

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

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Codes of Conduct Vs Moral Character

The moral or ethical system in place in first century Judaism was a system of "code ethics." Whether what was practiced in first century Judaism was what God intended in the giving of the law is debated by scholars. What is not debated, however, is the fact that the moral system of first century Judaism was a system of "code ethics."

The moral codes followed by much of Judaism in the first century consisted of the moral/ethical teachings of the Torah as interpreted by the scholastic or rabbinic community of the first century. This body of interpretation was originally an oral tradition, and then was written down in later centuries in a collection of writings called the *Mishnah*, which was later expanded to what is now called the *Talmud*.

This "oral tradition" included moral and ritual codes, which are referred to in the NT Gospels as "the traditions of the elders. This "code ethics" system constituted a system of legalism second to none. This is what Jesus opposed so tenaciously in his teaching; so also Paul, the apostle of Christ. Both Paul's letter to the Galatians and the letter to the Romans are concerned, in great measure, with this issue. Judaism's system of code ethics was, in essence, a doctrine of "salvation by lawkeeping." Paul's great break from his pharisaic background was his teaching of "salvation by new creation," rather than by lawkeeping.

Moral Character and the Moral Teachings of Jesus

When we speak of the moral teaching of Christianity we are speaking of a system that centers in the moral character of Jesus of Nazareth, who stands before the Christian as the paradigm or exemplar of moral behavior. It is not his commands (codes), *per se*, but "him" who is the moral standard by which we live. If Jesus is our Lord, then his words are authoritative for us, but we must make every effort not to reduce him and his lordship over our lives to a catalogue of teachings equal to the 613 commandments (*misvot*) of the *Torah*. Somehow Jesus as Lord gets lost in the process and "the teaching" becomes "the Lord" rather than the author of the teaching.

The Word of the Lord or the Word as Lord

Oftentimes the collected form of revelation can become more authoritative than that which has been revealed. This is what happened to a first century Judaism, which resulted in the worship of the Law (*Torah*). The *Torah*, consisting of statutes, judgments and commandments, became the god of the Hebrews - their lord and their savior. All the while they gave lip service to God, but when the issues of right vs wrong, good vs evil, truth vs error, and righteousness vs unrighteousness were considered, the Law (*Torah*) was the final authority, not the revelation of God contained within the Law but the scrolls themselves. In fact, the song of praise sung by the children of Israel when the Ark of the Covenant went before them was transferred over to the synagogue and when the *Torah* scrolls were removed from the chest containing them, they were carried through the congregation to the singing of the same song.

This tradition continues to the present day and is not wrong in and of itself but it does show the place given the *Torah* at the time of Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures were intended to be a revelation of who God was; it, however, became something of a personified authority figure - a god in and of itself, and the oral tradition associated with the interpretations became the standard by which to measure the faithfulness of the Jew, especially, so with the various sects of Judaism (e.g. the Pharisees and Essenes). Their

treasured parchments scrolls became literal “icons” representing the presence of God in their midst in their synagogue services.

The Morality of Transformed Moral Character

A major mistake in the thinking of first century Judaism was that law was authoritative because it was law. This is wrong. Law is only authoritative because its author can enforce it. The teachings of Christ are authoritative because he is Lord, not because his words are law.

Law can only control or condemn a person, it cannot transform him. Here is the difference between all other world religions and Christianity. In the religion of Christianity, Christ is not concerned with controlling the one converted to him; rather, he is concerned with transforming him. Conversion to Christ is a transformation - a character transformation. This character transformation occurs through the believer's death to his existence in Adam and his rebirth into new existence in Christ. As a result one's moral character is conformed to the image of Christ (i.e., his moral image/character), not to conformity to a set of codes or collection of commandments.

Codes, Character, and Moral Development

What does all this discussion of first century Judaism have to do with a study of the Sermon on the Mount? Everything! What Jesus was saying to the people listening to him in this sermon was that their moral character was far more important in the interpretation of who they were than their claims to righteousness based on their conformity to codes.

People who demonstrate a high level of moral behavior are people who are at a higher stage of moral development than those others. Modern day social scientists, moral philosophers, and developmental psychologist are convinced that human behavior develops through a variety of stages from early childhood through adulthood into the maturity of old age. As one's moral reasoning develops, so also does his or her moral behavior.

Lawrence Kohlberg, the late head of the Center for Moral Development at Harvard University, has given years to research in this area. His research has contributed more to our understanding of moral behavior than the work of any other single figure of our time (*The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages*, Harper and Row, 1984.). Significant for our purposes here are the insight this research gives to the value of the moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. What Jesus taught over two thousand years ago is proving to evidence his insight concerning human behavior and the value of moral character over moral codes in influencing moral behavior. The essentials of this research on the stages of moral development are as follows.

All human behavior is motivated by two forces: consequences and character. We behave as we do because of our thinking concerning the consequences of our actions (good or bad) or we behave as we do because of our character (i.e. who we are as moral beings).

If we are more influenced by consequences (positive or negative), our behavior is usually a controlled behavior. If we are more influenced by moral principles informed by our belief-disbelief system, our behavior is usually that of character behavior. From early childhood through adolescence our behavior is, essentially, controlled behavior (i.e. we are controlled by consequences and codes). As we develop through adulthood, our moral behavior should be more and more influenced by our moral character; that is, if we are maturing as moral beings. Moral character develops through the following states.

Stage One is, "The Obedience or Punishment Stage." What is right is doing what I'm told so that I won't get punished (consequences). The moral reasoning here is that the right thing to do is what I won't get punished for. This is the stage of moral development with early and middle childhood; preschool through elementary (ages 1-7), and it remains in place in some measure as the child moves into the following stages of development.

Stage Two is, "The Marketplace Morality Stage." This is a "what's in it for me?" stage. The moral reasoning here is that what is right is doing what gets me rewarded or gets me what I want. This is the stage of morality

associated with later childhood and pre-adolescence (ages 8-12, middle school). This stage becomes stronger and the first stage becomes weaker as the child enters into the next stage. The characteristics of both stages are not eliminated as the person matures into the next stage. The degree of the influence of the characteristics of each stage of development (stronger or weaker) depends on each person's development into the next stage. Some persons never develop beyond the lower stages. The follower of Jesus will develop in conformity to the image of God within him or her as exemplified by the moral character of Jesus.

Stage Three is, "The Conformity Stage." This is an "everybody else is doing it" stage of moral reasoning. What is important is group approval or group affirmation. Acceptance and rejection are powerful forces at this stage. The moral reasoning here is, "if others are doing it, then it's OK." This is the stage of moral reasoning associated with early and middle adolescence or middle and high school (ages 13-18).

Stage Four is, "The Law and Order Stage." The thinking here is that if everyone were law-abiding, the world would be a better place. A high value is placed on doing one's duty, and law defines duty. Being moral means manifesting a behavior that is controlled by laws, rules, or codes of conduct. Rules, however, should be good rules; i.e. they should be intelligible, reasonable or fair, and they should be enforceable and enforced. This stage of moral behavior is usually associated with later adolescence and early adulthood, typically associated with the collage or early professional years (ages 19-29). The transition from stage four to stages five and six are often very slow in developing, if they develop at all. The greater majority of the human race ends their moral development at this or a lower stage in that these stages are all characterized by self-concern or, more popularly understood as "selfishness."

Stage Five is, "The Social Contract Stage." The utilitarian principle of what is in the best interest of the greater number of the community is the moral behavior desired. The "categorical imperative" of Emmanuel Kant, is often considered the best example of this stage, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." If it would be wrong if everyone did it, then it is wrong for anyone to do, it is the moral reasoning of this stage. What is morally right

is upholding the civil rights of one's neighbor; i.e. the social contract of one's society (nation, community, family, friends, etc.). Essential to this stage is a social consciousness concerning the well being of one's neighbor. This stage is associated with middle adulthood (the age is the 30's through the 40's).

Stage six is, "The Universal Moral Principles Stage." The attitude that characterizes this stage is, "with ill-will toward none and good-will toward all." At this stage of moral development one is guided by moral principles such as the value of human life, human rights, human dignity, human freedom, and human responsibility (for oneself and toward others). Here, one has seen the value of living out of moral principles over living out law for law's sake. At this stage concern for others can take precedence over concern for self. This stage is usually associated with mature adulthood (age 50's and above). This stage is not reached by the majority of the human race; those that do are most always associated with religious belief and the stages of faith development presented by Dr. James Fowler in his *Stages of Faith*, published by Harper and Row, 1981.

Moral Development and Moral Behavior

Controlled behavior: Stages one through four are behaviors associated with controlled behavior: the threat of punishment, the desire for reward, the desire for acceptance or compliance, and a sense of duty to law and order. What motivates moral behavior at each of these stages is "self-concern," either in the form of avoidance of undesirable consequences or receiving desirable consequences, all are motivated by self-concern or selfish behavior.

Character behavior: Stages five and six are higher stages of moral development in that they have to do with behavior which is motivated more by the moral character of the individual than self-concern.

A person at stages one through four behaves as he does because of self-concern. The person at stages five and, especially, stage six behaves as he does because of a well-matured moral character.

Conclusion

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking directly to the issue of moral behavior. We must give great care to hear what Jesus is saying in these teaching of two thousand years ago. What he said there is as significant of those of us living in the twentieth century as it was for those living in the first century. People do not become better people because they have better codes to control their behavior; rather, they become better through the development of moral character, and that is what happens in conversion to Christ.

In conversion to Christ one is created anew (2 Cor 5:17), a character transformation takes place (Rom 6:6; 12:2; Eph 4:22; Col 3:9). The moral behavior of Jesus of Nazareth was an expression of his moral character. What he taught here in this sermon, he exemplified in his life. He showed man how one is to behave as a being created in the image of God. When we have been transformed into his image, our behavior will reflect that transformation. Who we are as moral being is a reflection of who he is in that we are beings created in his image; to be true to our nature we must be who God intended us to be - beings created in the image of God.

Questions for Discussion

1. What was Jesus' attitude toward the moral and ritual codes of the traditions of the elders (cf. Matt 15:1-20)? How was first century Judaism a system of salvation by lawkeeping?

2. How had "the Law/*Torah*" become the Lord of Israel? What was the original intent of the giving of the Law?

3. How do Christian ethics differ from the ethics of Judaism? Example: If we are under the 10 commandments, are we not under the same type of ethical system as the Jews? Are we or are we not under a code ethics as were the Jews?

3. Discuss the expression: "When we speak of Christian ethics, we are speaking of a moral/ethical system which centers in the moral character of Jesus of Nazareth."

4. Why is it so important to see that our moral/ethical system must center in the moral character of Jesus of Nazareth and not in a collection of commands or moral/ethical edicts?

5. What does Jesus' lordship imply about our relationship with him? If we are to obey him as our Lord, is this not another system of salvation by lawkeeping?

6. What is the role and function of the Scriptures in the Christian religion; especially in view of such passages as John 5:39-40.

7. Discuss the following statements: "Law can only control and/or condemn a person, it cannot transform him." "In the religion of Christianity, Christ is not concerned with controlling the one converted to him, rather, he concerned with transforming him."

8. Why can law not effect a transformation of one's character? What can law do? Answer: control behavior and condemn uncontrolled behavior.

9. Discuss the following: "What Jesus was saying to the people listening to him in this sermon was that their moral character was far more important in influencing moral behavior than moral codes." What do you think of this statement?

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