

Introduction to Christian Ethics
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Unit #7 Key Ethical Themes in the Teaching of Jesus
7E The Fundamental Emphasis on Love

- In our last lesson, we examined Jesus' teaching on the subject of the people that He chose to be His special building project.
- We saw that *Jesus' ethical teaching was designed for a people given identity and separateness by their close relationship to Him, in a world where they would be rejected by most people as He was.*
- We saw that He set Himself the task of building for Himself a people that not even death could hold or keep from Him.
- His people would be a single unified flock comprised of Jews and Gentiles.
- Their loyalty and obedience to Jesus would make them a closely united spiritual family.
- Their loyalty to Him would also separate them from the world at large which would generally be hostile to them.
- Jesus' people would not form a state in this world, so He gave them no administrative laws by which to organize and govern a nation.
- But He taught them how to behave toward each other and outsiders, so that their moral character would resemble His, and they would have a morally uplifting influence on those around them.
- He also taught them to be wise, practicing responsibility to the judgment of the group.
- They were to settle their disputes internally, without the help of outsiders.

Questions or comments?

The Fundamental Emphasis on Love

- Jesus stressed that the principle of love was fundamental to pleasing God and doing the right.
- We saw in an earlier unit that Jesus regarded love as fundamental to the Law of Moses.

[READ Mt 22:36-40]

- There is a great deal to Jesus' teaching about the importance and meaning of love in our relationships, so in this lesson we are going to explore this area in greater depth.
- Love was fundamental to Jesus' ethical teaching for His people.

- For this reason, *He commanded that we love one another.*

[READ Jn 13:34f; 15:10-13]

- Here we have Jesus carrying out His role as a lawgiver.

- Moses delivered God's words; but Jesus issues commands *in His own name.*

- Jesus gave *very few commands* but this one law He repeated and repeated to such an extent that Paul was able to refer to it simply *as Christ's law.*

- In **Gal 6:2** Paul says that **Christ's law is a reason for bearing one another's burdens.**

- If you think about it, this command seems very odd.

- How can you command people to love one another?

- You might just as well command the ocean to lie still.

- It is also a very difficult command to obey.

- Some people are very difficult to love, however we understand the word.

- Another noteworthy thing about this love commandment is the fact that Jesus called it a *new* one.

- Obviously *it was not new*, because it was the basis of the Law of Moses, but in another sense, *it was new.*

- **[READ 1 Jn 2:7-10]**

Q: In what sense was His command a new one? Jn 13:34f

A: [DISCUSS]

1. It was new because it implied a higher conception or standard of love.

- Jesus defined love **by His personal example** and we know that His love led Him to lay down His life for the disciples whom He considered His friends.

- But for most of those who have followed Him through the ages, He laid down His life while they were His enemies (**Romans 5:10**).

- It interesting that it was Paul, the persecutor of Christians and of Jesus who put this truth into words (**Acts 9:1-4**).

- Jesus' command requires us to focus on the welfare of others to the point where **it is personally costly to us to do so**, and our inclination is to stop before love leads us that far.

- He also commanded that we love our enemies (Mt 5:44).

- This cannot mean liking or admiring them, or being loyal to them or having warm feelings toward them.

- If we focus on feelings, it is hard to see how we can love our enemies.

- Jesus' conception of love requires us to do loving things toward our enemies.

- We are to **focus on their needs or their welfare to the point where doing**

so costs us something [**READ Lk 6:27, 35**].

- Jesus illustrated this idea in the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- Samaritans and Jews had no dealings with each other and carefully avoided any sort of contact with each other.
- Humanly speaking, the Samaritan in Jesus' story had no reason for tenderly caring for a dying Jew.
- His actions are an example of compassion toward a stranger in need even when the stranger is an enemy.
- This kind of love that Jesus commands cannot be hidden because it does things that are visible and remarkable to observers.
- Its very breath is action, even when our natural inclination would be to do nothing.
- If faith without works is dead, as James tells us, then love without works is a lie.
- **1 Jn 3:18f** says, *"Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We shall know by this that we are of the truth."*
- *Love that moves us to serve others confirms to us that we know God.*
- True humility is demanded by this kind of love, because it can require us to do for others things that it seems uncomfortable or unnatural to do.
- It can require us to wash another person's feet, as Jesus did.
- It can require us to do difficult or unpleasant things for people who need our care.
- Example of the lady who bathed Mrs Smallman.

2. Another new element in Jesus' command is the fact that He is telling us to especially direct this more intense and energetic kind of love toward His people.

- Our love for fellow believers is supposed to stretch us even to the point of dying for them (Jn 15:12f).
- Other Scripture passages make the same point.
- 1 Pe 2:17 says, *"Honour all men, love the brotherhood."*
- 1 Jn 3:16 says, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."*
- Gal 6:10 says, *"While we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."*
- Jesus' command to wash each other's feet makes the same point.
- This love among believers is to be so noticeable and so undeniable that it becomes *a convincing evidence to all men of our relationship to Jesus* (Jn 13:35).
- That makes it an essential prerequisite of effective evangelistic outreach.

- Our love for other believers is also intended to be *an important evidence to us*.

- 1 Jn 3:14 says, “*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.*”

- In other words, **our love for fellow believers provides a strong basis for personal assurance of salvation.**

- *So obedience to Jesus’ love command gives muscle to our testimony and assurance of salvation to our spirits.*

- It is clear from the second chapter of Acts (vss. 44f) that the early believers voluntarily demonstrated a radical sort of love for one another.

- Individuals willingly gave up their property to provide money with which to care for the needy among them, so that no one was left in need.

- Some have described this as an early example of the practice of Communism, but it was different from Communist theory and practice in a number of important respects.

- The sharing was entirely voluntary.

- It was also temporary and limited to the circle of believers in the Jerusalem congregation, and it did not mean the end of the personal ownership of property.

- But the Jerusalem congregation set an example and established a standard for the love believers are to show one another.

- **Jesus’ new command about loving one another has also had an important effect on the language used in the Greek New Testament and in the Greek-speaking Christian church.**

- There were two commonly used words for love in the Greek spoken in Jesus’ era.

- Those words were *eros* and *philia*.

- *Eros* was used to refer to sexual desire and love, but the word *eros* is never used in the New Testament, so **we can ignore it as far as Jesus’ ethical requirements are concerned.**

- Doing what comes naturally because of our God-given sexual drives does not have to be commanded.

- Christians need to manage their sexual impulses, and keep them within the bounds of personal purity defined by God, but that is a subject for another lesson.

- The usual ordinary Greek word for love was *philia* and from it we get many English words such as *philosopher*, *philatelist*, *philanderer* and *Philadelphia*.

- Like our English word, *love*, *philia* was used to express a range of

meanings from liking or fondness to strong friendship, deep affection, loyalty and commitment to another person.

[READ Jn 16:27] Here the word *philia* is used twice, for our love for Jesus and God's love for us.

- In Jn 15:17 Jesus used this word to command believers to love one another.

- A noun derived from the word *philia* came to mean a kiss (*philema*), as it does in Lk 22:48, when Judas kisses Jesus.

- In the parallel account in Matthew 26:48 Judas uses the verb *phileo* with the meaning to kiss (*phileso*).

- The verb form of the word, *philia* is used 25 times in the New Testament and its noun form is used once.

- But this normal Greek word for love is not the word that Christians commonly used among themselves when speaking about love, and that is very odd.

- The Greek word that is usually used for love in the New Testament is *agape*, and this uncommon word became the clear favourite of Christians.

- The proof of its popularity among Christians is the fact that the verb form of *agape* is used 142 times in the New Testament and its noun form is used 115 times.

- In addition, the adjectival form of this word (*agapetos*, beloved) is used about 63 times, and many of these occurrences are references to fellow believers.

- What makes the oddness of the Christian preference for this word very obvious is the fact that before the time of Jesus Greek-speaking people very rarely used the word *agape*.

- In fact, it was used so rarely in pre-Christian Greek that its meaning back then is somewhat unclear.

- It seems that this rarely used word was adopted by Christians to express their new and unique conception of love.

- Apparently they just didn't think that the ordinary every day Greek word for love was strong enough to express their understanding of love.

- So Christians adopted the word *agape* and made it theirs by using it often.

- It became the word that they used to express the meaning of love as Jesus had defined and commanded it.

- It is not uncommon for languages to have more than one word for love.

- Some have an ordinary word that is used most of the time and a special stronger word that is rarely used (e.g. English: love/adore, French aimer/adorer; Ukrainian lubati/ cohati).

- It seems that the Greek word *agape* was used very sparingly and rarely, to

express intense and very deep caring for someone.

- But for Christians it became the ordinary word used to express love.
- The use of the two words, *agapao* and *phileo* in John 21 is very instructive.

[Read Jn 21:15ff].

- Twice Jesus asks if Peter has *agape* for him and twice Peter answers that he has *philia* for him.
- The point of Jesus' question seems to be, ***“Peter, do you love me deeply and truly?”***
- Possibly Peter was embarrassed to claim to have that kind of very strong love for Jesus, so soon after denying Him three times.
- He may also have been embarrassed to use such a strong word in speaking to a man.
- Each time Jesus shows that Peter's love for Him is acceptable and adequate, because He responds to Peter's affirmation with, the words ***“Feed My lambs,*** and the equivalent words, ***“Feed My sheep.”***
- This command amounts to saying, ***“I trust you to care for those who are dearest to Me.”***
- Jesus deliberately gives the man who has denied him three times three opportunities to affirm his love.
- Jesus asks the question a third time using Peter's word, *philia* and Peter answers using the same word.
- It is as if Jesus is saying to Peter, ***“I appreciate that you have difficulty saying that you agape me. The word you have used to express your love is acceptable, and the kind of love you have for me is good enough for me to trust you to take care of my sheep.”***

- Jesus explained our duty to love God and others in such a way as to expand and deepen all other ethical duties.

- Most of His teachings about our duties to God expand upon or explain our duty to love Him.
- Most of His teachings about our duty to others also expand upon or explain our duty to love them.
- So He explains the command against murder as constituting an extreme offence against love **[READ Mt 5:21f].**
- Love also rules out lesser offences such as anger and using words like dummy or fool.
- **[READ Mt 5:38-42]**
- Here Jesus **replaces the principle of an eye for an eye** by His instruction to **put up with insult** (turn the other cheek), and **let people in difficulty or in need impose on you.**

- This change makes sense because of our over-riding duty to treat others in a loving way.

- **[READ Mt 5:43f]**

- Here He explains the command to love our neighbour as requiring us to **love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.**

- Such a radical form of the love command was not recognized as a duty in any other faith before the time of Jesus ancient, and if any other world religions now teach such a high view of love, there is little doubt where they got the idea.

- You may be interested to hear some of the things that the Koran, the holy book of Islam, says on the subject of how to treat people who do not share the Islamic faith.

- In my copy of NJ Dawood's translation of the Koran, the text is not divided into chapters and verses as is the Bible.

- Instead, the text is divided into passages a number of pages long, and each of these has a memorable title of its own.

- The following quotation is from the section named **Victory (page 270):**
“Mohammed is Allah's apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another.”

- The next quotation is from the section named **Repentance (page 323):**
“Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that Allah is with the righteous.”

- It is easy to see the sharp contrast between this teaching and the teaching of Jesus concerning how we should treat our enemies.

- Other passages in the Koran may have a gentler tone, but it is easy to see how these two passages could encourage Muslims with terrorist tendencies to feel that their actions are justified and permitted by God.

- **Jesus' best known expansion of the love principle is called the Golden Rule.**

It is found in **Mt 7:12**, which says, ***“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”***

- In this command, Jesus recognizes and conserves all the highest ethical teachings and insights of the Old Testament.

- Jesus also said that the commands to love God and man sum up the Law and the Prophets.

- The clear implication of these two sayings, when you put them side by side, is that our duty to love others is paraphrased and clarified in the Golden rule.

- No one before Jesus ever suggested that love for others should impose such a **demanding and proactive duty** on us.

- The highest the pre-Christian world ever reached was the silver rule: **Don't do to others what you do not want them to do to you.**
- This command only requires people to avoid doing bad things to others.
- The important thing about His Golden Rule is that *it requires us to act.*
- *It requires us to do specific good things for others according to our best judgment as to what is good for them - the same careful judgment that we bring to bear when we think about what is good for us.*
- In recent years, some people have suggested that our actions should be guided not by the **golden rule**, but by **the platinum rule: Do to others what they would like you to do to them.**
- Children would like us to do this, because it would involve giving them what they want rather than what we believe to be in their best interests.
- Adults committed to wicked behaviours would also like us to do for them what they would like us to do for them.
- That is not how Jesus explained the ethical obligation of love.
- He addressed the Golden Rule to His followers.
- He trusted them to apply the standards of righteousness they had learned from Him when applying the Golden rule.
- Of course our Western culture takes a very different approach to what it means to be led by love.
- It thinks that people should be given what they want, rather than what is good or what is good for them according to God's perspective.
- Our culture seems to believe that *it is ethical to be led by our sincere feelings, wherever they may lead us.*
- This view generally understands **feelings** as meaning **strong attraction and forceful impulses or urges.**
- This makes sense to people in harmony with Western culture, although it tends toward selfishness, scoffing at loyalty, and commitment, and rejecting the very idea of duty.
- The Scriptures teach us to be guided by a determination to please and obey God, doing the right, whatever our feelings incline us to do.
- *The interesting thing is that when we do this with a good will, our feelings generally follow our actions and catch up with them so that when we do the right things we find joy and fulfillment in doing them.*
- There is an instructive story about a woman who had come to dislike her husband intensely, and decided to divorce him.
- She went to see a trusted advisor, explaining that her problem was not how to save her marriage, because she had resolved to put an end to it, but how to ensure that her husband was deeply hurt and miserable when she left him for good.

- On her confidant's advice, the woman resolved to be an absolutely marvelous wife to her husband for a whole month, so that when she left, he would feel his loss very keenly.
- For one whole month, the man was overwhelmed by her loving treatment of him.
- Every meal was a dream come true.
- His every want, preference, dream and fantasy was thoughtfully fulfilled.
- Bedtime became something he looked forward to all day.
- The plan worked perfectly.
- As the end of the month approached, she had him right where she wanted him, and she met with her confidant again to discuss how the plan was working out.
- Her confidant heard what had been happening all month, and asked how she was going to break the news.
- The woman's answer was, ***"I'm not going to leave him. Part way through the month I found that I was falling deeply in love with him again, and now I would not dream of leaving him."***
- She had treated her husband lovingly, and her feelings toward him had caught up with her loving behaviours.
- I cannot vouch for the truth of this story, it may be an urban legend.
- But I believe it illustrates some important truths about how people work.
- It is not good for us to be led by our feelings.
- They make unprincipled and irresponsible leaders.
- But when we commit ourselves to a good course of action, whether or not we feel like doing so at the time, our feelings soon catch up with our behaviours.
- Feelings make poor leaders, but they make excellent followers.

- **Summing up what Jesus said about love, it is clear that His teaching is designed to stretch us in our dealings with others, teaching us humility and unselfishness in our service to them.**
- **Whether we feel like it or not, our love is to show itself in concrete loving actions toward both believers and unbelievers, close friends and bitter enemies, but *especially toward believers.***

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?