

The Morality of Jesus
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Different cultures place different values on certain behavior such as stealing, lying, sexual behaviors, violence, etc. To understand Jesus' morality, we must appreciate what was honorable ethics and what was seen as sinful. Sometimes this is most clearly seen in what got Jesus in trouble. Basically there were four things which engendered opposition for our Lord: Blasphemy (claiming certain prerogatives that only God had such as forgiving sins, receiving worship, or claiming equality or characteristics of God), threatening the temple, breaking Sabbath rules of rest, and fellowship with sinners. These first two accusations surfaced at his trial and are political charges. What is interesting, however, is that they were unprovable even with false witnesses. Moreover, they seldom surfaced in Jesus' ministry. Far and away the most common accusations against Jesus were the last two, which were social, not political accusations. In fact, I would argue that these are the real reasons Jesus was killed. But why were they such volatile activities?

Sabbath Violations:

Sec.	Text	Incident	Jesus' Logic
49b	Jn 5:10-18	Healed the Lame man	Like Father like Son--God is always working.
50	Mt 12:1-8 Mk 2:23-28 Lk 6:1-5	Picking Grain	Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath – greater than David or the priests
51	Mt 12:9-14 Mk 3:1-6 Lk 6:6-11	Healing Shriveled hand	"Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil?"
96a	Jn 7:21-24	Defense at the Feast of Tabernacles	If Moses allowed circumcision on the Sabbath then healing the whole body is acceptable
100a	Jn 9:1-7	Healed Man born Blind	To show the glory of God
110	Lk 13:10-21	Healed woman bowed double	A Child of Abraham is much more important than an ox or Donkey
114	Lk 14:1-24	Healed man with Dropsy	(Same as above)

The Sabbath was one of the distinctive marks of Judaism (along with circumcision, diet, and dress). Hence, to abandon the Sabbath was to jeopardize the identity of an ethnically endangered people group. While the rules may have been meticulous, even petty or silly, they represented something very serious to a group which perpetually found themselves outcast refugees. Persistent persecution and marginalization made the Jews ultra-sensitive about protecting their ideological (not to mention, geographical) turf.

Befriending Sinners

Sec.	Text	Incident	Jesus' Logic
35	Jn 4:4-42	Woman at the well	Samaritans can receive the gospel
55	Lk 7:1-10	Healing the centurion's servant	"I have not found such great faith in all Israel."
59	Lk 7:36-50	Prostitute Anoints Jesus	The one forgiven most loves most.
78	Mt 15:21-28	Canaanite Woman's demonized daughter	Your great faith has saved your daughter even though you don't belong to Israel.
100	Jn 9:1-7	Man born blind	Those who see are blind and the blind see (v. 39).
116	Lk 15	Parables of Lost & Found	Finding the Lost makes heaven rejoice.
127a	Lk 19:1-10	Zacchaeus	The son of man came to seek and save the lost.

Who in their right mind would protest kindness to marginalized people? We must remember the whole system of ritual purity. We must think like a first century Mediterranean person: (1) If a person suffers it is because God is punishing them for sin. To show them pity is to discredit the righteous judgment of God. (2) One person's sin can "rub off" on you if you get too close. (We remember all the rules for ritual purification and avoidance.) Thus sinners must be left alone to pay for their sin.

In short, the entire moral system of Judaism, reduced to a catalogue of rules, functioned as the walls of a box. A Jew was a good Jew if s/he could get to the center of the box by keeping more rules than anyone else. Specifically they were the visible rules of diet, day (Sabbath), and dress. Jesus came along and replaced the "morality of the box" with an ethic of compassion. He said that a good Jew was not one who kept the rules, but one who reached out to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and sinful. The problem is that these two systems are mutually exclusive. You can not show compassion to those outside the box and stay in the box at the same time. It's like children playing around a pool who lose their ball in the middle of the pool. Someone is going to have to jump in if they are to retrieve the ball. Only in reality, we're not rescuing a lost ball but drowning people.

All of us see the foolishness of the "morality of the box" . . . at least as it is exposed in ancient Judaism. We have more difficulty, however, in recognizing it in our own religious heritage. I'm not sure what the rules are where you live. But I've not found a group of Christians yet in any country, of any age, that has not had a false list of rules that supposedly described a good or bad Christian. Jesus is just as explosive with our false boxes as with his own culture's. To be a good Christian is therefore, not a matter of eating or drinking, dressing or resting. It is a matter of loving people that society despises regardless of the personal repercussions (which often come from the religious elite!).