So far in this course we have looked at how scripture and Church teachings assist us in the formation of conscience and provide us with moral norms. We looked at how culture, authority, and education are also a part of the process. We have further identified the methods that we use to make moral decisions when norms or values conflict. And throughout the course we have looked at how living a virtuous life is really the “good life.”

This final module deals with both business and environmental ethics. In these case studies, we will face questions that concern environmental values, economic values, and sometimes both. So where do we begin to look for norms to guide us? What does nature or business have to do with Christian morality?

We begin our search for norms that apply to our care of the environment in the book of Genesis. In the story of creation, God created the earth, the heavens, and all of the plants and animals, and God “saw that it was good.” In verses 27-31 at the end of the first chapter of Genesis, human beings were created in the image of God and were given “dominion” over all of nature. Listen to what the scripture says:

So God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed and its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

So Genesis tells us that humans are to have “dominion” over other creatures. What does this mean? “Dominion” does not mean to dominate, nor does it mean to use up the resources at will. The word “dominion” is a term associated with governing rather than domination. In the third chapter of Genesis, verse 15 says:

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”

The implication for contemporary man is that the created world is good and we are to care for all of creation. It also suggests that the resources are here for our benefit as well as for the benefit of the other creatures that share the planet.
If we look through scripture for additional clues to our responsibility to other living creatures, we could certainly look to the story of Noah for an indication of God’s desire to save the animals as well as humanity from the great flood and the consequences of evil in the world.

Here are a few more biblical verses that refer to humanity’s responsibility to care for the earth and all the living things that share the planet with us.

From the Old Testament, in the Book of Leviticus 18:28, we read:
“And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.”

From the Book of Numbers 35:33-34, we can read these commands:
"You shall not pollute the land in which you live.... You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites."

And from the Book of Deuteronomy 20:19, we read:
"If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?"

Passages that call for care of creation are not limited to the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we can look at Paul’s letter to the Romans 1:20. It says there:

"Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."

In both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says the following:
"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight." (Luke 12:6; cf. Matthew 10:29)

Finally Jesus teaches us in the Gospels to love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. If we love God, we love the things that God loves. We are called to love each other as well. In John’s Gospel Jesus says:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)
In John 10:10 Jesus says:
“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

So how does this help with our moral decisions regarding nature and the environment? No one has ever lived without water. It is essential to our very being. No one has ever lived without air. If we love one another, we will care for the habitat that allows for human flourishing. We must act to preserve and protect nature for our own survival and for that of all God’s creatures.

While care for the environment requires us to think about stewardship, so, too, does the economic reality of human existence. Many of our basic human needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, tend to require the means to obtain them. Moreover, we have many interactions in our daily life that have a financial aspect to them. For example, consider your encounters with waiters, landlords, or employers. Not only can we think about economics through a moral lens, but we ought to do so.

What would a moral approach to the economy consider? First, we must consider the plight of the poor and the most vulnerable. Proverbs 22:16 tells us, “Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.” In Matthew 25, Jesus praises those who care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned, all of whom we can clearly see are vulnerable.

Second, a moral approach to the economy would consider the dignity of work and the rights of workers. Workers have the right to be reasonably compensated for their labors, and it should be possible for workers to improve their economic situation through labor. This is especially made possible when workers have the chance to become partners or co-owners in the means of production. Such possibilities enable workers to genuinely participate in economic life.

Third, one must recognize that stewardship also has an economic dimension. Businesses as well as governments ought to encourage sustainable development that allows for the ongoing economic improvement of the community. The resources that God provides in the environment are not meant only for the enrichment of a few but for the benefit of all. By pursuing policies that lead to sustainable development, leaders in the local economy can contribute to the common good.