

The Ethics and Pro-Social Values of Christianity

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Christian Values

Human Nature and the Need for Salvation

Like Jews, Christians believe that humankind was created in the image of God. Yet in the Christian tradition, humanity suffers from a “fallen” nature, debased and hopelessly flawed. Doomed by the disobedience and subsequent punishment of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, humankind is forever weakened by evil inclinations within and ever-present temptations without. The allures of the world’s temptations are no match for the souls of humanity, who in their estrangement from God live dark and brutal lives, and whose soul remains in danger of perishing for eternity in the afterlife.

Christianity teaches that the only hope for humankind is complete faith in God, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) All of humanity is fallen, and each individual is capable of redemption through faith. More specifically, it is the complete faith in the redemptive power of God in the person of Jesus Christ to restore humanity from its fallen state (Matthew 1:21; 26:27-29; Luke 1:76-78; 24:46-48). Left to ourselves and our intrinsically violent, self-interested natures, humanity cannot hope to create just civil systems and build ethical relations.

The Christian creed maintains that faith in the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ – his forgiveness of his persecutors after having experienced every form of human evil and violence - provides the model of forgiveness and compassion that makes it possible for humanity to rise above our flawed natures and live in peace in this life and the next (John 3:15-17; Colossians 1:13-14, Hebrews 9:12).

In this sense Christianity shares the Abrahamic ethic of human equality, since all of humanity is created in the same image, descended from Adam, all are fallen and in need of salvation through faith, and God loves all among his creation equally. The Abrahamic vision of spiritual liberty is understood by the moral choice given to individuals to accept or reject faith in Christ and to repent and atone for wrong-doing. The Epistles of Paul “exalted the example of the man who broke with the established church.” (Sandmel, 316)¹

Christian Values:

Love and Universal Humanity

Christianity inherited Judaism’s concern for the individual relationship with God and the importance of manifesting that love in relations with others. When Jesus was asked which of God’s commandments was most important, Mark records Jesus’ response: “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all

¹ Sandmel, Samuel. *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*.

your strength.” (12:28-30, citing Deut. 6:4) He then added: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:31)²

According to this Great Commandment, every other law and commandment, then, is secondary to the law of love, or is fulfilled in the act of love (Luke 10:25-37). Paul views the love of neighbor as fulfillment of the law, as well as individual commandments of the Torah (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-15). Paul makes this point particularly clear:

“Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment are summed up in this command, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14).

When pressed about who the neighbor was, Luke records Jesus as answering in the form of a parable: when a man was robbed, beaten, stripped and left to die, two religious people passed the victim by without help. Then an “impure outsider” –a Samaritan, came to the victim’s aid, tending to his wounds and bringing him to safety. Jesus thereby makes the argument that a neighbor is anyone, regardless of status or piety, who is in need. This was a self-conscious effort to broaden the sense of community beyond traditional boundaries to a universal standard.

Elaborating on Biblical ethics, Jesus proclaims that “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Like Judaism, Jesus asks believers to love all others as God loves creation: God sends sunshine and rain on the good as well as the bad (Matthew 5: 43-48) As God does not distinguish among his creation, nor should his believers.

Love

Love is one of the most central themes of the New Testament. The depths to which God loves humankind is attested to in what is probably the most oft-quoted verse in the New Testament: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

God’s love for humankind is likened to a father’s love, demonstrated most famously in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), where the father waits patiently for the wayward son to return home. When he does, he is embraced and accepted completely in an expression of God’s unconditional welcoming of the repentant sinner. Love is not merely an attribute of God, but what God fundamentally *is*. The New Testament states that “the very nature of God is love, and that is why it is possible to say “God is love” (I John 4:8, 16).

² Matthew’s version is as follows “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22: 37-40)

Individuals are called upon to love God in return for his love for us (Mark 12:30), though this does not take the form of a command or a duty. John writes that “We love because he first loved us.” (I John 4:19). Christians are therefore enjoined to be mindful of the heart, and are asked to “do everything in love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14) In this way, their deeds and actions are pious and empathetic, imitating God and reflecting God’s will for humankind. Jesus tells his followers to “take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29).

Inner Purification

In Christian teaching, the heart plays a prominent role in the individual relationship with God and with others. What is in the heart has the power to manifest into reality (Mark 11:23). An open heart allows Christians to perceive and imitate God’s qualities of mercy, compassion, forgiveness and empathy: Love is the “fruit” of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) “and that which is poured into the hearts of those who believe in Jesus the Christ (Romans 5:5). Matthew adds: “Blessed are the pure at heart, for they shall see God.” (5:8)

Conversely, wrong beliefs lead to bad actions (Mark 7:14-22). Jesus makes it clear that God’s concern is with the heart, as it is “out of the heart” that “come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19, Mark 7:21, see also Matthew 9:4 and Mark 2:8). As Luke (6:45, also Matthew 22:33-35) explains,

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

One well-known passage in the New Testament distinguishes the role of love in worship of God, and the kind of love to be celebrated in the Christian community (1 Corinthians 13: 1-7):

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

St. Paul’s eulogy on love expresses the love that humanity needs with one another: “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but not have love, I gain nothing... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13:13) In loving God and loving others, humanity elevates itself and unites in purpose with God.

Love and Ethics in Community

Correcting one's inner beliefs and purifying the heart, then, is the first task for Christians in order to be reconciled with God and with each other.³ As 1 John 1:5-8 writes,

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

As the Hebrew Prophets had proclaimed, there was a fundamental contradiction between authentic worship of God and mistreatment of others. Early Christians pointed this out in embedded Christian values of love in community, 1 John 4:19-21 writes:

We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Christian Fellowship: Agape

Early Christians used the term *agape* to mean "Christian love", the kind of self-sacrificing love of God for humanity that Christ exemplified. *Agape* is an expression of love that exists in the context of relationship, though doesn't require knowledge of the other nor any expectation of reciprocity. In many Bible translations, *agape* is translated as charity (from the Latin *caritas*).⁴ The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. described *agape* as

³ There is tension in the Christian tradition on the role of salvation by righteous works and salvation by faith alone, which is particularly emphasized in Protestant Christianity – particularly Calvinism. The New Testament binds beliefs to actions, such as when Matthew (7:16-20) writes:

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

James (2:14-24) is even more explicit about the relationship between faith and deeds:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

⁴ Augustine reserved the word *caritas* for the love of God for humankind and for human love motivated by the divine.

meaning “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men... it is the love of God working in the lives of men.”

Christians are called to practice the kind of unconditional, volitional, respectful love for God with one another (1 Corinthians 10:24; Ephesians 4:1-6). Paul urges the imitation of Christ as authentic worship to believers: ‘Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.’ (Ephesians 5:1,2) This was intended to inform all social relations, from family and marriage (Ephesians 5:25; 6:1-4) to friendships (John 15:13).

John records Jesus as proclaiming, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12, 13) Jesus’ subsequent death on the cross represents for Christians the ultimate act of compassion and love. Paul writes that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) According to 1 John 3:16-19:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.

Paul talks at length about brotherly love (1 Thessalonians 4:9; Romans 12:10) and its significance to the community (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8: 12-14). As a divine gift, *agape* “appears to be a dynamic force that is conterminous with the presence of the Spirit of God, engendering the practical realities that make harmonious communal life possible (I Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:14)” (Switzer, Vol. II, 637).⁵

Brotherly love becomes the litmus test for the follower of Christ: “By this all will know that you are my disciples... if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Thangaraj writes that the “human response to God’s love is expressed not only through one’s love of God with one’s entire being; it is primarily expressed through the love of neighbor.” (Thanagaraj, Vol. II, 451) For Paul,

love is not only a theological concept but also an ethical prescription preventing corrosion of early Christian communities in times of communal discord and factional bickering (Galatians 5:15). For Paul, those who live in God’s Spirit by baptism are enabled in their capacity to love fully. (Switzer, 637)

Schramm notes that neighborly love is associated with the practice of a number of good and charitable deeds, including “table-fellowship, first aid, and release from debt or

⁵ In Greenberg, Yudit Kornberg, ed. *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*. II volumes.

healing.” (Schramm, in Vol. II, p. 381).⁶ Paul encouraged local church concern with the wider human community.

Christian social values, while centrally based in the cardinal principle of love, also carry over many of the ethical precepts found in Judaism. As Hebrews 13: 1-3 explains:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Ethic for Enemies

Christians understand God’s desire to see a love of ‘the other’ regardless of their religious, tribal or other identity markers. Christian love went so far as to emphasize the love for enemies and praying for persecutors (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:14; 17-21). Luke (6: 32-36) elaborates this principle explicitly:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners’, expecting to be repaid in full.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Transformation and Social Change: Nonviolence and Forgiveness

Jesus undertook “transforming initiatives” to respond to violence (Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*) Transformational because they changed expected roles and status.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-41)

Paul’s twelfth letter to the Romans has a number of ethical verses expounding on the manner of living a pious life that is “holy and acceptable to God” based on Jesus’ teachings (Romans 12:1). These include: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (Verse 14)”, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (Verse 17) and “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). Paul concludes:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by

⁶ Ibid.

doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12: 19-21)

Christianity teaches that God chose to send Jesus as a mercy to humankind instead of punishing them for their transgressions. In fulfilling God’s will (Matthew 26:39) and in forgiving others, Jesus provides Christians with the ultimate example of the transformation of evil into good. Jesus’ actions and principles of nonviolence were a source of inspiration and empowerment for early Christians. In particular, Christians drew from Jesus’ remark to Simon Peter, who rushed to defend him and he was being arrested: “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52; see also John 18:11). Jesus enjoined his followers not to harm those who harm them:

“You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” (Matthew 5:38-40)

Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan⁷ explains the theme of nonviolent transformation as “the Law of the Cross”:

“the suffering of Christ does not pay a debt of suffering to God as is often supposed; rather, the suffering and death brought into the world through sin is transformed through the power of Christ, for in Christ, God has taken up the suffering of the world and transformed – not through violence, but through the power of love.”

Key to the success of nonviolence strategies for social change is the basic belief in the value and dignity of all human life, which includes a principled love for adversaries and oppressors. It is this moral principle and ethic for dealing with enemies which often transforms social dynamics and systems of oppression.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

The power of nonviolence, Buttry notes, is that these acts demonstrate that the ego-gratification of oppressing another is taken away, while the “‘powerless’ person has the power to act outside of accepted scripts of the oppressive relationships. By taking a transforming initiative, the person claims his or her own humanity, while at the same time not denying the other. A moral mirror can be held up which exposes the evil of the system, or at least refuses to accept the definitions under which the oppressor operates.” (Buttry, 17)⁸

⁷ In McMahan, Christopher. “Suffering in Christianity,” in Kornberg, op. cot. Vol. I. p. 616.

⁸*Christian Peacemaking: From Heritage to Hope.*

Paul demonstrates a similar understanding of the transformative power of the powerless in describing the purpose and calling of the members of the early Christian community, who were not

...wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Redemption and Redemptive Suffering

While love is a central virtue of Christianity, love is understood to involve both cost and consequence. The birth and death of Jesus are both considered signs of God's love, and the profound suffering of Christ is described as necessary to his salvific work (Luke 24:26). Rigney writes that Christian love is reconciled with the notion of pain: the "conjoining of painful suffering and atoning sacrificial death is a distinctive feature of Christianity." (Rigney, Vol. II, 455)⁹ It is from this final sacrifice that Christians themselves are asked to relinquish themselves and become "born again".

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the principle which brings together the Christian values of love, agape, compassion, humility, mercy and redemptive salvation together. Forgiveness is a defining virtue and practice of Christianity, which follows from the recognition that humanity is deeply flawed and yet always within reach of redemption and God's mercy. More than an ideal, forgiveness is central part of Christian worship and identity, and is prominently and frequently stated in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Having faith in God is related directly to God's forgiveness of one's sins, and one's ability to forgive others (Luke 5:20; 7:47-50; Matthew 18:35) As God forgives, so are Christians expected to forgive. The Bible is clear on this point: Mark (11:25) warns that "when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Matthew reinforces the point:

"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."
(Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus' many examples of forgiveness provide models for Christians. Jesus begs God to forgive those who had physically harmed and were killing him, for "they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). For those that *do* know what they have done, Christians are expected to confess their transgressions in full sincerity and repent of their actions in order to be assured of God's forgiveness and reward. It is the promise of God's merciful forgiveness for the sincere repentant that distinguishes Christian belief.

⁹ In Greenberg, op. cit.

The transformation of the heart, being so important to Christian faith, is essential to forgiveness. Matthew 18:35 asks Christians to “forgive your brother from your heart” if they are to receive the blessings of God’s forgiveness and find peace. So important is this principle that to be Christian *means* to forgive when asked by another in sincerity. Luke (7:47-50) describes the relationship between love, faith and the forgiveness of sins:

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.... Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

When Jesus was asked whether there were limits to such acts, if after the seventh time of bestowing forgiveness to a repeat offender that was enough, Jesus replied, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Luke (17:3-4) reaffirms this:

So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.

Repentance

As forgiveness is a central value, so is the belief in the power of redemption. If all of humanity is fallen, then the ability to perceive one’s errors and sincerely seek a change in one’s heart is a sacred process denied to no one. Sincere confession of transgressions (Matthew 3:6; 18:15-17; Acts 19:18; James 5:16-18) and other hidden sins is a key feature of this process of transformation.

It is expected that right actions will invariably follow such a profound internal realization and transformation of the heart, and it is a commandment from God not to withhold forgiveness from a sincere repentant in order not to obstruct the workings of God. Mark (9:42) warns followers: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” In the same way, Jesus praised those who strive to reconcile among others and resolve their conflicts: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

A Christian is required then to demonstrate “good faith” through sincere forgiveness and a willingness to facilitate such transformations, which entails a ‘rebirth’ or renewal of the relationship and individuals involved. Such ‘clean breaks’, ‘clean slates’ and leaps of faith are necessary for a society of fallen individuals to live in peace and obey God. Christians are promised God’s forgiveness if they sincerely ask for it and have faith, and so it becomes the responsibility of a Christian to do the same (Luke 15:11-32).

The ability to forgive and make amends (Luke 19:8-10) is understood as the ability to restore relationships with God and within the community (Galatians 6:1-3), and underscores all of the other virtues articulated by Jesus (Ephesians 4:32). As Colossians 3:12-14 explains,

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other

and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Hypocrisy

The emphasis on purity of motives and right belief makes the charge of hypocrisy an issue of particular concern to Christians, which the Gospel of Matthew particularly notes (Matthew 6:2; 6:4-6; 6:15-17; 7:4-6; 15:6-8; 22:17-19; 23:12-16; 23:22-30; Romans 2:21-24). Within his community, Jesus often hurled charges of hypocrisy against religious and other Jewish leaders. In the tradition of social criticism, Jesus railed against leaders he condemned as abandoning their more important obligations to social justice while making outward appearances of piety. Matthew (23:23-28) writes that Jesus exclaimed,

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Other verses underscore a deep frustration at the failure of community leaders to live up to their duties to defend the causes of the weak (Matthew 23:23; Mark 7:9-13). Jesus was particularly scornful of the “unengaged piety” of religious leaders. Luke (20: 46-47) writes:

Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.

Early Christians strongly encouraged the doing of good works in private, so as to avoid the temptation and fate of the hypocrites, who perform their good deeds “with trumpets” and for the admiration of peers. As Matthew (6:1-6) writes:

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Generosity

Jesus particularly singled out love of wealth as a false god (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13). Greed, covetousness, arrogance, gluttony and pride are understood in Jewish and Christian Scripture alike as being idolatrous (1 Samuel 15:23). Matthew (6:21) records that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Those like Zacchaeus, however, who equitably shared their wealth were assured salvation (Luke 19:8-10). The New Testament reminds Christians, “give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38).

The New Testament also speaks to the importance of generosity, remarking “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again (Luke 6:30).” The Christian manual *Didache* (ca. 100 CE) claims that the true Christian must give to everyone who asks, without looking for repayment. Jesus is understood by Christians as a paragon of generosity and self-sacrifice (Matthew 20:25-28; Acts 5:31): “Though he was rich... yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

While Jesus emphasized the importance of the spiritual over the material, he nevertheless strongly advocated for social justice and generosity for the poor. This includes just lending practices (Luke 6:33-36) where Jesus reminds followers to

Lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Special place for “the least of these”

Jesus’ ministry was devoted to the poor and the vulnerable in his community. Not only were the needy the most deserving of love and fellowship, but that their piety and faith was closest to God. Jesus’ message of worldly renunciation and God’s special blessings to those steadfast in the face of hardship gave particular dignity to the poor. James records that Jesus said:

“Listen my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?” (James 2:1-7)

Jesus particularly singles out the needy and the vulnerable for special blessings by God. Luke 6:20-23 records that Jesus

looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of

the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

In the tradition of Jewish prophets, Jesus devoted his energy to speaking out and addressing the plight of the poor and the powerless. His ministry focused on the suffering class – lepers, despised women, the sick, the blind, the hungry, the persecuted, and other marginalized peoples (Luke 4:18-19, 7:18-23; Matthew 11:2-6) at a time of tyranny and occupation. As others throughout Jewish history had done, Jesus warned his community of the consequences of corruption, injustice and God’s judgment in this life and the next (Sider, 47).

Jesus himself had been a refugee (Matthew 2: 13-15), with no regular income during his public ministry. He sent his disciples out with very little to sustain their work, relying on God for their well-being. Jesus emphasized that God had no care for one’s worldly claims or accomplishments, but rather it was the state of their heart and faith which would determine their fate in the afterlife. He also taught that those that those who imitated God by loving and caring for the neediest would be rewarded by God:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me...

He goes on to say that on Judgment Day, Jesus will testify that “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these My Brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40) For those who did not clothe, feed, quench, heal, visit the sick or those in prison, God would pronounce “You that are accursed, depart from me into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” whereas the righteous will find eternal life (Matthew 25:41,45)

Jesus’ own actions with the needy and vulnerable provide a paradigmatic model for believers: he personally washed the feet of the outcast and downtrodden, he gave to the poor, fed the hungry, blessed the children, associated with social outcasts such as tax collectors, Samaritans, women and non-Jews and resisted retaliation. He cast himself in the role of servant. Matthew (9:10-13) describes an incident where Jesus was asked why he dined with “sinners”: On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus proclaimed the merit of caring for the poor by feeding the hungry: “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” (Luke 14:12-14; Hebrew 13:1-3)

Humility

Humility, love, mercy and compassion are key Christian values drawn from Jesus’ teaching. According to Matthew (18: 10), Jesus said "See that you do not look down on

one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Humility before God (since all are sinners) was one such way to find right belief and God’s mercy (Galatians 6:3). For those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,” Jesus told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where he concludes that “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14, see also Matthew 23:12).¹⁰

Once Jesus remarked that “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3,4). James (4:6) writes that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humility was essential for Christians living in community (Matthew 20: 25-28; Mark 9:35; Philippians 2:2-8). To early Christians, Peter wrote, “all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.” (1 Peter 3:8)

Self-Righteousness

Speaking to social ethics and universal compassion, Jesus warned against self-righteousness in judging others:

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Matthew 7:1-5)

In one of the New Testament’s more famous stories, Jewish leaders asked Jesus what the punishment should be for an adulterous woman for whom the law had stipulated the punishment of stoning. Jesus replied “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) Paul of Tarsus, or St. Paul, was even more explicit:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

¹⁰ The parable is as follows: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Romans 2: 1-4)

Christians are reminded that accountability – final judgment – is God's domain. James (4:12) pointedly asks, "But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?" In Romans 14:10-12:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Since only God understands what lies in human hearts, Christian founders emphasized the importance of correcting one's own inner beliefs while refraining from judging others. According to 1 Corinthians 4:5:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Mercy

If all are sinners, Christians are then asked to not only be humble, love others and refrain from passing judgment, but also to be merciful with the struggles of others. Matthew (5:7) records Jesus as saying "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Romans 14:1 encourages Christians to "accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." James 2:12-13 reminds believers to

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Early Christians were very concerned with the way in which Christians relate to one another, as 2 Timothy 2:22-25 illustrates:

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...

Self-deception and 'ends justifying means' paradigms are denounced in Christian teaching (Galatians 6:7-8; James 1:26; John 1:8), as holiness is a way of living itself (Matthew 4:8-10, 16:26). By focusing on righteousness and the inner kingdom, they

could find comfort and sustenance from God through faith, God would reward them for eternity in the afterlife, and their needs on earth would be met. Matthew (6:31-34) writes:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The bedrock of Christianity is absolute faith in God, from which appropriate, ethical and righteous actions will follow. Through faith in Christ, and faith in the belief that Jesus died for our sins and thereby atoned for our natures, Christianity promises God's mercy and their salvation in this life and the next (Ephesians 1:6-8), and affirms that their deeds would comport with their faith. Faith in God rescues believers from worldly temptations, while those who trust in God's mercy repent of their transgressions, forgive others, and open their heart to do God's bidding on Earth will be saved (Matthew 13:15; Acts 2:38, 10:42-44; 13:37-39)