

"Spiritual Formation & Moral Knowledge "

Dallas Willard - Bethel Pastor's Luncheon - October, 2008

Scribe's Comments - The session was transcribed from the recording in good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The [brackets], **bold**, and underline disclose the scribe's commentary and cross-references other Dallas Willard teachings.



["Disappearance of Moral Knowledge in the Church"](#)

[1:18:54] [Bethel 1]

[Talk 1 of 2 - ["The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge"](#) Bethel 2]

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[Links to more Willard, ["Disappearance of Moral Knowledge"](#) talks]

The ability to discern good & evil is largely missing. We live in a time where there is no recognized body of knowledge for good and evil. I'm not saying there is not such knowledge or that no one has it. There is not a "recognized body of knowledge" that is made publicly available for people who need to know as a basis for organizing their lives and helping others.

Our teaching institutions - churches & schools - do not provide knowledge of good & evil, right & wrong. They provide a lot of feelings, opinions, sometimes traditions and even some force that might be applied depending on the setting.

At our schools, everyone is told that they should not plagiarize, steal data, cheat on tests. However, anyone who does, does not feel the they are a moral failure. If you were to heap on moral opprobrium on someone who cheated on a test, you would be treated as out of line. They are not treated as signs of failure as a person.

No one says, *"I cheated on a test, I am a bad person."*

Maybe at Bethel it would be treated differently because you have a tradition about this. Some of religious traditions might feel the moral force of prohibitions about this. We are in a time of choosing what kind of person you are is treated as a subjective thing you might pick up but could never hold another person to it unless in an institution where you have an agreement.

Teaching Knowledge in the Christian Church

This result that we now have in our society quite generally is a result of what has happened with Christian teachings in general.

What you teach as a Christian teacher or minister is in fact not thought of as knowledge. It is thought of as tradition, personal view

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of certain types of people. It is not thought of as a solid basis for moral understanding and practice.

In our culture, our ethics came out of our religion - Judeo-Christian background. Some contribution from classical civilization - Greek & Roman but very small. It would never had the traction without the teaching and the life of the Christian church.

It is generally recognized that the ethical understanding we have - Justice, benevolence - come from the biblical sources. Certainly not the Greek sources. There is nothing comparable that comes from the Biblical sources. We have a social reality where the weight falls on the church. Who is going to be the teachers of the nations? The Great Commission directs the followers of Christ to make disciples of all nations - all ethnic groups. Broader term than what we call nations in the modern world.

Teach Them First by Making Disciples

You lay a foundation in their understanding of their world of God, redemption, righteousness that leads them to say, *"Yes, I would like to be a student of Jesus Christ."* Not what you would call a "Christian" today. WE have an established practice of treating people as Christians without reference to Disciples.

* Walk up on the street, "I want to teach you Algebra." Not go over well. But if you pay money to sit in a room and hear me teach Algebra, they will sit there and take it.

There is a prior moment to teaching. You have to find that moment. For the Christian teaching, it is a moment of discipleship.

I want to be a student.

Whatever tuition, whatever needs to be done, I'll do it.

How you do that?

You ravish people with the Kingdom of God.

There greatest opportunity in life is to enter as a disciple of Jesus. You bring them into an environment of Trinitarian presence of disciples. "Where 2 or 3 are gathered, i am in their midst." It's also of 2000-3000.

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They are learning from Him. We are in a position to use the knowledge we have of good & evil, right & wrong in forming character. That's when Jesus says at the end, "Teach them everything I commanded."

The Great Omission

A lot of people think you can not do that. Sermon on the Mount presents hopeless ideals to make us hopeless to drive us to the Cross. But we must also be driven beyond the Cross.

Start with nothing and in 3 centuries 50% of the population in the Mediterranean cities were believers in Jesus.

Today no one by human cleverness can teach people to do what Jesus said.

"*Taking up your cross*" is an important part of the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. It means giving up having your way.

People in churches disagreeing become mad at each other and forget their point because they want to have their way. That leads to leaving the church. You don't love them by leaving.

The Great Omission is rooted in the deeper omission of discipleship. [15:20] It depends on what you've heard in the message of salvation.

"Trust Jesus Christ"

"Give your life to Christ!"

If you do that, you'll step up into the Kingdom of God.

"Nevertheless, the kingdom was near."

You are bearers of the kingdom of God. That's what it means to have life in Christ, life from above. New birth is about born into the Kingdom of God. The K of G is not heaven after you die. It is God in action, God reigning, the effective range of God's will.

It is not the Church. It is everlasting to everlasting. The Church is not everlasting. The Kingdom is over all Kingdoms of the world.

You and I are invited to live in the Kingdom of God by putting our trust in Jesus Christ. Then we are taken into the Kingdom and a new life begins to flourish in us. It begins to bring to our life what God intended.

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Teaching people to do all that Jesus said is not just getting after them to do it. Scolding, making them feel guilty, condemn. What you do is help them have a different vision of their life before God.

Create good where you are for Him. He is available. We are not waiting for Him. We open ourselves to action of God in us. Expectation of God is how we fill our lives with the Kingdom of God. That's where discipleship comes in because it is a learning process to come to the place where I deal with everything in my life under the expectation of God.

The general form of **temptation** is that I must act on my own less I miss something good.

* Eve in the Garden - "Look at that. Good to eat. Make you wise."

The response to all temptation is to broaden one's vision and see everything under God. That's what enables us to know that if I miss this opportunity, I will not be missing out of something important. Only if I am inviting God into my life and I am provided not want I want but what I need.

Destructiveness of lust - strong desires.

If we do not follow the temptation we will be abundantly provided for.

Psalm 23

[26:25]

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (lack not good thing). That's the promise of the Kingdom of God.

Knowing the good Shepherd and the Kingdom in which we live with Him enables us to distinguish what we want, what we need and what is good. He announces it is available to everyone.

We make a disciple by showing them this life. It will not be regarded as a sacrifice but a great opportunity.

Parables - "Pearl of Great Price" & "Treasure in the Field"

The Cost of Non-Discipleship or Teaching to Do What Jesus Said

Jesus helps us see the cost of Non-Discipleship. That's what makes the decision to be a disciple very compelling to many people if we just bring it to them.

We start with the Great Omission. The greatest mission field today is the American Church. Teach the kingdom of God where they can see the choice and make the choice to be a disciple of Jesus.

Then we can teach them to do everything Jesus said.

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People look at that and say, "That's hard."

Give to those who ask. Don't ask to get it back.

They turn them into legalisms. You have to start with the Kingdom.

If the person doesn't bring it back...

Jesus brings us back by His teaching of the kingdom of God.

They become sensible, easy, not by willpower but by gradually changing who we are.

"Bless those who curse"

Once of the most common prayers in our society, "God damn it"

The prayer is *"God bless it."*

Blessing - I invoke God for the good the person I am blessing.

You can pray for them and bless them with the knowledge of God

You can do that for your enemy. You can pray that they come to know God. You will feel better. Your blessing will grow. When you are punched, blessing comes out not anger because you are full of blessing. You are not angry, not contemptuous. You have a loving, caring attitude. Blessing is the easy thing to do because that's what you have in you.

We're looking for easy routine obedience easily comes out of who you are.

Love God with our all...neighbor. Not giving us a job.

Can we do that ?

Should we do that?

Do we do it?

Do we do that in our churches? Sign out front, "We meet to do the things that Jesus teaches."

6 week course on teaching you how to bless those who curse you.

In our present situation it does not occur for us to do that.

Teach people in a way that they become people who can do that kind not thing. But we don't have a vision for that. We don't think how we can do that?

Am I wrong? Do we center our education purposes to teach people to do what Jesus said to do.

Your theology will come out - "No, you can't do those things. You'll remain a miserable sinner until you die."

...all of the things that defeat people from doing this.

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What is lacking is a decision to do this. Don't have to have a budget, degree, building. All that is required a decision.

You don't have to be brilliant, good looking, not one of the things required to build a mega-church. Anything Jesus teaches us we can learn to do. But we have to learn to do it. That's where discipleship comes in.

If we do that, we will see a remarkable return of moral knowledge in our world. Currently it gets picked to pieces and dragged around by very silly things that go on in our institutions. They were not put here to teach what Jesus taught. There not here to bring moral development and character. They are in an embarrassing position because they inherited the universities from the church. The church claimed and had the means. Now the universities have the job but don't have the resources. Most faculty disown the job. They claim it would be arrogant to do and go ahead and do it in their own form.

* Charles Barkley - *"I ain't nobodies role model."* That's not his decision.

Adults will teach young people by tones, language, body language, what you teach about.

The Church is in a position to teach the nations.

No one else is. The spokesperson for Christ is in the position.

~ ~ ~ **End of Teaching @ 44:40** ~ ~ ~

~ ~ ~ **Q & A**

[46:30]

Q - Should we be expecting to see more signs & wonders?

A - Signs & wonders will take care of themselves. Invariable evidence of the kingdom of God. Indicators of the break through of the Kingdom. They are not the gospel. When the Kingdom is present you are going to see things that are not natural. Life now trusting Jesus Christ.'

Q - Use of culture in churches as a tool for teaching?

A - Culture is welcoming people in terms of who they are. You accept that. You don't have a choice about culture. There is no such thing as culture-less person.

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Treasure & Vessel. Our culture is vessel. My culture is not treasure.

Vessels are dear. Culture is what you take to be real and proper without thinking about it. Someone comes in with a different way of thing and we think that is culture.

* Missionaries leading natives in Isaac Watts hymns. That was culture. One of the main challenges to spiritual growth in our society is how can the contemporary service and the old folks get along? We can't so we'll have two services. Now this is an occasion where we need to learn something about treasure & vessel. Don't want to hold the line about our culture being treasure.

Q - [53:40] - What does accountability look like?

A - Jesus is teaching about how we turn things loose not how we get things back. He has striking statements - "Love those who love you? Lend to those you expect to receive? What credit is that to you?"

* Give my chainsaw to him who asks in resignation to God. I think he has another one if I need it. Should I speak to my neighbor? Well, maybe. I don't rant at him. I still love him. I will still help him. Jesus is talking about the kind of openness you have in the kingdom of God. Expressions of how someone who lives in the kingdom of God learns how to live.

You have to understand how Jesus teaches - against the background of behavior. Normal - "Why should I give it to you?"

Jesus' teaching are not laws. Generosity of the kingdom.

Q - [1:00:20] Present the gospel to non-Christians?

A - Do discipleship evangelism. Evangelize for disciples. Invite people to become disciples not consumer Christians - consume the merits of Christ, the services of the church, the fellowship. If we start with something else that is not discipleship, we will be challenged to move them.

* Bait & Switch

It's very hard to move people who have been raised in a tradition as consumer Christians and now you're asking them to give up their lives.

Many people have not had anyone ask them to be disciples.

Give people the opportunity to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Change the basis of the teaching and have people come to that. Start teaching about the Kingdom of God. People will say, "There's something different coming here." If you teaching the Kingdom of God, people will come out of the woodwork.

Q - [1:05:45] What disciplines will help us become more Christlike?

A - Depends on where you are.

Solitude is the primary discipline to break you out of your mold.

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Worship is fairly constant. You need it all along. The only discipline that will pull you straight in times of temptation like pouring water on a fire.

2 draws in temptation - trials & sin

Two disciplines most central to regular walking in the kingdom:

Fasting & Scripture Memorization

It might differ for other people.

They are not righteousness, they are wisdom.

Q - [1:09:40] How do you see counseling?

A - [1:10:30] Absolutely essential - medication, prayer, exorcism

Many people can't do disciplines. For many people, you don't start with disciplines, you start with ministry. Something in their power they can do. Many people are so crushed there isn't anything in their power.

Disciplines are not righteousness. If you fail at a discipline, you have not sinned otherwise they will load you with more guilt. We need counselors. People need to hear the gospel and that is not discipline, it is ministry.

~ ~ ~ **End of Video @ 1:13:30** ~ ~ ~

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