

“Kingdom Ethics”

Introduction: Consider the following that I came across a few years ago and have updated just slightly:

Did Jesus use a smart phone at the Sermon on the Mount?

Did he ever text or tweet to get his message out?

Did his disciples carry Fitbits as they went about their route?

Did Jesus use a smart phone at the Sermon on the Mount?

It highlights, of course, just how different our hi-tech world is from the one in which Jesus lived. So, we might be tempted to think that he and his teaching would be pretty much, if not completely, irrelevant to our day. But every time I open my smart phone, I encounter a world filled with anger, lust, prejudice, unfaithfulness, anxiety, revenge, family dysfunction, religious persecution . . . the list goes on. In other words, in my day, I meet a world that is very familiar to Jesus, a world that is just as much in need of who he is and what he brings as those in his day were in need. Jesus knows this, of course, because he is smarter than even our phones!

What Jesus brings into our world is life, real life, the life that is truly life, abundant life, kingdom of God life. Such life is available to all who take Jesus up on his invitation to be transformed from the inside-out through turning from their old way of life, receiving the forgiveness he offers, and following him in the power of his Spirit into the new, kingdom way of life that he unfolds. To be sure, this new way of life is challenging. But, importantly, it is not a hurdle to leap over in order to qualify for life in God’s kingdom; rather, it is how we are called to respond to and reveal, the lavish love of the King.

We meet this kingdom life, or ethics, in what is known in Luke as the Sermon on the Plain. We saw last week how Jesus prefaced his remarks with numerous physical and spiritual healings, and then launched into an introduction of blessings and woes, seeking, we said, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. He goes on, then, to highlight the heart of his ethical teaching, which is love. In doing so, he lists four groups of people we are least likely to treasure: our enemies, those who hate us, who curse us, and who mistreat us. Then, he calls us to love them, do good to them, bless them, and pray for them. If we weren’t gasping for breath after the blessings and woes, we certainly are now! What kind of life is this?! What kind of wimps is Jesus producing?! Can he really be serious? To answer, let’s ask some questions: Why would we want to do this? What might it look like? How is it even possible?

I. Why?

A. Put simply, we are to love, do good to, bless, and pray for our enemies, those who hate us, curse us, and mistreat us because this is the way the character of God and the reality of his kingdom will be extended to a broken and needy world. Beginning at the end of our reading, Jesus sums it all up in this way: “Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” To put it differently, now that we have been brought into the family of God, we are called to take on the family likeness.

B. Too often, perhaps, God is viewed as a stingy, gloomy, and even vindictive being. Or, conversely, it is thought that all religions are basically the same and all gods are really just variations on the same theme. But the God Jesus reveals allows for neither of these conclusions. This God is far, far

different from any other. This God's love is extravagant. This God reigns over a kingdom, as NT Wright puts it, that is glorious, uproarious, and absurdly generous. This God is so merciful that his mercy extends to those who are our enemies, those who hate us, those who curse us, and those who mistreat us. Remarkably, one of the primary ways this God has decided to reveal this to others is through how we treat them, what we say to them and what we do for them.

## II. What?

A. So what does this kind of love and doing good look like? What it doesn't look like is loving those who love us, doing good to those who are good to us, and lending to those who we're pretty sure will repay us. That's an ethic that is driven by an exchange, or by a contract. "You do for me and I'll do for you. You stop doing for me and I'll stop doing for you. You do me harm and I'll do you harm." Any old sinner can operate this way, Jesus observes. Instead, the kind of kingdom of God love Jesus is talking about looks like turning the other cheek and taking another slap—a sign of disrespect in the ancient world—instead of seeking revenge. It looks like giving something extra to a thief who has already taken your coat. It looks like lending without worrying about repayment. It looks like letting something be taken without demanding it back. It looks, although Jesus doesn't say so here, like a marriage, a relationship which is not driven by a contract—what I can get from the other—but a covenant—what I can give to the other, even when, and especially when, the other isn't doing a very job of giving to me!

B. Two words of caution here. First, we need to be discerning. There will be times when we will need to protect ourselves in various ways. Jesus wouldn't want a woman to take repeated abuse from her husband. As the Keller's put it in their book on marriage that we're working through on Sunday evenings, she is called to love him by forgiving him, and then having him arrested! Or, one who drives intoxicated on a highway needs to lose their license. Or, the snowboarder who cuts the legs out from another skier needs to be disciplined by the ski patrol. For these kinds of situations, and many others, God has provided for a governing, and restraining authority (see Ro. 13). Second, at the same time, we need to feel the tension here and be careful not to try and water down the instructions Jesus gives with dozens of qualifications that come to our minds. At the very least we should be asking ourselves the question about motivation: Is it revenge we have in mind, or the good of the one who has offended us in some way? Is our response revealing the character of the kingdom of God and the lavish love of the King? What might bring healing, or woo another to seek the grace of God?

Illustration: It's worth reflecting here for a few minutes on the OT text the church pairs with this account in Luke; it is the story of Joseph, spelled out for us in the latter chapters of Genesis. The story of Joseph is the story of a sad, troubled, family whose dysfunction runs back for generations and is characterized by dishonesty, manipulation, sibling rivalry, and other not so honorable behavior. Joseph is the youngest of twelve brothers but is his father's favorite (hence the beautiful coat of many colors his dad gives only to him), a status he lords over his brothers.

One day, his brothers seize the opportunity to get rid of their bratty, big-mouthed, dreaming little bro. They were going to kill him but instead, sell him off as a slave. To cut a long story very short, he ends up serving the Egyptian Pharaoh, rising to second in command, and heading up the Egyptian welfare program. This ends up saving Egypt from famine. When the famine spreads and his brothers show up looking for food, years have gone by since they had gotten rid of Joseph. While they don't recognize him, he recognizes them. What will he do? Will he seek revenge? Will he get even? While he toys with them for a while, while his actions and emotions are not always straightforward, ultimately, he makes a

choice that shatters the old, dysfunctional family pattern—he offers forgiveness, seeks reconciliation, feeds and rescues his family, and moves God’s redemptive intentions for the human race forward in the process. How does he do this? “You meant it for evil,” he tells his brothers, “but God meant it for good. It was not you who sent me here but God” (Ge. 50:20; 45:8). Joseph had wrestled long and hard with God, in a pit, in a prison, and in the employ of Pharaoh. In so doing, he had come to see the hand of God moving in his life and caring for him even and especially in difficult circumstances.

### III. How?

A. At our recent Dinner for 8, after we had each shared a bit about our family lives and how challenging many of them had been, someone asked the question, Will there ever be a cure for dysfunction?! If there is, I think it’s here. I think it’s when we seek, as Joseph sought, to see and to understand how the hand of God has been operative in our lives and then to operate going forward out of his love. And do to that, living as we do centuries after Joseph, we can go to the cross. For it is there that we find the kind of love that can make us into the kind of person who seeks to love the neighbor, or even family member(s) who is our enemy.

B. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who lived in the mid-twentieth century and wrestled with what it meant to love the Nazi who was his enemy, is helpful to us here. Reflecting, perhaps on Paul’s words in Romans: “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son . . .” (5:10), Bonhoeffer came to learn that we become able to love our enemy when we ask not how the enemy is treating us but only how Jesus has treated us. He writes: “The love for our enemies takes us along the way of the cross and into fellowship with the Crucified. . . In the face of the cross, the disciples realized that they too were his enemies, and that he had overcome them by his love. It is this that opens the disciple’s eyes, and enables him to see his enemy as a brother... The disciple can now perceive that even his enemy is the object of God’s love, and that he stands like himself beneath the cross of Christ” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 150f).

Or, as another, more recent theologian, Miroslav Volf, who wrestled with love of his enemy in the midst of the horror and suffering of the Balkan warfare, has put it, on the cross Jesus both identifies with the victims of violence, while also providing atonement for the perpetrators (*Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 23).

B. “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” sums up Jesus. Well, what has God done to you? How has God loved you? If it is his lavish love that which fills and shapes our hearts, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, then the instructions of Jesus will not seem like an exhausting self-improvement program but the way in which the grace we have received from God can be extended to others. Whether we’re dealing with irritating colleagues or customers, impossible children or spouses, nasty neighbors or confounding politicians, we can be generous rather than protective, we can be secure rather than striving, we can be peace-filled rather than anxious. We can love without needing to get anything in return because we have all that we need from the God who meets us in Jesus.