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Presentation Transcript
Teaching Morality at Church 5
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Last time we talked about teaching morality to children at home as the fourth part of our series on *Morality*. Today, for the final installment, we're going to talk about the church's role in the moral development of children.

Robert Coles said that each child presents us with a moral challenge. That *is* true. It's kind of ironic. While we're talking about teaching morality to children, they're also challenging *us*. We have to learn about morality if we're going to teach them. So that's a powerful statement, but what does it mean in practical terms?

Well, I'm going to start at a very unusual place – with a bunch of monkeys. There was an Italian scientist.... Not monkey in the trunk, but a different kind of monkey. There was an Italian scientist who was doing some brain mapping. He was using monkeys to do it. He discovered the presence of what are now called *mirror neurons* in the brain. He had all these monkeys wired up so they could watch where the activity was occurring in their brains. They saw that when one monkey did something, a set of neurons fired in *that* monkey's brain, but they also fired in the brains of the other monkeys. "Monkey see, monkey do," I guess. Right? But what that meant was, that when monkeys *observe* a behavior, their neurons are being wired for that behavior, whether they are doing it or not – even though they are not actually doing it themselves. Since he made that very interesting study, it's been demonstrated that human beings have mirror neurons as well.

So what does that mean for us? Well, what it means is, that when a child observes what adults do, that pattern is being created *in* the mind of the child. And because they *are* children, there is a lot more blank territory to fill up than with us. What that does is, it makes it easier for the child who is seeing this behavior to reproduce the same behavior later. But it is not just about behavior. Have you ever heard the term *state of mind*? We might have one state of mind when we're sitting in a hot tub reading a book. We might have another state of mind when we consider historic spending levels by the federal government. We might have yet another state of mind when we meet a friend that we haven't seen for years. Children pick up states of mind and they create those with their mirror neurons. They pick up the moods, the attitudes, the states of mind, the emotions, the motives. They might not have any of those emotions or states of mind, but they are building those networks in their brain. They pick up the climate of a group of people.

They absorb the values of the people around them by listening to them talk, and watching the expressions on their faces, and detecting the feelings that they have.

So these very flexible brain neurons in children are formed into webs of connection that can reproduce those same states of mind after they have observed them in us. We all know that happens, but now we know *how*. And we know that it is on purpose, because God designed it that way. So, it's not just – when we talk about teaching morality to children – that we have to model behavior. But we also have to model our values, our attitudes, our moods and our states of mind.

I was working with an agitated couple recently. They were *way* past agitated. They were really angry with each other. I was trying to teach them how to solve their own problems instead of hiring a mediator or a counselor every time they had a disagreement. I would have one of them talk to me like I was their mate. Then I would repeat what I heard to the other person. So they were kind of going through me to communicate. But when I would repeat back what I had heard, I would strip out all the harsh terms, the insults, the judgments, the put-downs and I spoke in a very low, flat tone, without any emotion in it at all. We were working away on this problem and after about half an hour, both of them were mirroring my volume and tone. I hadn't directed them to do it, but they just fell into it unconsciously. When I brought it up, they both smiled and I asked them, "Don't you notice how much easier it is to *hear* that than yelling and hollering?"

So we know that God has created these mirror cells in our brain to help us to reproduce the behaviors of others. We know how that happens now. What that means is, in practical terms, is that everything we think, feel, say and do has the potential to affect the morality of the children who are in our presence. Wow! Much more complicated than we might have first thought.

Okay, now we're going to think about how that applies in real life in the congregation and in the larger organization, if there is one. If you're going to communicate as a church to the children that are there, you have to have a moral membership – the *people* in the church. The church is the people. Right? We know from the scriptures that the church is the body of people who have made a commitment to Jesus Christ and, consequently, have been given the Holy Spirit. The people are the church. It's not a building. It's a group of people – the called out ones – *ekklesia* – right? That's what the word means in the Bible. The people determine the spiritual environment of the group that they are in.

Have you ever been at a Bible study, or a family gathering, or any kind of small group – whether it is at work or wherever – where one of the people is in a bad mood? It affects everybody, doesn't it? Have you ever entered a new group of people and realized they were all of the same general mindset about something? I remember the first time I ever spoke to the teachers at the first school I worked at. They were functioning under terrific pressure – all facing the same stressors – most of them provided unwittingly by the principal. They were all being affected by the principal in the same way. There were in the same general discouraged state of mind.

Now, in the church, we like to think of ourselves as immune to that kind of thing, because we have the indwelling Holy Spirit. But that idea is completely erroneous. God does *not* override us and make us act good. The Holy Spirit does *not* control us. He provides power and support to help *if* we want to keep our commitment to Him, but He's not going to make us do it. So what we *choose* to do, as a group, has a powerful effect on all the other people in the group, including – and especially including – the children and the teenagers – and young adults, as well, for that matter. The younger you are, the more affect it has. And that has everything to do with church health and church growth, doesn't it? If we can't keep our kids, how are we going to expect to generate any enthusiasm in other people?

So when people look for a new church to attend, they're looking for something spiritually healthy to be a part of. It turns out that our spiritual health is, in large part, created by our morals. I'm going to read you a quote from Dr. Robert Kohls, who has been studying morality all his life, pretty much. He said:

Morality defines not only how we get along with the world and one another and the rules of life, it characterizes our very nature. Morality has to do with human connection. It has to do with the kind of connection that responds to others and, in turn, earns the caring response of others. If we are deprived of our morality, we are deprived of an essential part of ourselves.

So morality has to do with spiritual character, at least for us in the church, it does. Our character determines, in large measure, how our congregation is going to be – what it is going to *feel* like, what the atmosphere is going to be, what the mood, the climate, the aura is. And that moral climate is determined by individual choices by the distinct parts of the congregation – all the people.

So, when we talk about the congregation being the people and the people determining the spiritual atmosphere, we have to think about individual choice. So let's get down to what each person is willing to do in the group to make the group a spiritually healthy group.

Several years ago we did a long series called *True Spirituality*. And many of the qualities that we covered in that series make up godly morality. They are still available – if you want them – on MP3 from the Website, or we'll even send you CDs if you want to let us know you'd like them.

Dr Kohls tells a story about himself as a young school psychologist in New Orleans when a six-year-old, named Ruby Bridges, was the first black child to attend public school in that city. He was watching from the second story window at the front of the school as she was escorted by burly U.S. marshalls up the front walk to the school. There was an angry mob of white people standing on either side of the walk, yelling, jeering, cursing and spitting. He noticed – from the window looking down – that at one point along the walk – this long walk up this big, prestigious-looking, two-story, brick building – that she stopped and appeared to be talking, but she wasn't talking to anyone in particular. So later in the day he had a chance to talk with her and he asked her what she was saying and to whom she was talking. She told him she was praying for those people. He expressed

surprise. And she said, “Well, they need praying for, don’t they?” So let me ask you this question. Who had moral high ground there? I see a lot of similarity in that story to one that Jesus told. It’s in Luke 16.

Lk. 16:19 – *There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen. And he lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar, named Lazarus, covered with sores. He must have been laid there because he couldn’t walk. He might have been disabled. ...and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even dogs came and licked his sores. Jesus had a way of filling in details a lot of us would rather skip. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. And the rich man also died and was buried. So now we’re going to get the rest of the story. They each lived their lives the way He described it. One was probably well thought of in the community. He might have had authority. Certainly was wealthy. He had all the things that go along with that. And Lazarus – well, nobody paid any attention to him. He didn’t have any power. He probably smelled bad. Was not fun to look at. He was one that was disdained. It says, *In the grave, where he was in torment, he looked up* – I guess, *in hell*, is the word – I didn’t look at the translations, so I don’t know which word that is – *and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. So he called him. “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire.”* That is a very, very loose translation of what that really says. But the point is, that this man realized something about Lazarus – finally he had the moral high ground. He was the one that was not in the fire. He was with Abraham. *But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things while Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us. All the things that humans tend to consider important don’t matter in the face of God’s judgment. What matters there is what He thinks is important – nothing else. Our stuff doesn’t count. Things don’t count. Position doesn’t count. Power doesn’t count. Good will of other people doesn’t count.**

What was it that Ruby Bridges was expressing there on the walkway in 1960...I think it was 4. Well, first, empathy, and then, compassion. She knew those people needed praying for – cared for the spiritual state of those people who hated her. That’s another way to say what she was doing. I don’t think at six years old she would have said it that way, but, when you look at it, that’s what she was doing.

So, what can we learn about that? One of the things I learn is that you don’t have to be rich, you don’t have to be ordained, you don’t have to be anything to be on the moral high ground. It’s not about any of that stuff. You know, if somebody has a bad attitude, it can affect the whole group. And so can somebody with a *good* attitude, who is willing to put the good attitude into action, so that other people can see it.

I remember at summer camp one year, we were trying to decide who to take on the backpacking trip. We never accepted everybody to go, because not everybody wanted to go. So we didn’t make provision for everybody at camp to go on it. There was a really great canoe trip other people could go on and some would rather go on that. So we would

secure permits for X number of people – somewhat less than the total number of the camp. This particular year we had one more who wanted to go than we had permits for. I don't remember how we determined, but I think we drew straws. The thought of being left out caused some of them to become quite competitive. Right? Fifteen slots and sixteen people that wanted to go. So who is it going to be? Well, the one who got left out was in his last year of eligibility. So he was going to miss out on that trip. It was his first time to camp and he was just going to have to miss it. He was disappointed, but he took it well.

After we had that meeting, a young girl approached me privately and told me that she had two more years of eligibility left. She could go later and she wanted to give her slot to this boy – this older boy. So once the other teens, who were competitive and not willing to give up anything, saw that he was going and she was not, they quickly figured out what had happened. That really made an impression for the good for that group. I think some of them thought about what it would have taken to do that. I don't even remember the boy's name, but I sure remember her's. And she knows I remember and she knows why. As a sidelight, I've heard ministers in her church talk down about her, because she thinks for herself. She doesn't always agree with everything people older than she thinks about. But, for my part, I'd rather one person like her for a friend than a hundred drones who just go along.

So those two examples to me – Ruby Bridges and this young woman – she's a young woman now – she was a kid back then – illustrate the power of individual choice in the creation of a moral climate. We don't really know what the crowd thought of Ruby Bridges. We don't know if they even knew she was praying for them, but it surely affected Robert Kohls. It changed his whole life.

So we have to have – if we're going to affect children morally at church – we have to have a moral group of people that they can absorb it from – first parents, but they are also around people at church. And people at church affect a lot of how our kids think.

The second thing that we need to have is, we need to have moral leadership. Lazarus was a moral leader. He sat outside the gate of the rich man, hoping for a few crumbs from his table. Who did the rich man look to for a tiny bit of relief in the end? He realized too late he was morally bankrupt and that Lazarus was rich spiritually. If he had paid a little more attention to Lazarus and had gotten to know him a little bit, he might have seen what was there – kind of like Robert Kohls did with Ruby Bridges.

We talk a lot about authority in our society. In our society we elect people to authority positions most of the time. And when we do that – and it's increasingly becoming more and more true – we judge on outward appearance. Television is making that more and more a factor. I doubt Abraham Lincoln could be elected today to office, because he probably wouldn't have shown well on TV. He might not have been really good at sound bites either. We judge on speaking ability, experience – things like that – all outward stuff. But the only *real* authority in the kingdom of God is *moral* authority. There is no popularity contest or elections in the kingdom. It's all about empathy, care for others, fairness, commitment to God. So that's why I'm going to repeat what I say all the time –

every time I talk about leadership – and that is, leadership boils down to knowing the right thing to do and then having the courage to do it. It doesn't have anything to do with how much money you make, what kind of clothes you wear, cars you drive, who you know, what positions you hold, what awards the community has given you – nothing! It has *nothing* to do with that. It has to do with knowing what God wants us to do and then doing it. That's all about our character, which is based on our morals – our values.

Mk. 12:41 – *Jesus sat down opposite the place where offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts, but a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Most people in our society won't even stop to pick up a penny anymore. Ernestine does. And I think maybe a penny might have had a different value back then than it does now, but this was a fraction of a penny. And calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth. This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."*

I know people who crave to be church leaders, but don't tithe. I know people who long to be in the spotlight of leadership, but don't know how to keep the Sabbath and are not interested in learning how. They have the same attitude that unconverted people have about it. It's a restriction. I know people who think, because they have authority in the church, they also have morality. No. There's a huge disconnect there – between those two things. One doesn't have anything to do with the other. That doesn't mean that everybody who is in authority doesn't have morality. It just means that they don't go together. They are separate from each other. That was the whole point of Jesus' parable. That's what it was about, wasn't it? It doesn't matter what stuff you have. That doesn't make you a moral person. Anybody who knows the right thing to do and is willing to do it, is on high moral ground. And that's what makes them a leader. Anybody can look at their example and be guided God's way – even if you're a fifteen-year-old girl at a summer camp willing to give up her spot on a backpacking trip. We don't very often hear, "Here take my place on the church board. I've demonstrated only the willingness to protect my own interests." We don't hear that.

The third thing I wanted to mention – besides having a moral membership and moral leadership – is that they must produce a moral organization. How do you know if you are in a moral organization? Well, I'm going to enumerate a few things that such an organization manifests as a result of moral members and moral leaders. I don't have time to cover all of them, but we can talk about a few.

An organization that is a moral organization is clearly marked by care for its members rather than care for the organization. People come *before* the structure.

The Ford Motor Company, in the past, has claimed to be a family of car owners as well as a family of car builders. However, it is their company policy, when they discover a dangerous flaw in one of their models, rather than recalling the cars and fixing them so people will be safe, they first calculate the potential cost to recall and then the potential cost to pay the lawsuits from the deaths resulting in their faulty product. And they go

with whichever one is cheaper. And they are not alone. I just picked on them because I know about the Pinto gas tank. So Ford Motor Company is not about taking care of the car owners, but about taking care of the car company. It's not a moral company. It is profit based.

A very large Christian church has, over the years, had a number of scandals regarding pedophilia among their ministry. Rather than rooting out the problem, they've tried to cover up the problem to save face for the organization rather than protecting the little boys who attend services there.

If you look in Revelation at the description of the great false church, it says that it is lead by a beast and false prophet, and we see it characterized like a predatory animal that devours people rather than taking care of them.

So a moral organization is marked by care for the members rather than care for the organization. If you contrasted the biblical picture of the Church of God with the beast power, what would that look like? Well, I can think of several scriptures right off the top of my head, which I did when I prepared this sermon, without going into great depth to it. In Galatians 4:26, Paul said:

Gal. 4:26 – *The Jerusalem that is above – which is also the church – is free, and she is our mother.* Mothers take care of their kids ahead of themselves. I talked to a mother recently who was making sure that her kids got plenty to eat, even though she was going hungry.

What would the ministry look like in the true Church of God compared to the beast power priesthood or ministry? In 1 Thessalonian 2:6, Paul said:

1 Thess. 2:6 – *As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

The ministry of the moral church *loves* the people in the congregation. They love them like they love themselves and they take care of them. They provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the people.

What else does it do? Well, a moral organization focuses on the *autonomy* of the people in the organization. Now how could that possibly be the case? Well, you know, the girl I mentioned earlier was a problem to the ministry of her church because she thought for herself and acted on her beliefs. They actually should have been fostering that kind of character in *all* the young people in their midst. Why do I say that? Because self-discipline is one of the cornerstones of morality. I mean, it's easy to think about doing the right thing, but it takes self-discipline to do it day in and day out, week in and week out. Self-discipline only comes after being given *freedom* to make choices. That's how we learn self-discipline. So, it's a shame when a young person has to ??? the right, instead of having it offered to them. But sometimes that happens.

So it focuses on the autonomy of the people. It realizes it is creating people to produce more of the same thing and to be autonomous in it – to go out and maybe even start a new organization that is also moral. I heard a minister say one time that his job was to make himself obsolete – or unneeded – because everybody else in his congregation would know how to do everything that he could do and more – that kind of thing. You can't get that kind of result without thinking about how to help people be autonomous, and independent thinkers, and able to weigh and study.

The third thing that I want to talk about is that the moral organization stimulates moral thinking in people. One of the ways children learn morality best is from the presentation of moral dilemmas – to talk about potential problems. Get them in a group and talk about difficult choices and they will come up with a moral choice. I've done it dozens of times – hundreds of times over the years.

I recall a discussion with a man over the phone once. I'd never met this man, but he was a member of the church I was in. He wanted to talk about how to handle a terrible problem in his congregation. The kids in his church were watching demonic television shows. "Our kids were just sucking it up and being corrupted by it." I could tell that this was all about his agenda rather than what the teens in his area really needed. So I asked him a question that he deeply resented right off the bat, just to make a point. I asked him, "What problems are you seeing as a result?" And he didn't come up with a single one. So then I asked him, "Are you sure this isn't just something you are worried about?" When he persisted, I said, "How many teens in your church have become demon possessed as a result of watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?" He said, "Well, what do you think we should do?" I said, "I think that, if you are really that worried about it, you should tape a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* show and play it for them at their Bible study, and then ask them to point out the good and the bad in the program." He didn't know why that would be helpful, so I read Hebrews 5:12 to him, where it says, "*In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk being still an infant is not acquainted with the teachings about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*" One of the characteristics of spiritual maturity is to be able to tell the difference between good and evil.

Well, after I had that discussion with that fellow, I thought, "I ought to try that." I have talked to people about it, so now I should go and see what happens. I didn't tape a show because I didn't have a long enough slot at a youth conference I was going to, but it didn't matter, because they'd all seen the program anyway. I asked them to sit together with me...I had a blackboard and I wrote down...I said, "Let's think of all the good and the bad things about this television program. So, astoundingly, they came up with *all* the bad things – more stuff than I could have thought of – terrible stuff! But they couldn't think of a single good thing about the program. So I said, "Does Buffy have really good, faithful friends?" "Yeah." "Is she really close to her mother? Does her mother really love her and take care of her?" "Yes." "Does she have a teacher/mentor at school who really helps her?" "Yeah." See, they couldn't distinguish. The devil *never* gives us all bad. He

always lumps it in with good stuff. So being spiritually mature is the ability to *distinguish* what is what in the mix.

So, if we're going to *stimulate* the moral development of our children – and moral thinking – we need to *challenge* them on the issues and to be able to distinguish what is good and what is bad about every situation. In human experience, there is hardly ever anything that is all good either. Right? We're all nodding our heads. So that means at church there are some things that aren't just right either. So, what's wrong with talking about that? "Let's keep them ignorant. We don't want them to *know* what's bad. We want them to stay spiritually *immature*." No! A moral organization stimulates moral thinking.

The fourth thing that you can look at about any organization is, does it have *respect* for the demands of individual conscience? Given the same facts, none of us are going to come up with the same decisions about whether things are good or bad, right or wrong, or what to do about it. And in a free organization like the church – Jerusalem above is *free*, right? – not everybody is going to come to the same conclusions about what is moral and what is not. So part of morality is to allow other people to have the same freedom we have and to decide for themselves what is wrong.

I had an occasion with a large Church of God, who historically had not kept the biblical holy days. And at the time I met with them, they were experiencing a shift in that group of people. A number were discovering the holy days and were beginning to keep them. This was causing a stir in their midst. Were they going to allow this? Were they going to make a rule – drop it or get out? What were they going to do? Were they going to graciously accept those with the difference? Or were they going to make judgmental remarks about them behind their backs? Some chose the latter.

What were the children learning that heard that? Were they learning that the holy days were to be ridiculed? Well, probably some were, but what they were *really* learning was, that they would be ridiculed, too, if they stepped out of line – because they were in a judgmental organization. Why do kids learn that? Why do they learn *that* lesson instead of the one we want them to learn? Well, they learn that because children always look at things from the perspective of how is this going to affect me? We do that, too, as adults, but children do it more, because they realize their safety and security is dependent on what the adults do.

I was talking to a couple that had an argument in front of their kids awhile back. As a result of this big blowup they had, the boy ran away, and the girl thought it was her fault and was anxious and depressed. The parents were shocked to see such a reaction. "Hey, it was just an argument. That's how we solve our problems." Kids don't understand that. So I explained to them that children *always* wonder what will happen to them if the parents split up and figure that they, somehow, had something to do with it.

The same is true at church. If we treat people disrespectfully, they will know that they may be treated disrespectfully, too. If we treat people *with* respect, they know that, even though they might be different, or have problems, they're going to be treated with

respect, too, and they will feel secure. And if we don't, then they'll feel anxious. They'll feel like they are walking a tightrope.

The fifth and final thing I want to talk about is that organization that is moral has programs in place to demonstrate care for those inside and outside of the organization. Now, I've always done a pretty rap on programs, because my thing is all about doing it one at a time – person-to-person, face-to-face. But a program is a good thing when it gives us a chance to *do* that. If you have a camp program and you teach the ski instructor that the real reason he is there is *not* to teach skiing, but to *encourage* the kids, then you've got a good program.

So, it is one thing to say that an organization cares for its members and the world at large, but where is evidence? Unless you have an organized way – that's what organizations do, right? They *organize* things.... Unless you have an organized way to do that, there is no evidence of moral climate.

So how can you manifest a moral climate in your organization? Well, it has to do with the caretaking that goes on – those within and those without. Do the people on the board allocate precious funds to make those opportunities available? What happens in your group?

Elaine's niece wrote to us, asking for money to help her go on a mission with her church. So here we are, running a ministry that is dedicated to the spiritual advancement of children, and what are going to do? Be warmed and filled? No! We have to help! And so do you! So do you when kids come to you like that. And so does your board. If the church and group that you go to is not a moral organization, they won't want to do that. But if they are, then they'll help.

If the congregation's children are inspired to participate in these kind of outreach activities, we'd better be ready to back them up. And if we can't host the activity ourselves, then we can, at least, support it with money. Does your congregation *know* to do that? Do you know what to do? How do you do things like that? In the independent Church of God, there are a few organizations – like LifeResource Ministries – I'm not tooting. I'm just saying that we are part of the group – that exist to help groups learn *how* to help children develop faith. So, does your organization take advantage of those things? Or does it even *care* about learning those things?

I was talking to an amazing young woman last night on the phone. She's going to give a workshop at Lake Tahoe at our Feast site on how to use the five learning styles when teaching children. This is something they are learning in public schools at the time – teachers are. They know that people don't learn the same way, so they are teaching the teachers how to incorporate all five styles as they teach their material. Well, she's going to do that at our Feast site. What a great thing! But, you know, she came up with something else. She suggested that, after the people have the seminar, why not put them to work teaching the youth classes so they can actually *practice* using the material they were taught?

See, that's the kind of thing we're interested in – real skill development – not so much wishing and dreaming and posturing and talking, but actually starting to learn how to make a difference in the moral lives of the children around us. And that's how you do it.

So, your group needs *you* to be a moral person – if it is to be a moral group. The people are the church. And God will imbue with the Spirit only those who are willing to take that kind of action. So it kind of gets down to, what are you willing to *do*?