

Dear members and friends of St. John,

In the wake of the tragic shootings at the church in Charleston, South Carolina (June 17, 2015), many are wondering what went wrong. Whose is to blame? While we'd like a simple answer, the reality is certainly complex.

I often think back to my days growing up. Television had gripped America, and Americans largely sat around their TV's at night for entertainment. What was showing: *Leave it to Beaver, My Three Sons, I Love Lucy, The Dick Van Dyke Show* – and many others. When you watch these old programs, a striking subtheme emerges: **The teaching of morals and ethics.** The message of these shows predominately showed the proper social behavior of Americans. Adults acted responsibly in the marriage setting, and as parents. Children respected their elders; parents disciplined their children and made them apologize and make amends for the wrongs they'd committed. Society had moral and ethical footings.

Today, the occasional show may touch on morals and ethics, but **liberal thought** has inundated our society. Over the last 30 years, what has been the dominant thinking of educators concerning the teaching of morals and ethics? It may be harmful to the self-esteem of our children. Children should be rewarded for free-thinking, for standing up to authority, for making decisions that will help them reach their personal goals. Individual achievement and happiness is of far more import than community and sharing and service to others. And so, we have a society dominated by narcissistic behavior and individualistic thought.

But there are greater forces that are work in American society. Hidden forces that take a great toll. These forces of evil have been effective in removing our children (and their parents) from the Church and her teachings. Don't think for a minute that this isn't a huge factor in what's happening to America today. The Bible is clear: **We are all sinners**, and without the work of the Spirit and the Word of God, **we** would lapse into self-centeredness and moral decay. Listen to St. Paul, writing in Romans:

"¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Romans 8:1-6 [ESV]

Notice verse 4: "*in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us...*" **We are called to lead Godly lives.** That means to serve our Lord by serving our neighbor in love. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave for *our* self-centeredness, for *our* hatreds, *our* refusal to lead moral lives. By faith in Him (faith: "*the law of the Spirit of life*") our hearts and minds are changed. We no longer "*live according to the flesh,*" but now "*set [our] minds on the things of the Spirit.*" While we are saved by faith alone (and not by our good deeds), good deeds are how we respond to this great gift of life!

Folks, this is huge! Even the liberal educators in our public schools recognize the decline in morals and ethics. There are curriculum changes in our schools that are meant to teach proper behavior – moral and ethical behavior. While this may help to a limited degree, it won't solve the bigger problem. You see, the TV shows of the 50's and 60's did **not teach** America how to behave – no, it merely reinforced what children and adults were learning in church through religious instruction. **The Spirit has to change the heart and the mind – there is no substitute for this!** Then, outside instruction that reinforces what the Spirit holds sacred and good, can be received with great benefit to our children and their parents.

Lest you think **perfect change** comes in an instant, at the moment we believe in Christ, think again. The Old Adam inside of us (our old sinful self) needs to be killed, replaced by the New Man in Christ Jesus. In other words, the change of our heart and mind is a work-in-progress. And God is doing the work. We read,

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:1-3)

"*Be transformed...*" (v. 2) You come to worship, you attend Bible study, you receive the Sacrament of the Altar, and **you are transformed by God. It's a lifelong process.** As this happens, you are able to "*discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" Folks, that nothing more or less than Godly behavior and thought – good morals and ethics are built in.

And what about the liberals that have placed self-esteem above moral and ethical behavior: "*...I say to everyone among you **not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...***" (v. 3). God is transforming us to place God and others *ahead* of ourselves. That's foundational to good morals and ethics. Narcissistic behavior gives way to *a servant's heart*.

So, how do we respond to well-meaning people who want to double-down on the teaching of morals and ethics? Will bringing back the old TV programs change America? Will new public school curriculums change our children? **It must begin with God doing the changing.** We need to be inviting our family, neighbors and friends to church. Our teenage children must not be allowed to sleep in on Sunday mornings. We need God in our lives. America needs God – the real God who died on the cross. New laws, increased public education, and wishful thinking will not work. The **ONLY** way to mend and reverse the decline, like we've witnessed in Charleston, is to reach out to our neighbor with the message and love of Christ. May God empower you and me, and all Christians in America, to do so.

Pastor Travis