

Render Unto Caesar

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

30 August 2026

Children's Talk: Who Made You a Judge?

Who here likes being right? I think all of us like being right. And it's good to be right. But it is not always easy to tell what is right, and when that is the case we need to be humble about what we actually know.

There is a story about Moses, before he became a leader, judging in a situation in which it was very clear what was right and wrong: an Egyptian was attacking a Hebrew man, and Moses stepped in to protect the Hebrew man against the Egyptian. But when he then had to judge a situation that was messier, things did not go as well:

And when he went out the second day, behold, two Hebrew men were fighting, and he said to the one who did the wrong, "Why are you striking your companion?"

Then he said, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

So Moses feared and said, "Surely this thing is known!" When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. (Exodus 2:13-14)

Moses thought he knew who was right and who was wrong; but it actually wasn't so simple, and when the man who Moses thought was in the wrong challenged Moses, he became afraid and ran away. It wasn't so easy to fix things this time around!

There are times when it is obvious that what someone is doing is wrong and you need to step in: when someone is getting bullied or hurt; when someone is doing something truly dangerous; and so on. But a lot of the time it isn't so obvious, even if at first you think it is:

- A classmate is telling another classmate to give back their pencil; but the other classmate says the pencil is theirs, they stole it!
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One way to help with this is to think how you would feel if someone did the same thing to you: if a classmate made you keep a school rule, or an older brother made you obey your parents. Jesus says this is important to think about, because people judge us based on how we judge them:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.
(Matthew 7:1-2)

Just because you are right, does not mean you can fix everything. Have patience and humility, and respect people even when they are wrong.

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The first chapter of the first book of the Word describes creation taking place over seven days; and in this description, separation and distinction are emphasized: light is divided from darkness; day is divided from night; waters below are divided from waters above, and then land creates a further division. In the spiritual sense this description of creation is not actually about how God literally made the world; it is about how He remakes each and every one of us spiritually as we grow older. And in this growth and re-creation that we all go through, it is important that we start to notice these distinctions: the difference between us and God; the difference between truth and falsity; the difference between good and evil; even the difference between good and better, between bad and very bad.

The division or distinction we are going to focus on today is represented in God dividing the waters:

Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." Thus God made the expanse, and divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day. (Genesis 1:6-8)

The two sets of "water" here refer to the oceans (the waters below) and the sky, from which rain falls (the waters above). This might seem like a relatively unremarkable fact, after all we know the sky is divided from the ocean and whatnot. But as a spiritual symbol it means something quite profound: symbolically, the New Church says that this image of God separating what is high in the heavens from what is down below in the oceans stands for Him giving us the recognition that there exist things that are higher and things that are lower; that there are within us inner, spiritual, meaningful concerns alongside outer, natural, superficial concerns. I have

here a few objects (Bible, Nintendo Switch, etc.), and they can all occupy time, energy, or focus in our lives; if we treat them as if they were all the same there will be problems; so I want to think about separating them into the categories of spiritual or natural, or heavenly or worldly.

The fact that God had to separate the waters represents the need for us to separate spiritual things from natural things, something that we can have a surprisingly hard time doing. Jesus speaks directly to this confusion using the example of taxes, and whether it was lawful for a good religious Jew to pay taxes to a foreign overlord:

“Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”

And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:15-22)

Jesus was challenged to determine if it was right to pay taxes. His answer speaks directly to the distinction between earthly and heavenly things: “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In other words, don’t take a worldly thing like paying taxes and make a huge spiritual controversy out of it! And by the same token, don’t take a spiritual thing and reduce it to the level of something earthly.

We (or at least, I) do this all the time. An example that comes to my mind is with Netflix. I spend a lot of time on Netflix, and sometimes I have to intentionally resist the urge to just binge TV. When I succeed, and instead of binge I do something else, I’ve noticed that I can start to feel smug, as if I have rendered something up to God, as if I have grown spiritually; when in actual fact I have only

given up something of the world and may not have made any spiritual progress at all. Because for all that spending less time on a screen feels more wholesome and fulfilling and just “better,” it, on its own, does not make me a more heavenly or Godly person. To grow spiritually, I will have to consciously use that regained time to engage with the spiritual aspects of myself, or connect with the Lord and his teachings. Now don’t get me wrong: Spending less time on a screen, for me, is a wonderful opportunity to grow spiritually. But I can’t get confused and think that giving up screens is in itself a spiritual act. Someone who constantly binges Netflix is no worse of a person than someone who spends time with a book, for instance: watching Netflix has absolutely no moral weight, good or bad, on its own.

The flipside to taking spiritual credit for natural behaviour would be taking spiritual blame for natural failings. This refers to those times when we feel as if we are bad people for doing things that are not morally or spiritually problematic. A fairly common one might be diet. Maybe we have chosen to give up a certain food like sugar. And that may be a good thing! But when we break a diet and indulge in unhealthy, sugary food, we often feel a sense of guilt, as if we have committed a moral wrong. Now it makes sense if you are somewhat disappointed that you have not managed to keep your commitment; but healthy eating is not a spiritual choice. It is a natural one. Feeling like a bad person because of what you eat is rendering to God the things that are Caesar’s; in other words, treating a worldly choice as if it has heavenly implications.

We moralize all sorts of earthly decisions: diet, health, spending habits, social etiquette, academic or sporting success in kids, what kind of job you’re able to hold down, being able to live without relying on anyone, etc. When we render these earthly choices as if they were spiritual ones, we either become wracked with

unnecessary guilt or puffed up with unearned pride. Distinguishing between worldly obligations and spiritual obligations can free us from a world of guilt and enable us to make real progress spiritually, not just a false sense of growth.

This is not to say that natural things are unimportant: Jesus did not say, "Render to God the things that are God's and forget about Caesar." One example that seems particularly relevant these days is environmental concern. On the one hand, whether or not you recycle is not a moral question. Someone who is forgetful and bad about it is no worse a person spiritually than the one who meticulously sorts his waste and uses as little as possible. And yet, even if it is not a moral choice, the future of our environment and even planet could be at stake. That is huge! Hence, perhaps, why Jesus did not tell His followers to neglect earthly concerns. The key is to not confuse earthly concerns with spiritual ones.

Part of what makes this distinction so hard is that at times spiritual and natural things are entangled. The Teachings of the New Church make a point of distinguishing between natural trials or temptations, which occur when natural things like health and money are under threat, from spiritual trials or temptations, when one's faith, charity, and even salvation are under threat. Yet even though these two threats are very distinct, they can also be intimately linked:

...spiritual temptations belong to the internal man; they are attacks made on his spiritual life. Anxious feelings in this case do not exist on account of any loss in their natural life, but on account of the loss of faith and charity, and consequently of salvation. Natural trials are often the means by which those spiritual temptations come about. For if a person is suffering natural trials - that is to say, sickness, sorrow, loss of wealth or position, and so on - and during them comes to think of the Lord's help, His Providence, and the state of the wicked, in that they boast and rejoice when the good suffer and endure various miseries and losses, then spiritual temptation is bound up with natural trial. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8164)

So let's go back to the example of recycling. How well you recycle says little about your moral character. Yet if your concern to recycle is motivated by a concern for the

planet; and your concern for the planet is motivated by a concern for humanity; and if when you recycle your mind is drawn to the Lord and doing His will by caring for humanity, then there is a spiritual element. Recycling in itself is neither good nor evil; nor should we pride ourselves or condemn others spiritually for the simple act; but caring for humanity *is* spiritually good, and is one of the things that we must render to God.

Another example that came to mind is smoking. Smoking, in itself, is neither good nor evil. It is of course damaging to the body, and done in excess will definitely reduce a person's life. Now if a person contemplates the good that comes from having a healthy body, and desires to serve uses for many years, and wants to be around to show love for their family as long as possible, they might be inclined to stop smoking. But that same line of reasoning applies to drinking a coke. It is not as simple as saying, "smoking is bad." Before you beat yourself up for doing something, there needs to be understanding as to whether there really is some spiritual good behind it. For many examples, what is good for one person might be bad for another. For one person, giving up Netflix might have huge spiritual implications, because without the distraction they can focus on truly spiritual things; while for another person, continuing to use Netflix might have huge spiritual implications, because it helps them relax, get centred and focused, and then make good, spiritual choices.

I started the sermon by neatly dividing things into these categories of spiritual and natural; but the truth is, it is how we use things that renders them spiritual or natural. If you have money and you use it to promote good things in society and provide work for people and care for those who have less, then money has become a deeply spiritual thing in your life. On the other hand, if you study the Bible for the sake of getting a better reputation in the church so that you can sway people and get

your way more often, then the Bible has become a worldly concern in your life. The line between natural and spiritual is blurry. Instead of seeing some actions as purely spiritual and others as merely natural, we should go deeper within to find what is at the heart of a behaviour that actually makes it spiritual, or holds it as worldly.

We all have a tendency to feel guilt when we fail to face up to challenges properly, and to become over-proud when we conquer them. Jesus invites us to become more discerning as we face these challenges: which of them really matter? And which of them is it totally okay that you fell far, far short of your goals? Don't let your desire to render something up to God lead you to inadvertently render up something worldly, something that actually has no bearing on your moral character. There are things in this life, big, scary, important things, that still do not reflect your value as a human being. Render to God the things that truly belong to God: a desire to do your best, concern for your fellow humanity, and a willingness to get up and try again when you fail. Those are the choices that make up the parts of you that matter the most.

Amen.