

What to do and what not to do?

I am dreading this sermon this week because it forces us into an uncomfortable position. It is going to make Church an uncomfortable experience, Not least because there are probably going to be moments in the next few minutes when you might not agree with me, and I much prefer it when you agree with me, And there might be moments when you think I am not representing Jesus, and therefore you might not think I am a very good minister, and I much prefer it when you think I am an okay minister.

The problem though that this is a story where people are made to feel uncomfortable in a religious place – and Jesus is the cause of this... I would much prefer that Jesus hadn't done that.

I have a lot of sympathy with the synagogue ruler in Luke 13 who complained that when Jesus had healed on the Sabbath that there were six days in which we could do our healing, and the seventh day was a day in which one could rest.

Jesus could you have given us a few more stories where we could all agree, and were less troubling, and then we could all go home from Church with a good feeling instead of worrying that the minister was saying things we didn't agree with, and that he was an okay minister.

The two stories that we are dealing with today take us into the field of ethics, and the way that questions are worked out as to what is right and wrong.

Funnily enough we don't often talk about ethics in Church because it is too controversial and too difficult and consequently we don't arm ourselves with the way that Christians have been thinking about these big issues for 2,000 years.

There are basically three approaches to ethics. And Jesus can be cited in support of all three.

The first is rule based ethics. Rule based ethics are when you agree that there are a straightforward set of rights and wrongs in the world, that if you break these it is like breaking the laws of physics and there are consequences.

So when Jesus said that not a jot or tittle of the law was to be changed – that's rule based ethics.

Then there are contextual ethics, and those say that in specific cases you have to work out things on their merits. You have to a guiding principle, and then you work out what those mean.

So you might have a principle like love, and you use love to work out what the best thing is to do in every situation. Famously Joseph Fletcher wrote a book called situation ethics in which he said that the priority in every situation is to love, and then you work out within that what love means – and he found examples where murder, adultery could very rarely be allowed on the grounds of love.

And this can be justified for example when Jesus says that all commands come down to the command to love God and neighbour, or Paul in Romans says that all in Romans 13:8-10

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,”^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”^[b] ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And then finally there are virtue ethics – in which you say that what is important is the development of character: perseverance, wisdom, love, kindness, courage – and with those trained into you, you work out what to do.

So Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience

To be fair all ethics are a combination of these – you cannot have a rule for every situation, and even in situation ethics you have to at least one rule.

Now we come to our two stories...

See which form of ethic is at work in each of these....

They both happen on the same day, which is the Sabbath, which is a huge commitment in Israel – everybody agreed that you kept sabbath and you didn't mess with sabbath.

I read recently of someone talking of the experience of working in Israel and the rush hour that happens on Friday night that everyone has to get in on time for Sabbath.

Sabbath was so important that even the Jews didn't fight against the Romans on the Sabbath.

Behind this was a belief that if you did the right thing, then God would make it up to you, look after you. It was a sign of trust in God.

But Jesus seems to love the Sabbath as a time for healing. Not just healing, but also bread making.... That's far more troublesome.

The disciples are hungry and are picking corn on the harvest – you can't believe that Jesus didn't stop them, or at least didn't stop them being seen.

The Pharisees challenge Jesus, and Jesus gives no less than four principles why this is justified.

The first is that the rule gets overridden when you are hungry – have you not heard what David did, when he took the bread.

The second is that special categories of persons are beyond the law like the priests, and the implication being that when Jesus says I am greater than the temple, then just as the temple allows certain people to break the sabbath, so he too allows certain. The logic here is hard to follow – what is meant by someone is greater than the Sabbath.

The third principle comes from the prophets – which is “I deserve mercy not sacrifice” – that laws should be interpreted in such a way that you maximised kindness rather than sacrifice – it could go even further to suggest that the whole system is at fault. That sacrifice stands for the whole Jewish law.

The fourth principle seems to be that Jesus gets to decide – for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. I make the rules round here.

Then we have the incident with the healing of the man with the withered hand. And this time Jesus uses an analogy – that you would pull a sheep out of a pit on the sabbath and the implication is that it stays there not one more day, you get it out as soon as possible, the needs of the sheep override the sabbath; and that human life is worth more than a sheep's life.

Notice here that Jesus does not say that sabbath keeping is minor; but rather that there are a set of principles at work here, which point towards the worth and dignity of humans; that rules should always be interpreted that way – as to what is for the healing of people. Note that sheep have economic value – humans have value from being human – so you look after whatever is valuable.

Notice that Jesus doesn't do what Paul does which is to say "Some have holy days, and others don't and it's up to you what you do."

It's what love demands – and this still makes things difficult, because we know that we are not always good at working out what is best, and it's okay when a sheep is in a ditch, but not all situations have the same morale clarity as this, so what do you do.

And perhaps Jesus it would be easier if you just gave us a new set of rules and we could stick to them.

Jesus doesn't seem to be worried about keeping a set of rules
As he does enabling flourishing life.

But what is flourishing life, and surely that is the moral mess that we are in at the moment, because people tell you all kinds of stories about what makes them fulfilled and alive, and some of those go against what seem to be some very clear rules.

So what do do we do?

And do we have to do anything? Since most of the time we can construct life without facing these major ethical dilemmas.

What do we do?

Principles

1. What do they need? What makes them live?
2. Where is mercy and where is sacrifice?
3. Am I going to get into trouble for this doesn't seem to be a factor? Am I going to get into trouble with religious people even doesn't seem to be a factor? In fact if Jesus' example is to be followed here, you should towards that which will have people plotting against your life.

And shall we agree on this? What happens when we don't agree?

What shall we do?