

"Morally Discerning"

Week 4 | October 28, 2018

Matthew 22:15-40

Sermon Summary: In our individualistic culture, most people consider few things to be truly moral issues. Sure, there are some big universals like "don't kill" and don't steal." But most of life really isn't a moral issue or problem. "You do you" as long as it doesn't hinder anyone else from "doing them." But God sees things differently. He wants shalom for everyone—harmonious, interdependent flourishing. That means almost everything is "moral" at some level. Morality is about right and wrong *and how to get along*. It's not just avoiding vice but cultivating virtue. It's about how you shape your character...and your calendar...and your covenant relationships. It's about how you invest your time, money, and energy. It's about the stewardship of life.

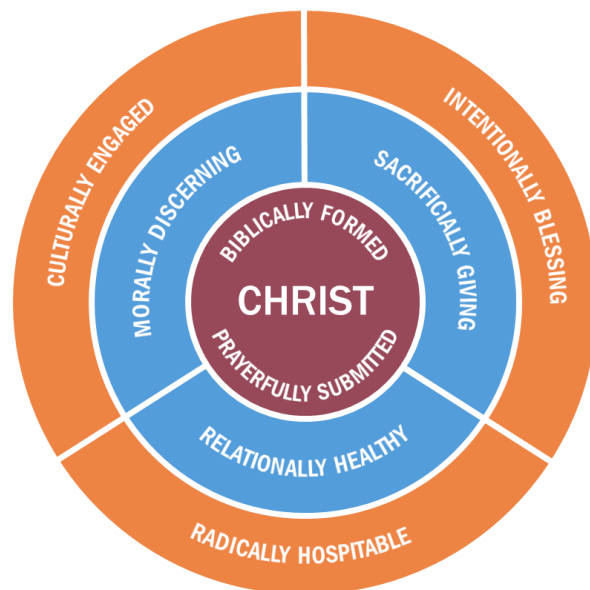
And that's why we need discernment: the ability to love the right things in the right way and to the right degree. There aren't rules for most of this. Rather, we perceive reality and then discern|sense|love our way "shalom-ishly" into it.

In the three vignettes in today's Scripture passage, Jesus both teaches and models discernment. All the powers-that-be are arrayed against him, hoping to shame and discredit him before the people, which would destroy his influence. When they fail, they decide to shame and discredit him by a false trial and crucifixion. It's Tuesday of Holy Week. Friday's a-comin'.

The first opponents, parties from opposite sides of the aisle, pose a moral dilemma about taxes: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus looks at a coin stamped with the image and inscription of Caesar and says, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." He's not evading the question, nor is he advocating for a kind of Christian "dual citizenship" and shared loyalty. He's not saying, "Pay taxes and pay tithes. Obey the government and obey God's moral law." That's what we should do, but that's not the teaching here. Just the opposite. Jesus says, in effect, "Caesar has stamped his image in this little bit of metal—I guess it belongs to him. Give him all he wants. But is anything else here marked with an image? Anything at all? *Oh yeah—you are!* You bear the image and inscription of God. You are wholly owned by him. Your citizenship is in heaven; you are ambassadors of God's kingdom.

And that's the first foundation of a morally discerning life: **Know who you are and whose you are.** If you start from that place, most moral quandaries will work themselves out. You might not have precise answers for what you should do in every situation, but you'll be pointed in the right direction.

In the second scenario, the Sadducees try to show how ridiculous the idea of resurrection is. What if a person has multiple spouses? Whose husband or wife will they be in the so-called "resurrection"?



But Jesus says, “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures or the power of God.” You have no *telos*—no end or ultimate goal of your lives. You can only see on this horizon, and so you live for money and power and pleasure. But people who know God’s word also know God’s end—resurrection and reward and a reign that lasts forever for God’s righteous people.

And that’s the second foundation of a morally discerning life: **Know God’s word and where you are going.** Jesus, for the joy set before him, endured the cross. He resisted sin rather than giving into it precisely so that he could save us and reign with us. That’s the reward of any life centered on Christ.

Finally, in the last episode, a lawyer asks Jesus about the greatest commandment in the Bible. Jesus gives the standard orthodox answer: Love God with all your heart. But then he adds the kicker: “And a second command is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says the whole Bible hangs on these two commands. In other words, the morally discerning person will **know others as coequal recipients of their love.** That is, virtual co-equals with God—“the second command is like the first”—and certainly coequals with ourselves, whom we all love and comfort and care for a thousand times a day.

These three principles will keep us on the moral straight-and-narrow, flying us day by day as arrows aimed at God’s bullseye.

Discussion Guide

1. Read Matthew 22:15-40.
2. When you initially hear the call to be morally discerning, does it turn you on or turn you off? Why?
3. In the sermon we heard that morality is about right and wrong and getting along. It’s not just about avoiding vice but cultivating virtue as “beings-in-relationship”—people living in a world where God desires *shalom*: harmonious, interdependent flourishing. And since we don’t have rules for everything in this complex world, we need discernment—the ability to love the right things, in the right way, to the right degree.
 - Where do you think Christians typically are most lacking in discernment these days?
 - Where have you lacked it?
 - In an ideal world (or at least one that is better than ours) what would *shalom* look like?
4. Religious people sometimes struggle with *moralism*, a self-righteous and judgmental attitude, especially toward those who don’t live up to our standards.
 - What are some things that the gospel would say as a corrective to moralism?
 - What are some things the gospel would say as an encouragement to true moral discernment?
5. Discuss and apply the principles from Matthew 22:15-40 to your lives:
 - A. Know who you are and whose you are (as image-bearers of God).
 - How does having an identity in Christ lead to a moral life?
 - B. Know God’s word and where you are going.
 - How does having a “telos”—an end in the resurrection, reward, and reign of God—lead to a moral life?
 - C. Know others as the co-equal recipients of your love.
 - Reflect on some of the ways you love yourself. If you loved others that way, how would it lead to a more moral and Christlike life?
 - How has Christ loved you this way?