

LESSON 5

THE ETHICS OF JESUS

Introduction

There is an interval of some four hundred years between Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament, and the birth of Jesus. These four centuries have been called 'years of silence' because there was no prophetic voice or other written revelation from God which forms part of our Bible. The New Testament begins with the account of the birth of Jesus. This event is so significant in history that time is now counted with Christ as the dividing line in history. What happened in the four hundred years before the birth of Christ? A study of the history of the Jews, of the culture and development of the Greeks, and of the growth of the Roman Empire gives a clear understanding of many tendencies which have ethical and moral implications.

Judaism, the religion of the Jews that flourished in this period, became very legalistic. There were minute laws, along with the interpretations of the rabbis, which became as authoritative as the laws of Moses, the teachings of the prophets, and the wisdom of the sages. Jesus was born, grew into manhood, and launched His public ministry in this environment. However, He taught with an emphasis upon basic principles which were to find their application for mankind in any period of history. In Christ, the moral teachings of the writers of the Old Testament found their fruition. He united all the virtues which were emphasized prior to Him by the men who helped to formulate God's moral laws (Matt. 5:17-20).

Religious Leader or Ethical Philosopher?

During the course of history, there have been men who have tried to separate Jesus' moral and ethical teachings from His religious teachings. They wanted to make Jesus nothing more than a teacher of ethical norms without religious foundation, but this is impossible. The ethical teachings of Jesus are basic for one who is a citizen of the Kingdom of God. The religious leaders and philosophers of the first century were not aware of the importance of the coming of Jesus into the world nor of the impact that His teachings would have upon humanity.¹

There was a great difference between Jesus as a religious teacher and the moral philosophers who were His contemporaries. He was not just another philosopher. The philosophers of that day emphasized utilitarianism, humanism, and hedonism with their teachings. Jesus' teachings cannot be systematized to be both inclusive and exclusive. Nor are the teachings of Jesus purely teleological. (*Teleological* indicates an emphasis on the ends or goals of life.) His teachings point out the goals which are worthy, but at the same time they emphasize the proper means for reaching these goals.

¹W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1880), 1:338.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus taught basic principles which apply to all mankind for all ages. In His teachings, Old Testament teachings found their _____.

(*fruition*)

The foundation for Jesus' ethical teachings is a sound _____.

(*religious experience*)

Jesus' teachings not only point to worthy goals but they emphasize the proper _____ for reaching these _____.

(*means, goals*)

E. F. Scott clarifies the relationship between the ethics of Jesus and that of other systems in the following words, 'His ethic was not only different from that which had gone before but was in a real sense its antithesis.'² Thus Jesus was not just another philosopher who came and lived for a time. He was a religious teacher who came to introduce a way of life that was different from all others into the world.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

It is important to recognize that the ethical teachings of Jesus, as well as His religion, are centralized in the concept of the Kingdom of God. The theme of the Kingdom of God runs as a thread of gold through the Gospels. Christ referred to the Church two times and to the Kingdom seventy times.³ His is a gospel of the Kingdom. The majority of the parables illustrate this truth.

The meaning of the Kingdom of God, however, is not easy to interpret. Scholars differ in their opinions on this subject. The great controversy seems to be whether the references to the Kingdom have to do with actuality or with the future. Is Jesus talking about a way of life that is to be followed during the course of human history, or is He giving ideals for a time that transcends history? One needs to closely study the illustrations of the Kingdom of God in order to clarify its nature.

The Kingdom is spiritual

The Kingdom of God is defined as the righteous and sovereign rule of God in a redeemed society. People who accept the conditions of the Kingdom of God and make an effort to live in obedience to His will constitute a redeemed society. This definition emphasizes the concept that God is sovereign and rules in the world. Man is subject to His power and authority.

We must recognize that this Kingdom is spiritual in nature. People in the day of Jesus wanted to make Him the physical, visible king, but Jesus rejected that role. He knew that being king over a spiritual kingdom was much more important than establishing Himself as king over a country. He insisted that His Kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36).

The Kingdom is invisible

In Luke 17, Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you' (17:20b-21). There is a great deal of difference among scholars as to the meaning of the two Greek words *entos humōn* which Luke used in verse 21. Some have not wanted to translate the words as *among you* precisely because it is inconceivable to think that Jesus would say that the Kingdom was among the Pharisees who expressed so much opposition to His life and teachings. Another emphasis is that Jesus was saying that the Kingdom is really within the heart of the believer. The stress in this interpretation is not so much upon the location of the Kingdom as upon the invisible nature of it. The invisible dwelling of the Kingdom within every believer gives it a mystical nature that reaches beyond the limits of

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus was a religious _____ who came to introduce a new way of _____.

(teacher, life)

Jesus' teachings and religion were centred in the concept of the of _____ of _____.

(Kingdom, God)

The Kingdom of God is the r _____ and s _____ rule of G _____ in a redeemed s _____.

(righteous, sovereign, God, society)

AS YOU READ THE TOPIC JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD, LIST THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KINGDOM.

1. The Kingdom is _____.

(spiritual)

2. The Kingdom is _____.

(invisible)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The Kingdom is within the _____ of the _____.

(heart, believer)

²E. F. Scott, *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 29.

³Henlee H. Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), p. 46.

race, colour, and nationality.

Jesus here pointed out something which was different from the concepts held by His contemporaries. He was saying that the Kingdom of God is a divine power which works quietly in man and gives him the motivation and the impetus to live a morally clean life. The Kingdom gives him ideals for which to strive. L. H. Marshall states:

In this conception of the Kingdom of God in the heart, religion and ethics meet. God takes the initiative and comes to the soul of man with a transcendent moral claim. When a man recognizes that claim, and voluntarily surrenders himself to it, he has come under the rule of God, and thus the Kingdom of God is established within him. . . . It is in this way that the living God enters into the living experience of man, for man thus experiences God as the light of the mind, and finds in obedient fellowship with God the strength and the inspiration of life.⁴

The Kingdom is present and future

C.H. Dodd has propounded the idea that the Kingdom is already present and is being realized in the course of history.⁵ His 'realized eschatology' has become widely accepted among many groups. His theory is based upon the passage of Jesus' teachings which emphasizes that the Kingdom is within us. Albert Schweitzer, the great physician, musician, missionary, and theologian, promoted the idea of an 'interim ethic' in which he insisted that the teachings of Jesus were norms for the people to follow from the time of His death until the establishment of His eschatological Kingdom. Others insist that the teachings of Jesus are for the present age, applicable as a standard of life and a potential for all mankind.

The Kingdom is individual and social

Jesus taught the people to pray, 'Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done . . .' (Matt. 6:10). The Kingdom cannot be realized socially until it is experienced individually. The teachings of Jesus are difficult to apply to society if the majority of the people in that society do not accept them as norms for their lives, whether or not they are Christians. Some countries have laws that coincide with the ideals that Jesus taught, but other laws conflict with His teachings. The Social Gospel movement in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was based upon the hope of being able to establish a Christian society. The movement failed because it did not recognize that one must first experience the effects of the new birth in his life personally and individually. As more and more people have this experience, they will be able to see the value of uniting in their goals of helping others to see the value of Jesus' teachings as their goal in life. There is always some doubt about groups of Christians which unite as political parties to try to legislate their standards upon all the citizens of a given country.

The Relation Between Religion and Ethics

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the teachings of Jesus, as compared with the teachings of other religious

⁴L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1950), p. 29.

⁵C. H. Dodd, *The Coming of Christ* (Cambridge: University Press, 1954), p. 25.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is a divine power which works in man and gives him the _____ and the _____ to live a moral life.

(motivation, impetus)

CONTINUE TO LIST THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KINGDOM.

3. The Kingdom is _____ and _____.

(present, future)

4. The Kingdom is _____ and _____.

(individual, social)

TRUE OR FALSE?

The Kingdom can be realized socially without being experienced individually. _____

(False.)

REWRITE THE STATEMENT TO MAKE IT TRUE.

(The Kingdom cannot be realized socially without being experienced individually.)

leaders, is the close relationship existing between a religious experience and its effects on one's life. The first claim of Jesus is 'follow me'. Upon accepting this challenge, one comes to realize that it leads him to a high moral standard of living, as well as to a thrilling spiritual pilgrimage. Jesus condemned religious systems that did not produce changed moral lives among their adherents (Matt. 23:1-39). He emphasized that one cannot become good apart from having a genuine religious experience (John 4:10-29). Love for God is basic in order for one to have love for his neighbour (Mark 12:30-31). Jesus' life clearly illustrates that, when one experiences love for God, he communicates this love in becoming concerned for his neighbour. Zacchaeus had a religious experience when Jesus dined in his home, and he determined to correct the ills of robbery and deceit which had characterized his dealings with others (Luke 19:8). When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he should do to inherit everlasting life, Jesus responded by saying that he should go, sell all his goods, and distribute them to the poor (Matt. 19:21). This requirement indicates that sincerity in religious motivation also implies concern for the conditions of others.

The Distinctive Elements in Jesus' Teachings

Non-systematic

Jesus taught with general principles and illustrations of these principles instead of giving detailed and legalistic rules. His statement to love God and one's neighbour is a principle which can be used and applied in many specific details. Jesus made references to resistance to and use of force, but He did not give specific instructions concerning every possible situation in which force might be needed. For this reason, there is much latitude in the interpretations which are given to the question of the correct use of force. Some see no problem in participating in a war that is not aggressive because it falls within their classification of a 'just war'. In no place do we have a systematized presentation of the ethical teachings of Jesus. Rather, His teachings were determined by the occasions which He faced and the questions that were asked. In Judaism, Jesus could see the effects of a legalistic approach to the systematized study of the Law. Men had taken the Law and tried to imagine every possible hypothetical case in order to establish rules to be followed when the conditions presented themselves. Jesus saw this system as grievous burdens to be borne (Matt. 23:4). It took the joy out of living. 'Instead of framing laws, he stated principles, and made them so few and broad and simple that no one could overlook them.'⁶

Internal and external

Jesus taught that morality is a matter of inner being as well as external conduct. The Sermon on the Mount is a classic presentation of His attempt to internalize the Law. God had revealed His ideals through Moses, but the people were not able to measure up to the requirements of the Law. Even in cases where some did obey the external requirements of the Law, there was an emptiness in their comportment. Jesus tried to internalize the Law by insisting that inner attitude is more important than external obedience. Thus hate in one's heart is

⁶Scott, *The Ethical Teaching*, p. 27.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus' teachings emphasized a close relation between a religious _____ and its _____ on one's life.

(*experience, effects*)

Zacchaeus exemplified that when one experiences love for _____ he communicates this love in concern for his _____.

(*God, neighbour*)

AS YOU READ THE DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS IN JESUS' TEACHING, LIST THOSE ELEMENTS.

1. Jesus' teachings are _____.

(*non-systematic*)

2. Jesus' teaching are _____ and _____.

(*internal, external*)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus' taught that morality involves inner _____ as well as external _____. The Sermon on the Mount is an attempt to _____ the _____.

(*being, conduct, internalize, Law*)

the root of evil that causes one to kill. Lust creates the desire to commit adultery, and covetousness may produce the temptation to steal. The principles of Jesus cause man to examine his inner motives for his actions. If one functions from right motives, his actions will be beneficial to mankind and his own health and maturity enhanced. But, if he functions without right motives, he may do more harm than good and never realize that inner satisfaction. Thus the teachings of Jesus help to develop a healthy attitude.

Positive quality

Jesus' teachings are marked with an emphasis on the positive view. The Golden Rule as stated in the Jewish literature before the birth of Jesus (see Tobit 4:15) was negative. Confucius also taught it in the negative form, and this negative idealism is also seen in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Moslem writings. Jesus gave the Golden Rule in its positive form (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). He also taught that the offended person should take the initiative to reconcile any differences with his brother (Matt. 5:23-25). He insisted that the attitude of the Christian should excel that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). He also emphasized that an enthusiasm for good does more to diminish evil than anything else. This fact is illustrated by Jesus' telling about the demon that was cast out of a house. The house was left vacant and clean, but seven other demons came and took possession of the house, leaving it worse than ever (Matt. 12:43-45).

Jesus taught that one is able to receive pardon from God in proportion to his capacity to pardon his brother, 'For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt. 6:14-15). In the ancient world, forgiveness was unknown and vengeance was the rule of the day. The principle of 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth' was a step forward from the ancient law of the jungle. But Jesus came to appeal to man to have a forgiving heart, for this is the way to health and happiness. Resentment and revenge result in frustration, energy consumed, and ill health for the one who cannot forgive.

Present and future elements

Jesus' teachings are applicable for the present as well as the future. If one lives in accord with His teachings, he will have a purpose in life and make a positive contribution to society. He will live in harmony with God and his fellow-man. He will also be preparing a reward for himself in heaven. Jesus illustrated this truth in Matthew 25 when he said that one who gives food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and attention to the sick and imprisoned is doing these acts for Christ and will inherit a reward in heaven (Matt. 25:34-46). Many emphasize the future element in these teachings and seem to make the Christian life little more than a time of preparation for what is to take place in the future life. Others feel that this life is all there is and that heaven or hell is created and experienced by the individual during this life. Jesus brings a balance in this area by showing that His way of life has its application to the present as well as to the future.

A teleological ethic

The ethic of Jesus is teleological. This type of ethics places a strong emphasis upon the end or goals that are upheld as

CONTINUE LISTING THE ELEMENTS OF JESUS' TEACHINGS.

3. Jesus' teaching are _____.

(positive)

4. Jesus' teaching apply to the _____ and to the _____.

(present, future)

5. Jesus' ethical teachings are _____.

(teleological)

relevant for man. 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matt. 5:48) is a declaration which gives perfection as the goal of one's life. Jesus is speaking here of being complete, mature, and whole as well as holding up a moral ideal for man. Being perfect is perpetually relevant since no one can reach absolute perfection in this life. 'But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you' (Matt. 6:33) also points up the goal of the Christian life. As one makes the Kingdom of God his chief purpose in living, all other goals take on proper perspective in his system of priorities.

Good and Evil

Jesus and sin

There is a contrast between the emphasis of Jesus and that of Paul with regard to the word *sin*. Paul used the term *sin* frequently, but Jesus used the word only on four occasions. Jesus spoke of the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt.12:31; Mark 3:28-29). In the model prayer He said, 'Forgive us our sins' (Luke 11:4). In response to the woman who came with the alabaster box of ointment to anoint His feet, He said, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Luke 7:47-49, RSV). The man who was healed of his paralysis received the same blessing (Matt. 9:2-6; Mark 2:5-11; Luke 5:20-24).

But the fact that Jesus did not use the term *sin* frequently does not indicate that He did not recognize the problem of sin in man. There are passages which show clearly that He recognized something was wrong with man and needed to be corrected. Let us look at some of the basic ideas which point up this truth.

Self-love as the root sin

Self-love occupies a prominent place in the teachings of Jesus about the source of sin. Marshall indicates that, according to Jesus, sin has many branches but it has only one trunk, egoism. The sins of the flesh, as well as those of the spirit, have their roots in self-love. The social vices, such as slavery, lack of respect for women, economic injustices, and racial discrimination, are all results of self-love. The most striking example of this egoism is seen in the parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:13-21). He decided to tear down his barns in order to make them bigger, enabling him to store all his fruits and goods. He also thought that all was well since he possessed these material commodities. But God said that this man was foolish because in the midst of material riches he did not recognize his spiritual poverty. This attitude was the opposite of what Jesus taught, 'Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it' (Luke 17:33).

Egoism is the desire to save ourselves and to further our own interests above all else. Self-abnegation is a willingness to give up personal interests in order to give ourselves in service to a higher cause. Jesus said that we need to crucify our own personal desires and be filled with God's love and the desire to serve Him and our neighbour. The idea that we put others before ourselves in terms of personal desires is central to Christian morality.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The ethic of Jesus is _____ since it places a strong emphasis on the g_____ that are upheld as relevant for man. An example is found in Matthew _____.

(teleological, goals, 5:48)

What did Jesus stress as the source of sin?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

According to the text, what is egoism?

(Compare your answer the text.)

Sins of the flesh

It has been said previously that Jesus did not have much to say about the sins of the flesh. Many have asked, 'Why?' The answer may be that He dealt primarily with the Jews, and these sins of the flesh were not as prominent among them as among the Gentiles. The Old Testament Law had had a positive effect upon the Jews, and it had created at least an outward morality in the lives of the majority of the Jews. For this reason, Jesus gave a stronger emphasis to the sins of the spirit which were prevalent among these people. His dealings with Gentiles were less frequent, and for this reason He did not have very much to say about the carnal sins. This does not mean, however, that Jesus passed over these sins lightly. He gave serious consideration to them, as noted in His statement, 'And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee . . . if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee' (Matt. 5:29a, 30a). Jesus recognized that the source of the sins of the flesh is an evil heart, 'For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man' (Matt. 15:19-20a).

Sins of the spirit

When condemning the attitudes of the Pharisees, Jesus touched upon, and strongly condemned the sins of the spirit: hypocrisy, pride, and complacency. He illustrated how easy it is to see the sins of others and overlook our own in the graphic illustration 'Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye' (Matt. 7:5).

Jesus spoke a great deal about the need to serve humanity. He taught that it is not enough simply to refrain from that which is evil; one must also be involved in actions that contribute to the welfare of others. In the parable of the talents, the one who did nothing with the one talent he received was condemned because of his inaction (Matt. 25:24-27). In the story of the Good Samaritan, the Levite and the priest did nothing, neither good nor bad. The hero of the parable is the Samaritan. He was despised by the Jews, had few resources, and apparently was unable to help Jews in most instances; therefore, nothing was expected of him. Despite these impediments, he surprised everyone by taking the initiative to offer help (Luke 10:24-37). In the final judgement scene in Matthew 25, those who had done nothing in service to their fellow-man were condemned (Matt. 25:41-46). The rich young man said that he had fulfilled all the laws of God from the time of his youth. However, Jesus showed him that he lacked that which was most basic—giving God first priority (Mark 10:17-22). Jesus set an example of looking for opportunities to serve mankind.

Jesus also emphasized the importance of going beyond outward obedience to the Law. Ceremony without sincerity of heart was empty. One could go through the rituals and still be guilty of sins of the spirit. His greatest condemnation fell upon the hypocritical Pharisees, who prayed, fasted, and tithed in a rigid, compulsive manner. But they did it from the wrong motives. Therefore, Jesus called them hypocrites (Matt. 23:13-33).

Jesus recognized pride, which often accompanies being religious, as a sin of the spirit. He did not consider the minute details of how to observe the Sabbath as important as some

GIVE SCRIPTURES AS ILLUSTRATIONS FOR THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.

1. Jesus gave serious consideration to sins of the flesh.

2. He recognized that the source of sins of the flesh is an evil heart.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

LIST THREE SINS OF THE SPIRIT WHICH JESUS CONDEMNED IN THE PHARISEES.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus taught that it is not enough to refrain from _____, one must be involved in contributing to the of _____ others.

(sin, welfare)

Jesus also stressed the need to go beyond outward obedience to the L_____ or c_____.

(Law, ceremony)

Pride is a sin of the _____.

(spirit)

did. Neither did he give undue emphasis to those things which defile a person, as illustrated in the following Scripture:

And he saith unto them, are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught. . . . That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

(Mark 7:18-23)

The Good Life

After having considered what sin is in the teachings of Jesus, we now turn to look at His concept of the good life. Christ gives some basic principles that serve to indicate what He expects of man.

The will of God: the supreme good

Jesus spoke frequently of the Kingdom of God. Those who accept His way of life become citizens of the Kingdom. The will of God becomes their standard for living. God has made provision for every man to have a proper relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ. Being a citizen of the Kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ means becoming subservient to the King and obeying His commands. Man's will is given over to the rulership of Christ. We enthrone Him and are willing to lose our identity for His sake.

The relationship of character and conduct

Jesus emphasized that man must be of a good character if his conduct is to be moral. Isolated actions of correct behaviour do not necessarily prove that one is good. This truth is also expressed in the statement that good deeds cannot save an individual. Christian character is created first of all by the transforming change which results from the new birth. Good deeds come as a result of this change. Jesus said, 'Ye shall know them by their fruits' (Matt. 7:16). This verse indicates that the pattern of one's life produces the kind of fruit that reveals the true character. We are more interested in producing people with true Christian character than maintaining good conduct among individuals. Jesus placed the emphasis correctly when He noted that conduct is a result of the attitude of the heart.

The perfect example: Jesus

Jesus' life is the perfect example. If we follow His pattern of loving, we shall find the good life. Although we do not have fixed rules to obey, we learn how to be obedient in love by following His example. The principal steps are to have a faith which centres in God, a love for God and our fellow-man, and a hope as we face the future. The results will be purity of heart, sincerity, forgiveness, humility, love for one's enemies, mercy, justice, sexual purity, and longing for the spiritual as over against the material treasures. The good life is one of service

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Those who accept Jesus' way of life become citizens of the K_____ of G____, and the w_____ of God becomes their standard for l_____.

(Kingdom, God, will, living)

Christian character and good deeds result from the transforming change which comes with the _____.

(new birth)

Jesus life is our p_____ for finding the good life, even though He did not give us fixed r_____ to obey.

(pattern, rules)

and sacrifice and absolute confidence in God.⁷

The good man is the one who voluntarily accepts the will of God for his life and thus finds supreme happiness. For the Christian, control of his behaviour comes from within and not from without. He need not follow a list of rules or fear punishment if he violates a list of prohibitions. He does not have to struggle by himself to withstand temptation because God gives him the dynamic of the Holy Spirit to assist him in times of trial. Because of God's change in his life, his attitude and point of view are different. Jesus made this new kind of life possible because He came, lived the perfect life, and left this example for each Christian.

Challenges to the Relevance of Jesus' Teachings

Upon summarizing the ethical teachings of Jesus, we are impressed by their high standards. They establish ideals beyond the reach of any person despite his efforts to attain them. For this reason, many have dismissed His teachings by saying that they are impossible to attain. Others argue that they are irrelevant for today. Let us look at some of these points of view.

His teachings are too ascetical

Some reject the ethical teachings of Jesus on the grounds that they present ascetic norms and thus lead to an austere way of life. Those who use this argument cite the passages which refer to the sacrifices one should make to follow Jesus, such as separation from the world and its interests, lack of concern for material possessions, denial of personal pleasure, and the necessity of living a holy and perfect life.

Ascetical tendencies in history.—We cannot deny the fact that historically much that is called Christian has come out of a context of asceticism. (*Asceticism* refers to the practice of strict self-denial or of punishment as a measure of personal and spiritual discipline in the mistaken belief that it brings spiritual benefit.) In the first decades after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, the Christian life was explained in terms of self-denial and separation from the world. Some Christians thought that there were so many evils in the world, such as political, economic, social, and moral corruption, that the only course for the Christian to follow was one of radical separation from those activities which would contaminate him. Some went so far as to live a celibate life within the bonds of matrimony. The celibate life was praised as being more holy than marriage. To follow the example of Jesus and remain unmarried was to inherit greater rewards in heaven.

The Roman Catholic interpretation.—The Roman Catholic Church insists upon celibacy for the clergy but recognizes that marriage is normal and one of the sacraments. In a sense, this policy represents a double standard because it excludes those who accept religious orders from participating in marriage and excludes those who marry from participating in a religious order. Although much pressure has been placed upon Catholic officials to change this requirement, the Pope still insists on adhering to it.

Leo Tolstoy is an example of a certain kind of asceticism.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The good life comes from _____ and not from _____ . It comes by the power of the _____ .

(*within, without, Holy Spirit*)

How did Jesus make the good life possible?

(*Compare your answers with the text.*)

AS YOU READ CHALLENGES TO THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' TEACHING, LIST THE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS.

1. _____

(*His teachings are too ascetical*)

GIVE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF ASCETICISM.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

(*1. separation from the world, 2. lack of concern for material possessions, 3. denial of personal pleasure, 4. necessity to live holy and perfect life*)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Some Christians thought that to remain unmarried was to inherit greater rewards in heaven. _____

2. Roman Catholic clergy may marry. _____

3. Roman Catholics allow those who are married to enter religious orders. _____

(*Compare your answers with the text.*)

⁷Georgia Harkness, *Christian Ethics* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 54.

He rejected the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant attitudes about many aspects of religion. He advocated a strategy of non-violence and pointed out the futility of war. According to his own interpretation of the teachings of Jesus, he denied the right to have policemen and other restraining officers. Although he was married, he gave up his own right to own property and turned over to his wife and children all legal rights to property and royalties from his writings. He helped to organize bread lines and identified with the poor and outcasts. He attempted to follow his understanding of the logical results of Jesus' teachings by putting them into practice.

Biblical passages.—Perhaps it is wise to take a look at some of the passages which have been used to justify the ascetic way of life. Jesus responded to the question of the rich young ruler by saying, 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me' (Matt. 19:21).

Is Jesus demanding asceticism as a basis for becoming a Christian? Is He requiring poverty for His followers? No. Here we have an illustration of Jesus' effectiveness as a teacher. When more was required of the young man than he was willing to do, he showed that he was not sincere in his intention to follow Jesus. Instead of seeing this as a standard requirement which Jesus makes of all, we need to see that any man is an idolater who allows material possessions, education, family, or anything to come between him and God. As Marshall says, 'In His words to the Rich Ruler, Jesus was not legislating for all and sundry, but was simply appealing to a rich and very self-centred man to make a supreme expression of love for his fellow-creatures and to give signal proof of the sincerity of his expressed desire to achieve the highest virtue possible to him.'⁸

In Matthew 19:12, we read, 'For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.' This verse is sometimes interpreted to mean that Jesus placed the life of the celibate on a superior plane to the person who gets married and has children. This interpretation holds that one can serve God better without contracting the obligations that come naturally with marriage.

One may have been born with the natural gift of celibacy. Jesus indicates that this is fine. If one has a health problem necessitating his becoming a celibate for medical reasons, he can still serve God effectively. There may be some who willingly become celibates by so sublimating their sexual impulse that it does not need overt expression. Jesus here, however, expresses an indifference to celibacy, saying, 'He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.' Some try to make celibacy a condition for serving God effectively, and others make of celibacy the end of ends. If one feels that he is more holy because he does not get married and have children, he is deceiving himself.

Jesus enjoyed a close relationship with His family. There were times when fulfilling the needs and desires of His family conflicted with His mission to the world. His family did not fully understand the nature of His mission. Thus Jesus said, 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and

⁸Marshall, *New Testament Ethics*, pp. 175-176.

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Leo Tolstoy based his attitudes on Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic positions about religion. _____

2. He practiced his own kind of asceticism. _____

3. Jesus demands asceticism in Christians. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus used ascetic demands in His teachings to point out insincere i _____ in His would-be followers.

(intentions)

In His words to the rich young ruler, Jesus appealed for him to give p _____ of his expressed d _____ to follow Him.

(proof, desire)

Some interpret the teaching in Matt. 19:12 to mean that one can serve God better w _____ the obligations which come with m _____.

(without, marriage)

wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). Jesus was not saying here that one must abandon and hate his family in order to be His disciple. In many cases, family members rejoice in one's decision to become a Christian, although their first reaction may be negative. This situation is especially true in some areas where Christianity is not well known. The extreme rejection on the part of family members in some cases may be the result of erroneous impressions at first. But in those instances where one must choose between following Jesus and being rejected by family members, Jesus says that He will give support to them. Referring to the errors that many commit in trying to fulfil this passage literally, Henson says, 'The scandals of Christian literalism are scattered thickly through Christian history.'⁹

A person may have a need to suffer in order to follow Jesus because of some psychological malady within himself. Thus, he creates the atmosphere which elicits rejection from family members. Or it may be that one gets a certain satisfaction from seeing others suffer and, thereby, sets up the situation which permits him to abandon parents and relatives under the guise of sacrificing for Jesus.

Likewise, the passages dealing with Jesus' command to cut off the members of the body which are the occasion of sin are not to be taken literally (Matt. 5:29-30). Inflicting physical suffering upon one's own body does not make one more holy or consecrated to God. Nor does the punishment of one's body solve the problem of temptations which come because of instinctual desires. A better way to handle temptation is to try to deal with the circumstances which make temptation a reality. Prevention is a better solution.

Jesus was not an ascetic as He lived His daily life. He did not identify with the extreme radicals of His day. He participated fully in the social activities of the people. His visits to the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, His presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, and His willingness to dine with publicans and sinners indicate that Jesus was sociable and enjoyed participating in the normal social activities of His day.

Scott emphasizes that instead of being ascetic Jesus was holding up three points of supreme importance: (1)The spiritual interests of man should be given priority. Man should renounce those activities which impede his becoming a follower of the Way. If man is willing to sacrifice all that he has to follow Jesus, then he does not need to do so. (2)Jesus realized that material possessions and the power which they convey have a tendency to deceive man and make him blind to spiritual values. (3)The demand for personal self-abnegation is the result of obedience to the will of God. If one's main goal is to glorify God, personal interests and wealth will become secondary in his life. One recognizes that even his own life delivered up to Christ is too little to give for what He has done for him.¹⁰

Some would try to discredit the teachings of Jesus by saying that they are for fanatics and that they produce fanatics. When rightly understood, His teachings are applicable to every person, whether he is a Christian or has not been

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus did not teach literal hate for family but He promised His support to those who must choose between following _____ and rejection by _____.

(Jesus, family)

Jesus' command to cut off members of the body was not to be taken _____ because punishment of the body does not resolve the problem of _____.

(literally, temptation)

LIST SOME EVIDENCES THAT JESUS WAS NOT ASCETIC.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

LIST THREE POINTS WHICH SCOTT SAYS JESUS EMPHASIZED WHEN HE WAS ACCUSED OF BEING ASCETICAL.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

⁹Herbert H. Henson, *Christian Morality* (Oxford. The Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 92.

¹⁰See E. F. Scott, *Ethical Teaching*, pp. 51-55.

influenced by Christian teachings. Some have become ascetics and fanatics by falsely interpreting Christ's words. When one searches for scripture verses to justify his beliefs, he can usually find ways to twist them to fit his particular desires.

Protestantism does not teach two standards, one for the clergy and another for the laity. Rather, each Christian comes under the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures as he seeks to follow the ideals that Christ has given. The Christian life offers the challenge to participate in the daily tasks that are a part of life while at the same time seeking to apply Christ's teachings. This kind of life is more demanding than if one isolates himself from everyone and everything and invests his time in communion with God.

His teachings are irrelevant today

Others have expressed their opposition to the ethical teachings of Jesus by saying that they were applicable only to the times in which Jesus lived. They ask, 'How can the teaching of one who lived 2000 years ago in a remote part of the Roman Empire—without any formal education, as far as we know, and outside the influential class of society—be relevant to all nations for all ages?' Only Jesus could give such timeless and all embracing teachings. The small group that accepted His teachings and became His followers were chiefly from the lower classes—fishermen, shepherds, and small business men—but that group has grown through the centuries until today people of all nationalities, social classes, and ethnic groups have found a desirable way of life in His teachings.

It is paradoxical that the teachings of one who lived and taught so many centuries ago are applicable to the electronic and space age. Some reject His teachings simply on the grounds that they are too old. But the truth is that they are timeless and as contemporary as today's newspaper.

A knowledge of the historical background of the day in which Jesus lived can make His teachings even more understandable. An awareness of such factors as housing facilities, social customs, agrarian conditions, and religious practices is helpful in understanding the meaning of His teachings and the principles which are relevant for our day. In His teachings, which are enveloped in first century customs, we find eternal principles which are still applicable.

We must also recognize that man's basic needs have not changed. The same spiritual hunger which characterized the first man is still a part of man's nature. Perhaps there has not been another age in which the teachings of Jesus have been more needed than the present age. His teachings with reference to the sacredness of personality, the brotherhood of man, the duty of kindness to one's fellow-man, and respect for oneself and for others are principles which must be followed if the human race is to survive.

It will always be part of the ethical ideal for man to show compassion to the needy and the suffering as the Kind Samaritan did; to be merciful to repentant prodigals as the father in the parable was; to check vindictive feeling instead of insanely demanding eye for eye and tooth for tooth; to stifle in the heart the first motions of sullen hatred and unbridled lust; to do to others as he wishes to be done by; to subdue inordinate self-love; to honour his word so that men may know that his yea means yea and his nay nay; to temper justice with understanding and

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Jesus' teachings apply only to Christians. _____
2. One can twist the Scriptures to fit his own desires. _____
3. Protestantism does not teach two standards. _____
4. Seeking to live by Christ's teachings is more demanding than isolating oneself from the world. _____

(1. False, 2. False, 3. True, 4. True)

CONTINUE LISTING THE CHALLENGES TO THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' TEACHING.

2. _____
(His teachings are irrelevant today)
-

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Jesus' teachings are t _____ and c _____.
(timeless, contemporary)

Although His teachings are enveloped in first century customs, they hold eternal _____ which are still _____ today.
(principles, applicable)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Man's basic needs have not changed. _____
2. Man does not need to show compassion or to be merciful since those ethical ideals are outmoded. _____

(1. True, 2. False)

charity in all his judgements; to spurn vanity and display and self-complacency; to be ready to forgive in great-hearted fashion; to find more joy in giving than in getting, and to recognize that true greatness consists in high service.¹¹

The conclusion must be that the ethical teachings of Jesus are as applicable for contemporary man as they were for His society. In following His teachings, we shall be as modern as any follower of contemporary religious teachers.

The morality which Christianity inspires and demands is never left behind by the developing race, but ever moves in front of it like the fabled pillar of Israel's guidance through the wilderness, an ideal and a prophecy.¹²

A perfect civilization and a rightly apprehended Christianity would harmonize, for the kind of social conduct required by Christianity is identical with that which the health and permanence of civilization demand.¹³

Carl Henry affirms the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount in the words, 'It is untrue that modern man has outgrown the Sermon on the Mount. . . . Modern man may evade the requirements of the Sermon, but it remains to condemn him as a transgressor.'¹⁴

His teachings were for an interim

Another theory is that the teachings of Jesus were intended for the interim between the coming of Jesus to earth and the establishment of the Kingdom. This idea was introduced by Johannes Weiss during the last century. He suggested that many of the teachings are influenced by Christ's eschatological viewpoint and were intended for emergency situations only and not meant to be applicable for all times.

Albert Schweitzer presents the thesis of Weiss (whose view is called *interim ethics*) in his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in which the idea is suggested that the ethical teachings of Jesus are not applicable for us today because they were intended for the epoch between the ascension of Jesus and the establishment of a kingdom which was expected to be initiated immediately. Since this event did not take place, the teachings cannot be taken as completely applicable for today.

To accept this idea is to place Christ among those who were mistaken with reference to the time of His coming to establish the Kingdom. We do not believe that Jesus was mistaken in this respect. Although He stated that He did not know the hour of His coming (Matt. 24:36), He did know that His teachings were to be pertinent for future generations.

The eschatological element is definitely present in the teachings of Jesus. The extent to which His ethical teachings are influenced by His eschatological point of view is difficult to determine and vice versa. Jesus may have used eschatological terminology which represented a hope for the people of His day. Oppressed people tend to project more hope in future changes than can be realized in most cases. Even when changes come, they usually do not bring about the realization of all one's dreams. Perhaps we err in tying Jesus' ethical teachings into any eschatological framework.

¹¹Marshall, *New Testament Ethics*, p. 189.

¹²Henson, *Christian Morality*, p. 27.

¹³Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁴Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 282.

CONTINUE LISTING THE CHALLENGES TO THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' TEACHING.

3. _____

(His teachings were for the interim)

Who advocated interim ethics?

(Albert Schweitzer)

If this life were all there is for man, then the ethical teachings of Jesus would still be good principles for man to follow because they would contribute to health, happiness, and harmony with others. They represent the ideals of the good life. If there is hope for an afterlife, and certainly there is scriptural basis for having such hope, then there is even more reason to follow the teachings of Jesus because the future reward will be in proportion to the degree of one's faithfulness in the use of his talents in service to God and his fellow-man.

His teachings are to be interpreted existentially

Existentialism, a philosophical school of thought which emphasizes existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his own development, has influenced many religious leaders today. The movement had its beginnings with Pascal and Kierkegaard. Later, Heidegger's methodology greatly influenced such contemporary theologians as Bultmann, Tillich, and Otto. According to the existential theologians, the teachings of Jesus have the purpose of creating a mental disposition towards the ideals presented as the good life. They are not to be taken literally as instructions or precise commandments for man to follow. What is valid in the teachings of Jesus is to be determined subjectively by each person. Existential theologians contend that the teachings of Jesus are impossible to follow literally. As we face who we are before God, we realize our weaknesses and strive to move towards His ideal.

This interpretation gives a certain relativity to every aspect of religion. Existential theology suggests that the revelation of God cannot be limited, and, for this reason, the authoritarian approach to religion and ethics is questioned. This point of view gives more freedom to man and respects man's use of reason in directing his life.

Objections may be raised to the existential interpretation of the ethical teachings of Jesus. First, man is finite and only God is infinite. God's laws, which have been established since the creation, cannot be changed by man's will. Man may choose to disregard them, but he cannot annul them simply by an act of will. The writer's opinion is that man must recognize God's revealed will as recorded in the Bible as the foundation of ethics. His ideals for man are to be followed to the best of one's ability. Second, this interpretation also judges that much in the biblical narratives is mythical and thus without historical validity and divine authority. What the existentialists propose to emphasize—the importance of attitude, motive, and goal of comportment—may be endorsed by others. They do not make light of the importance of love for God and one's neighbour, and in this we are in accord with them.

The ethical standard of Jesus is unattainable

Many who are not Christians, and some Christians who lack consecration, judge the ethical teachings of Jesus to be too high and impossible for man to attain in this life. They take literally some of the figures of speech which Christ used—such as, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God' (Matt. 19:24)—and conclude that it is useless to put forth the effort to attain goals that are so unrealistic. When Jesus said to give to everyone who asks (Matt. 5:42), He was showing the value of the non-vindictive attitude towards life and not giving a

TRUE OR FALSE?

Acceptance of Jesus' ethics is applicable only for this life.

(False)

CONTINUE LISTING THE CHALLENGES TO THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' TEACHING.

4. _____

(His teachings are to be interpreted existentially)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

E _____ holds that Jesus' teachings are not to be taken l _____. Existentialists teach that we realize our w _____ as we face who we are before God and s _____ to move toward H _____ i _____.

(Existentialism, literally, weaknesses, strive, His ideals)

GIVE TWO OBJECTIONS TO THE EXISTENTIAL VIEW OF JESUS' TEACHINGS.

1. _____

2. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

CONTINUE LISTING THE CHALLENGES OF THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' TEACHING.

5. _____

(The ethical standard of Jesus is unattainable)

commandment which was to be followed literally.

The teachings of Jesus are hard to follow and do represent demands upon the Christian. Nevertheless, a serious attempt to follow His teachings will do more to spread goodwill in society than ignoring or violating them does. We must rise to the challenge to follow the high ideals.

There are many objections to the teachings of Jesus as a standard of morality for today. But those who have embraced the Christian religion find them to be challenging and relevant. The dynamic to follow them comes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The Gospels do not give a systematic presentation of what Jesus expects of man, either in terms of religion or morals. In the quiet study of His life and teachings, we find an ideal to follow. As we study His teachings, we must delineate between teachings which applied only to the historical situation in which He lived or were given to specific individuals under extraordinary circumstances and principles which are pertinent for Christians of every age. Many teachings are helpful for all men, whether or not they are Christians.

A serious attempt to follow what Jesus teaches will lead away from ritualism and legalism, unless these rituals are the product of a genuine inner experience. Following Jesus' teachings will lead to a synchronization of religious experience and moral living. His teachings will remove the drudgery of obeying rules or avoiding prohibitions from life and give the thrill of a dynamic relationship with a Person who is real despite the fact that He lived almost two thousand years ago. A dynamic daily relationship between Christ and all His followers would create a true revolution in any generation.

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Do the following exercise.

1. What is the foundation for Jesus' ethical teachings?

2. What is the concept to which the ethical teachings of Jesus are central?

3. Define the Kingdom of God.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Some conclude Jesus' teachings are unattainable and _____ . Nevertheless, following them would spread _____ in society.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Christians find Jesus' teachings c_____ and r_____. The H_____ S_____ gives the power to follow them.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

4. List the characteristics of the Kingdom of God.

5. Explain the statement 'The Kingdom is invisible.'

6. What did Jesus teach should be the outcome of a basic religious experience? Illustrate.

7. List the distinctive elements in Jesus' teaching.

8. According to this study guide, what is a *teleological ethic*? Illustrate.

9. What did Jesus teach about self-love?

10. Explain Jesus' attitude towards sins of the flesh.

11. List the sins of the spirit condemned by Jesus.

12. How is Christian character created? How do good deeds come about? Illustrate.

13. How did Jesus make the moral life possible in a Christian?

14. List the viewpoints that contend that Jesus' teachings are irrelevant for today.

15. Give four characteristics of asceticism which are listed in the study guide.

16. Was Jesus an ascetic? Explain your answer.

17. What is meant by the criticism that the teachings of Jesus were local and temporary?

18. Explain the concept *interim ethics*. Who popularized this view?

19. Why do some people not even attempt to follow the teachings of Jesus?

Supplementary assignment (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read Matthew 5—7 and pages 42-68 in *Introducing Christian Ethics*, and do the following exercise.

1. What made Jesus the master teacher of the moral life?
2. List the distinctives of the teachings of Jesus given by Barnette.
3. Describe the Sermon on the Mount.
4. Write a brief interpretation of each Beatitude.

Advanced assignment (*Level 3*). Do the following additional exercise based on the above reading assignment, (including Matthew 5—7).

1. Write an essay contrasting the old with the new righteousness as taught by Jesus.
2. Discuss the ethical implication in the Lord's Prayer.
3. Outline broadly the Sermon on the Mount.

Seminar Discussion

1. Evaluate the viewpoints that contend that the teachings of Jesus are irrelevant for today.
2. Discuss the areas of modern life where the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount may be applied directly. Name specific areas of your culture that especially need the application of the ethical teachings of Jesus.
3. What is your church doing to implement the teachings of Jesus in your culture? What can your church do that it is not doing now to implement these teachings?
4. Develop a plan for leading churches to fulfil their moral leadership in the community.