

## THREE

# Ethics in the Christian Scriptures

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 13:13

### Words to Watch

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<i>agapē</i>	counsels of perfection	love
analogy of Scripture	golden rule	love chapter
<i>chesed</i>	greatest commandment	<i>philia</i>
context	holiness	Sermon on the Mount

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### Introduction

A recent report from a comprehensive United Nations study showed that over 795 million people worldwide suffer from malnutrition or food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Another study shows that every year over three million children die from starvation alone.<sup>2</sup> Yet in the United States, one in every three people is overweight.<sup>3</sup> While 1.4 billion people live below the international poverty line, the richest 1 percent of the world's population controls 50 percent of its wealth. These data raise a host of questions, including how much wealth is enough, whether people should be permitted to accumulate as much wealth as they want, whether the wealthy have any obligations to the poor, and what role governments should play in encouraging access to opportunity, distribution of wealth, taxation, and minimum standards of health and well-being. Amid all of this is the fact that food and water are basic to any kind of human survival; without these basic needs being met, people die slowly and painfully.

There are a number of causes for food scarcity. Armed conflict in many places in the world prevents both agricultural production and food supply delivery. Political stability is thus a necessary condition for the development of agriculture and the economic growth of a society. In addition to the political conditions, poverty causes much malnutrition since without economic resources people cannot purchase what they need for survival. Environmental disasters are a third factor that accounts for many cases of starvation and malnutrition.

Concerns about food scarcity are not unique to the twenty-first century. Much of Jesus's preaching in the Christian Scriptures concerns food, which is often understood both literally and metaphorically. Jesus teaches that we need food for the body as well as food for the soul. In the famous **Sermon on the Mount**—Jesus's longest sermon (Matt. 5–7)—he explains how people are to live lives that are blessed (e.g., the Beatitudes), how they are to behave, how they are to love, and how they are to pray. With regard to salvation, Jesus says, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). Considering that the scribes and Pharisees were among the religious leaders thought to be the most holy and righteous of the Jews, Jesus's words were startling and disconcerting. They ran counter to much of the religious **context** with which first-century Jews were familiar. Generally speaking, context has to do with the situation—the particular place in time and circumstances—in which Scripture was written. Thus, in interpretation, it is important to investigate such matters as the genre, historical context, and literary context of a biblical passage.

While the ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount include Jesus's imperatives concerning anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, love for enemies, almsgiving, fasting, the accumulation of wealth, worry, and judging others, the sermon culminates in what is known as the **golden rule**: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). These words of mutuality were not unique in antiquity; versions of it can also be found in other religions. Jesus did not see this imperative as new—or at least not radically new—since he immediately notes that this principle encapsulates “the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). The golden rule epitomizes much of Jesus's morality, which is also found as the second part of his **greatest commandment**: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—a command also found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Lev. 19:18).

This chapter begins with a survey of the moral teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul. We then consider the centrality of love and how love is an expression of holiness. Finally, we return to a recurring theme in the Christian Scriptures: How do we care for the neediest among us? That is, in a world of poverty, what are the obligations of those who are economically advantaged to those who are economically disadvantaged?

## Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount

The central teachings in Christian ethics are found in those passages of the Christian Scriptures (traditionally referred to as the “New Testament”) that reiterate the main teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and in those new teachings that Jesus offers, especially in the Sermon on the Mount and at other key places in the Gospels. Much of the ethical decision-making among Christians hangs on particular interpretations one has of key texts in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and so in addition to the teachings themselves, interpretations of those teachings need to be considered.

The Sermon on the Mount addresses a number of moral issues, but these moral issues need to be interpreted since there is historical, literary, and cultural distance between Jesus's original audience and contemporary readers. The literary structure, sociocultural context, and

enduring ethical significance are all important features that affected the meaning of the message for the original audience. The question is to what extent the ethics of his day are adequate for today. Have social, political, economic, national, and military contexts changed so much that Jesus's teachings have only limited application today?

There are several ways to interpret Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.<sup>4</sup> First, there is a literal or absolute way of interpretation. Consider Jesus's comparison of murder and anger: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5:21–22). Consider also Jesus's teaching about retaliation: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:38–39). Historically, those Christians who have followed these teachings literally are pacifists. However, the majority of Christians have not been pacifists, despite regular appearances of pacifists throughout church history (for example, Anabaptists). Other statements by Jesus have not typically been interpreted literally—for example, his imperative, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Multiple qualifications of the latter imperative have been made. In general, Christians have had to nuance their understanding of Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in order to make sense of it, rather than following the sermon in a literal or absolute way.

A number of nuanced interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount have arisen. Some have qualified Jesus's statements, claiming that parts of what he said are unreasonable or unwise. The qualifications, perhaps, are due to other passages in the Bible that mitigate (or eliminate) what Jesus said (a strategy known as the **analogy of Scripture**—that is, the interpretation of unclear biblical passages with clearer biblical passages on the same topic) or due to cultural differences between the first and subsequent centuries. For example, they might consider it unreasonable or unwise to turn the other cheek, to "give to everyone who begs from you and . . . not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:42), or to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), and so on.

Another nuanced interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount recognizes how Jesus sometimes used the literary device of hyperbole, or exaggeration, in his preaching for the sake of oratorical flourish rather than ethical obligation. For example, when Jesus talks about the need to avoid adultery, he says the following about resisting lustful temptation:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members 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 of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matt. 5:27–30)

Because the Bible does not contain examples of Jesus's followers gouging out their eyes and cutting off their hands, these teachings are usually interpreted as figurative or symbolic in nature, emphasizing the need for caution but not of literal self-mutilation. This raises the question of whether the moral caution itself is as figurative as the examples of tearing out eyes and cutting off hands. Certainly, Jesus used figurative and symbolic language elsewhere in the sermon, such as when he talked about his followers being the "salt of the earth" and the "light

of the world” (Matt. 5:13–14). Thus, some argue that Jesus’s teachings may need to be nuanced in light of the rhetorical exaggerations in his sermon.

Another way to interpret the Sermon on the Mount is to consider the core of Jesus’s teachings rather than specific applications of the principles. On this reading, explicit references to moral dos and don’ts are not crucial; instead readers are to discern ethical principles that underlie Jesus’s teachings, leaving individuals to decide for themselves how to apply those principles in real-life situations. Consider Jesus’s exhortation to almsgiving (Matt. 6:1–4). Today many Christians feel the need to restrict almsgiving, if they think that those seeking alms need to be taught a lesson of tough love for the sake of self-reliance rather than receiving gratuitous charity. From this perspective, collective almsgiving ought not to occur—either by churches or governments—since Jesus’s ethics should be considered individualistic and not social, spiritual and not physical.

Similar to the aforementioned interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is the belief that Christians’ attitudes are more important than their actions. For example, Jesus often talks about the need for right attitudes with regard to anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and enemies. Because of the finitude of human existence and circumstances, and because of the corporate impact of sin on the world, some regard it as unrealistic (as well as unbiblical) to expect perfect performance of righteousness and justice from Christians. On this view, since people are saved by grace through faith rather than by works (Eph. 2:8–9), God does not expect perfection with the new covenant. God only expects people to be forgiven by the atonement of Jesus Christ. As such, Christians should endeavor to have right attitudes motivating their actions and accomplishments without concern that they have done enough to merit their salvation.

Still other Christians introduce boundaries on how the Sermon on the Mount ought to be understood and applied. Medieval Catholics talked about **counsels of perfection**, which were instructions that Christians should obey if they want to go beyond the reception of salvation and fulfill Jesus’s exhortation to become “perfect” (Matt. 5:48). These counsels of perfection were to be distinguished from the precepts of the gospel, which all should obey but which do not necessarily lead to perfection. Although it may be impossible for the majority of Christians to pursue Christlikeness in the challenges of their day-to-day lives, some may take on a more virtuous, ascetic lifestyle for the sake of achieving sainthood. Monastics were especially interested in pursuing these counsels of perfection, and many of them adhered literally to Jesus’s teachings as found in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere without making such earnest living a requirement for average Christians. These counsels of perfection are rooted not only in the Sermon on the Mount but also in Jesus’s exhortation to a rich young man. After saying that he had kept all the commandments (Matt. 19:17, 20), the rich young man was given an additional command by Jesus: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). Although the rich young man did not heed Jesus’s additional command, it is argued that others ought to do so in pursuing spiritual and moral perfection.

One final approach to the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is the dispensationalist approach. Those holding this view have a specific eschatological understanding of Jesus’s teachings and of much of what is found in the four Gospels. According to dispensationalism,

there exist multiple eras (or dispensations) in world history in which God interacted with humanity through various covenants. Although there may be some similarities between the covenants, each is quite unique with distinct ways by which people are saved. Jesus lived prior to the start of the church dispensation, it is argued, which started at Pentecost. As such, his teachings are not intended for Christians and churches today but are instead for a future final dispensation known as the Millennial Kingdom, which Jesus will establish on earth in the end times (see Rev. 20:1–6). According to most dispensationalists, Jesus will physically return after a secret rapture and a seven-year period of tribulation and divine wrath on the earth. Thus, these dispensationalists argue that the ethics of Jesus—as found in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere—will apply fully in the final dispensation but apply only preliminarily and nonbindingly for Christians today.

From this brief survey of how Christians have interpreted the Sermon on the Mount, we can see that there is no unanimity with regard to how to understand Jesus’s teachings in general and his ethics in particular. This does not mean that we are without any guidance with regard to learning about Jesus’s beliefs, values, and practices. Certainly the Bible contains the primary starting point when determining Christian ethics. But Christians should be humble when making their claims about what Jesus and the Christian Scriptures state precisely about any particular ethical issue.

For some, the determination of Christian ethics is thought to be a deductive science, studying the whole of what the Christian Scriptures say about ethical issues. Such approaches often include claims to certainty and absolute truth with regard to their ethical conclusions, which can be appealing to those wanting clear-cut answers to questions they have. But for most, biblical studies are more of an inductive practice, which looks at the biblical evidence and to what may be found from church traditions, critical thinking, and relevant experience. Such determinations may not appear to be as confident or absolutistic as deductive approaches. But they are more rooted in a plausible reading of the Bible, given the diversity of ethical views that Christians have historically embraced.

## Paul and Christian Ethics

Although Christians usually look to Jesus in deciding their ethics, the apostle Paul also powerfully influenced the early development of the church’s ethics. Paul affirmed what he considered to be the divine or eternal laws of God, but he rejected what he considered to be ritual law, which he identified provisionally with Judaic traditions and not as enduring laws for Christians. It is thus difficult to determine a systematic understanding of Paul’s ethical beliefs, values, and practices.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty is increased by the fact that biblical scholars question the authorship of some of the biblical letters. Consequently, multiple ways of understanding Paul’s theology have arisen, including his view of Christian ethics. For the sake of brevity, we will discuss two of them, known as old and new perspectives on Paul.

After the Protestant Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed (Calvinist) interpretations of Paul emphasized the discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity and minimized the need of good works, which pertains to obedience to the laws of God. Luther and Calvin argued that

good works do not factor into salvation in Paul's letters. For example, Ephesians 2:8–9 says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Although good works may be considered virtuous, they do not impact salvation that comes by "grace alone" (Latin, *sola gratia*) and "faith alone" (Latin, *sola fide*)—two key slogans of the Protestant Reformation. Focus is placed on the irresistibility of God's election of people for salvation, for there are no conditions for people's atonement; it is God alone who determines their salvation. Luther and Calvin disagreed with regard to the uses of the law. Luther emphasized the spiritual and civil uses of the law, while Calvin advocated a third use, which considered the laws of God to be morally instructive and beneficial to decent, orderly living. Christians were to obey the law not in order to merit salvation but as an obedient act of praise and thanks to God for salvation, which had practical benefits for life.

The so-called new perspective on Paul emphasizes a greater continuity between Paul's view of grace and faith, including God's role in providing for people's salvation, and the conditionality of their choosing to assent, repent, and act faithfully. Consider Ephesians 2:10, which follows the aforementioned passage by Paul: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Good works may not merit salvation, but they are inextricably bound up with it. Thus, good works ought not to be excluded from the discussion of people's authentic faith and salvation, despite anticipated paradoxes involved with their inclusion in discussing the Christian life.

It is somewhat of a misnomer to talk about old and new perspectives on Paul since the so-called old perspective is identified mostly with the Protestant Reformation. In some respects, the new perspective on Paul reclaims theological and ethical views that predate the sixteenth century. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have long emphasized how God voluntarily chose to limit sovereign control over humanity in order that people might have sufficient power—afforded to them by divine grace—to choose freely to accept or reject God's will for their lives. With regard to decisions about both their ethical obedience and their eternal salvation, God provided grace preveniently so that, despite the limitations of finite existence and of sin, people may decide for themselves freely, without the constraint of external factors, necessity, or fate. Like the conditionality of God's covenant relationships established with people (and groups of people) in the Hebrew Scriptures, people are conditionally subject to the new covenant, with which God wants people to cooperate with divine grace in order to receive eternal life and then live Christlike lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul did not consider the Christian life to be one of spiritual and ethical passivity. He did not think of Christianity in terms of adherence to ritualistic circumcision, dietary laws, and the keeping of Jewish festivals. But he did consider the Christian life to be decisive and active, and he was hopeful with regard to living Christlike lives, ethically as well as spiritually. In Galatians 5:6, he says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." Paul goes on to say that Christians are "called to freedom" but that they ought not "to use [their] freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Gal. 5:13). Finally, echoing the words of Jesus, Paul says, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). Paul did not offer principles without specific guidance with regard to

responsible moral living. He still provided a list of vices that Christians should avoid, which he described as “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19–21), and a list of virtues (“fruit of the Spirit”) they should pursue as they are guided by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26). So Paul affirms Jesus’s law of love as a love that can be ethically identified and willfully obeyed with the aid of God’s grace.

## **Moral Responsibility**

Although Christians have had divergent opinions on the degree to which obedience to God’s laws relates to the gospel message of salvation, they agree that people are responsible for their moral choices. There are several ways in which people are responsible: spiritually in relationship with God, individually in relationship with others, and socially as members of a group. The Christian Scriptures address all of these relationships, providing guidance and warnings for the decisions we make.

In the Gospels, Jesus often speaks about the moral responsibilities his followers undertake when they choose to become disciples. An important passage that addresses these concerns is found in Matthew 25 in a story known as the great judgment or the sheep and the goats. In this passage, the people of all nations are gathered before the “Son of Man” as he separates the “sheep” (the righteous) on his right from the “goats” (the unrighteous) on his left:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:34–40)

Those who practice compassion on the most vulnerable are the true disciples. They are not merely hearers of the word; they are also doers of the word (James 1:22). The ones who receive their reward are not those who profess their love for God, nor those who possess the right doctrine, but those who practice compassion to those who are on the margins of society. Those would-be disciples who fail to do this are condemned to eternal punishment.

It is in this famous passage that we see the three kinds of responsibility at work. We are responsible to God by keeping God’s command to practice compassion. We are responsible as individuals when we visit the sick and care for the most vulnerable. And we are responsible socially when we recognize that this is our task not merely as isolated individuals but as people living in community. Although the Bible speaks to God’s loving and forgiving character, it also speaks to God’s justice. God requires responsibility on the part of those who would be disciples, but God also provides hope, which is grounded in the message of Jesus Christ.

## **Ethics of Love**

Jesus, Paul, and the other authors of the Christian Scriptures focus time and again on the importance of love—of loving God and of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. The greatest ethical command that Jesus gave had to do with love, and this principle is echoed throughout the Christian Scriptures. The Bible progressively reveals that the greatest motivation of God toward humanity was based on love. Perhaps the best-known verse in the Bible is John 3:16, which tells of God’s love for the world: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God’s love for us is echoed in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (5:8). This theme of God’s love throughout the Christian Scriptures sharpens the emphasis found in the Hebrew Scriptures about God’s *chesed*—God’s “steadfast love” for humanity (e.g., Exod. 15:13; 34:6; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:10).

Although love is central to understanding Jesus, Scripture, and the whole of Christianity, there is no consensual definition of the term. In the Greek language, several words are used to describe love, which will be discussed below. However, in the English language the word “love” is used to describe many dimensions of affection and commitment. The highest love is thought to be attributable only to God, and yet people are called to love as well. As one of the so-called theological virtues, love is thought to be a gracious *gift* from God, as well as a *task* that people are to undertake—aided by the Holy Spirit—in loving God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:28–31). As such, **love** has to do with our proper relationship with God, others, and ourselves, characterized—at least—by holiness, righteousness, and justice. Historically, love was thought to be the highest virtue, which mediated between the deficiency of selfishness and the excess of enablement.

One of the greatest biblical descriptions of love was written by Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 13, the so-called love chapter, Paul talks about the “more excellent way,” surpassing all other gifts, charisms, and virtues, including faith and hope (1 Cor. 12:31; cf. 13:13). First Corinthians 13 provides both the theological and ethical foundation for other counsels that Paul gives. It is noteworthy that Paul used the Greek word *agapē* (translated as love) throughout the chapter, as we shall see below.

Christians have discussed the different types of Greek words for love used in the Christian Scriptures—three in particular. The first is *agapē*, which suggests a higher, more holy, unconditional type of love, divinely aided by grace. *Agapē* is used to describe the love of God and Jesus for humanity and also the kind of love that humans should have for God. In addition, a second word for love is *philia*, which connotes more of a brotherly or sisterly love, as in the love between friends. Sometimes the word *philia* is translated as friendship. Such love is important for relations among people, including family, friends, and neighbors. But in the Christian Scriptures the more unconditional type of love, *agapē*, is the preferred type of love to which Christians should aspire in fulfilling the law of love. A third word translated as love is *philostorgosa*, which is a combination of *philos* (beloved, friendly) and *storgē* (natural affection, filial love). For example, Romans 12:10 translates the word as “mutual affection.” This variation of love also suggests friendly regard, especially toward one’s kindred.<sup>6</sup>

## Love and Holiness

Love and holiness are affiliated throughout the Christian Scriptures. **Holiness** is an attribute that has to do not just with righteousness and justice but with the very character of God as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and with the holistic ways in which God relates with people: spiritually and physically, individually and collectively. Thus, the love Christians are to have for God, for themselves, and for their neighbors ought also to reflect a holistic character. For example, when Jesus says that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, this love is not directed only to single individuals with whom we come into contact. Love extends to our neighbor collectively, including aliens, strangers, and foreigners. Although we must have wise boundaries with regard to how we are to love our neighbors, our love is to be more inclusive rather than exclusive of others who are somehow different or who are not of our tribe or family.

Since the modern era—initiated by the scientific revolution, the rise of the nation-state, and the Protestant Reformation—Christians and churches, especially in Western civilization, have been individualistically oriented. The so-called rugged individual who makes it on his or her own is an ideal that reflects our sociocultural context more than it reflects biblical ideals. The Bible balances individual standing before God and others, just as it cares about how both individuals and groups relate to others, individually and collectively. With regard to ethics, there is no biblical distinction between personal and social ethics; instead, ethics are thought to impact people holistically. Even ethical decisions thought to be private and publicly inconsequential have an impact on others, directly or indirectly. Likewise, ethical decisions thought to be public and privately inconsequential have an impact on people individually, directly or indirectly.

Because of the impact of people’s sociocultural context on their understanding of the Bible and of ethics, Christians have become increasingly concerned about understanding their own context—their situatedness—as well as the context of the Bible and of historic views of Christian ethics. As a result, Christians have reread the Bible in light of contemporary concerns about such matters as the liberation of people from that which binds them physically and spiritually. Such bondage may occur due to the marginalization, oppression, or persecution of people based on their class, race, gender, ability, or some other reason for discrimination. Indeed, there may be reason to be concerned about unethical treatment of the ecological environment in which people live since the Bible says that people are entrusted with having “dominion” over the world, being caretakers rather than exploiters in their care of creation (Gen. 1:28). Too often such issues have been dismissed as trivial and not perceived as genuinely ethical issues for which Christians ought to be concerned. But there are no bounds to the holistic nature of biblical ethics because they embrace all people, at all times, and in all places, extending even to the created world in which we live. Christians may disagree on the precise ways in which they are to be engaged in such social, political, economic, and environmental issues, but it is difficult to argue that the Bible is indifferent to them.

Jesus serves as an exemplar for Christian ethics and not just as someone concerned with a privatized, truncated view of right living. Jesus presented a completely holy way of living, which translated into a holistic understanding of Christian ethics. His love for others included

compassion ministries that cared for the symptoms of suffering—for example, poverty and bigotry due to racial, ethnic, or religious differences. His love also included advocacy ministries that cared for the causes of suffering—for example, due to the hypocrisy of leaders who oppressed people spiritually, economic abuses of money changers who oppressed poor worshippers, and colonial leaders who oppressed people politically and militarily.

## Case Study: The Nearest and the Neediest

The result of what Jesus teaches in the Christian Scriptures is that everyone is my neighbor. People are called to love not only their friends and relatives but also strangers and enemies. This seems to be a radical departure from basic human impulses since it seems to view all people in a radically egalitarian manner, and it thus raises a number of questions: Can I no longer privilege my children over those of a stranger or an enemy? Should I take the time to entertain my enemies as I do my friends? How do I deal with the demands of those most in need? In contemporary ethical discussion, these questions can be framed in terms of the nearest and the neediest. Do I have greater obligations to one or the other? If so, what are the consequences? Philosopher Joshua Greene presents an adaptation from one of Peter Unger's many thought experiments to illustrate the problem:

You are driving along a country road when you hear a plea for help coming from some roadside bushes. You pull over and encounter a man whose legs are covered with blood. The man explains that he has had an accident while hiking and asks you to take him to a nearby hospital. Your initial reaction is to help this man, who will probably lose his leg if he does not get to the hospital soon. However, if you give this man a lift, his blood will ruin the leather upholstery of your car. Is it appropriate to leave this man by the side of the road in order to preserve your leather upholstery?<sup>7</sup>

Here most people believe that it is morally wrong to fail to help the wounded person. Simply to drive off without attending to that person's needs evokes a sense of moral outrage on the part of those interviewed since a person's well-being compared with the inconvenience of having one's upholstery ruined seems to trivialize the victim's health and welfare. However, Greene asks us to consider another case:

You are at home one day when the mail arrives. You receive a letter from a reputable organization. The letter asks you to make a donation of two hundred dollars to their organization. The letter explains that a two-hundred-dollar donation will allow this organization to provide needed medical attention to some poor people in another part of the world. Is it appropriate for you not to make a donation to this organization in order to save money?<sup>8</sup>

Most people find that it is morally permissible to withhold the donation to the relief organization. Since we have no immediate *prima facie* obligation or emotional pull to those who are halfway across the globe, many people feel that it is morally acceptable to refuse the request. But the question then arises: Have we not trivialized the lives of those at risk in just the same way as we would have trivialized the well-being of the injured hiker? Why do we make these different judgments? The reason is that in the case of the wounded hiker, we have a clear instance of a personal moral violation. In the case of the relief organization, however, it represents an impersonal moral violation. The only difference between the two cases is the proximity of the person in need to the potential aid-giver.

Garth Hallett, a Christian ethicist, raises a similar problem.<sup>9</sup> A couple could spend \$50,000 a year sending their child to an elite private liberal arts college or let the child go to a community college for free. The \$50,000 savings could then be sent to a reputable world relief organization. If all people have equal value before God, then it follows that for the parents to spend that money on their child is to refuse the demands of the neediest. The Christian tradition is quite clear that the neediest have the greater demands on our resources. But the couple could object that, since they brought their children into the world, they are responsible for them, while they had nothing to do with the circumstances of these other people and their misfortune. On this view, the neediest aren't neighbors in a recognizable sense.

The parable of the good Samaritan raises a question about the idea of proximity as it relates to the question of who is a neighbor. Is my neighbor merely the closest person to me physically, as in the case of the person who lives next door to me? Or is my neighbor the person who is closest to me in terms of social status and familiarity? Or does the concept of neighbor go beyond these two meanings? The good Samaritan in the parable tends to a needy person who is both physically near to him and also socially distant. Given the proximity of all people in a global environment in which we navigate by means of computers, social media, and instant news, are there truly any people who are not our neighbors?

### ***Discussion Questions***

1. How do you interpret Jesus's ethics in the Sermon on the Mount? Do you think Jesus's moral teachings should be followed literally, or do you think they need to be nuanced? If so, then how do you nuance Jesus's ethics?
2. With which interpretation of Paul's ethics do you agree: the so-called old view, which emphasizes salvation by grace through faith alone and rejects the relevance of good works (and ethical obedience) for salvation, or the new view, which emphasizes how genuine salvation by grace through faith is inextricably bound up with good works?
3. Although Christians have been forgiven for their sins, to what degree does God hold them accountable for ethical obedience (or disobedience) to biblical teachings?
4. What is the relationship between love and Christian ethics? How do distinctions between the Greek words for love—especially *agapē* and *philia*—help us gain a greater understanding of Christian living?
5. Why is it important to remember that the ethics of Jesus and the Christian Scriptures apply to ethical issues pertaining to people socially and individually? In addition to ministering compassionately on behalf of the poor, how might Christians advocate on their behalf?

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<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Meeting the 2015 International Hunger Targets; Taking Stock of Uneven Progress* (Rome, 2015), <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf>.

2. World Hunger Education Service, Hunger Notes, World Child Hunger Facts, 2011, <https://www.worldhunger.org/world-child-hunger-facts/>.

3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), 2013–2014, <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-statistics/overweight-obesity>.

4. Craig Keener argues that “more than thirty-six discrete views exist, depending on how one counts them.” *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 160–62. For our discussion, we will only summarize main approaches to the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.

5. For a table of the Pauline virtues and their citations, see David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 50.

6. A fourth Greek word sometimes translated as love is *eros*, which has to do with erotic love and is not mentioned explicitly in the Christian Scriptures—perhaps because it is also the name of a Greek god. These terms do not always operate in precisely defined ways; etymological and grammatical considerations of the Greek language alter their meaning. Consider some examples from the Gospel of John. First, when John talks about how the “Father loves the Son,” sometimes the word *agapē* is used (e.g., John 3:35), and sometimes the word *philia* is used (e.g., John 5:20), signifying the interchangeability of the words in describing God’s love in the book of John. Second, people were described as having *agapē*-type love, but their love was not for God or others but for their self-interests (e.g., John 3:19; 12:43).

7. Joshua Greene, “From Neural ‘Is’ to Moral ‘Ought’: What Are the Moral Implications of Neuroscientific Moral Psychology?,” *Nature Reviews and Neuroscience* 4 (2003): 848.

8. Greene, “From Neural,” 848.

9. Garth Hallett, *Priorities and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).