

The ethical issues in the Sermon on the Mount

This article reflects on the central ethical principles within the Sermon on the Mount and how they provide the basis for Christian Ethics today.

In the first section of the Sermon; the Beatitudes 5.3-12 highlight the importance of being meek and humble before God, disciples acknowledging they are poor in spirit. The beatitudes outline the attitudes of the true disciple contrasting them with the attitudes of the people of the world. The theme of humility which underlies all the Beatitudes plus an acceptance that disciples have to trust and obey God's teaching in all they do and say, influences their ethical approach to life.

Jesus disciples are to be like the salt of the earth and light in the world, so they have to be visibly while preserving the ways of the Kingdom. This will make them distinctiveness to other people. Salt is a preservative and is also flavouring. Christians by preserving the work of the Kingdom bring a different flavour to life. Light enables people to see in the dark. Christians through their work and witness should bring light and hope into the lives of others. They are to uphold the law as set out in the Old Testament with the help of Jesus' additional teaching.

The basic principles stem from the Sermon's emphasises on the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which commands; "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your might." The commandment provides the basis of Jesus' teaching which is also influenced by the Decalogue known as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1.17) and the personal conduct rules in Leviticus 19, which contains teaching on how God's people should treat their neighbour and help strangers practically those in difficulty. The parable of the Good Samaritan deals with this subject. These principles therefore lay at the heart of a Christian's approach to ethics.

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In verses 5.21-48 Jesus uses six antitheses to illustrate the ethical conduct he expects from his disciples. These include teaching on: murder, anger, lust, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and our attitude towards enemies and neighbours. (I should point out that some of the following material has been used in the article reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount)

1. Jesus commences his six antitheses of ethical teaching with the sixth commandment, "you shall not kill," He then builds on this, to give teaching on anger management and to show his disciples the importance of reconciling differences. The pattern of teaching is the same on all the sections relating to ethical conduct. The murder of anyone is strictly forbidden, but Jesus goes further to say that anger and hatred, which often led to murder, are also forbidden. While the human courts have the responsibility for judging and punishing criminal acts, ultimately everyone will be judge be God. Even if we have not committed a criminal act, God knows our thoughts and the motivation behind all our actions.

In the modern world we see war and conflict each time we put on our TV. People are being killed in fights between gangs, by terrorist and then you have teenagers walking into schools and killing teachers and pupils. We live in a world where many seem to ignore not just this commandment but the fact they will spend the rest of their life in prison. Then there are those who appear to hate other people whose faith differs to theirs and have some strange idea that it is okay to kill people who do not share your faith. Today we can see the damage done when one person kills another, the pain and suffering of those who are bereaved can clearly be seen. All people need to work together to bring an end to the needless killing and make all aware that they should not commit murder. In my view there is no ethical justification for the murder of another person.

(Some people may wonder how this applies to war. When a country or group goes to war they are clearly breaking the commandment. By forcing countries to defend themselves they make the people they are attacking break the commandment when they are forced to act to defend innocent people.)

2. The second teaching draws on the seventh commandment “you shall not commit adultery”. Jesus reminds his listeners that the eye that should keep us from stumbling, can also trip us up. The self mutilation referred to in verse 29 (“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,”) cannot be meant literally. Jesus frequently uses this type of oratory to illustrate the point he is making. Do not commit adultery like you shall not kill was modified by Jesus. He includes lust, and the desire of an illicit relationship. Jesus intention appears to condemn the deliberate harbouring of desire for forbidden relationships.

Those who commit adultery seem to be blind to the pain their action causes. Adultery usually leads to divorce with all the hurt that causes for all those involved and in particular the injured persons and any children that are affected. When a couple marry, they promise to support each other whatever life throws at them. But in the modern world some people think its okay to commit adultery, there is even an adultery website, which I believe should be closed down. The people who run these sites do not care who gets hurt and that it is ethical and morally wrong by the standards of any truly civilised society.

3. The Sermon moves on from adultery to the subject of divorce, Jesus develops it to include the action of men also being adulterous, which brought a radical change to thinking on marital break-up in his time, as only women had been blamed for adultery. His teaching on divorce does accept that divorce could be acceptable when there had been unfaithfulness, but that people should not divorce for any other reason. In my view his teaching sought to protect women who had very few rights at the time of Jesus and would probably in today’s world, acknowledge a person cannot remain in a marriage if they are being abused.

There are some circumstances where divorce is ethically and morally the right course of action. If one of the partners leaves the other after having an adultery relationship (an affair) then divorce in most cases is the most logical conclusion. If one of the partners is abusing the other either physically or verbally then a divorce may be the only way the abused person can be protected from the abuser. This said when a couple marry they promise to care for each other, so when a person commits adultery or abuses their partner, they have not only broken their vows, they have also broken the trust there should be between a married couple. Divorce should only be a last resort and couples need to reflect long and hard on why they want to divorce the person they fell in love with and wanted to marry. Marriage is meant to be a life time commitment not a short term fling.

4. Jesus goes beyond the basic understanding of swearing oaths and making vows after providing a summary of the Old Testament teaching from Leviticus 19:12, Exodus 20.7, and Psalm 50. He says oaths only need a person’s word, if they are unreliable then the person is not a true disciple. The law on oaths reflects the Old Testament where the swearing oaths and making vows were not simply permitted but, in certain circumstances commended.

When people take an oath or make a vow it is important that they should honour them. This is particularly true when people marry. The previous teaching on adultery reminds us that not everyone keeps their marriage vows and this often leads to unhappiness and suffering. In a court of law when a person takes an oath to tell the truth they should do precisely that. However if a person is forced to swear an oath for example to a criminal gang, then they have the moral right to break it as they were forced to make the oath or if they do not want to be part of the gang

criminal activity. When people agree to a business contract or agree to do something for something they should keep their word and honour their agreement.

5. Jesus' teaching makes a radical change to the principle of proportionate retribution which was an ancient law and widely recognised. The examples eye for eye and tooth for tooth, etc, had led to cycles of retaliation. By teaching that the wrong doing should be dealt with by the courts and the punishment must not exceed the crime Jesus sought to bring an end to the cycles of retaliation which did and still does cause a great deal of suffering to innocent people. However Jesus went further by saying "Do not resist" this wider do not retaliate, it involves acceptance of ill-treatment. This was clearly teaching for the disciples who faced persecution, which they faced with non-violent resistance.

Passive resistance can be a powerful course of action, Gandhi being one of the famous people to use it to great effect. We all have the right to protest when we object to something. Passive protest has brought about many important changes in our society which have strengthened the rights and freedoms of individuals. Protestors who riot or take other violent action do more harm and damage than the thing they are protesting about. Rioters are usually thugs who wish to use the protest to commit crimes and carry out acts of violence. We all want to defend our family but any act of violence must be the ultimate last resort. We should when threatened first seek help from the police who are employed to protect us and not take the law into our own hands. In modern society we employ the armed services to protect our country and they work with the police to protect us from terrorist and other threats. Therefore do not resist and do not retaliate is possible within most civilised societies. Where the teachings of Jesus are important, are for example, when we are faced with aggression from a drunk or road rage, it is important not to meet aggression with aggression. Standing up to bullies and threats, a peaceful response is the type of non-violent response Jesus is referring to. Turning the other cheek is important, but Jesus did not say give into bullies. He did not give into aggression and went to his death because of the persecution he suffered. People seem unable to resist internet and text attacks, with this type of attack we can report the attacker or abuser to the provider and the police, block the attacker, switch the device or change our account information. Only through peaceful action and a resistance to violence can we make the world a safer and more peaceful place.

6. Love is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. He reminded people of the commandment to love your neighbour, he also says that you should not hate your enemy, but show them an indiscriminating love. It was a radical teaching by Jesus. His emphasis on this indiscriminating love sets his disciples apart from others. Jesus observes that even the tax collector loves his friends and family, but God's love is for all people. In a world where there is war and conflict showing love to our enemies instead of taking up arms would create a world of peace not one of war. The Old Testament teaching; "You shall love your neighbour" (Leviticus 19:18), only refers to their neighbours within the community. But Jesus advocating an indiscriminating love towards those outside our own community and opposed to the community of God, this reflects the character of God's love.

Love is the key to fulfilling the teaching of Jesus. Love of God, love of family and friends, love of neighbour and stranger, and the most difficult love of enemy. When we show love to our fellow human beings, they can find it hard to respond with aggression or violence. Showing love to people in need or to someone with problems goes to the heart of the Christian message. It is love which should control the basis for our ethical approach to life. If you love someone you cannot hate them, be violent towards them, commit adultery, lie to them or cheat them. When you love someone you keep your word and caring for them when they are ill or life's problems cause them stress and anxiety. Love is a beautiful emotion and when you are in love it is a truly

wonderful experience.

The teaching of Jesus present us with important principles to follow, the problems start to emerge when people treat the teaching as a clear set of rules instead of principles. Jesus' teachings were approximately two thousand years ago, in a society that will be alien to most of the readers of this article. We therefore do need to try to relate them to our century and hope that we have the correct understand. Most of the above can be related to our society and hopefully Christians will reflect them in their action.

The key feature of the Sermon is that it provides guidance on the way Christians ought to lead their lives, working for God's Kingdom and caring for neighbour, motivated by love. The passage reminds people that there is a different way of living to that of the world based on love, not violence and exploitation. These teaching have formed the basis for Christian ethical thinking since the time of Jesus. The principles set out in the Sermon are still relevant two thousand years after they were taught. The principle in the Sermon are not just ethical principles for Christians they also form the basis of other faith groups and non-faith groups ethics. They also form the basis of our judicial system which seeks to protect law abiding citizen, from those who would do us harm.

In my view, the teachings within the Sermon on the Mount have helped Christian ethics to transcend beyond simply being a code of conduct to influencing Christian's ethical approach to life. Although some may see the Sermon as a law based code of conduct centred on the Decalogue, others see it freeing people from the law enabling them to be led by the Spirit. In my opinion Christ's teaching contained both elements, enabling Christians to start to understand how they ought to serve God's Kingdom, as well as how this can be applied to the ethical conduct of individuals and community life.

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