

How can we apply the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount today?

This article considers how the central ethic principles in the Sermon might be applied in modern society.

How could the ethical teaching be applied to individuals?

Individual ethical conduct is closely connected to a person's relationship with God. For those who are living in a religious community the teachings can be rigorously applied, but for those who live in the world, have family and a job, the principles can be harder to follow. For example; when someone who is a member of your family suffers needlessly at the hands of the others, (e.g. muggers or drunken thugs) you can feel angry wanting to seek revenge. This is a natural reaction, so standing back and letting them be punished by the law, can make being pure in heart and turning the other cheek a real challenge.

The Bible speaks of people having God's love in their hearts, in the contemporary world people are more likely to understand this as someone having a conscience or compassion which helps people discern right from wrong. The Sermon does contain some universally accepted ethical conduct that includes; not to kill, steal, lie, and commit adultery, although this does not prevent people doing them and requires laws to punish those who break them. The principles do help individuals to discern right from wrong, but these alone do not make Christianity any different from other religions.

The contemporary world is very different to that when Jesus was present in the world, and the reader's understanding of the antitheses also has to take into account that the Gospel is Matthew's interpretation of Jesus' teaching. However, individuals do have within the passage principles they can apply to life. Firstly individual conduct is based on their relationship with God, which means living life humbly only seeking praise for God's kingdom. People should not kill, be aggressive or hate others. They should be honest in their dealings with others by not lying, stealing, and keeping their word when making agreements, also showing love to their neighbour and others within the community even though it may not be returned. The principles within the Sermon encourage Christians to apply the highest ethical conduct in their own lives setting a standard for others to achieve, thus reflecting the standards required by the Kingdom.

How could the ethical teaching be applied to a community?

Human beings need to be part of a community where people support each other whether they are part of a Christian fellowship, community group, or the community in which they live. Without a supportive community people cannot develop the social skills needed for a coherent society. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sought to develop the Decalogue and the community rules set out in Leviticus which provided the ethical codes for the Jewish community, so that they were relevant to his disciples.

Community relationships can be helped to develop when the community is based on ethical principles that reflect the needs of the community in which people live and show love of neighbour. However there are those who will not conform to any accepted ethical code of conduct, so a community does need legally enforceable ethical codes of conduct if it is not to descend into anarchy. If people ignore others they will not have the respect of their neighbour. The maxim; treating others as you want to be treated, is important if there is to be harmony within a community. If Christians are to reflect God's love for them, they should be playing their part in creating a caring community that cares for those within it and the environment in which they are situated. If people follow the ethical conduct taught by Jesus, it should promote a community that works for peace, love, and justice.

The Sermon reminds disciples how important it is to reflect God's love in their actions, so Christian community work is not simply about good community relationships. Christian pastoral work within a community is an important part of showing God's love and reflecting the Kingdom. Caring for people who are ill, visiting the isolated and lonely, helping the refugees and the victims of crime are all part of a Christian discipleship that seeks to serve God within a community.

How do the teachings influence Christian Ethics?

In my view the principles set out in the Sermon apply to all Christians and are not just guidelines to enable the elite to enter the Kingdom. Jesus was an excellent orator and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are still challenging his disciples today.

Society's knowledge has grown and there have been many changes, but the basic principles are still relevant and set Christians apart from the rest of society. For example Jesus' teachings on honesty ought to lead Christians to question politicians and business on their integrity and honesty. You should not steal, commit adultery and covert, but you should keep your word when swearing an oath and be honest this means that Christians can have a very different view on ethical conduct to many others within society. In the modern world many of the rules and principles taught by Jesus are incorporated into most countries criminal justice system which have been designed to punish criminal acts and remove the need for retribution.

Jesus' do not resist being wider than do not retaliate; it refers to the way individuals respond to others. Jesus' turning the other cheek is guidance on how they should respond to insults, but what do Christians do when the life of another person is threatened? The teaching surely cannot mean submitting to criminals or that you should not take action to protect loved ones. The teaching therefore has to be applied in the light of our modern understanding of what it means to reflect the love of God to others. Therefore taking action to protect another person from abuse or an act of violence is an act of love for the person who is suffering. I am confident that God would not want us to stand by and watch some get hurt when we can protect them from needless suffering.

Conclusion

The Sermon on the Mount still influences Christian ethics today, although some of the teaching cannot be applied directly to modern life it does help establish guidelines for Christian Ethical conduct.

The themes within the Sermon have given inspiration to Christians throughout the centuries, providing guidance for those who want to develop their relationship with God and serve his kingdom. People who live in the secular world may find it difficult to be able to fully form their characters in the likeness of Christ, however, they have a pattern to follow which sets them apart from other faiths and philosophies, and places them in a position where they challenge the attitudes of society. Although Matthew wrote his account nearly two thousand years ago it still influences Christian ethics today, because it does not just provide a set of rules, but provides a basis for a different lifestyle. The Christian life should therefore seek to demonstrate to the world what it means to serve God's kingdom with all their heart, reflecting this through their attitudes to other people.

Jesus' teaching may not have been an ethical code for all people, but was a universal code for all those who regard themselves as his Disciples and wish to develop a deeper and meaningful relationship with God. The first responsibility of a Christian is obedience and devotion to God. This will inevitably bring them into conflict with some of the ethical practices within a society. The Sermons' teaching is still a great influence on Jesus' Disciples, because it provides them with an ethical code that they can use being part of the community and society in which they live. Jesus did not say go and live as a separate group who live apart from their local community, he encouraged his disciples to go out into society, as an example of how people should conduct themselves. The ethics

within the Sermon can and do influences how Christians conduct their lives and how they treat others. In the contemporary world which is highly influenced by selfish motives, the ethical teaching of Jesus set out in the Sermon on the Mount represents a real alternative to the ways of the world. The Sermon does not just influences Christian ethics; it provides a whole range of teaching on the relationship of Christians with God and concern for other people.

End.

Copyright David W Rogers 2015