



## Questions Asked: Ethics Without Jesus

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This last spring I spoke at a university in Southern California. After explaining the value and purpose of a Christian mind, a student raised a question. "Ethicists can arrive at the ethics of Jesus without his teachings," she said. "If so, then why follow Jesus?"

Jesus' ethics were fresh and shocking to the world he addressed. The Jewish people around him in the first century were deeply rooted in Torah, the Law of Moses. They regarded the Ten Commandments with deep respect and even made additional laws to protect themselves from breaking Jehovah's laws. Jesus steps into this context and makes remarks like: "If you even lust after a woman it is like committing adultery with her." This deepened the meaning of "Thou shalt not commit adultery" beyond a behavior issue to a heart issue. To a people who were obsessed with minute behavior obedience, Jesus' words were an unsettling addition.

Nevertheless, a thoughtful Israelite in the ancient world would know that God cared about the heart. Loving God is a primary commandment. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5). This is deeply relational and delves straight to the heart issue. We should not be surprised that the behavioral aspect of the law earned more attention. Behavior is easier to manage. The Jewish people's ethic provided prolific case law examples and direction. But the heart remained untamed.

The Jewish people were not alone in their quandary. The Greek world also had a developed view of virtue ethics made popular by Aristotle. Virtue ethics depends on the soul being properly ordered with correct thoughts, controlled emotions and a robust will, in order that proper actions overflow from the well-ordered soul. This combination makes each citizen an asset to the city. But it was necessary to find a person whose internal life provided the correct external life. The problem with the Greek system of virtue ethics, they admitted, was that they needed a virtuous person to emulate in order to live virtuously. They needed a role model to watch and copy.

Unfortunately, there were no perfect models alive. Virtue Ethics had trouble getting started. In theory, the ethical system was brilliant, but in practice it lacked ultimate guidance.

It was into this Greek culture in the Jewish land that Jesus arrives, declaring the kingdom of God is at hand and teaching and living what it means to walk as a citizen of that kingdom.

In my estimation many of Jesus' teachings can be deduced from reason and observations. With just a little pondering, Jesus' ethic makes sense. The Jewish and Greek peoples had a general idea that morality goes beyond behavior and down to the condition of the heart. But it was the heart condition that remained unsolved.

Solomon was the wisest man in the world, according to God's promise. But even Solomon realized that wisdom was not enough to live virtuously, and this played itself out in his later years as his scores of wives and pagan gods testify.

Wisdom was not enough in the ancient world, nor is it enough for us today. We have more information today at our disposal than the world has ever seen,

yet, it could be argued, we are one of the most unloving, ungenerous, narcissistic generations as well. The dilemma is still present. Knowing the ideas of ethics is a chasm away from practicing them well.

This is where we need Jesus most desperately. He says that when you come to him, you are coming to his kingdom. And there you will have abundant life. This abundant life isn't merely about going to heaven, but about being granted the power and ability to begin practicing the virtues and morals that a citizen of his kingdom practices. We no longer have to be shackled to our failed behavioral attempts, knowing what is right but unable to do it. As Oswald Chambers has said, "When we choose deliberately to obey him, he will tax the remotest star and the last grain of sand to assist us with all of his almighty power." This is why our ethics need Jesus. We have alighted upon the Greek role model; we have uncovered the keys to the kingdom. With this kind of promise, who would want otherwise?

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