

ALIVE: Being Fully Alive Morally
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Today we are wrapping up a message series we started on Easter Sunday called ALIVE. During this series we have looked at what it means to be fully alive; alive spiritually, alive relationally, and alive financially. Today, we are going to look at what it means to be alive morally. There are competing ideas of what it means to be a moral person out there, so we're going to look at this and see what the prophet Malachi and Jesus both have to say about this. As we put the components of this series together, we get a glimpse at what an integrated life in Christ looks like.

Invite to take out the Study Guide and Outline...

I found something very insightful this week to help us all kind of enter into the moral conundrums we all find ourselves in. Morality is a broad topic with all kinds of applications. So I wanted to find some way to remind us that we are making moral decisions all the time, all day long, in the various situations we face at home and at work. This video comes from one of the greatest social satires ever created for the small screen.

Show video of Beverly Hillbillies.

Mr. Drysdale and Jane Hathaway both have their price, don't they? There is that point where honesty and integrity collide with profit and employability or convenience, or conflict avoidance, or any number of things that tempt us to compromise our integrity. Hopefully, that point for you and me is quite a bit higher than it is for Milton and Jane. But it is there, at some point, all the same.

I believe Jesus wants us to live lives of moral purity. His hope is that we would be beyond reproach. Not that we are going to be perfect and mistake free, but that our code of conduct to others is so high and so consistent that our word is believable and more importantly, our God is visible through us. This is part of what it means to be alive morally; that the life of Christ can be seen through the way we conduct our lives in our personal and business relationships.

Still, the shortcuts are there and they are tempting. We might be tempted to cover up an indiscretion with a lie; or increase our profit margin with unsubstantiated charges; or pad our paycheck by recording hours we didn't work; or cover up a blunder to save our job; or plagiarize a report and call it our own; or take credit for someone else's idea or work. And people all around us seem to be getting away with this kind of stuff, so that makes it even easier to justify taking the moral shortcuts. It doesn't seem to pay to be squeaky clean. Sometimes the moral high ground is not very profitable.

This is nothing new. We've been looking back to the Old Testament prophet Malachi in each of the messages for this series. As it turns out, the God-honoring people of his day struggled with the same reality. They even complained that it didn't make any difference if they honored God by being upstanding moral citizens or not, because it was pretty clear that the immoral ones were the ones that got ahead.

"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? 15 But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.' "Malachi 3:14-15

Those are some pretty strong words! The morality and integrity challenged people out there are succeeding and those of us who play by the rules are getting left out. And the Lord responds through Malachi to the people that the Lord will remember the faithful and God-fearing servants and there will be a day when the wickedness of others will be revealed.

It's a similar question and answer to one that we find in Psalm 73. The composer of this poem admits his struggle to understand why the immoral seem to be blessed and even says that his attempt to lead a God-honoring life seems to be in vain; (Psalm 73:3-5,8-9,12-13, 18-19 TNIV)

3 For I envied the arrogant

when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

*4 They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong. [a]
5 They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.*

*8 They scoff, and speak with malice;
with arrogance they threaten oppression.*

*9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.*

*12 This is what the wicked are like—
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.*

*13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
and have washed my hands in innocence.*

He goes on to say that he couldn't figure it out. He couldn't understand why God allows the immoral to prosper. Doesn't that fly in the face of the idea that the good will prosper? Aren't the ones who walk in obedience to God supposed to be the ones who are blessed? What's the motivation to be God honoring with your life if the people who make up their own rules become wealthy and powerful enough to oppress the rest? Why not just join them?

God eventually responds to the poet and shows him the "final destiny" of the people who play by their own rules and disregard God's way.

*18 Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.*

*19 How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!*

This is what we will call the principle of the slippery rock. Have you ever tried to cross a stream, walking on rocks just beneath the surface of the water, covered with slippery moss? You know how it goes. People start trying to cross a stream; they're walking very slowly, choosing stepping stones very carefully. Then partway across, they lose their balance a little bit, or they take a giant step from one submerged rock to another. And their foot slides over the slippery green surface of that next rock, and well, you know the rest of the story. It has something to do with a splash.

Well, the moral of the story is quite simple. Those who walk on slippery rocks long enough or often enough will eventually wind up in the drink. It's a pretty basic principle. Walk on a slippery rock long enough, you'll eventually wind up in the drink.

Now, the writer of Psalm 73 is agonizing over people who are far from God who don't give a care in the world about honoring or pleasing God with their lives, people who are cutting moral corners, shading the truth, skimming the till, sleeping in the wrong bed, abusing their bodies and spirit. The psalmist says, "How can these people be faring so well? They seem to be prospering and setting profitability records. How are they getting away with it if there's a holy God running this ship?"

And God gives them a partial explanation in Psalm 73 through the slippery rock principle. God whispers to the psalmist, "Don't envy people walking on slippery rocks. Don't envy their lives because they are one moss-covered rock away from disaster." "While it may look well to the casual observer," God says, "these people are in real moral trouble. They're one step away from a huge splash, and when they fall in the drink it could shatter their lives."

So if you're walking on slippery rocks or if you're tempted to take some moral shortcuts to try to get ahead; to be anything less than beyond reproach in your personal and business relationships, then take warning; this is a lesson for all of us. Don't walk on slippery walks. Stay away from those moss-covered stepping stones. Don't get near them. Go back to the moral high ground and say, "God, no more corner cutting in my life, in no area of my life. No more double talking, no more

exaggerating, no more gray area deal-making. No more deception. I want every thought, word and action to be beyond reproach. I want off these slippery rocks. I want back on the solid ground of walking in your ways fully, wholly, completely—no more. No more slippery stone walking for me."

So the prophet Malachi and the psalmist give us a warning about the eventual outcome if we choose to take the moral shortcuts. What they do not do is give us an adequate picture of what it looks like to be fully alive morally. The Old Testament answer to that question involved obeying 613 laws. These laws described the ways that the people of Israel were to be in right relationship with God through worship and how they were to be in right relationship with each other. So in Malachi's day, morality was determined by your ability to follow a lengthy list of do's and don'ts.

But Jesus has a more complete take on what it means for us to be fully alive morally. Jesus isn't all that interested in morality by rules and regulations. For Jesus, morality is about putting love into action. Rules have to do with religion. Love has to do with relationship.

During his ministry, Jesus summed up the Old Testament law in two different ways. One of those ways is called the great commandment. Jesus is asked which is the greatest of all the commandments and he responded that it is actually two - and they are each just as important as the other; to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. You probably know about that passage. But there's one other place where Jesus sums up all of the Old Testament into one phrase: Matthew 7:12 TNIV

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

You know this passage. It's called the Golden Rule. When you think about it, it pretty much the same thing as loving your neighbor as yourself. It's the same idea. What you may not know is that every major religion of the ancient world has some variation of this rule; and some of them predate Jesus. **Confucius**, for example, who lived 500 years before Jesus said, "**Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.**" Do you see the similarity? But even though they are similar, there is a significant difference. Confucius statement is prohibitive. Do not do what you do not want people to do to you. It's about restraint. It's about not doing something. Jesus' statement includes the prohibitive, like Confucius', but he adds the call to proactively do something for them that you would want someone to do for you.

For example, it's pouring down rain and you're on the highway and up ahead, there's a car stalled out on the shoulder with the hood up. Now you could move over to the left lane and give them some room and avoid splashing them, because you would not want to get splashed or run over. That would be fulfilling the saying according to Confucius. The Golden Rule according to Jesus would call you to do something more. The golden rule compels us not by obedience to a law or rules but by obedience to love. So minimally, that would mean calling to be sure that help is on the way, or if you feel like it's safe to stop and you know enough to actually be of help, then maybe it's to stop and offer assistance.

John Wesley, the founding force of the Methodist movement in 1700's England wrote something called the "Three General Rules". What Wesley found in his time was that there were lots of people turning their life to Christ but that they weren't sure how to live it out. It's like they said, "Now that I believe in Jesus, I think that means I have to live differently (morally), but I don't know what to do or not do." So Wesley wrote these 3 simple rules to help new Christians live out the moral of Christ-like love and help them progress in their spiritual life.

Now these three rules were:

Do no harm. Now you can see that this comes from the restraint side of the Golden Rule. This is essentially what Confucius said and what Jesus certainly included with his Golden Rule.

The next rule was to **Do all the good you can.** Actually, Wesley put it this way, "Do all the good you can in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." It seems that pretty much covers what it means to be proactively demonstrating love in action.

Wesley's third rule was to **Stay in love with God**. You can see how this one connects to the first of the great commandments to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. What Wesley meant is to do the things that keep our relationship with God vital; by practicing the spiritual disciplines of reading scripture and prayer and attending worship and receiving the sacrament of communion.

So this is the way that John Wesley answered the question of what a Christian moral life looks like. It's pretty clear that he didn't make this stuff up, he went straight back to Jesus and took what Jesus said and rephrased in language that people of his day would connect with.

The first two of the 3 general rules are basically both halves of the golden rule. And what would it look like if you applied this golden rule, maybe we could call it the gold standard to all the relationships in your life? What would your marriage look like if you were more about serving your spouse? What would your relationship with your children be like? If you're a salesperson, what does it mean to treat your customer the way you want to be treated? If you're in business, what does customer service look like if you're living out the gold standard? If you're a nurse, how does the golden rule effect your attention to a demanding, unlikable patient? How does the golden rule effect the way your treat your co-workers...both the ones you like and the ones you don't.; or an overbearing supervisor, or an underachieving employee?

Recently, you may have noticed that we've started using a phrase around here that helps us communicate our mission. Our mission is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. But what does an active faith look like? So we've started using this description of an active faith. It is to **Love God, love others, and serve the world**. Interesting, isn't it, how similar that is to the great commandments and the golden rule? So if your life is on the mission of loving God, loving others and serving the world, you are, morally speaking, alive. Being fully alive morally is living lives of integrity and honesty and grace which flows naturally out of our relationship with Jesus. Contrary to what many Christians may think, being alive morally is not agenda or rule driven. Christian morality doesn't come out of a set of rules and regulations, and it isn't always black and white. Christian morality is not a set of political agendas. It doesn't look judgmental. Christian morality is relational - it's sharing the love, grace, and forgiveness we have received from a loving savior to the people we meet along our journey of life, so that means that our agendas about what is right and what is wrong (even with hot topic issues of our day) play second fiddle to the golden rule; There was no one in history who was more capable or qualified to determine what is right and what is wrong than Jesus. Yet, we hardly ever see him pass judgment on the morality of others...and when we do see it, he is calling out the hypocrisy of religious leaders; because they do not live up to the standards by which they judge others. Clearly, Jesus knows all my moral failures, yet what he offers me is not judgment and condemnation or even a list of do's and don'ts, but grace and forgiveness. That's good news! I don't always get it right, sometimes I really blow it, but when I live out the golden rule, when I am "doing no harm" and I'm proactively "doing all the good I can", I feel so alive -and I think that's because it's in those moments that I am allowing Jesus to be most alive in me. And that makes his love more visible to the world, and that's some really good news...