

Radical Values for a Confused Church

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There is no doubt that making ethical decisions has become more difficult than it used to be. Technological advances mean that more things are possible than ever before, and so there are more things to make decisions about. I give just two examples. Medical advances mean that human bodies can be kept alive with artificial breathing and tube feeding. But does respect for human life as a gift from God always mean that keeping people alive like this is a good idea? Perhaps it would be better at times to let a person die with dignity. And we in the West need to realise that we keep one person alive at a cost that would save the lives of a large number of people in deprived parts of the world.

Our emerging ecological crisis offers another obvious example. The world population has been increasing dramatically and with more and more powerful technology so has human capacity to make a big impact on the state of the whole earth. In earlier generations the impact our actions made on the earth only affected small bits of it and its capacity for self-regeneration could handle all that we could throw at it. But no longer. How are we to balance the competing claims of development, and its evident capacity to benefit people, and the likelihood that we are doing irreversible damage to our earth in the process? Scientists often complain that politicians are doing too little too late, and they might be right. But politicians are charged with the task of balancing all the factors involved. Whatever we do as humans, especially anything on a large scale, has a high risk of producing unintended consequences. We intend the good, within a certain frame, by much of the time we inadvertently have an impact within another frame that is quite harmful in one way or another.

But technological advance is an aspect of something bigger. Life has always been subject to change, but for most of history the more profound experience of most people most of the time has been that things stayed the same. People have generally known what to do precisely because they have been in that situation before, or if they haven't been there, their parents have, and so on. There was experience and a tradition to look back to and draw upon. Life has always been subject to change, but increasingly change has become a way of life. Change has come at an accelerating rate, and it has come in virtually every area of life. Never before have so many people faced situations with a sense that they have never been here before and have no idea what appropriate rules of the game might be for being here. I think this is part of what lies behind the loss of confidence among parents that they can give values to their children for life as it will be for them. In a brave new world that keeps changing so rapidly who can know what is for the best?

Our contemporary life context means that it is genuinely harder for us to work out the rights and wrongs of things, or at least of some things.

Now that is not to say that it has ever been easy. Moralists have disagreed through all of history. And Jesus had a hard time getting some of his core values across to even those who were most devoted to him. It is just that what has always had its difficulties has become that much harder in certain respects.

Christians have not been immune from the difficulties of trying to be clear about what is the right path. But Christians have through history always felt that whatever might still be difficult about identifying the right, they had a reliable moral compass in the Bible that should keep them from going wildly wrong. And Christians have also believed that God had not left his church bereft of his Spirit; and that therefore wisdom from on high would be given for the church to find its way forward. Corporately and prayerfully it should be possible to discern God's will in changing circumstances.

But these days self-doubt has set in and it has set in on a large scale. Loss of clarity about a distinctly Christian ethic has become widespread. There are various reasons for this, but let me offer you just a limited list.

First, the history of the church makes, in part, depressing reading. There is so much that Christians

have done that embarrasses and shames us. Where was the guidance of God? Are we just as blind, but don't know it? Of course we need to note the terms of reference in relation to which we are hearing the story. These terms are generally those of our secular culture. So the version we get might be more than a bit one-eyed. But it is a version that has an impact on our confidence. And even without the distortion there is plenty to make us blush about our collective history. Of course there is also a history of which we can rightly be proud. But that is not what people want to rub our noses in.

Second, there are the clever things that scholars have done to give parts of the Bible a totally different sense from how they have traditionally been understood. Once enough dust has been thrown up into the air nothing is left clear, and it almost seems that anything can mean anything. Scholarship can clarify and correct, but it can also confuse and be cleverly wrong-headed. But what can ordinary people think when the scholars offer us their competing and contradictory wares?

To give one example, I lecture in an MA hermeneutics class at Trinity on the piece in Romans 1 on homosexual practice. I find myself drawing attention to no less than thirteen quite different ways in which scholars have set out to show either that Paul did not mean what the plain sense of the words suggests that he means, or that, if he was saying what he seems to be saying this is irrelevant for Christian ethics today. The way the passage has been understood throughout history is now only one of at least fourteen views on offer. This can easily make it look as though the way the passage has been understood throughout history has only one chance in fourteen of being correct. Most of the views involve one form of special pleading or another, and about half of them involve privileging modern secular perspectives over biblical ones. But with so many views flying around confidence about anything in this area can be quite crippled. Those on the vanguard of progressive thinking are utterly confident in relation to what they stand for. Orthodox Christians find themselves just a bit too confused to stand up firmly for their traditional values. So it has been an unequal battle in society at large, and quite often it seems like it is proving to be the same in the church.

And third, Christians have largely lost sight of the importance of the Old Testament for their faith and life. Liturgically, fresh efforts have been made to restore the Old Testament to the life of the church, but in the Church of England the 'Epistle' and the 'Gospel' have been and continue to be the steady diet of many, and serious Bible reading is not always much better practised in other churches. We hardly know the Old Testament, so when the difficult bits in the Old Testament are brought sharply to our attention, our capacity to find moral guidance from the Old Testament dwindles away. In the 1662 Prayer Book it was a rehearsal of the Ten Commandments that led into confession of sin, but now in the Church of England we settle for the double love-commandment. Nothing wrong in itself with that, but it doesn't help us to keep in focus the fact that it is the Old Testament that actually needs to be called upon to provide the main material base for a Christian ethical framework. For Christians the material of the Old Testament is focussed and prioritised by the material of the New Testament, but it is the Old that is intended to provide the main material base for a Christian ethic.

Take note of the confidence that surfaces in the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:5-7. Moses has been laying out the details of the Law that was to govern the life of the people as they made their way into the promised land. And he says 'you must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear of these statutes will say, "Surely this is a great nation and a wise and discerning people".' The sense of direction given by the Law was something to be proud of, something to be sure about, something to be confident in. Psalm 119, the longest of all the psalms by far, celebrates in every verse the value of the Old Testament Law. Verse 105 sums it up well: 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.'

To pick up for a moment on one of my opening illustrations: one of the challenges that faced the Old Testament people of God at two key points in their history had to do with change. In the move from the desert into the Promised Land had things changed so much that a radical rethink was called for? The answer that came was that the fundamentals remained the same. Again the challenge was there when the nation went into Exile. And again the answer was the same. True there were new challenges to be faced. But God had not changed and the stipulations of the covenant had not changed. The core issues in the lives of people remain the same despite vast changes in circumstances.

Radical values for a confused church is my topic. And so far I have spoken about the confusion, now

I want us to turn our attention to what I am calling the radical values. What I have in mind to appeal to here is Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the sermon Jesus first uses the beatitudes to point to the good news of the coming kingdom. God's face had turned away and his hand had been heavy in judgement on his people for many generations. There had been for them only a little that spoke of God's presence in blessing, and a great deal that spoke of his absence and of his displeasure. But now things were changing. For those who are ready for it, God is now announcing his intention to turn in blessing, and to bring to fruition all his longstanding promises of a better future. For those who had learned from the dark days and were prepared to stand in humility before God, everything was now going to change. Indeed it had begun to change, as Jesus both announced the kingdom, and in his own ministry marked its beginning.

In the school of hard knocks God can teach us a lot, and that had been his purpose for his people through the long years of bleakness. Humbled under the mighty hand of God one learns to look to God and nobody else, and if one has learnt well one learns to be merciful, to be pure in heart and to be a peacemaker. And one learns to take it on the chin when one is mocked for one's loyalty to God. If one had not already learned these lessons there was an urgent need to catch up right away. Jesus' beatitudes celebrated what had been learnt by many in the school of hard knocks, but they also pointed towards what would be necessary remedial learning for others.

With that foundation in place the way forward now involves throwing in one's lot with Jesus. Throwing one's lot in with Jesus distils and concentrates all that God had been seeking to teach his people over the centuries. But it also represents a moving forward in the purposes of God. Jesus makes it quite clear that what is involved in doing so is tough, but also that it is exhilarating. This is the focus of verses 11-12. Fierce persecution, but overflowing blessings are to be the lot of the disciples of Jesus.

Against this background as the sermon moves on, Jesus tries to help people catch a vision for the living out of an abundant righteousness. See verse 20. A righteousness that is generous and not calculating. A righteousness that is invested in going all out for God. Near enough is not good enough for disciples of Jesus. The only way to be is all on for God.

Part of this vision of an abundant righteousness is spelled out in Matthew 5:21-48 with six antitheses. In each of them Jesus points to what people had heard had been said, and by this he means how some feature of the Old Testament Law was being taken up and related to. And then he sets up a contrast in each case with words that start 'But I say to you'. In each case we are given a traditional view of some area of ethics, which is then contrasted with Jesus' challenge to a higher standard.

People have often looked at this pattern rather superficially, and thought that Jesus was setting aside the Old Testament laws in favour of a new gospel ethic. But the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount already anticipated this kind of misunderstanding in verses 17-19. Jesus makes it quite clear that he has no truck with those who would undermine the authority of the Old Testament. He did not come to abolish and there is no place for relaxing even the least of the commandments of the Old Testament Law.

So what is Jesus doing? I can only give you three pointers into what is going on here. But I hope they will help you to catch something of the thrust of Jesus' intention.

First, in the opening antithesis, from verse 21 on, Jesus is interpreting the murder commandment in the light of the love commandment which he is going to take up on the final antithesis. To some degree all through the set of antitheses Jesus is seeing the issues involved in the light of the love commandment. In Jesus' hands all the commandments attracts to themselves the same relational focus that is evident for the love commandment. The commandments are concerned about people and their welfare, and are to be understood in this connection.

Second, in several of the antitheses what Jesus sets himself against is an approach to the commandments that restricts their application to how they could function in a court of law. Murder, adultery and divorce were all matters of law and rightly have a place in the legal justice system. But legal justice systems are fairly crude instruments. They can only deal with quite a limited range of all

that is involved in the doing of good and bad. The idea that I am OK if a court wouldn't convict me is totally opposite to the thrust of Jesus' concerns. Where the legal system can only get at extreme cases, the sensitive conscience of the disciple needs to be alert for anything that has the slightest whiff of what the Law stands opposed to.

Third, in the eye for an eye antithesis, from verse 38 on, the movement is in quite the opposite direction. Here a part of the law that was meant to be sharply focussed on the functioning of the legal system was being generalised in quite an unhelpful way. It looks as though a statement from the Old Testament Law which in its actual wording could only refer to a principle of proportionate retaliation has by abstraction come to stand for a principle of aggressive protection of one's own interests. It has lost its whole-community focus and become narrowly selfish. There is no encouragement to be a doormat in how Jesus responds in this antithesis. Rather, to sum it up, but all too briefly, Jesus is suggesting that the hostile behaviour of the other person is to be challenged not by giving as good as you get but by the moral strength of one who is happy enough to call a spade a spade, but can provocatively signal a preference for suffering wrong over feeding the spiral of violence.

So let's look a little more closely at how these three aspects of Jesus' approach works themselves out in some of the antitheses.

You shall not murder is one of the ten commandments, and therefore part of the foundational ethical charter of the Old Testament, part of the terms of the covenant bond between God and his people. But the Old Testament also identifies murder as a crime, a crime for which the penalty should be death. So as a crime, murder was identified as something to which the justice system should and would respond. What Jesus is fundamentally complaining about here is the failure to keep these two perspectives apart. If we only think about murder in relation to criminal law, we will think that the commandment not to murder only has a bearing on what the criminal system can address. But as I have already suggested, legal justice systems are and only can be fairly crude instruments. We let ourselves off much too lightly if we limit our concern to whether a court would convict us.

Jesus' rhetorical strategy here is to appear at first to go along with the clumping together of these two dimensions of ethical principle and of capital crime. But instead of letting the crime dimension have the upper hand he puts the moral principle dimension into the driving seat. And he pushes the logic until we have a *reductio ad absurdum*. We will have to have a legal system, he suggests, that can deal with every angry word and insult. And we will have to have a legal system that can have at its disposal even the possibility of sending people to hell. Jesus is, of course, not seriously intending that we should try to do this. He wants people to see that this would be a recipe for disaster in the court system. Moral vision is not to be constrained by the necessary limitations of what can be identified and punished as crime.

For Jesus, once we set the commandment free to be the fundamental moral principle it is intended to be we are in a position to explore its full implications. For the Matthean Jesus the murder commandment can only have its proper force if it is allowed to speak against every expression of human alienation from another and every expression of hostility towards another. Courts can't do anything about most of this, but the ultimate sanction here is the judgment of God.

Jesus deliberately goes for an extreme here. He is not particularly concerned to focus on outbursts of anger and minor examples of insult. What he is suggesting by choosing these examples is that the scope of the murder commandment reaches even this far. And of course if it reaches even this far then there are going to be all sorts of intermediate categories, more serious than a flash of anger or a simple insult. We are being invited in imagination to fill all the gaps in. To think about where our own lives might come under scrutiny from this expanded vision of the command not to murder.

As I have already suggested what enabled Jesus to see all of this in the murder commandment was his recognition of the centrality of the love commandment. In Jesus' hands all the commandments attracts to themselves the same relational focus that is evident for the love commandment. The commandments are concerned about people and their welfare, and are to be understood in this connection.

The relationship between the legal system and moral principles is also involved in the antitheses on adultery and on divorce. If we only think of adultery as what can be publicly recognised and legally

punished as adultery we have quite a very restricted view. Jesus picks up specifically on adultery in the mind. He is not suggesting that sexual desire should be viewed negatively, nor are men being criticised for finding women sexually attractive. What is being criticised is making use of these things in order, in the realm of imagination, to indulge in illicit sexual activity. In our own day the web has opened up all sorts of temptations for doing just this. Jesus here picks up specifically on adultery in the mind. But he might also have picked up on other ways of behaving and thinking that violate the sanctity of somebody else's marriage. And here also in Jesus' hands the adultery commandments attracts to itself the same relational focus that is evident for the love commandment.

When it comes to the discussion of divorce the same principles are at work. The divorce antithesis is closely related to the adultery antithesis. Divorcing your spouse is yet another way of falling foul of the adultery commandment. Jesus wasn't trying to get the legal provisions for divorce overturned. But he was intending to shine a moral spotlight onto what was often happening. Serial monogamy is serial adultery, so far as Jesus is concerned. Marriages are designed to be for life. Divorces create victims, and once again Jesus sets the issue of divorce into same relational context of the love commandment, as he does elsewhere.

The material on oaths has caused heated disputes through history. I think that the way in which Jesus handles the relationship between the legal and the moral throughout the antitheses can throw some light here. It is very unlikely that Jesus is calling for a defiance of legal requirements for oath-taking. We should not be offering oaths because our word is our bond. The legal system will do what the legal system thinks it needs to do, but for those committed to the way of Jesus the truth of our word will be just the same, oath or no oath.

Finally some words on the eye for an eye antithesis. Eye for an eye is a central principle of Old Testament Law. It is a principle of proportionate penalties. It is often said to limit retaliation to a proportionate punishment. But in the Old Testament texts involved (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21) it is much more about marking the full seriousness of the crime committed and making sure that the guilty party was properly punished. If proper punishment was not meted out then the whole community would be considered to have colluded in the crime, and the whole community would be contaminated by the crime. I wonder whether there might be something here for our current judicial system to consider. I know that victims and victim's family, and often the police who track down criminals, feel betrayed by a legal system that at times hands out minor sentences or suspended sentences for quite serious crime. So far as we can tell an eye for an eye was not generally taken literally. There is only one instance of mutilation reported in the Old Testament, and that is way back in Judges (1:6-7).

The eye for an eye texts address the community and its leadership structure and not the victim or the victim's family as such, though there was in the Old Testament some provision for victim's families to have a role in meting out justice.

Jesus' response, however, makes it clear that eye for an eye had, in popular understanding, escaped the bounds of the legal system and become a justification for personally giving as good as one gets. In fact Jesus' examples suggest that eye for an eye had come to stand for a principle of aggressive protection of one's own interests.

An important guiding principle through the first five antitheses has been what comes to explicit expression in the sixth and final antithesis. Everyone believes in love. It offers a huge feel good factor. Who could ever speak against it. But the love everybody believes in spontaneously is symmetrical love: you love me and I will love you. Well functioning communities go further than this and recognise the value of compassionate care for the vulnerable and the needy. And if they function even better still, personal animosities can be repressed for the sake of the good functioning of the community as a whole. In human communities group solidarity can produce a lot of generous behaviour.

But Jesus calls for something way beyond that. We are asked to imagine the best and most generous of human behaviour. We are asked to think of the most unselfregarding kindness that we might ever have witnessed or heard about. It might be a mother's care for her child. It might be a man's sacrifice for his family or for his country. Whatever goodness any kind of human solidarity might draw from us we are being asked to display to those who are our enemies. Whether we feel

hostile to them or they stand opposed to us makes no difference. Jesus intends to take up and radicalise the highest demands of human solidarity, and then insist that we practice them for the benefit of those who are our enemies.

Where does all this get us to? I don't want to suggest that our ethical decisions are necessarily easy ones. Nor do I want to suggest that we won't make lots of mistakes along the way. But what I do want to call for is a renewal of confidence in our basic moral paths as Christians. There is plenty of room for humility, but not for the loss of moral confidence that has invaded the church. As in all things Jesus points the way. Despite all the changed and changing circumstances and all the competing views on offer, he took up with confidence the Old Testament material base for his ethics. Then he focussed and prioritised it in relation to the new thing he was bringing into being. That is, he brought it into connection with the good news of the coming kingdom and interpreted it in the light of the central call to love. And finally he brought it to bear sharply on the lives of those to whom he spoke. We should want to do no less.