

The Teachings of Jesus

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them."

In this passage, which is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he didn't intend to abolish the old Jewish religious laws, such as the Ten Commandments and the various regulations on marriage, inheritance, property rights, diet, and similar matters.

But he often did re-interpret these laws, or add to them, sometimes in very radical ways. As a result, some of his teachings were very controversial. According to Luke 4:28-30, some people in his hometown of Nazareth became so angry at him that they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Even today, some of his teachings still seem very radical to many people. Here are some of the best-known examples:

Violence

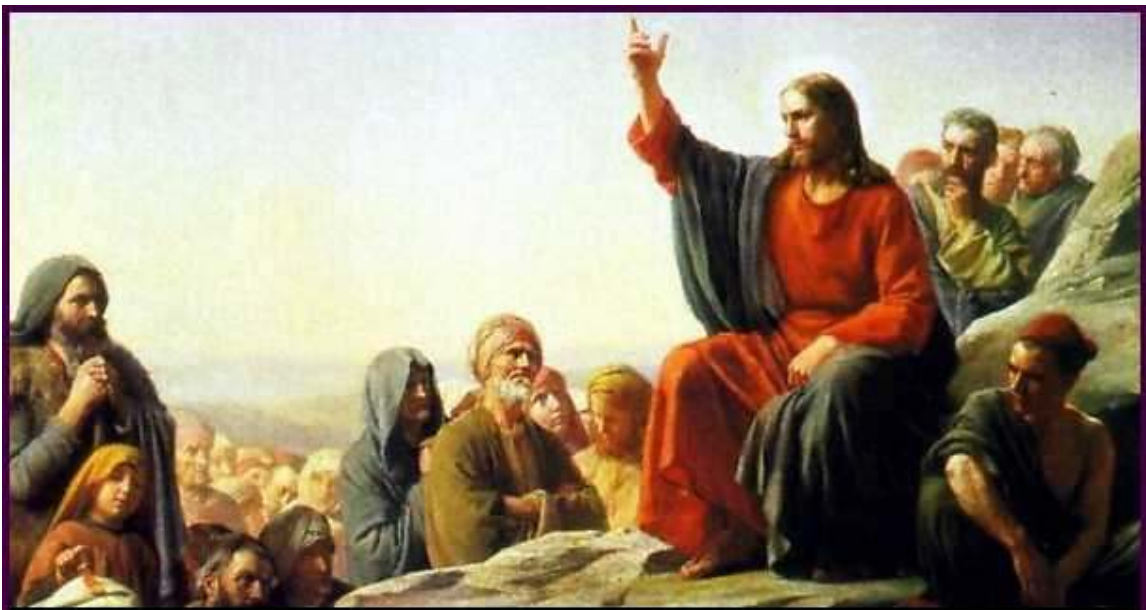
In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus says:

"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."

Some Christians, such as the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Quakers, try to strictly adhere to this principle of non-resistance. Some of them have been put in prison, or even executed, for refusing to participate in wars.

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus says "Love your enemies." Some people interpret this to mean that you should try to help them rather than harm them. Others say that any needed punishments should be left to God.

But many modern Christians consider these ideas to be unrealistic. They believe that it is sometimes necessary to defend oneself, or even to launch the initial attack. Many people also believe that evil-doers must be punished for their crimes, or at least locked up to prevent them from doing further harm.



Sermon on the Mount
by Carl Heinrich Block (1834-1890)

Wealth

In Mark 10:25, Jesus says:

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

Some scholars think that the word "camel" in this statement resulted from an accidental mis-copying of a very similar word which meant "rope". Thus, Jesus may have actually said "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle ...", which is a more natural metaphor.

But whether he said "camel" or "rope", his point was that it is very hard for a rich person to go to heaven. In fact, Mark 10:17-22 indicates that the only way a rich person can go to heaven is, in Jesus' words, to "sell everything you have and give to the poor." Some people try to avoid this conclusion by pointing to Mark 10:27, which says "all things are possible with God." Thus, God can make it possible for a rich man to go to heaven. Certainly this is true. But the context of the statement indicates that God would accomplish this by inspiring the rich man to reform his life and willingly give his money to the poor.

Jesus also warned against the accumulation of wealth on several other occasions. In Matthew 6:19 he says "do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth", and a few verses later, in Matthew 6:24, he says "You cannot serve both God and Money". In Luke 6:24 he says "woe to you who are rich." Jesus dis-approved of wealth because he thought it was wrong for some people to live in wasteful luxury while others starved.

According to the Book of Acts, his original followers tried to live by these teachings after he left them. They formed a community in Jerusalem, known as the Nazarenes, in which everyone "had everything in common" (Acts 2:44), and any new member had to sell his or her possessions and give the proceeds to a common fund.

But many modern Christians disagree with these ideas. They see nothing wrong with acquiring money and wealth. And people who do become wealthy are often admired by others.

Non-Marital Relationships

In Matthew 5:28-30, Jesus says:

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

In an effort to follow this teaching, some people have become hermits, or found other ways to live in total celibacy. Some of the men in the Heaven's Gate cult even castrated themselves. But most people aren't willing to take such drastic measures, and many doubt that it's really necessary.

Compassion and Forgiveness

The teachings quoted above are examples of what are sometimes called the Difficult Teachings of Jesus, because most people find them very hard to follow. Their radical nature has led some people to call Jesus an extreme moralist. Others have called him a utopian dreamer, a social or political reformer, or even a communist.

But whatever else he was, he was also a person of great compassion. He had very strong feelings for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts, and the persecuted, and he was keenly aware of the oppression and injustice that kept them in their place. This is why he condemned greedy people who live in opulence while so many others suffer in poverty.

Jesus also had a very strong willingness to forgive. He believed that everyone deserves another chance. A good example of this is his teaching about turning the other cheek: Not only should you instantly forgive a man who strikes you on one cheek, but you should also turn your other cheek to give him a chance to see his error and realize the need to reform himself.

Jesus probably didn't mean it literally when he talked about gouging out eyes and cutting off hands. Most likely he was simply using hyperbole to emphasize his point. But the mere fact that he could talk in this way provides another example of just how strong his convictions were.

Of course most people can feel compassion, and most people have some willingness to forgive. But few, if any, have ever felt these emotions as deeply as Jesus did, or had as strong convictions as he did. That difference may explain why some of his teachings seem so radical to us.

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