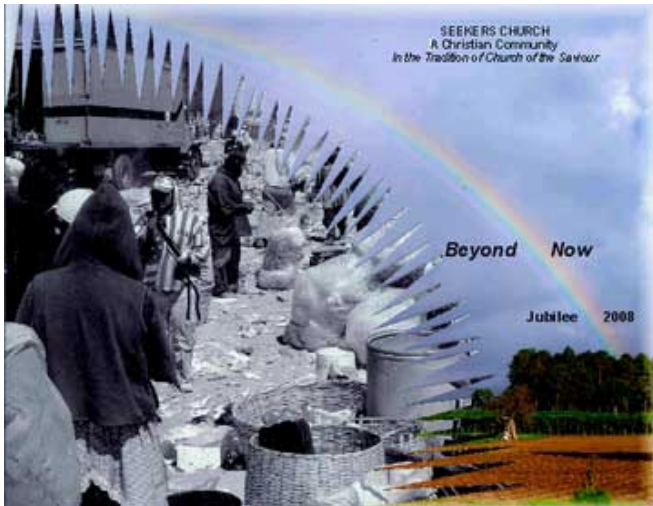


# **“A Time to Philosophize, a Time to Pray” by John Morris**

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In Plato's "Republic," Socrates is trying to find out what justice is. He talks to a number of fellow Athenians in this long dialogue, examining their definitions, testing their arguments. He is using reason to try to arrive at a moral truth.



At one point, Plato tells us, a man named Thrasymachus “had many times started out to take over the argument in the midst of our discussion, but he had been restrained by the men sitting near him, who wanted to hear the argument out. But he could no longer keep quiet; hunched up like a wild beast, he flung himself at us as if to tear us to pieces.”

This is what Thrasymachus sounded like, and some of what he had to say:

*“What is this nonsense that has possessed you for so long, Socrates? Tell me, do you have a wet nurse? Because you know she neglects your sniveling nose and doesn’t give it the wiping you need. You actually believe that the rulers in the cities think about the ruled differently from the way a man would regard sheep! And you are so far off about the just, and justice, that you are unaware that justice and the just are really the advantage of the man who is stronger. This man is the one who is able to get the better, in a big way. By stealth and force, he takes away what belongs to others, not bit by bit, but all at once. And when someone like this takes the money of the citizens, and kidnaps and enslaves them, and gets away with it, he gets called happy and blessed. The just is: the advantage of the stronger.”*

And I bet it sounded even fiercer in classical Greek! As you might guess, Thrasymachus himself is eager to become a tyrant over the Athenians. He offers this cynical definition of justice not in criticism but in admiration. Here we have one of the first appearances in literature of what we might call the Eternal Fascist, the man who believes that justice is a meaningless and childish term, that Might makes Right, that power is everything.

Socrates nonetheless engages him in argument. Thrasymachus is no philosopher, and we soon see him tied up in illogical knots. Indeed, Plato says, "Then I saw what I had not yet seen before – Thrasymachus blushing." But in the end, Thrasymachus doesn't care. He may have been bested in argument, but his mind is not changed. "Let that be the fill of your banquet, Socrates," he sneers, and stalks off, unrepentant.

If many of you remember just two or three things about Socrates, one of those things is probably his famous belief that no one does evil willingly. Socrates, and Plato, claimed that if a person truly understood why a certain course of action was unjust, or wrong, or evil, she would cease to do it. Ignorance is the sole cause of human injustice.

This ought to strike a familiar chord. Four hundred years later, in a culture where Plato was probably unknown, Jesus hung on the cross and said, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." It sounds like very much the same idea: The people who executed Jesus were not being deliberately evil or unjust, they simply didn't understand. They were ignorant.

But I'm not sure it is the same idea. I think there are some crucial differences between what Socrates meant and what Jesus

meant, and I want to spend the rest of this sermon looking at them. Why? Because the question of whether we can truly reason, or understand, our way into just behavior is still with us. Our society confronts it every day, and so do you, and so do I.

Let's return just briefly to Thrasymachus and Socrates. As I said, Socrates ties him up in knots. Any reader who follows the argument is able to see why Thrasymachus' position doesn't hold up. But he doesn't care! Now why is that?

If I put myself in his place, I suspect his thoughts would be something like this: "Well, Socrates, everyone in Athens knows you're the bomb when it comes to argument. I'm sure if I were better at this silly game myself, I would have held my own with you. But even if that's not true, even if your view is the more reasonable one, I frankly don't give an Athenian fig. What sort of a baby do you take me for, that I should value 'reason' over my own advantage? People like you, little Socrates, meekly do what this 'reason' tells you to, but not I. I am a tyrant, a master, and all I value is my own happiness and comfort."

Does that really sound so unfamiliar? How many times have we had this argument with ourselves? Yes, "reason" appears to recommend a certain course of action – often a difficult or altruistic one – but self-interest says otherwise. And that voice is powerful and persuasive. It says, "Why after all should I 'listen to reason'? It might get me killed! I might lose everything I have! I think I'll just look after Number One."

Now, it appears as if I'm setting up an opposition between Sweet Reason versus Bad Me-First. But I don't think that's it. Rather, I think it is a difference of values. Both voices are being reasonable, but they have a fundamental

disagreement. Socrates believes that being reasonable will inevitably lead to good and just behavior. Thrasymachus, however, doesn't place the same value on reason. His prime value is his own self-interest – and even that may be too elegant a description. What he really wants is to do what he wants. We mustn't picture this type of man as arguing for some sort of "enlightened self-interest" – that is too philosophically respectable. Instead, picture him as Plato first presents him, "hunched up like a wild beast," ready to spring and rend. He is much closer to Hannibal Lecter than to Adam Smith.

But surely, you may be thinking, reason can't really be so impotent. Aren't there strong arguments for behaving ethically, even if you don't bring in any spiritual or religious dimensions? Not unless you happen to already share those ethical values, I'm afraid. The good news is that most people have accepted the values that the world's religions have given them, while forgetting that – with a few exceptions – these religions have never claimed to be able to argue for them. But let's try it ourselves. I'll bring Katie up here and try to argue her into one of the Christian values, strictly on its own merits. This will be a very short argument!

*J: You ought to love your neighbor as yourself, and not place your own welfare above your neighbor's good.*

*K: Why?*

*J: Because it will make your neighbor happier, and help him to lead a better life.*

*K: I couldn't care less about my neighbor's happiness. I don't even like him.*

*J: Well, then, because it will make you happier – more fulfilled, more peaceful.*

*K: I'm already happy and fulfilled and peaceful. I love my big house and my powerful job and my vacations in Hawaii. The few times I've tried to help another person, it's just been a pain in the butt.*

*J: But doesn't it bother you to see so many of your neighbors suffering?*

*K: Not in the least.*

*J: Well, but a have/have-not society that's in constant competition, with everyone pursuing his own selfish ends, is doomed to fall. Don't you care about future generations, about the future of your country?*

*K: Frankly, no. I won't be around. What difference could it possibly make to me?*

This is of course a simplified and rather brutal exchange, but I think it makes the point. Treating others decently and fairly may be the cornerstone of most ethical systems (and most people's definition of justice), but it's pretty much impossible to argue for. You can't make a person care about the supposed good results, if they don't already hold them as values.

It is a very good thing that most nonbelievers have forgotten this. If they truly realized how indefensible their ethics were, I fear we'd have a lot more Thrasymachuses in our midst.

So how are we Christians different? What does Christianity offer as a solution to this apparent stalemate? (Let me say, parenthetically, that I believe all the world religions offer something similar, but as a Christian speaking to Christians, I'll frame it in Christian terms.)

When I succeed in behaving like a Christian – when I do something, or organize my life in such a way, that truly puts

Christian ethics into practice – I am not doing it because I think it is the most reasonable thing to do. I cannot offer a persuasive argument for it. I am doing it out of love.

That word doesn't figure much in Plato's ethical philosophy, but it's the heartbeat of our Christian way. Over and over again, we're told that nothing is more important than love – certainly not logic or argument. "God is Love." "Faith, hope, and love – but the greatest of these is love." Last week we heard that the greatest commandment is "Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind." In our reading today from First John, we're told, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" And a little later in that scripture: "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."

I wish I could stand here and give you a tidy little definition of love, but I can't. I think it's a spiritual experience. It takes place in a part of myself that can't be redefined as "emotional" or "mental." It simply is what it is – I experience it in the part of me that is part of God.

It's one thing to say to someone (or to myself), "Do this because it's right, because it's reasonable." It's quite another thing to say, "Do this because you love me." And yet that is exactly what Christ says to us. He is offering us an entirely different kind of motivation – not a reason, but a spiritual experience. We can have this experience through a prayerful connection with him. And he tells us that, once we've had it, we will want to do the things he asks, at least some of the time, at least enough of the time that it makes a difference, to ourselves and to others.

Might that not make a good argument, though? I could say to Katie, "You should try this Christian way, you should give this experience a chance, and then see whether it makes a difference." Yes, indeed – that's precisely what we do say to

our friends and neighbors who aren't Christians. But please note that it isn't an argument. We're making no attempt to convince, to use rational persuasion. It's more in the nature of an invitation, or an exhortation. Oh, I suppose we could take it one step further and say, "You may think you know what happiness is but wait'll you try this!" But I believe that would be dishonest. Christianity really isn't a prescription for happiness. We don't behave as Christians because we expect to get anything at all out of it, in fact. We do it because we love God.

I think there is one legitimate element we can add to our invitation, though. We can decide that actions may truly speak louder than words. We can decide that trying to use language to persuade someone else of the correctness of our beliefs is not the first or best way. When Jesus said, "Greater love than this has no man, than to give up his life for his brother," I'm guessing the words were unpersuasive until he proceeded to do exactly that. I hope I am never called to such a radical demonstration of love. But in a dozen smaller ways, it may be that a life lived in love can persuade even a Thrasymachus. Certainly my words would have no chance.

So, to end this, let's bring Socrates and Jesus back together. Socrates said, "No one willingly does evil." Jesus said, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do." Are they saying the same thing? I don't think so. Socrates seemed to believe that reason could not only show us what was good, but also give us sufficient incentives to value this good, to choose it over evil. Here is enlightened self-interest, properly understood. Of course only an ignorant person would choose evil – the enlightened individual clearly sees not only what the good is, but why she will be a better person for choosing it.

Is this circular? Better philosophers than I have said so.



And they have also pointed out that Thrasymachus follows all of Socrates' arguments, is even reduced to "blushing," but then goes on his merry tyrannical way. Something seems to be missing.

Jesus, I think, knew what the missing thing is. What is the "knowing" he referred to, when he said that his torturers "knew not what they did"? Not a rational knowing, I would say, but an experience – the experience of love. Jesus asks for mercy for these men, not because they're unable to follow a philosophical argument, but because they have never known a loving relationship with God.

The most interesting arguments are always the ones we have with ourselves. You don't often get to debate a full-fledged tyrant or fascist these days, at least not in the U.S. But in our private behavior, we're closer to Thrasymachus than we'd like to admit. How many times every week do I find myself caught in the inner struggle between doing what I want, and doing what Jesus wants? And how often do I try to reason my way out of it? Sometimes it is a matter of thinking clearly about a problem, but other times I have to stop and remind myself: "The first and greatest commandment is to love. Unless you stop thinking and start relating, to God and to your neighbor, you're never going to have the experience that Jesus intended you to have." In other words, there is a time to philosophize and a time to pray.

Let us pray.