

COLLEGE ETHICS SYMPOSIUM

ETHICAL DUTIES FROM THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS

The discipline of ethics can be viewed as an *ethics of being* and an *ethics of doing*. Jesus emphasized both approaches to living a morally responsible life. The first approach asks, “What kind of person should we *be*” (virtues or character traits)? And the second asks, “What should we *do*” (duties or behavioral principles)? Jesus used stories, questions, statements, parables, and everyday actions to illustrate the virtues and principles for everyday moral responsibility. Although they are a duty, they are difficult and a challenge to put into practice. The following seven *duties* are recurring themes from the gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. They are the marks of a Christian and the ideal standard for behavior:

- 1. Spiritual Enlightenment: In the search for truth, seek the likeness of God and a spiritual presence within yourself, your community, and all of creation.**
- 2. Integrity: Be honest with yourself, truthful with others, and humble in your relationships with them.**
- 3. Love for Others: Love your neighbors as yourself, invite others into your fellowship, and seek reconciliation with your enemies.**
- 4. Compassion: Do good by being kind and generous in serving the needs of others.**
- 5. Health, Healing, and Wholeness: Strive for health, healing, and wholeness in oneself and for others.**
- 6. Justice and Righteousness: Be fair in your transactions with others and seek justice in restoring others to wholeness and the community.**
- 7. Peacemaking and Non-violence: Engage in peacemaking, repent of wrongdoing, and seek reconciliation for harmonious relationships with all people, both individually and institutionally.**

This essay on the ethics of Jesus was prepared for the annual Ethics Symposium (2007) to provide an ethical statement based upon Christian principles as found in the four gospels of the New Testament. Jesus was deeply schooled in Jewish law and religious practices but his ministry gave deeper and extended meaning to the Jewish law. He summed up the law with general principles rather than trying to live by the hundreds of religious rules which had been established over centuries. With the purpose of identifying the ethical principles as taught and practiced by Jesus, I did a verse by verse analysis of the four gospels to determine what ethical and moral themes were inherent in his teachings and activities. Any lack of clarity or completeness is in part due to its being a synopsis of a larger document, not to mention the author’s limitations in writing it.

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ETHICAL DUTIES FROM THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS

1. Spiritual Enlightenment: In the search for truth, seek the likeness of God and a spiritual presence within yourself, your community, and all of creation. Jesus saw us as spiritual beings having a human experience. His teachings invite each person to look within themselves for the presence of this divine spirit. He spoke of this consciousness as the “kingdom of God.” This spiritual kingdom exists whether we recognize it or not and is in our “midst” and “at hand.” It is also a vision of how life can be here on earth for us to live together in community. Jesus conceived this spiritual kingdom to be personal and social, universal and invisible, but without any geographical, political, or human boundaries. It is a present reality and a future hope for each individual and for living together in harmony. The existence of this spiritual awareness has personal, religious, social, political, and economic implications. Jesus describes this God-like kingdom as heaven on earth. It is an alternate to the strictly secular community and a light unto the rest of the world.

- a) Matthew and Luke each speak of the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God more than 30 times. The teachings of Jesus as recorded in all four gospels describe the nature and makeup of such a community. Our moral responsibilities begin with the recognition of God, the Creator, as the source of our existence. Faith, prayer/meditation, and the search for truth enable us to become co-creators in making the kingdom a reality. The duty to become *spiritually enlightened* gives us an inner guidance system to fulfill the other six duties we have as persons on a spiritual journey. His everyday yet somewhat mysterious reference to the “kingdom” is the best shorthand summary of his message and passion.
- b) The word *light* is used with several meanings by Jesus to refer to the divine presence of God in the form of knowledge, goodness, or guide. We become part of God’s presence and activity by reorienting our lives and making a commitment to Jesus and his teachings so that the good news can become a reality. A defining characteristic of spirituality is the experience of some strong connection—a connection to something greater than oneself and to others.

Selected scriptural references:

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

After this, Jesus traveled from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 8:1).

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door is opened” (Luke 11:9-10).

2. Integrity: Be honest with yourself, truthful with others, and humble in your relationships with them. Jesus asks his followers to choose righteousness and goodness

for a responsible moral life. His righteousness is manifested by inward dispositions of the heart and moral actions. Integrity as a core virtue embodies a many-faceted combination of character traits. Honesty, humility, authenticity, truthfulness, promise-keeping, and sincerity are aspects of integrity that Jesus referred to in his teachings and parables. When our beliefs, words, and behavior are congruent, we act as a whole person and do not pretend to be something that we aren't. Deeds match our words.

- a) Jesus' harshest criticism was of the Pharisees, whom he observed as hypocrites who had a form of religion, but who lacked compassion for the widow, poor, lame, underprivileged, powerless, and outcast. Even some of the Pharisees and Herodias recognized Jesus as a person of integrity when they went to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Mark 12:14)
- b) He challenges those who follow him to be righteous, i.e., adhere to moral and ethical principles in their everyday lives. The person of integrity seeks to do what is right and good and avoids doing that which is harmful.

Selected scriptural references:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled; Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:5,6,8).

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 (Mark 7:20-23).

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 14:11).

3. Love for Others: Love your neighbors as yourself, invite others into your fellowship, and seek reconciliation with your enemies. Jesus adds a new meaning to love of neighbor regarding interpersonal and community relationships. The Greek word for such love, *agape*, describes the love of God for humankind and the kind of love we should have for one another without exception. It is a self-giving love without the expectation of anything in return. Agape love does not depend upon how we are treated by others. Although no conditions are set for the worth of a person, one does not have to admire the person or approve the behavior.

- a. The focus here is on inclusiveness in our relationships without boundaries that are barriers. Love as practiced by Jesus is unlimited and unconditional regardless of race, color, creed, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or station in life. While love as an ideal is found in the major world religions, Jesus gave it greater emphasis and inclusiveness. A mark of the early Christians as observed by the non-Christians was how they loved and cared for one another. Differences in physical attributes, social status, or cultural practices of others are not to be barriers to showing love for them. Followers of Jesus

have a responsibility to reach out and attempt to bring everyone into the life of the community in ways that support their well-being.

- b. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration are essential to this inclusiveness, both on the personal and community levels. The spiritually mature person goes a step further than usual by extending love to strangers and reconciliation with those who may be our enemy. If one has been wronged by another, forgiveness is required. When reconciliation is possible, efforts are to be made to restore a harmonious relationship and involvement in community life. The intention is to include everyone within the care and common good of community life.

Selected scriptural references:

And the second [commandment] is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

And I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:27-28). Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37).

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. This is my command: Love each other (John 15: 12-13; 17).

4. **Compassion: Do good by being kind and generous in serving the needs of others.** *Love for Others* is about relationships and *Compassion* is being of service. Sharing and caring for those in need is love in action and represents the highest form of love. It requires nothing in return. Compassion is the emotion that motivates us to respond to the specific needs of others and gives us staying power. Each day Jesus and his followers walked the dusty roads of Palestine looking for opportunities in the villages to teach and minister to the needs of those along the way. The compassionate person has the knack for finding oneself in the presence of the good to be done. It goes beyond the inclusiveness of No. 3, *Love for Others*, and responds to a condition that needs to be righted. Jesus demonstrated inclusive, unselfish caring but gave priority to assisting the underprivileged, poor, sick, disabled, oppressed, lonely, stranger, and children. He was so devoted to compassion and justice that he inspired his followers with remarkable hope and courage even after his crucifixion by the Romans. Unlimited love is a sacred power that accents the completeness and wholeness of life.

Selected scriptural references:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7).

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:37).

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (quote from Isaiah by Jesus) Luke 4:18-19.

- 5. Health, Healing, and Wholeness: Strive for health, healing, and wholeness in oneself and for others.** Matthew and Luke each record more than 25 instances of Jesus healing the sick, physically handicapped, and mentally ill. Whenever Jesus brought the disciples together, they were expected to do three things: preach, teach, and heal. *"So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere"* (Luke 9:6). He had compassion for those born with a disability and for those who lost their health due to a disease. His healing of the sick and restoration of the disabled to wholeness establish the importance he gave to health.

a) Jesus frequently referred to the preciousness of life as God intended it for each individual. His intention for us is to be whole. Health is an Old English term that shares a root meaning with the words hale, hearty, holy, heal, and whole. It is all inclusive in the harmonious functioning of mind, body, and spirit for living relatively free of disease and inner conflict. The attention Jesus gave to the well-being of individuals indicates that he saw health and consequently life as more than the absence of illness but as meaningful and joyful. Jesus in his ministry always treated the whole person. A characteristic of the early Christian church was its healing ministry.

Selected scriptural references:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23).

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness (Matthew 10:1).

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go..."Heal the sick who are there and tell them 'The kingdom of God is near you'" (Luke 10: 1, 9).

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10)

6. Justice and Righteousness: Be fair in your transactions with others and seek justice in restoring others to wholeness and the community. Throughout the Bible, justice is meant as a social and economic form of love, is often used in parallel with righteousness, and is mentioned hundreds of times. Justice and righteousness are two key concepts that refer not only to fair legal systems but also to just economic structures and practices. In the Old Testament, *righteousness* means preserving the peace and wholeness of the community. More specifically it means *delivering a justice* that rescues and releases the oppressed and also a *community-restoring justice* that restores the powerless and the outcasts to their rightful place in the community.

- a) In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*” (Matthew 5:6). Numerous times Jesus imparted to his disciples that they must strive for justice on earth as it is found in heaven. He did not say it was a sin to be rich, but he did challenge those who had wealth to assist those who were poor. He was critical of individuals as well as the Jewish law which was discriminatory and deprived the poor of the opportunity to attain the basic necessities of life. Jesus challenged the extremes of poverty and wealth and the lack of compassion for those economically and socially disadvantaged. He walked, talked, and ate with those who were poor, outcasts, diseased, disabled, discouraged, forgotten, and oppressed.

Selected scriptural references:

The rich young man (Matthew 19:16-26).

The poor widow's offering (Mark 12:41-44).

Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46).

“...From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12: 48).

7. Peacemaking and Non-violence: Engage in peacemaking, repent of wrongdoing, and seek reconciliation for harmonious relationships with all people, both individually and institutionally. Peacemaking is a commitment to the power of love to replace the love of power. Each of the six ethical duties contributes to and provides opportunities for peace and peacemaking. The absence of any one of them weakens the chances for peace. The Hebrew word *shalom* includes such English ideas as peace, well-being, and wholeness of health, justice, prosperity, and safety. An inner peace comes from spiritual enlightenment and peaceful relationships from love, service, and justice. Without justice, peace in personal, social, or political relationships is unlikely. Healing the body, mind, and spirit brings wholeness to relationships. Jesus proclaimed in his Sermon on the Mount, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God*” (Matthew 5:9).

- a) Jesus as attested in the Holy Scripture, knew no national boundary. Allegiance to the kingdom of God takes priority over national identity. He shows us that enemy-love is the heart of the gospel. Repeatedly, Jesus promotes non-violent methods for overcoming injustice. He challenges us to seek peace in unjust, violent situations wherever we find them. A commitment to peacemaking does not mean the absence of conflict, but requires that we explore nonviolent means to resolve the conflict. His *Love for Others* ethic requires that we have compassion, forgive others, and seek reconciliation to the extent possible. Peacekeeping is the responsibility of all who follow Jesus.

- b) Together the seven ethical duties create the spirit of the living God—making things the way they should be *in* people, *between* people, and *for* people in the heavenly community on earth. The practice of these principles will promote peace and thereby prevent violence. Combined they become the kingdom of God. Shalom!

Selected scriptural references:

Judgment on anger and murder (Matthew 5:21-24).

Turning the other cheek and going the second mile (Matthew 5:38-42). *Forgiving seventy-seven times* (Matthew 18:21-22).

“*Put your sword back in its place,*” Jesus said to him, “*for all who draw the sword will die by the sword*” (Matthew 26:54).

“*Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other*” (Mark 9:50).

General References: Barnette, Henlee H. (1961). *Introducing Christian ethics*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman; Hollinger, Dennis P. (2002). *Choosing the good: Christian ethics in a complex world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Harrington, Daniel & Keenan, James (2002). *Jesus and virtue ethics*. Chicago: Lanham, Maryland; Lindberg, Tod (2007). *The political teachings of Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins; Sider, Ronald J. (1999). *Just generosity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; Stassen, Glenn (Ed.) (1998). *Just peacemaking* (2nd ed.). Cleveland: Pilgrim Press; Stassen, Glenn H & Gushee, David P. (2003). *Kingdom ethics: Following Jesus in contemporary context*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Mel Witmer (8-3-07)