

Understanding Relativism with Mercy

Part 1 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

I'll never forget the first time I heard the words "moral relativism." I was in college, talking with a friend who was taking an ethics class on campus. He told me the professor promoted moral relativism — the idea that there is no objective moral truth. "Truth is relative," my friend said. "What's true for you may not be true for other people. There's no absolute truth that applies to everyone, so each individual makes up his own morality."

I had not yet studied much philosophy or theology, but what he was saying didn't sound right. I started asking him questions:

"So you believe in relativism? You really believe there is no absolute truth that applies to everyone?"

"Yes."

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So is relativism true? Is it absolutely true, for everyone, that there are no absolute truths?"

Silence.

"Well ... your relativism seems logically inconsistent!" I exclaimed.

"Gotcha!" I thought to myself. I was quite proud of my amateur apologetic moves. My friend had no answer. He even laughed and admitted that, in espousing relativism, he was asserting at least one truth: that there is no truth. He even acknowledged that his position was not consistent. But he did not change his mind. I might have won the argument on that particular point, but he continued being a relativist. And he wasn't worried about how intellectually sound his position was. Relativism just felt right: Individuals should decide for themselves what's right and wrong. What's true for you isn't necessarily true for me. We shouldn't impose our morality on other people. My friend was content continuing on as a relativist, despite the arguments presented to him. And many people in our culture are likely to do the same.

After several experiences like this one with my friend throughout the years, I eventually became convinced that merely debating a relativist does not work. Relativism is not something that can easily be overthrown with a quick, three-point apologetic argument or a superficial "Top 10" list of reasons for why it's wrong. Relativism is so deeply engrained in the mindset and lifestyles of modern men and women, it's just assumed. "Of course, relativism is right ... Why? ... Well, because each person should decide for himself what is right and wrong. Judging people is bad."

To break through the complex webs of relativism, I will offer seven keys for talking to your relativistic friends, children, relatives and co-workers. These are not proofs to win an argument, but key attitudes and approaches to guide your conversations as you accompany someone in a longer-term relationship. With God's grace, these seven keys can help you open up moral truth in their lives:

- Lead With Mercy
- Law Equals Love
- "I Disagree" Doesn't Mean "I Hate You"
- The Intolerance of "Tolerance"
- Relativism Is a Mask
- Relativism Wounds People
- Taking on the Heart of Christ

First, we must lead with mercy. We must always stand up for the truth. But if that's all we do, we might sometimes do more harm than good. We need to give people the full Gospel message, which includes both truth and the good news of God's grace and mercy.

In some cases, the biggest obstacle keeping people from accepting moral truth is the fear that they can't change, that they can't live up to God's moral law, and that their many sins must define them. Especially in our secular age, the Church, Pope Francis says, needs to be like a "field hospital," offering urgent care for the many who have been wounded by the relativistic culture. Someone gravely injured on the battlefield needs more than a lecture on his cholesterol level. He needs critical attention to the most serious wounds first. Similarly, we must give souls who don't know the Gospel that critical foundation, not just a condemnation of a particular immoral act.

The 12th-century mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux pointed out that many souls refuse to turn to the Lord because they don't know him to be a God of mercy. If people don't know God's patience, how ready God is to forgive, and how much he can heal their weaknesses, then why would they bother trying to repent? It would be too hard! Bernard explains that someone considering the possibility of turning his life around will run up against his own weaknesses. If he doesn't know God's mercy and grace, he will give up in discouragement:

"If he does not know how good God is, how kind and gentle, how willing to pardon, will not his sensually inspired reason argue with him and say: 'What are you doing? ... Your sins are too grave and too many; nothing that you do, even to stripping the skin from your flesh, can make satisfaction for them. ... A lifetime's habits are not easily conquered.' Dismayed by these and similar arguments, the unhappy man quits the struggle, not knowing how easily God's omnipotent goodness could overthrow all these obstacles."

That's why we need to lead with mercy, not just moral truth. Behind the debate you're having about some moral issue is a real person who has his own struggles with various weakness, sins, hurts and fears — a person who needs God's loving help. These souls need more than an argument about why what they're doing is wrong (moral truth). Yes, they need that, but they also need the encouraging news that they can be forgiven and healed and have a fresh start in life (mercy).

To merely tell a man addicted to pornography, for example, that he's committing a mortal sin is not helpful. Many men in this situation already feel trapped, ashamed and full of self-hatred. They simply can't imagine a way out. Let's offer them not just a condemnation of certain actions, but a way out of their sins by sharing the good news of how much God still loves them and wants to forgive and heal them. Let's pray for them, make sacrifices for them and share with them the Good News of God's truth and his mercy.

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Edward Sri, Ph.D., is a professor of theology at the Augustine Institute.

This series is based on his newest book, [Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love](#) (2017, Ignatius Press).

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