

Welcome to the Real World
(The Lesson We Need to Learn from Penn State)
November 13, 2011

I am beginning this message with an assumption. I know assumptions are dangerous, but I think I'm safe with this one: Whether or not you are a sports fan, I assume you've heard *something* this week about the scandal at Penn State.

The scandal has been all over the media from ESPN, network newscasts, and cable news outlets to national and local newspapers, social media, and the radio. If you are interested in news, the subject has been inescapable.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about, let me quickly recap it for you, beginning with a summary from the Pennsylvania Attorney General's website:

- "This is a case about a sexual predator who used his position within the university and community to repeatedly prey on young boys," "It is also a case about high-ranking university officials who allegedly failed to report the sexual assault of a young boy after the information was brought to their attention, and later made false statements to a grand jury that was investigating a series of assaults on young boys."¹
- As of this morning, three people have lost their jobs:
 - Athletic Director
 - President
 - Head Football coach—Joe Paterno
- In addition, two people have been placed on administrative leave
 - Vice President for Finance and Business
 - The assistant coach who brought the alleged abuse to light

Obviously, there has been outrage over the events that have taken place. In fact, in today's media and technology saturated culture, it seems that everybody and their brother can make their voices heard...and have done so.

¹ <http://www.attorneygeneral.gov/press.aspx?id=6270>, accessed November 10, 2011.

This morning, I want to look at this situation from a different perspective. While I certainly sympathize with the victims and am repulsed by the actions of the perpetrator, I am also dumbstruck by the moralizing tone from the media.

Many of them trumpet the idea of tolerance in our culture...and in such an atmosphere, I cannot help but notice how **intolerant** and **inconsistent** people are showing themselves to be.

Let me explain.

One of the cardinal virtues of 21st century American culture seems to be wrapped up in the word *relativism*. We seldom hear this word or its explanation. Rather, we see examples of it in movies, television shows, music, books, advertising, video games, social media, politics, and so on....

In a nutshell, *relativism* can be summed up with these three statements:²

- The word **truth** describes an individual belief or preference rather than an objective reality.
- There can be many truths about the same moral issue.
- When it comes to moral rules—principles of right and wrong—it's up to the individual to decide.

One of the supposed virtues of *relativism* is moral neutrality: You do your thing, I'll do my thing and no one can judge the rightness or wrongness of what we do. In fact, we're really not right or wrong, we're just different.

This idea that there is no inherent right or wrong, just difference, is summed up in the word *tolerance*. Tolerant people are impartial, non-judgmental, and neutral. They understand that each person gets to decide for himself or herself and that no one can impose his or her personal morality on others.³

The reverse is also true: **Intolerant** people are partial, judgmental, biased and bigoted. They insist on deciding what's right and wrong for others and do so by pushing their own morality.

² Gregory Koukl, "How do Christians answer the spirit of the age, relativism?" in Solid Ground (from Stand to Reason), May/June 2005 issue, page 1.

³ Gregory Koukl, from the opening letter of Solid Ground (from Stand to Reason), January/February 2006 issue, page 1.

This week I have heard and read, ad nauseam, Joe Paterno be vilified because even though he fulfilled his legal obligations, he did not fully fulfill his **moral** obligations to the victims.

Listen, I cannot speak to what obligations Joe Paterno did and did not fulfill. I am not privy to all the pertinent information. But I can speak to the inconsistency of the media at large in leveling charges about someone's moral responsibilities. In doing so, I am not leveling charges at any individual. Rather, I am taking aim at the false ideas of *relativism* and *tolerance*.

If *relativism* is true, then there can be no immoral cultures, laws, people, or acts. There is nothing ultimately bad, tragic or worthy of blame, and nothing ultimately good, honorable, noble, or praiseworthy⁴. For example, if relativism is true, then Mother Teresa was no better, or worse, than Adolf Hitler. She did her thing, and he did his. Neither was right nor wrong; they were just different.

Now, if you're saying to yourself, "Come on, Rob, there's no way people believe that." I'd say you are right because when you follow *relativism* to its logical conclusion, you have to make such comparisons...and most people are not willing to do so.

However, in our culture, people don't pay attention to what's at the end of the road. They act like it doesn't exist because it doesn't serve the purpose of the moment. Besides, if you offer such a comparison, you'll likely be accused of being too extreme.

I admit that my example is extreme...but again it's only because I want you to see the end result of *relativistic thinking*.

In addition, if *tolerance* is such a virtue, then why are the pundits allowed to be partial, judgmental, biased, and even bigoted? Instead of further polishing and selling the idea of *tolerance* such reactions reveal the bankruptcy of the idea. (This is especially true when

⁴ Koukl, "How do Christians answer the spirit of the age, relativism?"

you consider that the traditional definition of *tolerate* is to put up with something, or someone, you disagree with or dislike.)

I believe the reaction to the Penn State scandal opens a door for us to look at a cultural battle being fought on more fronts than we can engage at any one time. I also believe it opens a door of hope for us who know Jesus Christ as savior, who stand against the abuse that is alleged to have taken place, and who also stand against cultural standards inconsistent with the word of God.

This message is titled, "Welcome to the real world," because I believe the philosophy of *relativism* and its servant, *tolerance*, are misguided and dangerous notions of fantasy that seek to usurp God's place of preeminence in the universe and enthrone mankind in his place.

Let's start our look at **the real world** by reading 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 (page 821 in the pew Bibles)—⁴ *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* ⁵ *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*

I believe I can make four relevant observations from these verses. I'll note them first and then address them. **One**, we are in a war we cannot win on our own. **Two**, we are neither helpless nor destined for defeat! **Three**, we have weapons at our disposal that are divinely empowered to demolish strongholds. **Four**, we are to engage and capture the enemy strongholds.

Now, let's unpack these observations a bit.

One, we are in a war we cannot win on our own. Ephesians 6:12 tells us that, "...*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*"

This is called spiritual warfare and God's word is clear that the battle between good and evil, right and wrong, is not a battle amongst people. Rather, it is a battle against spiritual forces and *we cannot win on our own.*

Two and three, we are neither helpless nor destined for defeat, we have weapons at our disposal that are divinely empowered to demolish strongholds.

We cannot battle spiritual forces with conventional weapons; we must use spiritual ones. Listen to Ephesians 6:10-18, from *The Message* translation:

*.... God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. **This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish** against the Devil and all his angels.*

*Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. **Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them.** You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.*

If you're tempted to think, "Well that's not much to go on," consider Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 1:25, "...*the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*"

We are in a battle we cannot win on our own, but we are neither helpless nor destined for defeat because we have weapons at our disposal that are divinely empowered to demolish strongholds!

Four, we are to engage and capture the enemy strongholds. A stronghold is a well-fortified place. It is a position that will not be conquered easily. The passage in 2

Corinthians 10 identifies two strongholds we are to engage and capture: arguments and pretensions set up against the knowledge of God.

An *argument* is a reason for or against something and a *pretense* is a false allegation or justification. These definitions reinforce the fact that the battle is not against people. Also note that the strongholds we are to engage and conquer are both set up **against the knowledge of God**.

The ideas of *relativism* and *tolerance* are built on the foundation that there is no objective, universal standard of morality because there is no God to know and be known. Therefore, mankind is left to sort things out the best way it can. Part of that sorting has evolved into the teaching that you can do your thing and I can do mine, and neither of us is right or wrong; we're just different. It has further come to the place where it is impermissible to pass judgment on anyone or anything without being labeled as intolerant, judgmental, biased, or bigoted.

Oddly, though, those who label others in such ways do not acknowledge that they are themselves being intolerant, judgmental, biased, and bigoted. Therefore, they inconsistently apply their own philosophy and thus show its failure to deliver what it promises—a world where we all just get along by minimizing our differences and accepting every individual definition of truth.

I believe such inconsistency is itself a sign of the battle's spiritual nature. 2 Corinthians 4:4 tells us that, "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of **unbelievers**, so that they **cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.***"

Folks, we are in a battle we cannot win on our own, but we are neither helpless nor destined for defeat because we have weapons at our disposal that are divinely empowered to demolish the strongholds we engage and capture on God's terms.

In this message, I have highlighted a spiritual battle brought to light by a moral scandal that has rocked an institution known for integrity. I've shown that the battle is not fought against other people but against ideas contrary to the word of God. I've also shown that the

weapons used to fight this battle are spiritual and not physical. Yet, there is one more point I need to emphasize: the key to victory is obedience to Christ.

We cannot merely decide on our own that we are going to fight this battle and think that we have the knowledge and skill to engage the enemy and win just because we've read and talked about some verses that give us hope for victory. Such a naïve approach would be akin to reading David Leadbetter's book, *The Golf Swing*, and assuming we could go out and win the Player's Championship and take home the \$1.71 million prize that goes with it.

None of us would think such a thing was possible. In the same way, we must approach this spiritual battle realistically. We must ask God to open our eyes to the battle and to direct us in the proper fighting techniques. We must also learn the necessary skills to fight shrewdly and effectively, knowing that God's power will be displayed through us. Listen again to God's word from Ephesians 6 (The Message):

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare.

As our nation processes and continues to react to the scandal at Penn State, let's keep in mind that the abuse is wrong, not primarily because society has deemed some actions to be unacceptable, but because God—the author of universal standards—has decreed those things to be unacceptable. Ultimately, it is not our understanding, evolution, or enlightenment that matters. It is the word of God...which will stand forever.

We must engage these strongholds, first in our own lives and then in the culture at large—even here in our area. At the beginning of this message, I said that the word *relativism* is seldom heard or defined. That's because it is assumed to be a good and virtuous idea. That assumption is what makes it so dangerous to individuals and cultures. C.S. Lewis wrote that, "The most important ideas in a society are not the ones that are argued, but the ones that are assumed." It's time for us to stop assuming cultural values are legitimate and it's time for us to stand up and fight in the power of God who is the author of all truth!