

December 2013

Contemporary Christian Ethics

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Recommended Citation

Kreutter, Katie (2013) "Contemporary Christian Ethics," *Verbum*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol11/iss1/2>

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"From an ethical standpoint, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and parable of the Good Samaritan are complex and thought-provoking. In this work, multiple lenses for examining these passages will be evaluated and considered in an effort to better understand this material in respect to ethics and practical application."



Katie Kreutter

Contemporary Christian Ethics

From an ethical standpoint, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and parable of the Good Samaritan are complex and thought-provoking. In this work, multiple lenses for examining these passages will be evaluated and considered in an effort to better understand this material in respect to ethics and practical application.

In "The Ethical Implications of the Sermon on the Mount," Lisa Cahill posits that there are several ways to interpret the challenging components of the passage as they relate to daily living and decision-making. The first interpretation is that the text reflects an ancient ethic present within Judaism that is legalistic and literal.¹ This reading does seem justifiable in the sense that Matthew is continually linking the old covenant of the Old Testament with Jesus' fulfillment of the law and establishment of the new covenant. However, it seems somewhat doubtful in light of the greater context of Matthew as it articulates Jesus' message of adherence to the spirit of the law rather than man-made conventions of legalism. Likewise, such a theory seems incomplete as it does not address the seeming impossibility of flawlessly and entirely following this ethic introduced by Jesus. This leads naturally to the second theory considered by Cahill, or the idea of the difficult action passages leading the reader or follower to acknowledge his or her own incapability and utter dependence on God and God's grace.² Through the written works of such influential thinkers as Dostoevsky, it is clear that this pattern of thinking

¹ *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 41 (April 1987), <http://ldlearning.crcds.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=665> (accessed February 23rd, 2013), 145.

² *Ibid.*

has remained well-maintained throughout the centuries.³ This makes sense since the demanding call of the Sermon on the Mount for a completely counter-cultural and sacrificial lifestyle would likely lead one to prefer the passages were figurative rather than literal. These antitheses would then serve as introspective rather than responsive in nature, prompting a person to reflect upon his or her sinful state and admit reliance on God rather than engaging him or her with a social ethic and practice. Such an interpretation seems to trivialize the passage, however, since many of the verses are less extreme and seem to offer practical guidance for daily living. It is thereby challenging to reconcile these verses with the ones that seem impossible when they are clearly related to one another literarily, socially, and ethically. However, it is also challenging to argue that all of the verses are meant to be taken literally, as sanity would dictate against the rationale of dismembering one's self to avoid sin.⁴

The third theory that Cahill expounds upon seems to address this apparent discrepancy. This theory states that this ethic could indeed be considered in a literal fashion; however, it is not meant to be followed for any length of time as a practicable ethic since those who carried this theory believed Christ would be returning during their lifetime.⁵ Since that did not happen, the ethic is now considered ineffective and irrelevant.⁶ The fourth interpretation suggests a Kingdom ethic that is indeed feasible for a believer who is engaged with and reflective of God's Kingdom work on Earth and becoming increasingly fashioned to the likeness of Christ.⁷ This postulation, though incredibly thought-provoking, is challenging to support as well since its argument is based upon an ethereal concept with little to observe concretely to either prove or disprove it other than a professed Christ follower's actions.

³ Philip Yancey, "Be Ye Perfect, More or Less: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and the Impossible Sermon on the Mount," *Christianity Today* (January 23rd, 2010), <http://ldlearning.crcds.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=595> (accessed February 23rd, 2013), 5.

⁴ Cahill 145.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

While the Sermon on the Mount was clearly orated to a specific ancient audience in a particular historical and cultural context, nevertheless its implications seem relatively timeless, relevant, and applicable across generations. History and theology has indicated that as long as sinful human beings exist there will be situations on Earth that warrant a radical and ethical response. Whether that response is peaceful and restorative or hostile and destructive depends upon one's spiritual ethic and reading of this biblical passage. Whether it is read as impracticable or literal, this section of Scripture has an inevitable impact on Christian living and decision-making as it prompts one to examine the tension between the self as an individual and the self as a creature of God in community with others.

This self-examination relates well to the tension inherent within the parable of the Good Samaritan. In *Love Disconsoled*, Timothy Jackson defines agape in terms of three features that all espouse some level of concern for others.⁸ The level at which the concern should be manifested and at what expense to the self, varies depending upon the feature. In some ways, the first feature seems the most demanding. It calls for regard of others' welfare without condition.⁹ While this call seems relatively straightforward, there are many implications to it that merit consideration, such as whether regard should be given without condition in a circumstance where doing so would damage one's own welfare. This is especially pertinent when considered in the context of the next two features, which emphasize equality between persons and openness, rather than a requirement, to self-sacrifice, respectively.¹⁰ While self-sacrifice is certainly conveyed as a central facet of agapic love, it nevertheless seems to be defined with certain boundaries. For instance, in the parable, the Samaritan, who is classically understood to portray at least some level of agapic love, sacrifices his time and treasure to care for the man who is injured, yet he only does so to the extent that is necessary. He could have, in theory, continued

⁸ "Biblical keys to love" (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 15.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

to stay with the man and physically provide care for him at the inn where he took him, yet he entrusts his care to the responsibility of another and continues on with his own personal unrelated responsibilities (Luke 10: 35). The Samaritan gives of himself to this man without condition in one respect, yet there seems to be a condition that emerges once the need for his self-involvement is no longer imperative.

In effect, it seems that this parable does not dismiss self-regard, albeit distinct from self-love. In fact, it seems to suggest that care of the other involves care of the self in order for a person to have the capacity to continue functioning and caring. However, this parable also clearly emphasizes concern for the other over concern for the self, since the seemingly selfless and merciful response of the Samaritan is contrasted with the seemingly selfish and legalistic response of the religious leaders (Luke 10: 36-37). Although these leaders may have rationalized their reasoning for not responding from an ethical and moral standpoint, nevertheless their failure to act is conveyed as being the unfavorable option and contrary to the nature of agapic love. Likewise, the motives of the Samaritan are not disclosed. While it's possible he may not have even regarded the injured man as his equal, nevertheless his embodiment of agapic love is highlighted as he recognized at least some level of worth by responding to a need with a willingness to sacrifice.

The immense challenge of Christian ethics is manifested through these types of attempts to reconcile difficult biblical passages with practical application. There is much to be learned for contemporary living by thoughtful consideration of the teachings of Jesus as they were presented within the context of ancient hearers.