

Jesus and Ethics

New Testament ethics is a major field of study on which numerous books have been written. The field often focuses particular attention on the ethical stances of two individuals: Jesus of Nazareth and the apostle Paul. Although there is more to the discussion (e.g., ethical positions of individual evangelists and of the authors of non-Pauline letters), the ethics of Jesus and Paul predominate.

Here is a “thumbnail sketch” of what is typically said regarding Jesus and ethics.

In preaching the advent of God’s kingdom, Jesus underscores both the possibility and the necessity of repentance (Mark 1:14–15). Thus future hope becomes a motivation for acting mercifully and responsibly in the present. At points it may seem that Jesus is thinking mostly about the future: he makes moral acts a strict requirement for admission to the kingdom (e.g., Mark 10:24–25; Matt. 25:31–46), threatens persons with the final judgment (Mark 9:42–48; 12:40; Matt. 5:22), and promises final rewards to those who act rightly (Mark 10:21; Matt. 6:19–21). It is clear, however, that one’s primary motivation for morality should be the desire to live in conformity to God’s standards, not simply to obtain eternal life or heavenly rewards (e.g., Matt. 5:45, 48).

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus's view of the law of Moses was generally positive and, indeed, he often interpreted that law in terms that would intensify its demands (cf. his teachings on murder, adultery, divorce, oath taking, and retaliation in Matt. 5:21–42). Jesus's ethical interpretations of the law are grounded in a belief that the two-fold love commandment— “to love God and to love one's neighbor” (Mark 12:29–31; from Deut. 6:4–5 and Lev. 19:18)— expresses God's will in a fundamental, definitive sense. With this as the primary principle, Jesus proceeds to indicate concrete ways in which love should affect moral behavior: affirming marriage and discouraging divorce (Mark 10:2–9), using wealth to benefit the poor (Luke 19:8), caring for anyone in need (Luke 10:29–37), avoiding violence (Matt. 26:52), and living a life of service (Luke 22:26–27).

Bibliography

- Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. New York: HarperOne, 1996.
- Matera, Frank J. *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.
- Powell, Mark Allan, ed. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 263–64. New York: HarperCollins, 2011. .