

The Ethics of Jesus in His Earthly Ministry

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Introduction

At the tender, impressionable age of twelve, Jesus told Mary and Joseph that He “must be about my Father’s business” (Luke 2:49). Between twelve and thirty He grew or advanced in wisdom, stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). Scripture, not situational ethics, was His constant norm and determined delight.

His Unbending Loyalty to God’s Word and Will

At Jacob’s well in John 4 He told His disciples, “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work: (v. 34). At a synagogue in Capernaum He stated, “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). His expressed intention at all time was, “...For I do always those things that please him” (John 8:29). That the Father was so pleased with Him is evidenced at the Lord’s baptism and His transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). The Father gave Him a commandment and that is what He spoke (John 12:49-50). Early in the Lord’s Prayer He prayed, “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4). On Calvary He cried out in triumph, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Scripture, not situational settings, held total attraction for God’s loyal and lovely Son.

His Ethics in the Heat of Temptation

Subsequent to His baptism by John in the river Jordan He was led of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of Satan (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4). He had fasted forty days. Great and desperate must have been His hunger. The devil charged Him to assert His power, if He were God’s Son, and turn stones into bread. The situation would have suggested that He do that very thing. But Scripture, Deuteronomy 8:3, said *no*. He followed Scripture. Next, the Lord was tempted by Satan to jump from the dizzy heights of the temple to the Kidron Valley below. The situation might have said, “Take the dare and show him you can glide to the rocky valley safely.” But Scripture, Deuteronomy 6:16, said *no*. He stayed with Scripture. The devil then sought to secure worship from Him promising world dominion promptly. The situation would have said, “This is much easier than the way of Calvary; go for it!” Scripture, Deuteronomy 6:13, said *no*. Situation ethics held no attraction or affinity to the Scripture-bound Son of God.

Ethics and His Enemies

In the Sermon on the Mount He counseled that prayers be prayed for enemies, that blessing be given for those who would curse and persecute and that good be done for those who would do harm and injury (Matthew 5:43ff). Again and again in His ministry He taught His enemies the truth they needed to hear and heed. At the time of His arrest when Peter tried to defend Him with a drawn sword, the militant apostle was told to sheathe his sword for all who took the sword would perish with it. Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels to His defense (Matthew 26:51-56).

He even healed the cut-off ear of Malchus who was of the arresting party (John 18:10-11; Luke 22:50-51). We all know what situational norms would have done in such occurrences! He prayed for His enemies while on the rugged, Roman cross (Luke 23:34). His death was for the one who betrayed Him, denied Him, called for His death and mocked Him during the six hours He was suspended between the heaven He had made and the earth that rejected its Divine Creator as well as for those who loved Him, adored Him and counted Him the Captain of their salvation.

Ethics and His Disciples

Potential leaders of men and seekers after public offices usually paint glowing pictures of how rosy it will be for all if they are elected. Most always they are unable to fulfill or make good on their promises.

Jesus never misled any of His followers. Early in the Sermon on the Mount He spoke of the persecutions they were sure to meet in the future (Matthew 5:10-12). With constancy He told them there was a cross to bear before there would be a crown to wear (Luke 9:23). There was a price to discipleship that the likes of the rich young ruler could not accept (Matthew 19:16-22). James and John were promised their own baptism or immersion in suffering (Matthew 20:22-23). Peter was told what manner of death his would be (John 21:18ff). Jesus conditioned them for the hatred that would surely come their way (John 15:18ff; 16:2). When He gave the famed Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25; Mark 13 and Luke 21 there were warnings aplenty of what would come their way leading up and into the destruction of Jerusalem. He knew there would be persecutions hurled at His disciples from members of their families. Fathers and sons would be at distant poles. So would mother and daughters. So would in-laws with family frameworks (Matthew 10:34-36).

Jesus was perfectly honest as He called men and women into His great work.

Ethics and How He Dealt with Controversial Matters

A man's honesty is tested quite seriously when he faces enormous peer pressure to bend to the right or to the left instead of pursuing the straight line of integrity and total honesty. Jesus stood taller than Mount Hermon in these momentous matters.

What He would do with the law of Moses was controversial then and still is I might add. The Jews thought the Mosaic system was eternal and never would be annulled or abrogated. Yet in the Sermon on the Mount He told what He planned to do. When it came time for Him to go to Calvary, he nailed the former covenant to the cross and the middle wall of partition was broken down permanently as per Colossians 2 and Ephesians 2.

What could or could not be done on the sabbath was deeply controversial. Great miracles were frequently performed by Him on sabbath days. He never violated the sabbath day but kept it perfectly even as He did all Mosaic mandates. He stood His ground and would not be saddled with the ridiculous laws they imposed about proper sabbath observances. They filled that day with burdensome trivialities bearing no divine authority at all.

Roman taxation was controversial. The Pharisees and Herodians sought to impale Him upon one

of two horns of dilemma relative to this matter. He answered their carefully crafted query with consummate skill and relative ease in Matthew 22. Truth prevailed.

Sadducean infidelity was controversial. With the woman married consecutively to the seven brothers and as to whose wife will she be in the resurrection, they thought they could make Him look foolish in contending for the validity of the resurrection and a future life. He answered truthfully and egg was on their faces—not His.

Marriage, divorce and remarriage was controversial in His day for a surety. The schools of Hillel and Shammai were poles apart in their respective teaching on this important matter. A question was posed to Him in Matthew 19:3ff about whether it was lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause. Promptly, He went to Genesis 2 and showed from the beginning that marriage involved a man and woman and was to be for life. Jesus set forth the truth about marriage, the evils of divorce and the one ground permitting the innocent party to put away the guilty party and with the right to enter marriage with another who is eligible. The guilty party has no right to enter into marriage with another. It would be adulterous for him/her to do so.

The kingdom was controversial then and still is thanks to the premillennial proponents who abound in our badly divided religious world. Even His disciples, during His ministry, thought in terms of a materialistic kingdom with His rule here on earth. Lethal dispensational premillennialism makes the same tragic and inexcusable blunder in our day. This system looks for a worldly kingdom ruled over by Jesus on a Jerusalem throne with political plums passed out to them at will—their will! And it will last a thousand years, they contended. Jesus knew perfectly what manner of kingdom he and the Father planned - a spiritual one with His throne in heaven at Jehovah's right hand. He never misled anybody about the true nature of that kingdom as premillennial proponents do en masse detail today. For shame!

Treatment of others in Jesus' day was very controversial. Yet He taught the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12. He taught the doing of good to those who curse and despise us (Matthew 5:43ff). He taught what being a real neighbor is like in the Good Samaritan narrative.

The Great Commission would be controversial throughout the future of Christianity. Yet He gave it in simple and sublime language. He told us during His ministry that we must hear, believe in Him, repent of sins, confess Him before men and be immersed (Mark 4:23-24; John 8:21, 24; Luke 13:3,5; Matthew 10:32; Mark 16:16).

Some Applications

We face a world that rejects absolutes, that wishes to throw out God that, seeks to craft religion according to personal preferences and contends that all religions are of equal validity and merit. Jesus stood opposed to all such while He was here and we must do more of the same if pleasing to Him we would be. The controversial did not frighten Him; neither should it us. The exposure of error never did intimidate Him into silence; neither should it us. The presence of so much dishonesty in His world did not drive Him away from the high plane of total honesty and integrity He ever maintained. Neither should it us. That people forsook His as in John 6 or that Judas

betrayed Him in Matthew 26 did not thwart His determination to pursue the right tenaciously and cling to it minus any and all compromise.

Conclusion

His ethical excellency is a marvelous model for the emulation by all of us.