

“Handwashing, Dishwashing, Mouthwashing”  
Proper 17B (September 2, 2018)  
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen<<

NPR’s *Planet Money* did a profile piece back in June on Tommy Noonan - a bodybuilder who also runs a website that fights fake online product reviews on Amazon.<sup>1</sup> Fake reviews are those reviews of products written not by consumers, who are trying to help other consumers, but by manufacturers pretending to be consumers, who are trying to boost the positive reviews of their products.

Tommy Noonan’s intervention into this dark world of fake online reviews began in 2006 when he built an online review site called supplementreviews.com. Bodybuilders could login and review and rate health products. As the site became more popular, health supplement manufacturers took notice, and something suspicious started happening: overly positive reviews began taking over the site - reviews that sounded like sales pitches from marketing reps, with phrases like “university-proven studies” and “this product truly delivers on its promises.” Such reviews sounded to Noonan like they’d been written by people from the manufacturing companies, who secretly entered his website to write press releases to influence readers. Some of these fake reviewers gave themselves away as fake by logging into the website using their manufacturing company email addresses!

Noonan began to wonder how widespread fake reviewing is online: if fake reviews were happening on his relatively small website - supplementreviews.com - what was happening on behemoth sites like Amazon with thousands of products and thousands more reviews? As he began analyzing product reviews on Amazon, Noonan got good at spotting the fakes. He noticed, for example, that some reviewers only reviewed products from one company over and over again, which suggested that they worked for that company, and were trying to boost its sales. Other fake reviews used language that sounded like a sales pitch. But the most obvious fake reviews were the ones posted in bundles: a bunch of very positive reviews posted in matter of days. One product on Amazon received 78% of its most glowing 4 and 5 star reviews over a period of five days. Noonan discovered that companies were paying fake reviewers to post positive reviews at the same time to elevate a product’s rating.

All of this research led Noonan to wonder whether we, honest shoppers can trust *any* online reviews. He decided to write a computer program to help us identify the fakes, and started a new website called reviewmeta.com. You can copy the URL of a product into his website search window, and the algorithm will filter out suspicious reviews. For the *Planet Money* show, Noonan’s algorithm analyzed 177 reviews of an iPhone cable being sold on Amazon. The algorithm weeded out 94% of the reviews as fake, which dropped the product’s rating from 4.9 stars out of 5 to just 1.7 stars. Amazon disputed these numbers when *Planet Money* contacted them for comment, but Amazon did admit that product reviews are a problem, which they said they’re trying to fix. But as *Planet Money* pointed out, Amazon is an e-commerce site that makes money when products sell. And positive reviews - fake or not - boost sales. So, is it really in Amazon’s interest to fix fake reviews?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=623988370>

This story is a microcosm, it seems to me, of a larger problem in our culture - what journalist Nick Enfield calls an erosion of trust<sup>2</sup> - an erosion of trust in institutions, and in the information we consume. Enfield writes about a “new normal” in our “post-truth world,” where “experts are dismissed, alternative facts are (sometimes flagrantly) offered, and public figures can offer opinions on pretty much anything. And thanks to social media,” he goes on, “pretty much anyone can be a public figure. ... [W]e are seeing,” he writes, “either a lack of interest in evidence, or worse, an erosion of trust in the fundamental norms around people’s accountability for the things [they] say.”

This trust problem is illustrated by scholar of religion Monica Miller, who recalled walking into a Starbucks and seeing an advertisement that made her skeptical.<sup>3</sup> “Written on a matte black background” in font aimed at “any hipster toting around a typewriter,” she writes, a coffee advertisement read, “Ethiopia Single-Origin: Velvety-soft with peppery spice and sweet citrus notes.” Miller remembers being “put off by the assumption” that she would want “sweet citrus notes” in her coffee. But besides this, she started to deconstruct the ad in her mind: What does the phrase “Ethiopia Single-Origin” mean, she wondered? Do the “coffee beans” “all hail” from the same place? “Do coffee beans have a sense of geography?” “Would someone from Ethiopia walk into this cafe and immediately feel at home-away-from-home?” She had doubts about the ad, and thought maybe Starbucks was just trying to sell coffee by being clever.

Her skepticism illustrates, I think, this problem of trust - this “erosion of trust” that journalist Nick Enfield describes, and that Tommy Noonan has uncovered in his analysis of fake product reviews on Amazon. Some say it’s a problem with roots in the love of money - the pursuit of profit - a pursuit that Karl Marx once said would leave “remaining no other nexus between [people] than naked self-interest ... .”<sup>4</sup> If it’s in your interest to be deceptive to sell products, then you will be, whether by advertising Ethiopia Single-Origin coffee or by padding online reviews to boost sales.

In today’s gospel reading from Mark, Jesus delves into this problem of trust, among other things, and tries to locate its origins. For Jesus, this problem is deeper than Karl Marx’s “naked self-interest” driven by profit-motive. The problem, says Jesus, is the human heart itself. In the verses that follow the ones we heard this morning, Jesus lists things that proceed from the human heart - things like evil intentions, theft, avarice, pride, folly. Jesus is making the point - a point stated many times and in many ways in scripture - that deep within the recesses of the human heart lies the extraordinary capacity both for good and evil; the capacity to love selflessly, give generously, trust openly, and also to deceive and hate and hurt others. The human heart is a kind of battleground like in a Shakespearean play. Scripture speaks of the human heart as having the capacity to be desperately wicked (so says the prophet Jeremiah); but the human heart is also capable of trust and love and generosity (so says St. Paul in his letters); and the heart, says Jesus in another place, is capable of producing much good. Jesus once said in a sermon, “the good person out of the good

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/17/were-in-a-post-truth-world-with-eroding-trust-and-accountability-it-can-t-end-well>

<sup>3</sup> Monica R. Miller, “Selling Identities: One Coffee Bean at a Time,” in *Fabricating Origins*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015): 28-30. Miller argues that Starbucks is trying to sell “identity” - an important insight, but one that extends beyond the focus of this sermon.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (trans. Samuel Moore; New York: Penguin, 1967 [1888, English]), 222.

treasure of the heart produces good [deeds].” And, in another sermon, he said those who are “pure in heart” are “blessed,” because they can “see God.”

But what’s interesting about today’s story from Mark is that Jesus doesn’t begin by moralizing about the human heart. He begins by talking about mundane things like dishwashing and handwashing - and then, like any inventive preacher, gets carried away and expounds on deeper moral issues. The setting of today’s story in Mark is a dispute between Jesus and other religious leaders over whether someone should ritually wash their hands before eating. This is not an issue of sanitation but of religious ritual. Handwashing and dishwashing were technical legal debates over the issue of purity in ancient Judaism - an issue that had been debated by legal experts since the days of Moses; and there were different interpretations. Did *every* person need to ritually wash their hands before eating Kosher food or only priests in the temple? Did *every* dish need to be ritually washed in a prescribed way or only those utensils used in the temple? And, further, were there certain foods that would make a person ritually unclean when eaten? Debates over handwashing and dishwashing and mouthwashing - that is, eating certain foods.

I think it’s important to keep in mind that Jesus was a good Jew: kosher-eating, temple-honoring, law-abiding. But he didn’t believe that handwashing, dishwashing, and mouthwashing (by eating certain foods) - these external rituals - would cleanse a heart. Obeying the law doesn’t make someone moral. Morality goes deeper. It’s a heart issue - not a hands, dishes, or food issue. It might be technically legal to handwash, dishwash, or eat certain foods in a prescribed way, but none of these externals can get to the roots of morality: the do justice, love kindness, walk in mercy - types of morality; the “weightier matters” that Jesus talks about in another place: the “weightier matters” of, as he says, “justice and mercy and faith.” Jesus brutally called out those religious leaders who only focused on externals, accusing them of cleaning and polishing the outside, while harboring “greed and self-indulgence” on the inside. Or, as he once said to the Pharisees, “you clean the outside of the cup and the plate,” but your inside is still dirty. Or, to put this in modern language, it might be technically legal to post misleading product reviews on Amazon, but is it moral to do so? It might be technically legal to advertise Ethiopia Single-Origin coffee, but is it moral to do so if the phrase can be so easily deconstructed by scholar of religion who just wants a cup of coffee?

On Friday, NPR’s *Morning Edition* delved into the world of morality and legality when it interviewed Carlos Monje, the head of public policy for Twitter. Twitter, as many of you know, has been in the crosshairs of public debate lately because its rules are lax when it comes to policing free expression, and the sharing of ideas. But at the time of the *Morning Edition* interview, Twitter had just finished blocking hundreds of accounts that were promoting misleading information. Carlos Monje defended Twitter’s decision to block accounts when he said, “We [on Twitter] want to make sure that we allow a venue for all voices to come out. [But] if somebody breaks the law, if somebody engages in hateful conduct, if somebody calls for violence or uses racial slurs, those are things that we think are beyond the pale, and we’ll take [them] off the platform.” *Morning Edition*’s Steve Inskeep pressed Monje further on the issue of morality, wanting to know the root cause of misinformation on Twitter. “But what is it that causes the actual problem?” Inskeep asked. “Are you saying it’s purely human nature, [that this is] how humanity is? Is there something about social media that is bringing out the worst in people? What makes certain aspects of

this otherwise very useful conversation so very bad? ... Do you think who we are on social media is actually just pretty much who we are?" he asked.

Monje paused for a long time on air, and then said, "when there's a falsehood that comes out on the platform, the rest of the platform and folks who actually know what's ... going on swamp the falsehood with truth. And we've seen that over and over again. It happened after the Boston Marathon bombing when there was a rumor out that they had caught the shooter. When Gabby Giffords was shot, it was actually the hospital [on Twitter] that said no, in fact, she was still alive. The platform can be a tremendous force for getting the actual truth out there. And," Monje continued, "deleting a tweet doesn't delete the ideology behind it. And we [at Twitter] think it's important to have a space where these sometimes terrible ideas can come forward and be challenged in the public and in the open." Monje went on: "You know, I go back to the example of what was a hard day, I think, for me and for a lot of people here in the U.S., which was the Charlottesville rallies ... . We saw a lot of bad people ... . [S]eeing Tiki torches on the streets, seeing people spew hate on the streets of America ... . And we saw that reflected on Twitter in that a very, very small minority of users came out and said terrible things. But what we also saw, in the country and online and on our platform, is the rest of civil society coming out and rejecting it firmly and flatly and saying, this is not who we are."

...Maybe Carlos Monje is onto something here. Maybe he's articulating in different words, and in a different context, something Jesus himself was getting at so long ago. That external laws and rules and customs have limitations. They can constrain and set boundaries on behavior, but they can't change hearts; the moral life is about something deeper than handwashing or dishwashing or mouthwashing. Good and evil spring from the heart, as Jesus once said. And maybe Carlos Monje's appeal to the broader Twitter community to correct falsehood is just another way of talking about an ancient truth that goes back to Judaism and through Christianity and beyond: that the community - the people, the "body of Christ," in our tradition - a body, a community driven by those ancient values of justice and mercy and kindness and grace and truth can be an anchor for our moral feet - an anchor, a beacon, a compass - to steady us, light our way, set our course, and.....change our hearts, so we can be moral anchors and beacons and compasses in a world that sometimes seems completely insane. It's because morality matters that church will always matter. Amen.