

## Basic Principles Sermon

MPs, and their naughty expense claims! It's despicable is it not! All those naughty people. They discover the maximum amount they are allowed to claim for an item, and then go straight for that maximum claim. It is appalling, it is an outrage, and it's something Baptist ministers are encouraged to do! At least, I have been by senior Baptist figures. If you're entitled to something, you should claim for it, and the maximum amount. After all, you are entitled to it, and you have given up your life to serve. So you deserve the recompense and the perks. At least, that's what I was told. And such principles have the appearance of wisdom. But then, principles always do!

Paul encourages the Christians at Colossae to reject the basic principles of this world! But he doesn't suggest that those principles are replaced by a new set of more acceptable principles. He suggests that those principles are replaced with a person. With Christ.

The trouble is, that whenever principles are used, they can justify the worst horrors upon people. Principles serve the empire that is currently in power. The phrase that Paul uses throughout this passage, is that of 'Principalities and Powers'! The basic principles of this world tend to serve the principalities and powers, but they tend also to seem so natural to us, that they are almost invisible. The human philosophies have nothing to do with whether we read a philosophy book this morning and decided to try and live by it. The basic philosophies of this world are learned from Hello Magazine, from Soap operas, from Hollywood. They are learned by osmosis, you don't have to learn basic principles consciously. They shape the way that we encounter the world – they are like a set of lenses that we look at the world through! And it is these basic principles that lead to us living by the kinds of rules and regulations that Paul talks about, and that we can so easily come to expect others to adhere to – and in the name of Christianity.

The MP expense claim storm is a great example. All those naughty, nasty, selfish MPs – claiming a total of 6.2 million pounds of public money for their own selfishness. And what a Public service is done by the crusading tabloids and quality papers, who delight in pointing out the hypocrisy of those in positions of power. And we are taught to share the disgust, feel indignation, believe that we have been cheated. Our of 6.2 million pounds. Surely, this behaviour is awful, despicable, and should be stopped!

Quite right too. And there are various church organisations clubbing together to bring to parliament a set of Christian principles by which to live that would prevent such behaviour in the future. The trouble is – ministers in these churches have been encouraged to behave in precisely the same way – with their expenses! Why? Because it is in accord with the basic principles of this world – and we treasure those principles more deeply than we tend to know or want to admit. So, whatever 'principles' we may bring – whatever rules and regulations result, and by which we expect others to live – in what ways are they not, inevitably, the basic principles of this world that Paul is talking about.

But let's stick with these ministers expenses for now. Because morally, we know that it is wrong. We can get a label on this wrong doing very easily, because it is visible to us, easy to understand, easy to cite rules that must be followed, easy to point the finger of blame. But, of course, part of the problem is that in most cases, the MPs have indeed followed rules and regulations. And it is those rules and regulations, and what they allow – that seem to horrify us. The MPs are living by those rules and regulations – they can claim that they have done

nothing wrong! There are very few cases where the Police are involved. And that is the trouble with principles. They allow you to get away with murder! MPs have just been doing what comes naturally, to all of us. But now we know – there is something wrong with what comes naturally.

6.2 million pounds is a lot of money to waste on travel claims. And it's our money! But let's put this in its context. There is a much bigger fraud at work in our country at the moment – and the cost is not 6.2 million, but 6.2 billion pounds. The expansion of the M25. Now, regardless of whether you believe this is a good thing – regardless of the environmental impact, regardless of how the future of travel in this country may end up looking, there is an enormous scandal here, a thousand times worse than the MP's expense claims, that somehow escapes our attention: a project that should cost 478 million, has become 6.2 billion of public money, through a complex system called the Private Finance Initiative.

But what we see here is a far worse scandal than MP's expenses. What we also see, is that it is based ultimately on the basic principles of market fundamentalism, just as the MP's desire for extravagant expense claims are based on the same basic principles, and the Baptist Minister's desire to claim from Home Mission accounts are based on the same basic principles.

Basic principles of this world, which, as Paul says, are powerless to restrain appalling behaviour! Even if we draw up some rules for MP's expenses, they will not help us to prevent the far greater scandal of the Private Finance Initiative. They are powerless to do this! And if this is true in the public world of politics, it is equally true in the equally political world of inter-personal relationships.

Rules and regulations are, of course, important. “No food in the lounge”, “shoes off when you come in”, “don't talk over the top of someone else”. These are important, especially for my children. The fact that I have to keep repeating them, means that they are obviously not always followed. But, given the fact that they are learning how to relate to people and the world, rules are important because they communicate something of what it means to live responsibly – that is, to live in response to the needs of other people.

Now adults will come into the house, see a line of shoes – well – more a mountain of random shoes – and think – ah, the rules are, “No shoes on in the house”! They are not the timeless rules of the house – they are to save me time in cleaning up. The principles are based upon my desire to make things work smoothly – shocking as that may be to some people! Now, an adult doesn't usually need telling that if they have mud all over their shoes, and I'd have to clean up after them. But children do, and by learning rules they are learning automatically to be considerate towards me! Adults should not need to learn how to be considerate towards another person.

So it comes to the point when we mature beyond the need for rules and regulations. Not that we outgrow them because we are now bigger than rules. But because, we understand the spirit behind them, we understand what it means to be thoughtful about other people. So, for instance, the first thought when we enter a house we don't know – is not, “what are the rules? Should I take off my shoes?” The first thought is, “how do relate well to this person?” and if I have muddy shoes, then relating well might mean removing them!

And yet, it seems, Paul goes unheard by many modern Christians. Who still need to operate on the basis of rules and regulations. But I wonder whether those things are only necessary when you don't relate well to people. Rules and regulations don't require you to be confronted by the reality of another person. Now, in Paul's day, as in ours, Christians can wander round imposing their rules and regulations on other people – and yet, behind this, in my limited experience – there often lurks a social, inter-personal dysfunctionality. Rules are much easier to deal with than people. So people are squeezed into laws, rather than laws serving people. The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath.

But applying rules and regulations from the principles of this world, allow us to believe that we are living upright, blameless and worthy lives – as far as our relations with others go. And yet, we can – live by such principles and behave in dehumanising ways towards others. The British Empire was a fine example. The idea of a good, upright Englishman – a man of principle, upright and devout, and yet sharing in the guilt of the millions who suffered horrendously at the hands of the British Empire. The Principles of this earth can be used to batter people mercilessly – whether in mass, political ways, or in personally, deeply wounding ways.

The principles, and the principalities and powers of this earth are not based upon some timeless, divine, eternal truth. The only legitimate principles are not basic, timeless, truths. All authority, all principle, all virtues and foundations and ethics – are only, ever secondary to the authority of Christ. This is not to wave a magic wand over our earthly principles to make them timeless and give them divine legitimacy. To say that our principles are secondary to Christ, means that basic unchangeable principles by which we operate all always dangerously open to being changed by Christ Himself.

This is not the way that we usually understand principles. We usually see principles as something that even God himself has to obey. And if we live by those kinds of principles, we needn't fear every having to be challenged at the most basic level of our existence. But principles, are not timeless. They arise at sunset. They come along late in the day, and are based on the way that we have already chosen to live. Like wanting not to Hoover my carpets every five minutes. Or not wanting rebellion in the British empire. Ethical decisions are made in advance of the principles to which we appeal to justify them.

This is the point that Paul makes, when he says that principalities and powers are all humiliated on the cross. Of course, the cross is thought to be the place where the principalities and powers prove that they have the final word, the final authority. And yet, in Christ, it is precisely as the powers are at their most powerful, that they are shamed. Because the cross is not the final word. The resurrection turns the pride of the principalities and powers into shame, and the shame of a resurrected builder into the glory of God.

And resurrection, in our lives today, is our capacity to die and be remade. Our capacity for the basic principles by which we live to be broken, relativised, and based upon the shaky foundation of a living relationship. And that, is the point of worship. The Church's one foundation, is Jesus Christ her Lord.