

A Spiritual Framework For Ethical Reflection

Glen Stassen & David Gushee Kingdom Ethics (IVP, Downers Grove, 2003.) (Tear)

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Ethical Reflection

In our society a cardinal virtue is being non-judgmental.

A mate of mine says 'the only sin is to call anything a sin'.

1. Do you think its right for Christians to judge?
2. If not – why not? If so – why?

Levels of Ethical Reflection

Henry David Aiken Reason And Conduct (Knopf New York 1962)
says there are four levels of ethical reflection –

1. Judgments p100

Specific statements related to particular case – usually unexplained

2. Rules p102

General statements relevant to similar cases – spelling out expected behaviour
Note: 'Rules give reasons for judgments.' But 'Rules can criticise judgments' p103

3. Principles p103

Broad statements that provide rationale for evaluating particular rules – that do not spell out expected behaviour, but give guidelines for obeying -or perhaps disobeying - rules. Note: 'Principles give reasons for particular rules' But 'Principles can criticise rules' p103 'If rules are there for reasons the reasons for which the rules exist sometimes can and must override the rules themselves' p104

4. Convictions p105

Basic beliefs that provide rationale for overall ethical reasoning – they are the basis for our principles, rules and judgments. You can't go deeper than our deepest convictions. Usually embodied in meta-narratives.

Note: 'For Christians, God's character (revealed in the story of Christ) will constitute the basic conviction level.' p106

Christ's Framework For Ethical Reflection

1. Judgments – specific value statements - 'That fox!' (Luke13.32)

3. What does Christ say about making judgments?

Christ never promised us a problem free life. He said 'In this world the way it is, you are going to have big trouble.' (John 16:33) *But he did promise the power to deal with the problems we would confront. 'Nothing shall be impossible for you' to deal with, he said. (Matthew 17:20) Just be as 'shrewd' as you can be, he said. (Matthew 10:16)*

One of the biggest problems we have is making decisions or judgments

Some Christians believe we shouldn't make judgments. After all, they say, 'Didn't Christ say: *"Do not judge!"*' (Matthew 7.1) But every decision we make involves making a judgment. And elsewhere Christ says: *'Judge for yourself what is right!'* (Luke 12:57) What are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

Well, if we look closely, Christ doesn't actually prohibit making judgments. Christ proscribes making any judgments about others which don't include making the same sort of judgments about ourselves.

He says *'Judge for yourself what is right'* (Luke 12:57) But be careful *'Do not judge unless you are prepared to be judged. If you judge you'll be judged by the very same standards that you apply to others'*. That being so, you'd better off to *'take the plank out of your own eye before you try take the speck out of your neighbour's'*. Besides, *'if you take the plank out of your own eye, you'll be able to see more clearly when you try to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye!'* (Matthew 7.1-2)

So Christ encourages us to make ethical judgments with due care. Our judgments need to show personal integrity and social responsibility.

Whenever we are making judgments we need to be aware of our limits. We need to remember only God is omniscient - we are not; so only God is in a position to know people's hearts - we are not; *we can't judge people's hearts.*

All we can judge is what we see and hear – people's words and deeds. What Christ calls their 'fruit'. He says 'By their fruit you will know them. 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. Thus, by their fruit you will know them' - not fully, not perfectly - but sufficiently. (Matthew 7.16-20)

It is instructive to look at the role Christ played in helping others settle their disputes. Even though Christ was unafraid to state his opinion publicly, when it came to stating his views on how a particular dispute should be settled, he often refused. Whenever people asked him a question about a situation that projected the responsibility of answering the question away from themselves and on to him, Christ usually refused to answer the question.

Christ wanted people to own their own predicament, accept the responsibility for their own problems and accept the responsibility of making their own judgments about how to resolve their own problems.

One day two brothers came to Christ to settle a dispute that they were having over the division of their family property. Christ, in his typical style, answered the question with a question: *'Man, who made me a judge over you?'* (Luke 12:14)

Christ used this technique of questioning questioners to make people answerable to themselves. 75% of the time Jesus was asked a question, he answered with a question. It was often in the answering of a question that the person would be forced to take responsibility for making their own judgments about how to solve their own problem.

While Christ refused to allow people to project the responsibility for making judgments about how to solve their problems on to him, he also stated quite clearly that they shouldn't project the responsibility onto anyone else either - particularly the *experts*.

He actually warned people to *'beware of experts'*. (Luke 20:46) He told people that *they* were the *experts* on their own problems. Deep down they knew the answers. *'Why don't you judge for yourself what is right?'* he asked (Luke 12:57)

One day Christ was teaching, when a whole crowd of noisy people arrived dragging a woman who had been caught red-handed having an affair. They wanted Christ to pass judgement on her. According to Jewish law, if this woman was an 'adulterer', she was meant to be executed, and, traditionally, 'adulterers' were executed by 'stoning'. Christ had gone on public record as being totally opposed to affairs. As a matter of fact, Christ had gone much further than the law, and claimed that, if anyone even entertained the idea of having an affair with someone that they weren't married to, they were already an 'adulterer' in their hearts. So, when the woman was caught, red-handed, having an affair, it seemed an open and shut case. The woman had been caught in the act. The law required death - by 'stoning' - straightaway. Surely Christ, by his own standards, would have to *judge* the woman guilty of 'adultery' and condemn her to death as an 'adulterer'.

But Christ steadfastly refused to assume the role of *judge for them*. When asked for his verdict he simply said to the crowd of men around him, 'Let those of you without sin cast the first stone at her.' He then stooped and wrote something in the dust on the ground with his finger, leaving the men, baying for the woman's blood, to make their own judgement. (John 8:7-8) In encouraging these people to make their own decision Christ took a huge risk. A woman's life was at stake. But, in spite of the grave risk, Christ did not take the problem *from* the men and resolve it *for* them. He simply stayed *with* them and ensured they arrived at a *loving solution* - which was just to all the parties involved in the dispute. The men eventually made their judgement. And left - one by one - 'from the oldest to the youngest'. And the woman was left alone with Christ.. 'Has no one condemned you?' he asked. 'No one, sir,' she said. Then, and only then, did Christ make his judgement. He said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Just don't do it again.' (John 8:9-11)

Christ was prepared to make a judgement – but only in a way that developed people's ability to judge for themselves – without condemnation.

4. What does this confirm about what you already knew Christ said about judging?
5. What further issues does it raise about judging for you to consider?

According to Hebrews,

***a 'mature person' is
someone 'who by constant practice
has trained themselves
to distinguish good from evil'.***

(Hebrews 5.14)

6. What are the practical implications of these views for us?

2. Rules - general moral directions - 'Thou shalt not kill!'(Matt 5.21-26)

7. What rules does Christ lay down for his disciples to practice?
(A summary of Christ's rules are in the Sermon On The Mount)

Typically, the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted as a dyad – contrasting the higher ideals of Jesus on the one hand over against the lower ideals of Jewish tradition on the other hand - with an emphasis on the call for us to practice the higher- rather than the lower- ideals.

The lower ideal of Jewish tradition	The higher ideal of Jesus' mission
"You have heard it was said to the people long ago, `Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 5.21	"But I tell you that anyone who is <i>angry</i> with his brother (or sister) will be subject to judgment. (Eg.) Anyone who says to his brother (or sister), `Raca,' is answer-able to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, `You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." 5.22

'Seeing it this way naturally places the emphasis on Jesus' teaching. And since it is clear that Jesus does give commands in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching is interpreted as a command not to be angry and not to call anyone a fool. But since, if we are truthful with ourselves, we cannot avoid being angry, the high(er) ideal (is seen as) an impossible demand.' p134

However 'this is a misinterpretation. *Jesus in fact gives no command not to be angry or not to call anyone a fool.*' The statement by Jesus is *descriptive, not prescriptive*, of 'a vicious cycle that we often get stuck in – being angry and insulting one another.'p134 The prohibitions in scripture are *not against being angry, but against 'sinning' while we are being angry.* In fact Paul says, 'Be angry but do not sin' (Eph.4.26) 'Mark 3.5 explicitly says *Jesus was angry – with the hardness of heart of those who would not say it was right to heal the man with a withered hand on the sabbath.* Matthew 21.12-17 (and 23) show Jesus angry, and in Matthew 23. 17, *Jesus calls his opponents fools, which would contradict 5.22 if it is read as a command.'* p134

'Jesus does give commands here. There are five of them, all imperatives. Jesus' commands here are transforming initiatives that are a way of deliverance from anger and killing. They are not mere illustrations (of a higher ideal); they are the climax of his teaching (the way forward).p134

Jesus pitches his proposals 'not as *twofold antitheses* but *threefold trans-formative initiatives*'. p133 'The Gospel of Matthew has almost *seventy-five teachings* with a *threefold or triadic* pattern, and *almost no teachings* with a *twofold or dyadic* pattern'.p135

The first part of his pitch points to a *traditional norm*; the second part points to the points out a *vicious cycle* associated with a traditional norm; and the third points to a *transformative initiative or a way out of the cycles* we are stuck in that traditional norms cannot provide.p135

1. Traditional Norms	2. Vicious Cycle	3. Transforming Initiatives
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'This transforms our understanding of the whole Sermon on the Mount. It means the emphasis is not on some negative prohibitions that are (too) hard (for us). The emphasis is on positive transforming initiatives that are a way of deliverance based in grace' p136

Traditional Norms	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiatives
"You have heard it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 5.21	"But I tell you that anyone who is <i>angry</i> with his brother (or sister) will be subject to judgment. Anyone who says to his brother (or sister), 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." 5.22	"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother (or sister) has something against you, <i>leave</i> your gift there in front of the altar. First <i>go</i> and <i>be reconciled</i> to your brother (or sister); then come and <i>offer</i> your gift. Settle matters (or <i>make friends</i>) quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court." 5.23-26
The Old Imperatives	Descriptive/ Not Prescriptive	The New Imperatives p135

Note the new imperatives commanded by Jesus are expected to be 'regular practices'. p136

These practices are not a new law to replace an old law. 'It is a way of we can participate in God's grace mediated through the community. It solves problems'. p136

Example One. Matthew 5.38-42

Traditional Norms	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiatives
"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'." 5.38	"But I tell you, its not about retaliation – returning evil for evil." 5.39	"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, <i>turn</i> to them the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, <i>give</i> them have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, <i>go</i> with them two miles. <i>Give</i> to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." 5.40-42
The Old Imperatives	Infinitive / Not Imperative	The New Imperatives p137

Note the new imperatives commanded by Jesus does *not* include the 'impossible ideal of not resisting evil, *but* a naming of the vicious cycle of retaliation by violent, vengeful evil means' p138

Paul reported the teaching in Romans 12.17-21 as '*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him*

something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*'.

Note the practices Jesus advocated are exactly the practices he employed in response to persecution. 'The Greek word that means "compels" is exactly the same word used when Simon of Cyrene was "compelled" to carry Jesus cross (27.32); and *Jesus allowed himself to be struck and slapped (26.67) and his garments to be taken away (27.35) p140 And in being prepared to be crucified for his convictions, Jesus actively and nonviolently 'resist(ed) evil by taking an action to oppose injustice, to stand up for human dignity, and to invite reconciliation' p138*

Example Two. Matthew 5. 43-48

Traditional Norms	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiatives
<p>"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" 5.43</p> <p>The Old Imperatives</p>	<p>"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers (or sisters), what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? "</p> <p>5.46-47</p> <p>Inquisitive / Not Imperative</p>	<p>"But I tell you: <i>Love</i> your enemies and <i>pray</i> for those who persecute you, that you may be sons (and daughters) 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. <i>Be inclusive</i>, therefore, as your heavenly Father is inclusive." 5.44-45</p> <p>The New Imperatives p140-1</p>

Note the old imperative advocated by the Qumran community cited in the Dead Sea Scrolls. encourages us to 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. Jesus asks what the benefit in that is? It might be a common practice; but its not a helpful practice. *The new imperatives that Jesus commands as 'alternate practices' include extending 'love and prayers to our enemies as well as our friends' p140* In this context *the command 'to be perfect' means 'to be inclusive' – 'its meaning is very much like Luke 6.36 "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* p141 Those who have attempted heartfelt prayer for enemies know how transformative it can be! p141

The Triadic Pattern of the Sermon on the Mount

The triadic approach to the fourteen topics in the Sermon is remarkably consistent.p141 It is the pattern throughout the gospel – 'with about seventy-five triads and almost no dyads'. p141 The emphasis in Matthew's gospel on the third point in each triad is confirmed by the Gospel of Luke. In fact, Luke often leaves out the first two points, presenting only the third. p143 The main verbs in the first point about traditional norms are 'almost all futures or subjunctives'. The main verbs in the second point about vicious cycles are 'all continuous process verbs – indicatives, participles and infinitives.' *The main verbs in the third point about transforming initiatives 'are consistently imperatives' and typically the only consistent imperatives in the triads p143* The first point that Jesus makes in his teaching shows his awareness of traditional norms. The second point that Jesus makes shows that his teaching 'is by no means based on an idealistic assumption that we do not get stuck in vicious cycles'. *The third point Jesus makes in his teaching 'points the way of deliverance in the real world. It suggests a hermeneutic of grace-based active participation in the eschatological deliverance that begins now'. p143*

Traditional Norms	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiatives
1. Don't kill	But being so angry you're abusive can be brutal too	<i>Go, be reconciled</i>
2. Don't commit adultery	But a slow-burn lust is adultery in your heart	<i>So remove yourself from the temptation (Mk9.43-50)</i>
3. You can divorce	But divorce usually involves infidelity	<i>(Be reconciled 1.Cor.7-11)</i>
4. Don't swear falsely	But taking any oath suggests making false claims	<i>Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'.</i>
5. Take an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.	But retaliating entails returning evil for evil	<i>Turn the other cheek, Give what you're asked for</i>
6. Love your neighbour and hate your enemy	But hating enemies doesn't deal with enmity	<i>Love your enemies, Bless those who curse you</i>
7. Contributing publicly	Is parading your charity not practicing generosity	<i>Give without advertising it</i>
8. Fasting publicly	Is parading your piety not practicing sincerity	<i>Fast without publicizing it</i>
9. Praying publicly	Is parading your religiosity not practicing spirituality	<i>Pray authentically in secret</i>
10 Lots of prayer	Is simply repeating a lot of empty sacred phrases	<i>Make the Lord's Prayer the prayer of your heart</i>
11 Pile up treasures on earth (Luke 12.16-31)	But thieves break in and steal	<i>Store up treasures in heaven</i>
12 No one can serve two different masters	Its impossible to serve God and money at the same time	<i>So seek the Kingdom of God and don't worry about money</i>
13 Do not judge lest you be judged	If you judge you'll be judged by the very same standards	<i>So take the plank out of your own eye before you take the speck out of your neighbour's</i>
14 Do not throw your pearls before swine	They will trample on them and then tear you to pieces	<i>The only one you can totally entrust yourself to - is God!</i>

8. What difference (if any) does this make to your understanding of Christ' rules?
9. What is the significance of viewing Christ's rules as "transforming initiatives?"
10. What are the implications of these "transforming initiatives" for our work?

3. Principles - ethical guidelines for obeying and disobeying rules - 'Do unto others as you'd have them do to you!' (Matt 7.12)

Jesus didn't say to people "just follow the rules" - he said "follow me".

Jesus taught his disciples to pick and choose which rules to obey. After all, he told them, "you weren't made for the (Sabbath) rules, the (Sabbath) rules were made for you". (Mark 2:27)

11. What do you think Christ meant when he said "*you weren't made for the (Sabbath) rules, the (Sabbath) rules were made for you*"?

Jesus often broke the rules of his society deliberately. He touched untouchables against the rules and gave people a break when it was against the rules to do so.

12. Why do you think Christ often broke the rules of society?

Note: Jesus broke the rules for the sake of a higher principle - not a lower purpose.

13. What were some of the principles Jesus used as his ethical guidelines for obeying – or disobeying – the broke the rules of society?

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Eg. 'Do unto others as you'd have them do to you!' (Matt 7.12) etc

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Jesus got his ethical guidelines from the Hebrew Bible. He said: 'Do unto others as you'd have them do to you - *for this is the law and prophets*' (Matt 7.12)

Note: Jesus treated the Bible (the Hebrew Bible) as his authority (Matt 5.17-20) but *interpreted the law according to the prophets, especially Isaiah*, whom he quoted when he started his ministry. (Luke 4) p93

Jesus' Isaiah-inspired prophetic interpretation of the law led him to advocate the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law:

- ❖ *He explained the law as guidelines for love – love of God and love of neighbour (Matt 22.34-40)*
- ❖ *He emphasized ethics over liturgy and ritual – compare Amos 5.21-24 and Matt 21.12-17*
- ❖ *He stressed that righteousness meant justice - radically inclusive and egalitarian (Luke 4.18-19)*
- ❖ *He always focused on the heart of the issue – the causes - not symptoms - of injustice (Matt 7.18-23) p9*

The Sermon on The Mount

Jesus teaching is based on Isaiah's 17 salvation passages p25-29.

Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is based on Isaiah 61 p35

The Sermon opens with the beatitudes:

1. Blessed are the poor - or poor in spirit – who do not trust in status or riches
2. Blessed are those who mourn – who grieve over the injustice in the world
3. Blessed are the meek – who are angry but do not take up arms
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - who seek justice
5. Blessed are the merciful – who are compassionate to all in need
6. Blessed are the are pure in heart – who are whole-hearted in desire to do right
7. Blessed are the peacemakers – who work for peace in a world at war
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness - who suffer for just causes

These indicate the core principles and character virtues Jesus advocates:

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| 1. Not trusting in status or riches p38 | Humility |
| 2. Grieving over the injustice in the world p39 | Empathy |
| 3. Getting angry but not taking up arms p40 | Self-restraint |
| 4. Seeking for justice p41 (not vengeance) | Righteousness |
| 5. Extending compassion to all in need p44 | Mercy |
| 6. Being whole-hearted in a desire to do right p45 | Integrity |
| 7. Working for peace in a world at war p45 | Non-violence |
| 8. Suffering for just causes p45 (patiently) p47 | Perseverance |

These virtues are also in the writings of Paul cf p48-50 *This list is suggestive, not exhaustive* p54 - *different societies need different virtues* p53

Virtues are character traits that enable us to contribute to commun-ity' .p52 Peter Paris says: *'a person becomes morally virtuous in order to make a substantial contribution to the preservation and promotion of the community'* p52-3

14. Which of Christ's principles do we tend to practice well?

15. Which of Christ's principles do we need to do some more work on?

4. Convictions – based in our meta-narrative - 'Blessed are the peace makers for they will be called the children of God.' (Matt 5.45)

Convictions are embodied in narratives. Our convictions are defined by the narrative in which we live. Principles are nurtured by the narrative that we live. Rules are given their place in the narrative we live. Ethical decisions or judgments are helped by consultation with other people who seek to embody the narrative in their lives .p115 The bible is full of narratives. The narratives include principles, rules and judgments. The life, death and resurrection of Christ is the central narrative in the bible which incarnates the convictions we are called to embody through 'continuous repentance'. p117

A spiritual framework for ethical reflection that takes Jesus seriously involves :

1. *Looking to Jesus – and his story – his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection – his example, his parables, his principles, rules, and judgments etc*
2. *Then reading all other scriptures through the interpretive grid that Jesus employed –interpreting the law according to the prophets, especially Isaiah.*
3. *And studying other sources for help through the same interpretive grid* p97.

16. How can we embody the ethic of Jesus more fully in our lives?

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut says: *"For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. They demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. But that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes, be posted anywhere."* What would the world be like if we did?