

Christianity's Ethical Teachings

Jesus articulated one of the two greatest commandments as "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22.39)¹

The Apostle Paul clarified what love looks like in practice: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Cor 13.2-8)."

Jesus encouraged his followers not to jostle for authority and power: "But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mat 20.25-28)."

The Apostle Paul expanded on Jesus' teachings: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:14-21)."

Jesus didn't hesitate to blast the Jewish leadership of his day: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.... "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.... You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell (Mat 23.23, 27-28, 33)?"

¹ English Standard Version (ESV) is used throughout.

Excerpt from Plato's *Gorgias*²

Plato places in the mouth of Callicles (before Socrates refutes him) an argument that insists that the strong may do whatever they want, to the weak, and that society and government are merely attempts by the weak, to hold down the strong.

For to suffer wrong is not even fit for a man but for a slave, for whom it is better to be dead than alive, since when wronged and outraged, he is unable to help himself or any other for whom he cares. But in my opinion those who framed the laws are the weaker folk, the masses, and accordingly they frame the laws for themselves and their own advantage, and so too with their approval and criticism. To prevent the stronger, who are able to enforce their superiority, from gaining an advantage over them, the masses frighten them by saying that this is shameful and evil, and injustice consists in seeking to have more than his neighbors. They [the masses] are quite content, I suppose, to be on equal terms with others, since they themselves are inferior. And therefore the desire to have more than the masses, is by custom said to be shameful and unjust, and is called injustice, whereas nature herself makes it plain that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker; and in many ways she shows, among men as well as among animals, and indeed among whole cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior. For what justification had Xerxes in invading Greece, or his father in invading Scythia [modern day Ukraine and southern Russia]? And there are countless other similar instances one might mention. But I imagine that these men act in accordance with the true nature of right, yes and by heaven, according to nature's own law, though not perhaps by the law we frame.

Callicles goes on to describe how the weak majority keep the strong from gaining power over them: We mold the best and strongest among ourselves, catching them young like lion cubs, and by spells and incantations we make slaves of them, saying that they must be content with equality and that this is what is right and fair.

The response of the strong, superior man:

But if a man arises endowed with a nature sufficiently strong, he will, I believe, shake off all these controls, burst his fetters, and break loose. And trampling upon our scraps of paper, our spells and incantations, and all our unnatural customs, he rises up and reveals himself our master—who was once our slave, and there shines forth nature's true justice. And it seems to me that Pindar expresses what I am saying in his poem, that "Law is the king of all...[and] might makes right, justifying the most violent deed with victorious hand; this I prove by the deeds of Hercules..." who drove off the oxen of Geryon which were neither given to him nor paid for, because this is natural justice, that the cattle and all other possessions of the inferior and weaker belong to the superior and stronger.

² 483a-484c. W. D. Woodhead translation, with modifications from the Benjamin Jowett and W. C. Helmbold translations.