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Preaching the Law without Being Judgmental

By James Hein

The Unique Challenge Millennials Present to Preaching Law

Millennials are Extra Sensitive to Judgment

Cable television entrepreneur Bob Buford discussed the uniqueness of Millennials in a fascinating interview conducted with researcher David Kinnaman for his book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. Noting the shift in the self-assessment of various generations, he said that, in his surveying, when the Elder generation was asked to describe themselves, the most commonly used words/phrases were: "World War II and Depression, smarter, honest, work ethic, and values and morals." Boomers described their generation using terms like "work ethic, respectful, values and morals, and smarter." Busters (or Gen X) used terms like "technology use, work ethic, conservative or traditional, smarter, and respectful." And then he noted Millennials. The phrases they most commonly used? "Technology use, music and pop culture, liberal or tolerant, smarter, and clothes." He concluded, "Where has respectful gone? Where is work ethic? To me, this shows that the next generation is not just sort of different; they are DISCONTINUOUSLY different."¹

It might be interesting to pursue the reasons why each generation automatically assumes itself "smarter" than the previous or why something as superficial as "clothes" is a prominent self-

identification for Millennials. But for our preaching purposes, let's take note of the Millennial self-assessment of "tolerant."

Theologically conservative, traditionally oriented Christians tend to cringe at the very sound of the word "tolerance."

But let's not be too quick here.

Tolerance itself is a fully godly trait. The Apostle Paul, writing to some (hypocritically) self-righteous and judgmental Jews, said, "Do you show contempt for the riches of (God's) kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4)

Within the premise of the gospel is the idea that God doesn't merely send lightning bolts down upon me when I'm behaving badly. He's patient with me. He stays with me. And he seeks to win my heart over to the truth. He doesn't just shut me down and cut me off. Instead, for a time, God *tolerates* me, guiding me to repent of my untruth, see the beauty of his mercy, and voluntarily conform to his will.

Furthermore, some tolerance is necessary for differing peoples to exist peaceably in the same space. This is the basis for civilization.

The point is this: a younger generation's preference for inclusiveness is certainly not inherently wrong nor should it ever be scolded as such. This tolerant disposition is, however, a little misguided. This is where you, the preacher, help them navigate a better path for life by shining the light of God's Word.

The Tension in Preaching the Law

Millennials have grown up with a society devoid of moral universals. Again, if they have a cultural North Star for behavior, it's *tolerance*. I'm not suggesting they don't all have an innate knowledge of morality from God (Romans 2:14-15). I'm

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suggesting the culture they've grown up in hasn't reinforced that natural moral code the way it had in previous generations.

Additionally, their open-minded disposition is the natural reaction of a generation that has grown up with peers who are significantly more diverse—ethnically, religiously, relationally, and sexually—than their parents and grandparents. They have zero patience for mistreatment of those who are different. Inclusiveness, diversity, and political correctness are ideals that have shaped Millennials.

Before we tackle the challenge of how to preach the law, it's worth reminding ourselves that statements of inclusion are important to communicating the gospel clearly. Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). John says, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 John 4:2). Jesus himself says, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). These are clear statements of gospel *inclusion*. The gospel is so overwhelmingly inclusive that it works for EVERYONE. It's intrinsically inclusive. Let's not be too quick to stomp out a good, but often misguided trait of Millennials.

**BROKEN
SEPARATED
DAMAGED
DISCONNECTED
DIVORCED
DETACHED
SEVERED
SPLIT**

Finally, perhaps the most influential factor in the differences between the Millennial mindset and that of previous generations is the widespread dissolution of the family unit. Kids today are eight times more likely to come into the world without married parents than were Boomers. Without that natural, God-given parental unit in place as an authority in their lives, Millennials take longer to grow up, are highly skeptical of authorities, and will generally only trust you after personal, relational investment.

Since they understandably distrust traditional authority structures, Millennials rely heavily upon what *feels* right. What seems *fair*

is more powerful to them than what someone tells them is objectively *right*.

For example, it's difficult to convince Millennials that illegally downloading copyrighted music online is objectively wrong. The rationale could go somewhere along these lines: many musicians are disgustingly wealthy anyways; music is just the collection of sounds and ideas which *should* be free; why should wealthier people have more access to such things? Whatever the objective reality, it doesn't seem *fair* to them.

As an illustration of the rapidly increasing influence of Millennials, keep in mind that they've gotten their way on this issue. Starting with Napster back in 2000, the music industry could not stop Millennials from getting music for free. This is the basis for today's popular, free ad-sponsored music services like Pandora and Spotify.

Millennials possess a liberal-mindedness that is constantly pushing for fair. They will outright reject any authority structure that carries an insider/outsider type of mentality, and many of them are convinced that Christian churches embody such a temperament.

Millennials grew up hating the relational dissolution they experienced with their parents. They often feel that many truth claims are unquantifiable. So rather than bicker, Millennials prefer to constantly push for unity. Boomers were often skeptical of others but caustic in their attitudes. Millennials want to get along. They are forgiving and relational and have great difficulty understanding why other generations don't feel the same way. They love family. They long for togetherness. They hate constant negative speech about other political parties, have no time for comments that suggest racial bias, and will opt out of any Christian church that is obsessed with pointing out the flaws in other Christian churches.

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With these factors in mind, the obvious challenge to preaching the law then is that every pronouncement of the law is saying that something in us isn't right. The listener recognizes that he/she is further from ideal than previously thought and it *feels* like rejection—an unsubstantiated, uncaring push to the outside.

Overcoming the Challenge

Attitude – You're No Better

It sometimes seems like "don't judge" (Matthew 7:1) has now surpassed John 3:16 as the most frequently echoed scriptural sentiment in a morally relativistic generation.

While it's true that this section of the Bible (as others) does not prohibit moral judgment, the point remains: we aren't the final judges of God's law. We are merely witnesses to God's grace. Consequently, if the gospel is true, then I never have the right to look down on another person as inferior to me because we are both sinners saved exclusively by the grace of God in the work of Christ Jesus. Showing an aura of condescension while sharing the law with someone harms your ability to rightly preach the gospel, because it seems you don't understand the gospel yourself. Sinners are saved by grace alone. It works the same way for every single one of us.

This means that all human beings are fundamentally more alike than we are different. Guess who loves the sound of that? Inclusive Millennials.

All human beings are fundamentally more alike than we are different.

Technique – Affirm the Good, Correct the Bad

Okay. Okay. Yes, we all know Millennials have work to do on their problem with moral relativism. But before immediately correcting their inconsistent and illogical attempts at morality, let's start with a positive: these young adults are eager to find a point of commonality rather than a point of contention. This is drastically different from previous generations. Many Christians and Christian churches in the twentieth century largely defined their faith and denominational affiliation on the basis of what they were *not*, e.g. a Lutheran was *not* a Catholic because.... A Baptist was *not* a Lutheran because.... Certainly such doctrinal differences are serious and at some point need to be worked through, but Millennials don't want to start there. Many older WELS members often *do* appear to want to start there.

Doctrinal differences are serious ... but Millennials don't want to start there.

When confronting a misguided common belief in culture, consider the methodology that Timothy Keller proposes:

Our premises must be drawn wholly from the Bible, yet we will always find some things in a culture's beliefs that are roughly true, things on which we can build our critique. We will communicate something like this: "You see this 'A' belief you have? The Bible says the same thing – so we agree. However if 'A' is true, then why do you not believe 'B'? The Bible teaches 'B,' and if 'A' is true, then it is not right, fair,

or consistent for you to reject 'B.' If you believe this – how can you not believe that?" We reveal inconsistencies in the cultural beliefs and assumptions about reality. With the authority of the Bible we allow one part of the culture – along with the Bible – to critique another part. The persuasive force comes from basing our critique on something we can affirm within our culture.²

Let me offer some examples of what Keller is talking about.

Example 1 – Tolerance. What if someone says, "I think you're being intolerant—and therefore, unloving—of other beliefs and other Christians by not (e.g.) allowing them to commune with us." At that point you can agree that the gospel does promote radical, almost otherworldly, inclusiveness. However, tolerance of beliefs really has nothing to do with it. In fact, by saying that I'm being "narrow-minded" or "intolerant," you're being just as intolerant of my beliefs as you claim I'm being of yours. Neither of us is more or less tolerant than the other. Both of us are claiming authoritative spiritual insight. At that point, you've both affirmed their desire for a good, gospel-flavored attitude of inclusion, but corrected their misguided application of what *is* or *is not* unfair judgment.

To someone who possesses any of the humility necessary for learning, this then affords you the opportunity to walk through 1 Corinthians 10-11, at which point they might well see how loving, compassionate, and beautiful the idea of close Communion really is. If your approach is "That's just wrong," you'll run into a Nietzschean Millennial distrust of authority and institutional power plays.

Example 2 – Evolution. I regularly use this teaching technique on the issue of macroevolution. Most young adults operate with "macroevolutionary beliefs" since that's what they learned in their science textbooks. However, most young adults also often have compassion for the oppression of human rights around the world. So I establish that such human sensitivity (an 'A' belief for them) is a wonderful attribute, but gently point out how this is inconsistent



with their 'B' belief of evolution. Evolution is predicated on the idea of "survival of the fittest" and "the strong eat the weak." So if you believe in macroevolution, you cannot logically say that it is wrong for a stronger country in the Middle East to devour a weaker country. That's merely the advancement of the species, natural selection. At that point, their 'A' belief trumps their 'B' belief, and they feel compelled to correct the cognitive dissonance. I don't know that I've ever explained macroevolution to a young adult that way and not had them say, "Hmm. That's interesting."

Example 3 – Identity. We live in a time and place where students grow up hearing in their biology classes that their lives are accidental—as Bertrand Russell said, "accidental collocations of atoms." And then these same students hear in their psychology classes, "You just need to have more self-esteem." As a preacher, it's important and not that difficult to point out the internal consistency of such beliefs. "No wonder you feel so worthless! You're not an accident! The King of the Cosmos knitted you together in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). Not only that, God's only Son sacrificed his life in order to save your life. **That** is what you're worth to God! Don't you dare let a bitter philosopher or arrogant biologist who doesn't know for certain what happened a hundred years ago, let alone thousands or millions of years ago, tell you you're an accident." The 'A' belief here is the idea that human life is valuable. The 'B' belief is that mankind sprung about through a chemical happenstance. Further illustrate that anything without design is purposeless. Then ask them if they feel like their life has or should have purpose? If so, then they *must* necessarily be designed.

Affirm the good. Gently walk them through what is incorrect.

Notice that in each of those examples there is no condemning "You're wrong!" speech. Millennials will put up a defense mechanism against that. You can't just *tell them* that they're wrong. You have to *show them* the inconsistency of their beliefs. You have to show them a better, truer way.

Jesus is *THE* Way

So you come to the average person in the twenty-first century and you tell them that they need Jesus. They ask why. You start talking to them about the Ten Commandments—how sex outside of marriage is wrong, how greediness is wrong, how lying and disrespect are wrong. The Millennial is much more inclined than people of a previous generation to say, "What are you talking about? Who are you to judge? This is just who I am." All you end up doing is arguing about moral relativism.

On the other hand, try saying, "Everyone in the world is serving a master. We sacrifice to this master—our time, our energy, our wealth—at the expense of many other good things in life. But

many of those masters (e.g. career, romance, social approval, etc.) will enslave you and curse you and disappoint you. But Jesus is the only master who can fully satisfy you and put into perspective all competitors—also those who tempt Christians. And when we fail him and yet turn to him for rescue, he'll forgive us and demonstrate even greater love" (Romans 5:20-21).

Preaching the law has subtly transformed from harping on how certain behaviors are *wrong* (though they are), to showing how following Jesus is *better*.

This could be followed by an explanation of how God's laws, far from being oppressive, are really given in love to lead toward human flourishing.

Example 1 – The Necessity of Restriction. An old preaching illustration of this is the fish in the fishbowl. A fish needs restrictions to live. Since it can only live in water, it needs walls that hold the water together. If you decide you're going to liberate a fish by freeing it from its fishbowl and tossing it out onto the ground, it will flop about until its life is squeezed out. The fish needed those restrictions to live. True freedom then is not the absence of restrictions, but rather includes the presence of restrictions that lead to our health and well-being.

Example 2 – The Law of Design. Something which is designed only works when used in accordance with its intended purpose. For instance, I'm not particularly handy. I keep my tools in a zippered pouch, if that tells you anything. I once tried to remove a stripped screw from my wall with the backside of the hammer, i.e. the claw. I ended up ripping the dry wall apart. When you use something in a way other than how it was designed, it's not productive. It's destructive. You'll destroy your life if you don't use it the way God designed it to be used. God's laws help explain our design.

In summary, 1) tolerance is not all bad, 2) don't just *tell* but *show* Millennials, and 3) explain how we all will have a master, but Jesus is the only *worthy* master of our lives. His commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3) but beautiful. After all, Jesus is the one person who perfectly followed his Father's will, and just look at the beauty he brought to mankind by doing so.

¹ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, pgs. 37-38.

² Timothy Keller, *Center Church*, pg. 125.

Read more from Pastor Hein

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