

What Would Jesus Do? A Critique of Jesus' Ethics

George Amoss Jr.

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WWJD?

"a question that has captured the minds and hearts of millions" — John D. Caputo¹

The popular query "What would Jesus do?" is a modern reframing of the traditional idea of following or imitating Jesus. The original trope, attributed to Jesus himself, called for emulating him in self-denial and acceptance of suffering, as in this passage from the devotional classic called *The Following of Christ*:

That seemeth a hard saying to many, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his Cross and follow Me." But it will be much harder to hear that last sentence, "Depart from me, ye wicked, into eternal fire." ... Take up, therefore, thy cross and follow Jesus, and thou shalt go into eternal life. He went before thee bearing His Cross and died for thee upon the Cross, that thou also mayest bear thy cross and mayest love to be crucified upon it. For if thou be dead with Him, thou shalt also live with Him, and if thou be a partaker of His sufferings thou shalt be also of His glory.²

The final sentence of that passage echoes Paul's teaching in [Romans 6](#) that Christians are to be dead to self and sin³ and "alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (6:11b). But the modern "What would Jesus do?" breaks from that long tradition. It conveys instead an imperative to conform our behavior to an activist social ethic derived from words and deeds of Jesus in the scriptures.

¹ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, Baker Academic (2007), p. 22.

² *The Following of Christ*, also known as [The Imitation of Christ](#), is a classic devotional work usually attributed to Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380 – 1471). The quoted passage is from [Chapter XII of Book II](#), W. Benham's translation, with quotation marks added for the scripture quotations (Mt. 16:24, 25:41).

³ For examples of what Paul refers to as "sin," see [Romans 1:26-32](#).

The query first “went viral,” as we might say, in the early days of the Social Gospel movement.⁴ In 1896, a Congregational minister named Charles Sheldon adapted a series of sermons into a best-selling novel called *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* The novel’s principal character, the Reverend Henry Maxwell, urges his congregants to “pledge in good faith to do everything [only] after asking ‘What would Jesus do?’” When one of his hearers asks, “how am I going to tell what Jesus would do?” Maxwell replies that they can only “study Jesus through the medium of the Holy Spirit,” who, Jesus promised, “will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:13). “There is no other test that I know of,” he tells them; “We shall all have to decide what Jesus would do after going to that source of knowledge.”

Seeing that some skepticism remains, Maxwell, not scrupling to employ ambiguous qualifiers, asserts that “when it comes to a genuine, honest, enlightened following of Jesus’s steps, I cannot believe there will be any confusion either in our own minds or in the judgment of others.”⁵ But some people who genuinely believe that they “study Jesus through the medium of the Holy Spirit” may derive moral views that conflict with those of others, even within the same congregation. Indeed, any inferences we make from biblical stories of Jesus’ words and deeds will be colored by our own knowledge, experience, and prejudices. Before we attempt even that, however, it behooves us to investigate whether Jesus’ teaching and behavior should guide our ethical thought and practice today. This essay will argue that they should not.

About a hundred years after Sheldon’s book appeared, “What would Jesus do?” would again go viral when someone had “WWJD?” bracelets made. The query is very much with us today. And, like many other things that have gone viral, it still functions as a simplistic slogan masking disconcerting realities.



⁴ See the Wikipedia article on the Social Gospel Movement, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Gospel.

⁵ See *In His Steps*, pp. 23-24, freely available at <https://archive.org/details/inhisstepswhatwo00shel/page/22/mode/2up>.

An Ethic for the End Time?

“For whoever is ashamed of me in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one the Son of Man shall be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. I tell you truly that some of the ones standing here shall most certainly not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God having come in power.” — Mark 8:38-9:1 and parallels⁶

“Jesus thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, that God would intervene in the affairs of this planet, overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian kingdom here on earth. And this was to happen within Jesus’ own generation.” — Bart D. Ehrman⁷

Ten years after Sheldon’s release of *In His Steps*, Albert Schweitzer published *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*,⁸ a book that includes a fearlessly honest analysis of Jesus’ mission as depicted in the Christian scriptures. Schweitzer found that the picture of an historical Jesus best supported by the biblical narratives is that of a failed apocalyptic preacher.⁹ He reached that conclusion by taking Jesus at his word: as the Quaker scholar John Punshon would put it a century later,

The New Testament contains abundant evidence that the early Christians believed in the imminent Second Coming of Christ in a real, physical and historical sense. This understanding was plainly ... the necessary and inevitable corollary of Jesus’ own words.¹⁰

⁶ Translations such as the KJV do not indicate the emphatic negative in 9:1 that I have rendered as “most certainly not,” but that is the sense of the Greek double negative *ou mé* (“not no”) used here and in the parallels (Mt. 16:27-28, Lk. 9:26-27). Cf. Mt. 5:20 and 10:18 (discussed later in this essay). See also Heb. 13:5b: literally, “for he has declared, ‘Not no regarding you may I be lax, nor not no you may I forsake.’”

⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (1999), p. 3. Regarding Ehrman’s “here on earth”: the early church expected “a new heaven and a new earth” ([Rev. 21:1](#)), but I don’t think that rules out a transformed Earth, just as Jesus’ body was believed to have been transformed in his resurrection.

⁸ *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is freely available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45422/45422-pdf.pdf>.

⁹ Schweitzer has been far from alone in recognizing the centrality of end-time expectation in Jesus’ message. This section’s second epigraph is from Bart Ehrman’s 1999 book (see above). Other notable contemporary examples are Diarmaid MacCulloch’s 2009 *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (“The evidence for Jesus’ concentration on the imminence of the coming of the kingdom piles up”; p. 89), Dale C. Allison’s *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Baker Academic, 2010), available for reading or borrowing at <https://archive.org/details/constructingjesu0000alli/mode/2up>, and Norman Cohn’s *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come* (particularly Chapter 11), available for reading or borrowing at <https://archive.org/details/cosmoschaosworld00cohn>. For a succinct account of various scholarly perspectives on Jesus’ eschatology, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Metz, [The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide](#), Chapter 9.

¹⁰ John Punshon, Foreword to *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming* by Douglas Gwyn, Ben Pink Dandelion, and Timothy Peat (2018 ed.).

“The due time [*kairos*] has been fulfilled,” Jesus proclaimed, “and the Kingdom of God has drawn near: repent and trust in this good news [*euangelio*: gospel]” (Mk. 1:15). The *eschaton*, the end time, was at hand: very soon, cataclysmic events would culminate in the destruction of the present world,¹¹ the resurrection of the dead, and the universal judgment by (apparently, Jesus as) “the Son of Man.”¹² The unrighteous would be consigned to “the eternal fire”; the righteous elect would receive everlasting life in God’s new Kingdom of joy and peace.¹³ During the brief remaining interval, Jesus’ followers were to live in the faith that his predictions were correct, bearing “fruits worthy of the repented mind” (Mt. 3:8) — that is, their thoughts and deeds must be appropriate to the Kingdom, which was so near that its light was already shining into the darkness of this world.¹⁴

Schweitzer placed particular emphasis on this passage from Matthew 10:

Jesus commissions the twelve, charging them, “Do not pass through the way of the Gentiles, nor enter any city of the Samaritans, but go, rather, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim, ‘The Kingdom of the heavens has drawn near.’ Cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons¹⁵ ... [In the verses here elided, Jesus prescribes the disciples’ attitude and behavior — that of the righteous poor, wholly dependent on God — and predicts tribulations they will endure.] But when they come for you in one city, flee

¹¹ A terrible cosmic battle, in which God’s forces would, of course, prevail, was expected. As Dale C. Allison Jr. comments in *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, “[The] kingdom of Satan will not go away without a fight” (2009, p. 94).

¹² “The Son of Man” is an eschatological title used of and by Jesus in the Christian scriptures; it can be traced to Daniel 7 and 1 Enoch. For a brief introduction, see Francesca Stavrakopoulou’s *God: An Anatomy*, Chapter 18. Regarding 1 Enoch, Norman Cohn says that “in the centuries immediately before and after Jesus it was widely known and enjoyed great prestige” — *op. cit.*, p. 176. For discussion of 1 Enoch’s identification of Enoch as the Son of Man, see David Wilber, “[Who Is the Son of Man in 1 Enoch 71:14?](#)” Wilber argues that, because it contradicts the Christian scriptures, 1 Enoch is not divinely inspired (despite Jude’s apparent reference to it in those scriptures).

¹³ Jesus’ predictions of the end-time events from tribulation to judgment are detailed in the scriptures; see, for example, Mt. 24 and 25.

¹⁴ Apparently, Jesus perceived the dawning of the Kingdom in the ministry of John the Baptist: see Mt. 11:11-15 (discussed further in what follows), Lk. 16:16, and Lk. 7:24-29. Note John’s imminent/incipient eschatology: “Yet even now the ax is being placed against the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that is not bearing excellent fruit is being cut down and cast into fire” (Mt. 3:10, my rendering).

¹⁵ The manifestation of such power — including the ability to raise the dead, although Jesus’ resurrection has not yet happened — indicates that the Messianic Age is dawning and the community of the elect is being gathered. Cf. Lk. 11:20, Mt. 12:28, [1 Enoch 38](#). (Note that although Matthew sometimes uses the phrase “Kingdom of God,” his preferred term is “Kingdom of heaven” or “Kingdom of the heavens,” which may be a circumlocution, whereas Mark’s and Luke’s is “Kingdom of God.”)

into another, for truly I tell you: you will most certainly not¹⁶ finish the cities of Israel before the Son of Man has come.” (Mt. 10:5-8a ... 23)

Notwithstanding believers’ subsequent efforts to rationalize that failed prediction, Jesus’ confident expectation is inescapable there — as it is elsewhere.¹⁷

That expectation was integral to the ethic, already limned in that passage, which Jesus publicly preached and more or less enacted. Punshon probably had Schweitzer’s work in mind when he wrote,

About a hundred years ago, it became clear on strictly critical grounds that one can only sever Jesus’ ethics from his eschatology [*i.e.*, his thinking about the end-time, judgment, and Kingdom] with considerable difficulty.¹⁸

Following biblical scholar Johannes Weiss, Schweitzer called Jesus’ moral teachings *Interimsethik*, an interim ethic for those who would be citizens of the impending Kingdom of God.¹⁹ It was of necessity temporary, appropriate only for the short time before the full arrival of the Kingdom, because, as Schweitzer explained,

There is for Jesus no ethic of the Kingdom of God, for in the Kingdom of God all natural relationships, even, for example, the distinction of sex (Mark xii. 25 and 26), are abolished. Temptation and sin no longer exist.²⁰

As we’ll see in some detail below, the coming Kingdom is intended for the long-suffering, righteous poor and those who become so for its sake. Jesus’ adventual ethic elaborates John the Baptist’s urgent call for repentance: those who will enter the Kingdom when it comes “in power” are to live now as if it were already fully present. Because their hearts and behavior are “not of this world” (Jn. 18:36), such persons will be persecuted. Indeed, it is by their living and suffering thus in the present evil world that they demonstrate both their confidence in God (and

¹⁶ This is another instance of the double negative *ou mé* used for emphasis. See Note 6.

¹⁷ Examples include Mt. 16:27-28, 19:28, 23:36, 24:34, 26:64; Mk. 9:1, 13:30, 14:25, 13:30; Lk. 9:27. *Cf.* Jn. 21:22.

¹⁸ Punshon, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Schweitzer, *Quest*, p 352. As Robert Strimple put it: “The ethical teachings of Jesus, according to Weiss, should not be thought of as presenting the ethics of the Kingdom, but rather as setting forth the penitential discipline required of those who would enter the Kingdom of God. Thus, it may be referred to as an *Interimsethik*, an ethic for the interim remaining before the manifestation of the kingdom” — Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism* (1995), p 77.

²⁰ *Quest*, p. 364.

Jesus) and their readiness for the Kingdom, perhaps thereby even expediting its coming.²¹ As we consider Jesus' behavioral demands, we'll see further evidence that the fundamental conclusion of Schweitzer and "a myriad" of other scholars²² makes sense: Jesus (particularly as depicted in the Synoptics²³) believed that God's eschatological judgment was imminent, and his ethic was of a piece with that expectation. In our ongoing world, that ethic would be immoral in practice — if such praxis were possible.



²¹ Schweitzer took Mt. 11:12 (*et seq.*; *cf.* Lk. 16:16) to indicate that people were trying to force the Kingdom to come, a reading [the Greek text](#) can support. (See *Quest*, pp. 355-356.) Others take it differently; *e.g.*, as referring to persecution or to the zeal of believers. J. W. McGarvey's classic [The Four-Fold Gospel](#) offers an interesting take: "[People] hearing [the Kingdom] was about to be opened sought to enter prematurely, not by the gates which God would open when Simon Peter used the keys (Matt. xvi. 19), but by such breaches as they themselves sought to make in the walls. ... The context shows that John the Baptist was even then seeking to force the kingdom" (p. 222).

²² "Like a handful of historians before him and a myriad since, Schweitzer was convinced that Jesus was an apocalypticist" — Bart D. Ehrman, *op. cit.*, p. 125. For a small sampling of current views, see <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/jesusjohnbaptist.html>.

²³ The gospel books called [Synoptics](#) because of their similarity are Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Immoral Ethics, Impossible Demands

“Do not suppose that I am come to cast peace upon the land: I come to cast not peace but a sword. For I come to set son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. And a man’s foes are of his own household: one who loves family more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever is not taking up the cross and following me is not worthy of me.” — Matthew 10:34-38²⁴

“almost every reference to the family in the New Testament is resoundingly negative” — Terry Eagleton²⁵

We begin our examination of Jesus’ ethical demands with a particularly egregious pair, strongly suggestive of what we would identify today as an extremist cult. Anyone — these injunctions are spoken to “large crowds”²⁶ — who wants to be a follower of Jesus must meet demands such as the following two from Luke 14.

Consider: “Any one of you who does not take leave of all your possessions cannot be my disciple” (v. 33). For Jesus, the renunciation of all possessions, an act of faith that makes one utterly dependent on the providence of God, is a fundamental requirement of discipleship. But to meet that requirement in our enduring world would be to make ourselves burdens for others while abandoning those, such as family, who depend upon us. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Jesus seems to reverse the commandment to honor one’s parents,²⁷ enjoining hatred not only of them but of all family members, even of one’s children. That requirement, implied in passages such as this section’s first epigraph, is quite explicit in verse 26: “If any come to me and are not hating [*miseri*] their father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, and, yes, even their own selves, they cannot be my disciples.” Christians today may insist upon “family values,” but it is evident that Jesus intended to divide and destroy families in preparation for the eschaton. As literary critic J. Hillis Miller, recalling Abraham’s willingness to kill his son Isaac at God’s command, observed, “All Christian believers must pass the test God set for Abraham”;²⁸ that is, they must be willing to sacrifice their children. We’ll discuss that further in the following sections.

²⁴ My rendering, made with brevity in mind. See parallel at Luke 14:26-27.

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, “Was Jesus a Revolutionary?” <https://unherd.com/2022/04/was-jesus-a-revolutionary/>.

²⁶ Lk. 14:25, NIV. The KJV has “great multitudes.” The Greek is *ochloi polloi*.

²⁷ The verb *timaō* means to honor or to assign a value. In Mk. 10/Mt. 19, Jesus recites some of the traditional commandments, including the one about honoring parents, to a rich young man, telling him that one who obeys all of them is still lacking: one attains perfection by selling one’s possessions, giving to the poor, and following Jesus — *i.e.*, by abandoning family. Cf. Mt. 5:17-20, in which he asserts the necessity of obeying the commandments while claiming that his teaching fulfills, rather than destroys, them. The demand to hate one’s parents is a radical break with conventional morality, appropriate only because “the hour is coming and is now” (Jn. 4:23 and 5:25). It is perhaps also related to Jesus’ idea of life in the coming Kingdom: see Mt. 22:30.

²⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida*, Fordham University Press (2009), p. 210.

In imposing those extreme requirements, Jesus asks, “Which of you, intending to build a tower, wouldn’t first calculate the cost, to see if you have the wherewithal?” (v. 28).²⁹ His disciples would willingly pay the price because they saw the eschaton on the horizon and, as the philosopher Walter Kaufmann would put it, “If you think that ‘the Kingdom of God is at hand,’ any concern with noneschatological rewards becomes imprudent.”³⁰ But the horizon of our world, however ominous the clouds at times, is very different. When we perform that calculation, we must demur. In view of such passages as those — and, as we’ll see, they are not anomalies — I can only agree that an eschatological reading of Jesus’ ethical injunctions is necessary: at least they might make some moral sense in that context.



²⁹ The Greek word meaning “tower,” [pyrgos](#), is also found in the Septuagint version of Gen. 11, the story of the tower of Babel. Perhaps Jesus was making a comparison: in the last days, the “city and tower that will touch the heavens” (Gen. 11:4) are being built, if metaphorically, not by the proud but by the meek as they coax the Kingdom from God through their purity and suffering.

³⁰ Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press (1958), p. 296. Consider also such parables as Mt. 13:44, which likens the Kingdom to a treasure buried in a field: the finder sells all his possessions in order to purchase the field.

What About the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain)?

“How [theologians] rhapsodize about unselfishness, obedient love, as if the Sermon on the Mount were not constructed around the theme of enlightened selfishness. Surely, this morality is not centered in the neighbor but in salvation.” — Walter Kaufmann³¹

“Can one really construe this ‘righteousness’ of [Matt 5:20](#) as ‘morality’ in the modern sense of the word?” — Johannes Weiss³²

The Sermon on the Mount, often presented as a summary of Jesus’ ethical teachings, comprises a number of passages in the gospel book of Matthew, with parallels in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. Both versions begin with Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12; Lk. 6:20-26), lists of those types of people who are fortunate or “blessed” (*makarioi*) because they will soon receive the Kingdom. The Beatitudes are primarily eschatological in nature: such ethical teachings as are included reflect a stark moral dualism and are set in context of a promised reversal of socioeconomic status.³³ They echo prophecies such as we find in Psalm 37, verse 11a of which Jesus cites explicitly (Mt. 5:5):

[8] Cease from anger and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in any wise to do evil. [9] For evildoers shall be cut off, but those that wait upon the LORD shall inherit the earth. [10] And yet a little while [longer], and the wicked shall not be; yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. [11] But the meek shall inherit the earth and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. [12] The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. [13] The Lord shall laugh at the wicked one, for he seeth that his day is coming. [14] The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation. [15] Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken. [16] A little that a

³¹ Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-240. Spoken by “Satan,” who appears to speak Kaufmann’s views in conversation with “Theologian.”

³² Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, originally published in 1892; Scholars Press reprint (1985), p. 106.

³³ Dualism, binary thinking, is typical of apocalyptic. For Jesus, one either loves or hates; no alternatives, such as detachment, are acknowledged. One is either with Jesus or against him; neutrality is not countenanced ([Mt. 12:30](#)). One is either a sheep (a good person, pure of heart) or a goat (an evil person, impure), blessed or cursed ([Mt. 25:31-46](#)). Compare the modern psychological concept of [splitting](#). Similarly, as Theissen and Metz note, “The reversal of criteria is characteristic of eschatology. Those who have no privileges here are given privileges by the eschatological transformation which is beginning in the present.” — [The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide, p. 379](#). It is not the rich who are well off, asserts Jesus, but the poor, because God is about to reverse people’s positions. For an overview, see *The Apocalyptic Movement* by Walter Schmithals, available for borrowing at <https://archive.org/details/apocalypticmovem0000schm>.

righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked [ones]. (Ps. 37:8-16)³⁴

In the Beatitudes, Jesus asserts that the righteous poor who suffer now are, against all appearances, fortunate; they, and not those who enjoy a comfortable life while others languish, will soon receive prosperity, peace, and joy in God's new Kingdom. Wholly dependent upon God, they are about to be rescued by him: "Yet God shall most certainly³⁵ avenge his elect, who are imploring him day and night, with whom he is patient: I am telling you that he will avenge them speedily" (Lk. 18:7-8a). Those who are well off now, however, will suffer and perish. Luke's version highlights the expected reversal of present-day conditions and values by contrasting each assignment of blessedness with a corresponding "woe."

Blessed are the poor ones, because yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are the ones who are hungry now, because you shall be filled. Blessed are the ones who are lamenting now, because you shall be laughing. Blessed are you whenever people hate you and shun you and reproach you and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of Man: rejoice in that day, and frisk [for joy], because behold, your wages in the heaven shall be immense, for thus did their fathers do to the prophets.

But woe to you who have abundant resources [*plousios*], because you are already collecting your consolation. Woe to you who have been well fed, because you shall be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, because you shall be mourning and lamenting. Woe to you when people speak highly of you, because thus did their fathers speak of false prophets."³⁶

Matthew's narrative, apparently intended to be more placative and inclusive, omits the "woes" while spiritualizing some of Luke's categories and adding others, including moral traits. For him, inheritors of the Kingdom include not only the poor in spirit (compare Luke's "the poor ones"), the meek, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted for being just or following Jesus, but also the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who "hunger and thirst for justice"³⁷ (compare Luke's "the ones who are hungry now"). However, his version, too, is essentially promissory: every Beatitude hinges on the word "because" (*hoti*); e.g., "Fortunate [are] the meek *because* they shall receive the land" (Mt. 5:5, my rendering and emphasis).

³⁴ KJV, some punctuation modified.

³⁵ Yet another use of the double negative *ou mé* for emphasis.

³⁶ The implication seems to be that the relatively well-off are not pure of heart; consider, too, such passages as [Mt. 19:21-30](#).

³⁷ Mt. 5:6. Matthew's Jesus could be referring to those to whom injustice has been done or to those who desire justice in a broader sense; I think that the context could support both or either.

Both authors conclude the Beatitudes with a promise of reward for faithful suffering in the interim:

Fortunate are you when people reproach you, persecute you, and speak every kind of wicked declaration falsely against you because of me. Rejoice and exult, because great are your wages in the heavens, for thus they persecuted the prophets before you. (Mt. 5:11-12)

For simplicity's sake, from this point forward I'll focus on Matthew's version of the Sermon. As we explore further, we'll find that the eschatological theme continues beyond the Beatitudes and is found even in Jesus' most explicitly ethical teaching.

Following the Beatitudes, Matthew presents passages in which Jesus compares his disciples to salt and light (Mt. 5:13-16; *cf.* Lk. 14:34-35, which immediately follows the requirement that they take leave of all possessions). Neither passage makes a specific ethical demand (beyond fidelity), but both fit into the eschatological schema: Jesus' hearers are called to proclaim the good news of the dawning Kingdom in word and deed.

Jesus then says that the law, which he "came not to demolish but to fulfill," must be obeyed "until heaven and earth pass away, ... until all is accomplished" (Mt. 5:17-20). Nonetheless, failure to obey the law will not in itself bar one from the Kingdom; at least some transgressors "shall be called the most inferior in the Kingdom of the heavens." Observance of the law is not, therefore, the ultimate criterion of eschatological judgment.³⁸ In verse 20, Jesus avows, "I'm telling you that if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will most certainly not enter the Kingdom of the heavens."³⁹ But for him, righteousness is primarily a matter of inward disposition. The elect are pure of heart, and their deeds arise from that purity; such singleness of heart, and not a scrupulous observance of rules, fulfills the law already in the present *kairos*. In the Kingdom there will be no need for law because, the impure having been purged, only the pure of heart will abide there.⁴⁰ Jesus' "until all is accomplished" supports Schweitzer's observation that "There is for Jesus no ethic of the Kingdom of God."

³⁸ Jesus' view was consistent with some contemporary thought. Writing about E. P. Sanders' analysis of Jewish attitudes to the Jewish law during the time of Jesus, Timothy Peat says, "Obedience to the law is important ... but it does not earn God's grace. What is more, it is quite possible to fall short of the law and not fall from grace with God" — Dandelion, Gwyn, and Peat, *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming* (2018 ed.), p 36.

³⁹ This saying also uses the emphatic double negative *ou mé*.

⁴⁰ "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will cull out of his kingdom all that gives offense and all those committing iniquity" (Mt. 13:41). Compare 1 Enoch 62:13: "And the righteous and elect shall be saved on that day, and they shall never thenceforward see the face of the sinners and unrighteous." As Jesus says in Lk. 16:16, "The law and the prophets [were] until John": the Law is for sinners and is necessary only until the Kingdom arrives in its fullness. *Cf.* Gal. 3:24.

The requirement of purity of heart is reflected in Matthew 5:21-30, a passage that has taxed commentators through the centuries. There, Jesus says that being angry at your brother (or neighbor: *adelphō*) without just cause is equivalent to murdering him (which makes you subject to the death penalty); that insulting⁴¹ him makes you “liable to the council” (same); and that calling him a fool makes you “subject to the hell of fire” (v. 22).⁴² Jesus then continues in that vein, asserting that “any man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (v. 28). The penalty for adultery, as we are reminded by the apocryphal story in John 8,⁴³ is death by stoning (for both parties: see Lev. 20:10). I can make some sense of those assertions only in context of the approaching eschatological judgment, in which what matters most is one’s inner disposition. The elect may break some rules (such as plucking grain on the Sabbath⁴⁴), but their purity of heart and dependence upon God make them fit for the Kingdom, whereas many who observe the law scrupulously, proudly relying on their own resources, are inwardly impure. Indeed, in a later sermon Jesus pronounces a “woe” against the latter: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but within are full of bones of the dead and all uncleanness.”⁴⁵ (It seems that he exempted himself from his rule against insulting others.)

Perhaps not surprisingly, Matthew’s Jesus follows those extreme statements with yet another: mutilate yourself if you sin, for “it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be cast into hell” at the judgment (vv. 29-30).⁴⁶ Given its placement in the text, the statement conveys the warning that any man who looks at a woman lustfully had better blind himself: as Jesus says in Mk. 9:47a, “If your eye ensnares you, pluck it out.” Jesus seems quite serious about requiring behavior that would be not only irresponsible — a blind man could not support his family and would be a burden to them⁴⁷ — but also pathological. Again, however, his demands can make sense in the shadow of the eschatological judgment. Whatever is corrupting the heart, whether it be one’s customary way of thinking⁴⁸ or one’s own body, must be given up.

⁴¹ The example Jesus gives is to “say to one’s brother [*tō adelphō autou*], ‘Empty head!’”

⁴² We might perceive here another echo of Psalm 37’s “Cease from anger and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in any wise to do evil” as well as Leviticus 19:17a, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart.”

⁴³ *Apocryphal*: absent from the early sources; inserted into scripture later. My reference is to the story of “the woman taken in adultery” (Jn. 8:1-11).

⁴⁴ See Mt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5. Plucking grain that they hadn’t sown may be a sign of the disciples’ dependence on God’s providence.

⁴⁵ Mt. 23:27.

⁴⁶ Repeated in Mt. 18:8-9; see also Mk. 9:43-48.

⁴⁷ This injunction is effectively similar to such commandments as “take leave of all your possessions” (Lk. 14:33): fulfilling it would render one helpless, completely dependent upon God, and unable to fulfill familial and social obligations. See also Mt. 6:25-34.

⁴⁸ One customary way of thinking could be a legalistic perspective, the equation of righteousness with obedience to law. Another might be disbelief in the imminence of the eschaton.

“If any want to walk in my steps, let them renounce self, pick up their cross, and join with me, because those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 16:24-25).

Jesus goes on to forbid oaths (v. 33), a ban that Quakers have generally been adamant about obeying. Oaths being important to the functioning of society in biblical times, this commandment, too, is predicated upon the impending end of the present unregenerate age. Like other demands made in the Sermon, it is directed to the elect, whose “Kingdom is not of this world.” As Quaker founder George Fox apparently recognized, declining to swear is an assertion of the Kingdom’s power here and now.⁴⁹ Oaths may be required to restrain sinful people in the this-worldly domain of the Adversary, but Satan is powerless in God’s Kingdom, where every citizen is a saint “and a saint is not sinful.”⁵⁰ As symptomatic of and appropriate to the evil nature of this world, oaths are eschewed by the elect who dare to live proleptically in the Kingdom. Jesus’ injunction against oaths is eschatological.

More difficulty comes to us in the next section (5:38-42). Jesus begins by saying, “You hear it said, ‘Eye for eye; tooth for tooth.’” One might expect an exhortation to mercy to follow, but Jesus goes far beyond that: “But I’m telling you not to stand against (*antistēnai*) wicked people” (v. 39). Moreover, you are to assist them in further evil: as we might say today, you must *enable* them.⁵¹ If you are struck, invite the assailant to strike you again; if your tunic is demanded, give your cloak, too (increasing the hardship for a poor person); if you are forced to perform a service, do twice as much work as was demanded.⁵² Consistently, Jesus then admonishes us to give to anyone who asks of us and to lend to anyone who wants to borrow. While those latter injunctions may seem laudable if we fail to note that moral discrimination is implicitly forbidden, they, like the injunction in verse 39, ultimately point to the eschatological requirement of forsaking all possessions and leaving the future to God: if consistently obeyed, they would render one destitute. The practical consequences of their implementation would include, then, a dereliction of our responsibilities toward those who depend on us — and, if widely adopted, a disaster for an ongoing society. As E. F. Scott acknowledged almost a century ago, “The attempt to act literally on these commands has always led to financial extremes, and if it were general

⁴⁹ Early Quakers stressed an inward interpretation of such verses as [Lk. 17:21](#); they asserted that, as George Fox put it, “Christ ... set up his kingdom [over] sixteen hundred years ago” (*Journal*, p. 436). Regarding oaths, Fox wrote, “Christ [is] the oath of God, in which men have peace, who ends the strife between men and God, who makes all things new” (*The Great Mystery*, p. 298. See also “Concerning Swearing” in his *Journal*, pp. 254-255). Refusal of oaths would be for the early Quakers similar to pacifism in that it was a consequence and demonstration of their living in the Kingdom of God.

⁵⁰ The domain of the Adversary: see Lk. 4:6 and Jn. 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11; on the beginning of the end of that dominion, see Lk. 10:17-18. “And a saint is not sinful”: George Fox, *The Great Mystery*, p. 160.

⁵¹ Jesus seems here to contradict sayings of scripture such as 2 Chr. 19:2, “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?”

⁵² On the ability of a king’s worker to “compel thee to walk one mile,” see <https://www.studylight.org/commentary/matthew/5-41.html>.

would soon make any kind of social life impossible.”⁵³ Again, Jesus’ ethical demands make sense only when seen as contingent upon his eschatological expectation: the radical sacrifices necessary to adopt Kingdom life here and now would very soon gain for the elect entry into, or a high place in, that Kingdom.⁵⁴

We come now to the well-known injunction to “love your enemies ... that you may be sons of your heavenly father” (see 5:43-48), a commandment given as a counter to the saying “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (as if love and hate were the only possibilities). Note that, despite Jesus’ insistence that people must hate “even their own selves,” the framing here is explicitly prudential — that is, self-regarding. By loving one’s enemies, one demonstrates that one is a child of God and is therefore an heir, as in Matthew 25:34, “Then the king will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” Further, verse 46 asks, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you earn: don’t even the tribute collectors do that?” The commandment echoes prudential injunctions from the Hebrew scriptures; for example, Proverbs 25:21-22, a saying quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20-21, advises, “If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat, and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on their head; and the Lord will reward you.”⁵⁵ Its ultimate appeal is to selfishness.

Particularly in context of Jesus’ other commandments, the cost of loving one’s enemies could be very high, and not only for the ethical protagonist: it seems that loving one’s enemies can indeed entail hating one’s family. Grotesque dilemmas arise. For example, must you allow an enemy to harm or kill your child, whether directly or by acting against you, the child’s caregiver? Recall verse 39’s ban on resistance to evildoers: Jesus offers no exceptions. Normal human values are reversed by Jesus’ vision of the impending eschaton: instead of protecting innocents, we are to sacrifice them in order to win favor with God. Again I am reminded of Kaufmann’s remark: “If you think that ‘the Kingdom of God is at hand,’ any concern with noneschatological rewards becomes imprudent.”

As Jesus concludes in verse 48, the commandment to love one’s enemies requires that one “be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Who would attempt that, knowing that it means abandoning family and property: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you own, give to the poor, ... and follow me” (Mt. 19:21)? Lest we argue that Jesus spoke the latter only to one

⁵³ E. F. Scott, *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus* (1924), p. 27 f., quoted in Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (1960), p. 110. Notwithstanding attempts, such as Walter Wink’s in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, to rationalize Jesus’ requirements in these passages, the eschatological nature of such directives is evident.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Mt. 19:28, in which Jesus promises that his inner group of followers will sit on thrones and judge the tribes of Israel.

⁵⁵ “Burning coals” can signify purification: see Isaiah 6:5-6. Similar sayings include Ex. 23:4-5, Job 31:29-30, and the strikingly prudential Prov. 24:17-18, in which gloating over one’s enemy’s misfortune can cause God to “turn his wrath away from” that enemy.

rich young man, we should note again his insistence to “large crowds” that “any one of you who does not take leave of all your possessions cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:33). That requirement was already given an eschatological rationale:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it delights the Father to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in the heavens that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Lk. 12:32-34)

Or, in Matthew’s version in the Sermon,

Do not store for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; rather, store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (6:19-21)

Continuing from that, Matthew’s Jesus enjoins us to “give no thought to the morrow,” have no concern about food or clothing, store up no worldly goods for the future, but, like personified flora, rely solely on divine providence.⁵⁶ Here, Jesus again demands signs of childlike trust in the Kingdom’s imminent arrival. As Charles Guignebert observed, “The practical ordering of a normal life is impossible on such lines, but, for Jesus, normal life was about to come to an end”⁵⁷

The Franciscan phenomenon is illustrative. Early in the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi and his followers, the “Lesser Brothers,” pledged to “live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel,” “following the footsteps and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸ They gave away all of their possessions and thereafter owned nothing either individually or corporately; working or begging for their daily bread, they accepted no money and stored no treasure for the morrow. As Giorgio Agamben has observed, their way of life was “novel” at the time and is “in the present conditions of society, totally unthinkable.”⁵⁹ Indeed, it was not sustainable even then: as their numbers increased, the Franciscans split into factions over how strictly the rule should be

⁵⁶ Mt. 6:25-34, particularly verse 28, “And why are you worrying about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they are growing, neither toiling nor spinning.”

⁵⁷ Charles Guignebert, *Jesus* (1956), p.373.

⁵⁸ The quotations are from *Testament*, 14 and *Earlier Rule*, 1.1 in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, I: 63-64, 125, as quoted in the article “Franciscans” at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/roman-catholic-orders-and-missions/franciscans>. Ignoring Jesus’ directive (Mt. 5:48) that all were to be perfect, the Catholic Church taught that voluntary poverty was merely a “counsel” to those few who sought the option of perfection. Interestingly, the first Quakers claimed moral perfection but did not give away all their possessions.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, p. 110.

applied. Further, their begging had harmful consequences for others: in glorifying the voluntary poverty of the privileged and presenting its practitioners as saints who could serve as spiritual intercessors, “it potentially made the lives of those suffering from involuntary poverty even more difficult,” as Kenneth Baxter Wolf noted in *The Poverty of Riches*. “For one thing,” Wolf wrote, “Francis could not help but attract the attention of almsgivers, many of whom appreciated the vicarious spiritual advantages of supporting him in his quest for perfect poverty, as opposed to trying to alleviate the poverty of people who did not want to be poor.”⁶⁰ Francis and his followers encouraged that perspective, as we see in his eschatological claim that “in this last hour the Lesser Brothers have been given to the world so that the elect might carry out for them what the divine Judge will praise: ‘What you did for one of my lesser brothers, you did for me.’”⁶¹ Franciscan poverty, enacted in obedience to Jesus’ commands, was prudential for both donor and donee, “based as it was on deliberate divestment from this world and investment in the next.”⁶² I call that socially-irresponsible investing.

We can conclude our examination of the Sermon with the observation that it has an evident eschatological character. Its Beatitudes describe an impending reversal of fortunes. Overall, its ethical directives reflect a moral transvaluation — requiring an inward disposition, expressed or acquired now through belief and repentance, that sublates law and socially-responsible ethics — tied to imminent eschatological reward. Apart from that mythological context, they are demands for gross irresponsibility and injustice. Moreover, the element of divine sanction — one must love all others or suffer eternal fire — spoils our response to the invitation of love by interposing a coercive commandment. To the classic form of that commandment, the Golden Rule, we now turn.



⁶⁰ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*, p. 4.

⁶¹ Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 26. The statement is from a gloss on Mt. 25 attributed to Francis by Thomas of Celano; I have added quotation marks around its rendering of Mt. 25:40b. Note the tendentious translation: Matthew’s “for one of the least of these my brothers” is rendered as “for one of my lesser brothers,” “Lesser Brothers” being the name used by the Franciscans of themselves. It appears that the Franciscans sought to supplant the involuntarily poor.

⁶² Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

What About the Golden Rule?

“In the Paleolithic social environment in which our moral sentiments evolved, one’s neighbors were family, extended family, and community members who were either related to or known well to everyone else. To help others was to help oneself.” — Michael Shermer⁶³

“What is the point of a precept enunciated with so much solemnity if its fulfillment cannot be recommended as reasonable?” — Sigmund Freud⁶⁴

“Love your neighbor as yourself” is perhaps Jesus’ best-known moral injunction, but we will find no foothold even there. In that saying (Mt. 22:39 and par.), Jesus was citing a verse (18) from [Leviticus 19](#), in which the exhortation counters unjust or harmful acts against other members of the community.⁶⁵ In context, its sense is, as Hillel the Elder summarized it, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another; that is the entire Torah . . .,”⁶⁶ or, as Jesus phrased it positively in the Sermon, “whatever you would have people [*anthrōpoi*] do unto you, you do that unto them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”⁶⁷ In other words, to “love your neighbor as yourself” is to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Jesus not only repeated the ancient commandment; he also universalized it. What had pertained to the “neighbor,” a term that Leviticus expanded to include foreigners who dwelt among the community,⁶⁸ he extended to everyone. We see this in his parable of the “Good Samaritan,” which applies “neighbor” to a normally ostracized enemy,⁶⁹ and we see it in the Sermon’s inclusive *anthrōpoi*. Thus

⁶³ Michael Shermer, “Why Christians and Conservatives Should Accept Evolution,” <https://michaelshermer.substack.com/p/why-christians-and-conservatives>

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Strachey. Norton (1961), p. 100.

⁶⁵ Taking a cue from Jesus, I regard verse 18b, although it addresses revenge and grudge-bearing specifically, as the summation of the passage beginning with verse 9. Leviticus 19 as a whole appears to be a source of the idea that love of God and neighbor sums up the Torah. Note that a more literal translation of the Hebrew word that most Bibles render as “your neighbor” is “your associate”: see <https://scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/OTpdf/lev19.pdf>. The Septuagint uses *πλησίον* (*plēsion*), of which *The Outline of Biblical Usage* says, “according to the Jews, any member of the Hebrew nation and commonwealth,” and “according to Christ, any other man irrespective of nation or religion with whom we live or whom we chance to meet” — see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4139/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

⁶⁶ [Talmud Shabbat 31a](#): “... a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon [Shammai] repulsed him with the builder’s cubit which was in his hand. When [the heathen] went before Hillel, [Hillel] said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.’”

⁶⁷ Mt. 7:12 and Lk. 6:31, the well-known “do unto others.”

⁶⁸ Lev. 19:34: “But the stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the house of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

⁶⁹ Lk. 10:25-37. (For a reflection on the parable, see my “Love your neighbor as yourself?” at <https://postmodernquaker.wordpress.com/2018/06/04/love-your-neighbor-as-yourself/>.)

decontextualized and universalized, the commandment is, like his others, problematic outside of the eschatological frame.

First, our resources are not unlimited, yet Jesus demands a love in which the needs of all persons, including ourselves, are equal. But, as our mass media make all too evident by alerting us to the suffering of billions, to give to one person, whether oneself or another, is at the same time to withhold from countless others; we cannot avoid discriminating. As Sigmund Freud observed, “[Love] imposes duties on me for whose fulfillment I must be ready to make sacrifices,” yet “it is an injustice if I put a stranger on a par” with family and friends.⁷⁰ J. Hillis Miller put it more generally: “The act of fulfilling one’s obligations to one’s neighbor ... leads directly, and inevitably, to irresponsibility”⁷¹ toward oneself and one’s family as well as most others. Jacques Derrida, whose thought Miller was discussing, wrote,

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all of the others. I put to death, I betray and lie, I don’t need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. ... I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it.⁷²

If we could not ignore almost everyone in need and prioritize a few, we would be morally paralyzed. Our responsibility cannot be distributed equally among all of the world’s people: it is *because we love* that we must transgress a precept of universal love. Derrida could “hold [his] peace about it” honestly because he had acknowledged the reality of the situation, but we who hold our peace while pretending to universal love are hypocrites.

Second, alterity, otherness, is irreducible. We can’t simply love others as ourselves: self and other are, in some crucial ways, incommensurable. Identification of another’s being with mine would be an act of self-enclosed narcissism, a veiled refusal of authentic relationship, a simulation of love. As Emmanuel Lévinas recognized, ethics arises in the recognition of alterity: “The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.”⁷³ We might say, then, that ethics begins in a questioning of one’s assumptive self-projection into the other, in a willingness to recognize and encounter the other as *other*, as not-self. A simple injunction to

⁷⁰ Freud, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 101.

⁷¹ J. Hillis Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁷² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature In Secret*, The University of Chicago Press (1995, 2008), pp. 69, 71.

⁷³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Kluwer (1991), p. 43.

“love your neighbor as yourself” or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” can be, therefore, a prescription for failure.

Third, when we juxtapose Jesus’ Golden Rule with his requirement in Lk. 14:26 to hate “father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, and, yes, even one’s own self,”⁷⁴ we are faced with double binds. For one thing, if I would not treat another as I don’t want to be treated, then I cannot hate anyone. For another, if I hate myself, then a commandment to love my neighbor as myself is absurd.

Finally, it appears that Jesus himself did not love his neighbors, particularly when they were also his enemies. He repeatedly insulted them (which, ironically, did indeed make him “liable to the council”); we have already noted one example of that in his “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs”⁷⁵ And of course he drove people out of the temple, perhaps using a whip that he’d made for the purpose.⁷⁶ But the most glaring inconsistency is seen in the nature of the future he envisioned. After terrible, indiscriminate violence (“Woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! ... For then shall be seen great affliction such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world ...”⁷⁷), those who had previously lived in comparative comfort, working to care for their families and contribute to society, would be consigned to eternal torment for having refused his eschatological delusion and its destructive demands. “For whoever shall be ashamed of me and my words, of that one the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and [that of] the Father and the holy angels.”⁷⁸

If those considerations leave us with anything, it is the contextual reading as enunciated by Hillel, a rather obvious moral precept or wisdom adage despite its common violation: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.” As we’ve noted, the maxim did not originate with Jesus; it is unique neither to him nor to his Jewish tradition. Indeed, Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his

⁷⁴ The word *psychēn* can be rendered as referring to self, soul, life, etc.

⁷⁵ As George Fox’s writings amply demonstrate, early Quakers, believing that they were one with Jesus Christ, followed his example in insulting and condemning their religious opponents — stretching, it seems to me, the exhortation in Lev. 19:17, in which loving one’s neighbors entails rebuking their sin: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him.”

⁷⁶ The “cleansing of the temple” is narrated in all four canonical gospel books. It is only in John’s version, however, that Jesus fashions and uses a whip.

⁷⁷ Mt. 24:19, 21.

⁷⁸ Lk. 9:26. See the parallel at Mk. 8:38-9:1, quoted earlier as an epigraph. Cf. Mt. 25:31-46, in which the Son of Man condemns to “everlasting punishment” (KJV) the “goats” who did not obey Jesus’ commands. See also Lk. 19:27, in which Jesus concludes the “Parable of the Minas” by having the king (again, cf. Mt. 25) say, “But those mine enemies, which would not that I should rule over them, bring hither and slay before me.”

magisterial *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, refers to it as “a commonplace of ancient philosophy.”⁷⁹

Even in that formulation, however, the commandment demands the impossible. For example, I would not want people to allow me to starve; however, I know that I can’t avoid doing that to many others, even if I give away everything — which would, of course, end my ability to help anyone at all.⁸⁰ Perhaps the Golden Rule, whether expressed as “love your neighbor as yourself” or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” can serve as a kind of “impossible dream”⁸¹ and reminder for fortunate people to help others who lack basic necessities. And perhaps it can lead to defeatism or cynicism. In any case, and particularly as the essential ethical imperative (“for this is the Law and the Prophets”) in an ongoing world, as a practical requirement it is absurd.



⁷⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, Penguin Books (2009), p. 83. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule.

⁸⁰ For a challenging perspective on aiding starving people, see Peter Singer’s [“Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”](#) which may call to mind [Jesus’ story of Lazarus and the rich man](#).

⁸¹ In that connection, Derrida’s idea of “messianicity without messianism” may be of interest to some readers: for a clear and concise discussion, see Christopher Watkin’s remarkably accessible *Jaques Derrida* (Great Thinkers Series, P & R Publishing Co., 2017).

WWJD?

“No matter how much stress is laid on the poetic character of the eschatological thought of the New Testament, the conceptual world of the first century was radically different from that of the twentieth century.” — Harvey K. McArthur⁸²

Jesus can be a compelling figure. In his “hunger and thirst” for justice, peace, and generosity; in his insistence on human welfare over legalism; and in his willingness to suffer in order to bring those things about, we may see a reflection of our own hearts. At the same time, however, we recognize that our worldview, our perceived situation in time, is incompatible with his. Undeniably, he was wrong to expect the imminent destruction of this world, resurrection of the dead, judgment, and new creation. And he was wrong to insist that people can and should abandon responsibility and try to enact a prolepsis of that promised paradise. In the ensuing two millennia, we’ve seen the failure of every such promise and, often including horrors on a vast scale, every attempt to bring about a putative utopia from which, as in Jesus’ vision, those defined as unfit are violently excluded, punished, even destroyed. In our time, a responsible ethic must take all of that into account.

In the well-known teachings that we examined, we saw that consistent obedience to Jesus’ signature commandments, if it were possible, would be inimical to civilized society. Born of binary thinking, enmeshed in a vengeful fantasy, denying some of the very values — love of family, stewardship of resources, deterrence of crime — that foster the survival and progress of our species, Jesus’ ethic makes sense, if at all, only in the eschatological matrix. To attempt to extract and universalize it requires suppressing his apocalyptic “good news” and pretending to an ethical praxis that, even as unrealizable ideal, is antithetical to human life and well-being. Two thousand years after Jesus announced the impending end of this world, we find that, even if we could be confident in our answers, asking “What would Jesus do?” cannot yield moral guidance for us. Indeed, to assert the query today is to transgress ethics.



⁸² Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, Harper (1960), p. 98.