

In what ways did Jesus' ethical teaching make demands beyond those of the Jewish Law?

In understanding Jesus' ethical teaching, or indeed any teaching of Jesus, it is important to be aware of the historical situation in which Jesus' message came to be recorded in the gospels. The transmission of Jesus' message orally meant the use of oral forms, ways of remembering and passing on important aspects of teaching. The flourishing of Biblical scholarship in recent centuries, and particularly in the last, has brought to light the impress of various oral (and literary) forms in the scripture as it survives to us. Form criticism, and a related discipline, redaction criticism (studying the influence of the various early Christian communities and their situations on, say, the gospel texts), caution us away from a shallow reading of scripture in which, for example, one surmises Jesus' teaching on divorce simply by grouping together the passages from gospel to gospel in which divorce is mentioned and presenting this as Jesus' ethic on divorce. Also, there is a theological objection to seeing Jesus' ethical teaching or Jewish ethical teaching as somehow separate from their religious settings; in either case the ethical teaching cannot be properly understood without an awareness of the religious beliefs that give rise to it. In summary, critical commentary on Jewish ethics or on the ethical teaching of Jewish must draw on insights provided by theology and biblical scholarship, something on which most Protestant and Catholic commentators agree (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 12, Vatican II).

In seeking those ways in which Jesus' ethical teaching went beyond Jewish Law it would be instructive to note those ways in which Jesus' teaching *affirmed* Jewish Law. The Sermon on the Mount for many marks in clearest terms the distinction between Jesus' ethical teaching and that of Jewish Law, and yet on deeper reading the preoccupation with motive and disposition, the sourcing of all moral action within the person, that characterises the tone of these chapters may be read as a criticism of erroneous interpretations of Jewish Law, rather than of

Jewish Law itself. It may be argued that Jesus was acting in the manner of prophets of the past: reminding the people of the covenant relationship with God that lay at the heart of the Law: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is the one God: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength ...* (Deut 6:4-5). This great exhortation of Moses to the Israelites is followed by another: *Let these words I urge on you today be written on your hearts* (Deut 6:6). On reflection, it is easy to see in the Sermon on the Mount an implicit critique of the deviant forms adherence to the Law could take (cf. Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, Ch. 2). For example, legalism, formalism and religiosity, which express a concern for externals to the detriment of inner disposition, wither in the heat of Jesus' zeal for a righteousness that comes from the heart. Perhaps this is an explanation for what appears an extraordinary saying: *if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven* (Mt 5:20). Also, the eudaemonistic mentality, in which adherence to the Law was one's ticket to a good life, is roundly contradicted by: *Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the Kingdom of heaven* (Mt 5:10). But then that same mentality is also contradicted by the experience of the prophets (who often met with persecution) and, for example, in the Psalms, which sometimes tell of the trials of the just man. To summarise, one can identify more clearly the point of departure of Jesus' ethical teaching from the Jewish when one has identified points of contact.

Where, then, does Jesus' ethical teaching appear to go beyond the ethical demands of the Jewish Law? It has been noted that in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in the collection of sayings called the antitheses (*You have learnt how it was said ... But I say ...*), Jesus offers an interpretation of Jewish Law that at once *intensified, radicalized and universalized the ethical demands of Judaism* (Professor

Gardner, cited in the NDCE). Two proscriptions of the Decalogue - *You must not kill; You must not commit adultery* (Exodus 20:13-14) - are interpreted to the extent that murderous intent, expressed in anger and insult, and adulterous intent, expressed in a lewd look, both count as transgressions. Later in the same gospel, in response to Peter's question, Jesus is seen to radicalize (here the word *radicalize* is taken to mean 'make far-reaching') the traditional demand to forgive one's neighbour - not seven times but seventy times seven; that is, one should put no limits on a willingness to forgive. And in loving your enemy and praying for those who persecute you (cf. Mt 5:44), the command to love one's neighbour is universalized. It could still be argued that these insights, though certainly an extreme interpretation to some ears, are not a 'going beyond' the ethical teaching of Jewish Law; for example, the devout Jew, who has the Mosaic Law 'written on the heart', would tend not to draw a distinction between attitudes and actions; for him or her, murder, adultery, and so on, would begin with intent.

In fact, the real difference in the ethical demands of Jesus are not sourced in the demands so much as in the identity of Jesus. Because, in Christian eyes, Jesus is the Messiah, the one who establishes God's Kingdom, the will of God stems directly from him. Learning God's will, which after all both Jew and Christian accept as the ultimate guide in the moral life, is most clearly done in close relationship to the Messiah, the Son of God; following the Law is superseded by following a person who embodies all law and prophecy and is greater than both (cf. the Transfiguration accounts in the synoptic gospels). *The new immediacy of God's relationship with his own could not but set the law in a wholly new light* (Professor Gardner, cited in NDCE). The 'preparatory' function of the Law, that is, its role in preserving Israel's identity as a people set apart, a holy people, is no longer necessary - hence the setting aside of food laws, ritual hygiene, and so on. Furthermore, the 'heart of the law' is revealed as essentially responding to

God's loving nature; the urgent call to love God and neighbour overrides even the Sabbath law (cf. Mk 2:23 - 3:6) ... *I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets ... but to complete them* (Mt 5:17) sums up the Christian conviction that in Jesus the plan of God has moved into its last eschatological phase, and so all that characterised belief and practice before is somehow 'moved on', including what was necessary for righteous living. As already mentioned, Jesus, the embodiment, the completion, the full revelation of God's will, becomes the focus for righteous living. One could note the dearth of rules that Jesus himself gave to his followers; this does not mean a neglect for rules and rule-giving but simply that the ethical demands of Jesus are amply conveyed in his life and example: Jesus is the model of true righteousness, not only in his concrete actions, but also in the pattern of his life - ... *the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mk 10:44-45).

Accepting Jesus as the Messiah has other profound implications on understanding his ethical teaching: the presence of the Messiah inaugurates a time of grace - *I will pour out my spirit on all mankind* (Joel 3:1), from which at least three insights of importance to ethics can be drawn. First, the ethical demands of Jesus should be seen as a *response* to what God has done; second, that this response should be seen as a *total submission* of oneself to God's Will expressed in the Messianic presence; third, that this response is made possible by God's grace through the person of Jesus. One sees that the very sanctions to which Jesus appeals when commending his teaching to the crowds are sometimes other than the rewards and punishments at the end of time; instead, he often appeals to their sense of gratitude, of filial devotion to a loving Father - *be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Mt 5:48). This implies a new relationship between God and humanity to come about through Jesus. Furthermore, since this relationship is intended for *all* humanity, the ethical teaching of Jesus goes

beyond that of Jewish Law since it must fit his followers for a missionary duty: because they have literally to go beyond the traditional boundaries of Judaism in bringing outcasts and pagans into God's Kingdom they must 'go beyond' traditional ethical boundaries in the mind of popular Judaism - hence love of and prayer for enemies, foregoing revenge, unlimited forgiveness, and so on. Here, it should be noted that some thinkers, such as Dr. Schweitzer early

in this century, have asserted that Christian ethical teaching was not intended other than as an 'interim ethic' between the revelation of the Messiah and the Parousia expected soon after. This view has since been largely discredited, not least because the total loyalty, submission and self-emptying demanded in Jesus' ethical teaching have helped lay the foundations of a Church that has withstood much persecution through the ages.