

Week 1: Discovering the Hidden Options

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Memory Verse: James 1:5

TITLE SLIDE

We are coming up to elections this year and I don't know about you but I can already feel the tension. These past few years it seems like our country has become more and more polarized. The word polarized is fascinating. The word "polarized" started off as a term in physics, describing light waves oriented in a specific direction. But now, it's become a symbol for so many other things. Politics, Church, People, and the list goes on and on... In a world where polarized opinions seem to dominate every conversation, it's crucial to remember that God's wisdom often transcends human logic.

This brings me to the concept we'll be exploring in the next two weeks: finding "The Hidden Option." Inspired by Jonathan Malm's book by the same title, we'll delve into how, in a world that often limits us to two choices, God gives us a choice that is beyond our understanding. These messages will hopefully challenge us to move beyond the surface-level choices that society presents to us. It will encourage us to look deeper, to pray for divine insight, and to trust that God can reveal a path that brings together rather than divides. By exploring these biblical examples, we will learn how to apply these principles in our everyday lives, fostering a community that reflects the unity and love of Christ.

SLIDE 2:

In our world today, it seems that almost every issue is reduced to a black or white, Pro or Anti, For or Against, creating divisions and conflicts that can tear apart communities, families, and even churches. The world wants binary choices for multifaceted problems. Binary is this technical term in computing, describing the basic language of computers with just ones and zeroes. The issue of binary choices—only choosing between 1 or 0—affects our society, creating divisions and preventing progress and understanding in various areas.

Political polarization is alarmingly evident, especially in countries like ours, where political discourse often simplifies into a battle between two dominant parties or ideologies. Individuals are swiftly pigeonholed into categories such as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, with little room for the nuances and complexities that define human beliefs and perspectives. As a result, people often find themselves pressured to conform to one side or the other, fearing social ostracization or exclusion if they dare to entertain a more multifaceted viewpoint.

Similarly, the lens of black or white thinking distorts discussions surrounding social justice issues, obscuring the intricacies and nuances inherent within these complex topics. Consider the fraught discourse surrounding racial equality, gender rights, and immigration, where opinions are often polarized into simplistic categories of pro or anti, without acknowledging the depth and breadth of these critical conversations. In our own state these past few years we can look at the vital matter of police reform,

which, in its most basic form, becomes reduced to a binary debate between being pro-police or anti-police. This simplistic view overlooks the complexity of policing and ignores the potential for meaningful dialogue to create reforms that ensure public safety while addressing systemic injustice and inequality within agencies. By constraining these discussions within narrow confines, we limit our ability to explore comprehensive solutions that recognize the complexities of the issues at hand and pave the way for genuine progress.

Even within the sacred spaces of the church, the influence of polarized thinking can sow seeds of discord and division among congregations. Debates over theological interpretations, worship styles, or moral and ethical stances often become battlegrounds for opposing factions within the church community. Consider, for instance, the age-old debate between traditional and contemporary worship styles, where individuals are forced into opposing camps, each fervently defending their preferred approach as the sole path to spiritual fulfillment. This rigid adherence to each perspective not only stifles creativity and diversity within worship but also undermines the unity and cohesion of the body of Christ, as congregations become fragmented along ideological fault lines.

To address this widespread issue, we need to move beyond black-and-white choices and adopt a more nuanced, inclusive approach to dialogue. This approach should acknowledge the complexities of the human experience and aim to bridge divides rather than deepen them.

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The tendency to see the world in binary terms is not new, but the polarization seems more intense now than ever. It's as if every issue demands that we take a side, leaving no room for middle ground or alternative solutions. But what if there is another way? What if, instead of being forced to choose between two extremes, we could find a third option—an option that brings reconciliation and peace, reflecting God's wisdom and love?

This idea was inspired by Jonathan Malm's book "The Hidden Option". In his book he explores this very idea. He suggests that in every situation, especially those that seem to have only two opposing sides, God provides a hidden option.

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This hidden option offers a path that aligns with God's will and promotes harmony. This alternative path goes beyond the conventional "yes" or "no" responses that society often presents.

Malm says that these hidden options are divine interventions from God to guide us towards peace, understanding, and closer alignment with His will. Though not always obvious or easy to see, by seeking these alternatives, individuals can find paths that honor God and benefit everyone involved.

Malm's concept calls upon individuals to actively pursue God's wisdom, to pray fervently for insight, and to place trust in His guidance. These hidden options serve as opportunities for individuals to exhibit Christ-like love and wisdom, particularly in navigating complex and contentious situations where conventional wisdom falls short.

By embracing this shift towards seeking divine wisdom, individuals can create environments filled with empathy, understanding, and genuine reconciliation—a testament to the transformative power of embracing the hidden options that God offers.

Now I know this might be a new idea for some and it may not be sitting well with you.

As Christian when we are given a problem or a new idea we should seek Biblical guidance to make sure we are on the right path. So today we are going to look at two biblical examples where Jesus navigated divisive and challenging scenarios. His response to the question about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22) and His handling of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) are perfect illustrations of how Jesus revealed hidden options that transcended societal expectations.

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Earlier in our Scripture reading from Matthew 22:15-22, we witnessed a strategic collaboration between the Pharisees and the Herodians(huh-ROH-dee-uhns), two factions typically at odds with each other, as they conspire to entrap Jesus in a contentious debate. Their inquiry regarding the payment of taxes to Caesar was designed to force Jesus into a dilemma where any response would have adverse consequences. On one hand, affirming the obligation to pay taxes to Caesar would align with Roman authority but risk alienating the Jewish populace, who chafed under Roman rule and viewed such compliance as betrayal. Conversely, rejecting the payment of taxes could be construed as an act of sedition against the Roman Empire, potentially resulting in severe repercussions from the ruling authorities.

In the face of this carefully constructed trap, Jesus responds with remarkable wisdom and insight, going past the obvious two options presented to Him. Jesus's directive, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," encapsulates a profound truth that resonates far beyond the immediate context. By delineating between the temporal obligations to earthly authorities and the spiritual allegiance owed to God, Jesus reframes the question and offers a hidden option that harmonizes both civic responsibility and divine sovereignty.

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In doing so, He not only avoids the quagmire laid before Him but also imparts a timeless principle that underscores the importance of discerning and honoring different spheres of authority in our lives. He is not asking us to divide our loyalties or compartmentalize our lives. Instead he is holding before us the reality of God and the reality of our emperors. Both are real. Both are a part of our lives and our world. Jesus is asking us to step into and live in the tension of those two realities. That's what he did. That's where he lived. To stand in that place is to stand with Jesus. That's where life gets real. That's where life is really lived. It is neither a comfortable nor an easy place to be. There are no easy answers. Here's what I mean.

Moreover, Jesus' response underscores His profound understanding of the complexities inherent in human interactions and governance. Rather than succumbing to the pressures of polarized thinking, He demonstrates a nuanced approach that

acknowledges the legitimacy of earthly structures while affirming the primacy of God's sovereignty.

For us today, the story of Jesus' encounter about taxes prompts us to reflect on how we can apply the principle of discernment in our own lives, particularly in contexts where conflicting loyalties abound. Ultimately, Jesus' example compels us to strive for responses that honor both God and our fellow human beings, pursuing paths of understanding and peace.

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Let's look at another example in John 8:1-11, we encounter a woman caught in the act of adultery brought before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees. Let's read: "And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone." Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there

no one to condemn you?" She said, "No one, sir." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

In this scenario, the leaders, driven by their self-righteousness and a desire to entrap Jesus, present Him with a dilemma designed to test His adherence to the Law of Moses. They expect Him to make a binary choice: either uphold the strict legal mandate to condemn the woman to death by stoning, thereby validating their interpretation of the law, or disregard the law by offering forgiveness, thereby undermining His credibility as a religious authority.

Jesus' response to this dilemma is both profound and transformative. Rather than succumbing to the pressure of the two options presented to Him, He offers a hidden option that goes beyond their mere legalism. He wasn't forbidding judgment against adulterers, but he was requiring that the witnesses against the woman be morally qualified to put her to death. With remarkable wisdom and compassion,

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Jesus challenges the accusers by inviting the one without sin among them to cast the first stone. This response not only diffuses the tension of the situation but also exposes the hypocrisy of the accusers, who are forced to confront the sin in their own lives.

When Jesus escaped the trap of the woman caught in adultery, He provided more than just hope for himself. He also provided hope for the woman who earned the penalty of death. She was completely trapped and had no way of helping herself. If Jesus hadn't escaped the trap set for him, she would have died. Instead she learns of Jesus, offering

her a chance to repent and turn away from her sinful behavior. In doing so, He embodies both grace and justice, refusing to condone her actions but also refusing to condemn her outright. This hidden option represents a powerful demonstration of God's mercy and forgiveness, inviting the woman to experience redemption and restoration.

For us today, the story of the woman caught in adultery serves as a compelling example of how to navigate situations requiring judgment with grace and righteousness. It challenges us to go beyond legalistic or permissive responses and instead seek solutions that reflect God's heart for mercy and reconciliation. As we encounter difficult decisions in our own lives, we are encouraged to emulate Jesus' example, extending grace to others while upholding the principles of righteousness and justice. When we seek the hidden options that God offers us in life, those options will not only bless us but will be a blessing to others around us. For the person who is struggling with a sin of which they feel helpless to defeat, taking the hidden option of HOPE through Jesus will not only bless you, but all those around you.

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We get to participate in God's redemptive work in the world, fostering an environment of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

As we reflect on these stories, we witness firsthand how Jesus expertly balanced the principles of truth and grace with justice and mercy. His approach serves as a masterclass in navigating complex ethical dilemmas with wisdom and compassion.

Regardless of the circumstances He encountered, Jesus consistently sought to honor God while extending empathy and understanding to those around Him. This blend of divine righteousness and human compassion challenges us to follow Jesus' example in our actions and decisions. By doing so, we can navigate life's challenges with integrity, humility, and love, upholding God's truth while showing grace and mercy to others. In doing so, we contribute to the establishment of a world characterized by justice, compassion, and the transformative power of God's love.

In conclusion, as we reflect on the pervasive influence of polarizing choices in our society, it becomes evident that learning to think past these limitations is essential for fostering genuine understanding and reconciliation. We are made in God's image; we are more than just computers choosing between zeros and ones. Throughout His ministry, Jesus consistently demonstrated this truth, offering options that aligned with God's will and brought about greater understanding and reconciliation among people. As we navigate our own challenges and dilemmas, it is crucial that we seek God's guidance, praying for the insight to discover hidden options that reflect His wisdom and love. In doing so, we can become agents of unity, healing, and transformation in our world.

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your wisdom and guidance. Help us to see beyond polarizing choices and discover Your hidden options in every situation we face. Grant us the discernment to respond in ways that honor You and reflect Your love and justice. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.