whose hands are clean of innocent blood join and assist in this mandate. To refuse this demand is to join the murderers in complicity.

We must avoid moral cowardice disguised as pacifism and moral arrogance disguised as warmongering. Instead, we must pray for our national leaders as they demand justice and act to remove the threat of future acts of terrorism. All the peoples of the earth are threatened when international order is undermined by terrorists.

Temporal justice is God's requirement of earthly rulers. Ultimate justice will come when God's righteousness is established among the nations.
The Clash of Civilizations

Underlying these acts of terror is the development of a worldwide clash of civilizations. Many Americans live under the fiction that all persons share a common perception of justice and a common commitment to human rights. This is simply not the case.

Many persons and cultures around the world do not share our commitment to modern democratic values. The most important flashpoints in the world order fall where different civilizations with contrasting and conflicting worldviews come into contact.

For most of the twentieth century, western civilization faced its greatest challenge from fascism and international communism. These rival systems of belief were locked in a contest for world domination. They held very different conceptions of human rights and human dignity, and this led to almost categorical opposition on any issue of importance. The conflict with fascism led to a world war. The contest with communism led to a cold war.

Western civilization faces a particular challenge from the civilization of Islam. We must be very careful here. It would not be fair to accuse all Muslims of participation in violence or of celebrating these acts of terror. This would certainly be both inaccurate and unfair.

At the same time, the Islamic worldview is opposed to many of the most important pillars of western civilization. Though western secularists seek to deny the obvious, western civilization is based upon a Christian civilization and worldview. From the Judeo-Christian worldview of the Bible we gained our respect for human rights and human dignity. We have never held these ideals with full faithfulness, but no other worldview holds human life to be sacred because each human being is made in the image of God.

We face what Samuel P. Huntington has identified as a “clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order.” The victims and the perpetrators of these acts of terror represent two rival worldviews with irreconcilable aims and principles. Islam has turned its wrath upon the West, Israel, and Christian culture. Most particularly, Islamic culture hates western secularism and the moral relativism and corruption it has produced. As Huntington explains:

Muslims fear and resent Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs. They see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral. They also see it as seductive, and hence stress all the more the need to resist its impact on their way of life. Increasingly, Muslims attack the West not for adhering to an imperfect, erroneous religion, which is nonetheless a ‘religion of the book,’ but for not adhering to any religion at all. In Muslim eyes Western secularism, irreligiosity, and hence immorality are worse evils than the Western Christianity that produced them.

America has given the Muslim world many reasons to consider us decadent and dangerous to their concept of national righteousness and international order. The worldwide growth of Islamic civilization presents the West with its greatest contemporary

challenge. This is hard for secularists to understand, but in the end, theology matters.
Is This a Sign of the Lord's Imminent Return?

Callers to radio programs and Christians in chat rooms are debating whether these acts of terror are signs of the imminent return of the Lord. Let us be cautioned against the twin sins of understatement and overstatement.

Our Lord commanded us to be aware of the times and the seasons. Signs of His coming are identified, and a coming wave of unleashed terror is foretold. Nevertheless, we are also warned that we must not jump quickly to conclusions and over-read events as signs of the Lord's immediate coming. In the end, He will return as a "thief in the night," and the timing of our Lord's return is unknown to us.

In the meantime, we are to live in the hope of the Lord's coming, keep our hearts and lives ready for His coming, look always for His coming, and live in this expectancy. This much we know, every day we live brings us one day closer to the Lord's return.

Furthermore, we know that the Lord's return will bring the justice and righteousness for which we pray. In that light, we pray Maranatha, Lord come quickly.

The Call for Repentance

Jesus took the occasion of the tower's fall in Siloam and asked, "Do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

The falling tower in Siloam killed eighteen persons. The falling of the World Trade Center twin towers alone may have killed over 20,000 persons. They went to work Tuesday morning as any other day. They ate their breakfasts, kissed their husbands or wives, took the dog out for a walk, read the paper on the subway, got about their normal business and died in our greatest national tragedy.

This generation will remember that Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, as other generations remembered the attack on Pearl Harbor or the assassination of a President. We remember where we were standing, and the sense of unreality that came over us all. Reality has set in.

We are now facing one of the greatest challenges known by any people. International terrorism is unlike any foe we have ever faced. We are certain to be called upon to make sacrifices. Our way of life and our most cherished ideals, are at stake. The nation must rally around our leaders, pray for national righteousness mixed with rare wisdom, and work to

rebuild a trust so horribly violated. We must reach out to pray for all those in peril and suffering loss, and offer material assistance wherever we can.

Jesus took the occasion of the tower's fall and turned it into a call for national and individual repentance. Given our assurance that God is in control, and working even in this unspeakable tragedy to accomplish His will, dare we not see the horrors in New York and Washington as an opportunity for America-and Americans-to repent as well?

The parable of the fig tree makes the warning clear. The owner of the vineyard demands that his fig tree produce fruit, but there is no fruit. Cut it down, he orders. Why does it even take up space in my vineyard? The vineyard-keeper pleads for time to tend the tree that it might bear fruit.

"Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig it up and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine, but if not, cut it down."

It would be arrogance to claim that we have special knowledge of what God is doing through and in the midst of this horrible tragedy. But this biblical text explains that all such events are signs of our need for repentance. Thousands must have died in New York and many died in Washington. Like the Galileans in Jerusalem and the victims in Siloam, many may have died impenitent and unrepentant.

Our Lord's warning is clear, for "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Clearly, Jesus was not warning that those who heard these words were in immediate danger of Pilate's sword or a falling tower. They were, however, in immediate danger of God's judgment, and so are we.

This is a time for repentance, and in the midst of this national horror, Christians will face unprecedented opportunities to share the Gospel and tell sinners of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. We will be called upon to explain these events and to give an account. We must tell the truth in a time of terror. By God's grace, may we find the right words to speak, when we dare not be silent.

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