

# The Ethics of Jesus

by Mark E. Moore

Jesus said nothing about abortion, homosexuality, drinking, cussing, just war, slavery, the death penalty, or suicide. His comments on the nuclear family are negative, except the prohibition of divorce and remarriage (and his reiteration of Moses' command to honor parents). While he supports the OT injunction against fornication, he openly consorted with those guilty of it (cf. John 4:18; Luke 7:39). Our conservative Christian values of the West are simply difficult to reconstruct in the teachings of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, we will look at his words (part 1) and his actions (part 2) in an attempt to (re)construct Jesus' ethical system understanding, of course, that this is *not* the purpose of the Gospels. In fact, they are about the person of Jesus, not his ethics. Contrary to popular (secular) opinion, Jesus was not a 'good moral teacher.' In fact, his teaching was primarily ego-centric. That is to say, most of his ethical demands are tied directly to his person. If his claims turn out to be false, then he is a megalomaniac without peer and the *few* ethical remnants so touted by non-Christians (indiscriminate love, support for the disenfranchised, and unmitigated forgiveness) are plucked randomly from a house of cards that won't bear the weight of any agenda proposed by either the 'moral right' or the 'liberal left' (cf. Luke 6:46–49).

## I. Ethics of proclamation<sup>2</sup>—'micro-view.'<sup>3</sup>

1. **Divorce** is the only ethical edict of Jesus repeated in the epistles (1 Cor 7:11–13). Jesus' addition of not remarrying was unprecedented (cf. Matt 19:1–10/Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18).
2. **Love of enemies** was absolutely unique in the first century world (Matt 5:43/Luke 6:27–28; See Marius Reiser, "Love of Enemies in the Context of Antiquity," *New Testament Studies* 47/4 [2001]: 411–27).
  - a. How much more should we love one another as a witness to the world (John 13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17)? This was the greatest commandment (Matt 22:34–40 [/Mark 12:28–34, cf. Luke 10:25–28])
  - b. And our love for Jesus will manifest itself in obedience, especially love (John 14:15, 21, 23–24; 15:10, 14)

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<sup>1</sup> Additional ethical injunctions can, of course, be found in the Epistles, but this study will be limited to the gospels.

<sup>2</sup> The only ethical 'list' we find in the gospels, aside from the partial recitation of the Ten Commandments to the 'Rich Young Ruler,' is in Mark 7:20–23, "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" (/Matt 15:18–19).

<sup>3</sup>The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–6) is a key text for the ethics of Jesus. Chapter 5:21–48 deals with six issues: anger, lust, divorce, oaths (cf. Matt 23:16–22), resistance, love of enemies. Where the Rabbi's narrowed the commands Jesus expanded them, and where they expanded permissions [divorce & resistance], Jesus narrowed them. Thus, Jesus called us to a righteousness that surpassed the Pharisees (Matt 5:20) not in breadth but in depth. In chapter 6:1–18, Jesus offered three examples of righteous acts (alms, prayer, fasting) and ordered that they be done in solitude so that only the Father would see and reward. At first glance, this appears to be in opposition to letting our light shine. But our lights must shine in the world (chapter 5) not with fellow believers (chapter 6). We, like the Pharisees often have this backward. Bottom line: Jesus calls us to an ethic of absolute theism. The key question is this: Is the Father a sufficient source for our self-esteem? We must not underestimate the importance or difficulty of this question.

3. **Forgiveness** is the only part of the Model Prayer upon which Jesus comments. Matt 18:15–35; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3–4 enjoin ‘perpetual’ forgiveness rather than the limit of 3X’s in Rabbinic Judaism, which was generous compared to the rest of the ancient world. **“Do not judge,”** Matt 7:1–5 (i.e. ‘condemn’, cf. vv. 6–7; cf. Mark 4:24) is essentially connected to this ethical emphasis.
4. **Liberate the disenfranchised** (Matt 9:13; 23:23; Mark 2:4; 8:2–3 [/Matt 15:32]; Luke 5:31–32; 6:36; 7:34; 13:15–16; 14:1–5; 17:1–2; 19:9–10; John 3:16) Two sub-categories of this ethical emphasis:
  - a. **“Do to others . . .”** This differs significantly from the silver rule, “Don’t do to others . . .” [Personal note: For me this is *the* most difficult and demanding ethical statement of Jesus. I fail here far more than at any other point.]
  - b. **Give your wealth to the poor.** (Matt 25:31–46 is certainly clear enough on this point! See also Luke 12:33; Matt 19:21 [/Mark 10:21/Luke 18:22]; Matt 23:23; however, see also Matt 26:11/Mark 14:7/John 12:8).
    - i. It should be noted, however, that the key emphasis here is on absolute trust in God not compassion. Hence: “Do not store up for yourselves . . . Do not worry . . .”
    - ii. This is supported by a rather wide array of Jesus’ talk about money: Matt 6:24 (/Luke 16:13); Matt 10:9 (Luke 9:3/Mark 6:8); 16:26 (/Mark 8:37/Luke 9:25); 19:16–24 (/Mark 10:22–23/Luke 18:22–25); 22:20–21; Mark 12:41–44 (/Luke 21:1–4); Luke 8:14; 12:13–21, 22–34; 16:1–15, 19–31.
    - iii. This must be understood within a peasant-agrarian context where 93% lived at subsistence level under the 2% rich and 5% retainers.
5. **Self-Abnegation** is enjoined under several banners:
  - a. Take up a cross (Matt 16:24–26/Mark 8:34–37/Luke 9:23–27; cf. John 12:23–25)
  - b. Become like children (Matt 18:3–4 [/Mark 9:37/Luke 9:48]; 19:14 [/Mark 10:14–15/Luke 18:16])
  - c. The first will be last (Matt 19:30–20:16; Mark 9:35; Luke 13:28–30; 14:8–14, 15–24)
  - d. The greatest shall serve (Matt 20:20–28 [/Mark 10:35–45]; 23:1–12; Luke 22:25–27; John 13:13–17)

## II. Ethics of Praxis—Macro-view

1. Pivotal Encounters for the *Ethics of Compassion*
  - a. **Synagogue Sermon in Nazareth** (Luke 4:14–30)—in what could be called his inaugural address, Jesus deliberately cited Isa 61:1–2, a Messianic passage of compassion if not egalitarian Jubilee. He went on to claim affinity with both Elijah and Elisha in their acts of healing outside of Israel. To this could be added Jesus’ answer to John that his Messianic identity is substantiated by his liberating miracles (Matt 11:2–19; Luke 7:18–35).
  - b. **Call of Matthew** (Matt 9:9–17/Mark 2:14–22/Luke 5:27–39)—Jesus was celebrating rather than fasting and precisely with the wrong sorts of people. When Jesus said that new wine does not fit in old wineskins or a new patch on an old garment, he was serious.
  - c. **Clean and Unclean Foods** (Matt 15:1–20/Mark 7:1–23)—Unwashed hands were not about hygiene but about spiritual ‘cooties.’ Jesus purposely disregarded any and all ritual that created a barrier between God and the lost. This was true in the cleansing of the temple, in his multiple Sabbath violations, allowing children to come to him, touching lepers and fraternizing with sinners (and Gentiles, although he always did this with hesitance).
  - d. **The Parable of the Good Samaritan** (Luke 10:25–37)—This story, in fact, answers the great ethical question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The moral of the story is to love indiscriminately anyone who is near you irrespective of danger and differences.
2. What makes a good Jew a good Jew (aside from circumcision, which is not one’s choice)? This comprised what could be called the ‘ethics of the box’—the closer to the center you are the more you honor God. This is for self-aggrandizement not help for others (Luke 11:46)
  - a. Diet—Kosher foods
  - b. Day—Sabbath rest and worship along with Temple festivals

- c. Dress—Prayer shawls, phylacteries, and other ornaments of identification (cf. Matt 23:5–7/Luke 11:42–44; Luke 20:46–47)
- 3. The stratification of Jesus' society was based on several concrete factors
  - a. God punishes sinners (Job lived on even in Jesus' disciples, cf. John 9:1–2)
  - b. Inviolable 'caste' belief that one would die in the status to which one was born
  - c. Shame/Honor system in which honor was the primary value above time and money
- 4. Jesus' 'ethics of compassion' are, in fact, mutually exclusive to 'the ethics of the box' native to both ancient Judaism and much of contemporary conservative Christianity.