

The Life With Men

by Harris Franklin Rall

The sermon explores the integral relationship between religion and ethics, emphasizing love, service, and the principles of brotherhood as taught by Jesus.

Scripture: Matthew 5:38, Matthew 22:34, Matthew 25:31, Mark 8:31, Mark 10:35

Topics: "Christian Ethics", "Servant Leadership"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches on the inseparable connection between religion and ethics in Jesus' teachings, contrasting it with the practices of his time. Jesus emphasizes that true religion leads to ethical living, encapsulated in the commandment to love God and love others as oneself. He prioritizes mercy and service over religious rituals, teaching that genuine brotherhood stems from faith in God as Father. Jesus exemplifies a life of sacrificial service, teaching that true greatness lies in serving others selflessly and that the essence of life is found in giving rather than receiving.

Transcript

All realize today that religion and morals must go together. It was not so in Jesus' time. In the Roman world religion was quite distinct from matters of conduct and character. The leaders of the Jewish faith laid the stress upon innumerable rites and rules which were to be observed for their own sake. With Jesus religion and ethics are one. He knows no such thing as a religion which does not issue in ethics, or a morality that does not spring from religion. The oneness is apparent from three considerations.

(1) It is seen in the great commandment in which Jesus sums up all religion: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt 22:34-40). Given in double form, the commandment really is one. The Pharisees summed up duty in six hundred and thirteen rules. Jesus has but one, and that is not a rule but an inner spirit. In that spirit faith and service are one; it is the same spirit whether turned toward God or man.

(2) Jesus declares that our love of God must be shown in the service of his brethren, of God's children (Matt 25:31-40). The mere forms of religion had no interest for Jesus. To be reconciled to one's brother comes before the gift at the altar. The Sabbath was not a form to be kept or a work to be done for God; it was a gift to man, and a good deed was the right way of keeping it. It was mercy, not sacrifice, that God wanted, as the prophet had taught long ago (Matt 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-5). (3) The heart of Jesus' ethics comes from his faith. To be a brother sums up the whole relation to men, but what that means we know only as we look to God. From his spirit as Father we learn what we are to be as sons, merciful as he

is merciful. And from his Fatherhood we learn that all men are our brothers, evil as well as good. Looking back today, we know that there never has been any real and full brotherhood except as there has been this faith in God as Father.

The first principle in the practice of brotherhood is that of reverence, the regard for humanity as sacred. Here, as at every point in the practice of brotherhood, the ideal is simply that men are to be "sons of the Father who is in heaven." God values men, as we have seen, and even welcomes back those that have been sinful (Luke 15). Human life is the one thing that is worth more than all the world (Mark 8:36, 37). Not even the weakest and meanest of human lives may be injured with impunity; "Whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it were better for him if a great millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" (Mark 9:42). And even the spirit of contempt shown toward our fellow men brings down the judgment of God (Matt 5:21, 22). Only gradually are we seeing the tremendous meaning for our social life of this teaching of Jesus, which has slowly been reversing the practice of the ages. The protection of property was the chief interest of law and government in his day. Gradually under this principle we are making human welfare our chief aim.

The second principle of brotherhood is the law of grace and good will. Here too it is the spirit of the Father that determines what the sons should be. We are to show the forgiving spirit to men as he shows it to us (Matt 6:12-15). And it is not to be a grudging or limited forgiveness. As God forgives us freely and constantly, so we are to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven. Jesus enforces this by the parable of the wicked servant, who owed his king the enormous sum of ten millions of dollars. Such a sum he could not think of paying. According to the cruel law of the time, it meant not simply prison but slavery for himself and family. Instead his lord remits the whole. The servant, however, finds a man who owes him a few dollars, and throws his poor creditor into prison because he cannot pay this. We are to practice toward men the mercy that God shows to us (Matt 18:21-35).

The strongest statement of this law of grace and good will is found in Matt 5:38-48. Just as Jesus ruled out legalism between God and man, so here between man and his fellow men. He puts aside the old give-and-take, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." He stands for justitia, and not jus, for righteousness, and not rights. Against the assertion of rights and the use of force to obtain them Jesus sets up his new principle: unconquerable good will and trust in the power of love. It is easy to mistake these words by taking them literally, as Tolstoy did. By these figures of speech, by drastic statement, Jesus is trying to contrast a new principle with the old. As always, it is a spirit that he stands for, and not a set of rules that he is giving. The spirit of legalism says, "I will give what I get." God does not treat men that way. He shows men good, not to repay what they have earned, but because this spirit of mercy is his own nature and is right in itself. So we are to show to all men a good will which no evil on their part can overcome: not resistance, not force when kindness fails, but unflinching love all the time.

The final law is that of service and sacrifice. The common rule with men is, Let us get what we can. Jesus' rule was, Let us give what we can. He illustrates it from the social life. To Jesus it seemed a sort of profanation of that hospitality which he himself was glad to receive to make it, as it commonly is, simply a give-and-take affair. "When thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed: because they have not wherewith to recompense thee" (Luke 14:12-14). Such hospitality had in it the real joy of serving and giving. Such a spirit of unselfish service Jesus appreciated wherever he saw it. He rebuked the narrow spirit of the disciples who were suspicious of some man who was curing demoniacs, but not a member of their company. The man was serving men, that was the great matter. Even a cup of cold water counted if given in this spirit (Mark 9:38-41).

This unselfish service was no mere duty for Jesus. It was a life, and the only way to achieve life. There are several instances where he set this forth. According to Mark, there were two occasions when the question of position came up among the disciples. Once the brothers, James and John, came to him asking that they might have chief places with him when he should come as King in triumph (Mark 10:35-45). Another time the disciples quarreled among themselves (Mark 9:33-41). For them the coming Kingdom still meant power and rule. "In my kingdom," says Jesus, "the way to reign is to serve. The chance to serve is the real throne of life. That man is first who serves best."

The same principle Jesus set forth in even more searching manner on another occasion. At the turning point in his career Jesus began telling his disciples that instead of his winning an earthly triumph, his enemies were to gain their ends, and he must suffer at their hands and die. In answer to their protest he gave them this searching lesson. To try to save your life when duty brings danger or death is simply to lose it; and to give up your life in daily service or in some supreme devotion is to find it. Against the real life thus found the whole world cannot be weighed in value (Mark 8:31-37). Keeping is losing, spending is gaining: that was Jesus' law of life.

Most important of all is the fact that this is the animating principle of Jesus' own life. On the one hand is the spirit of service. That was life's meaning for him, the opportunity of spending it for others. He was a servant (Mark 10:45). On the other hand was his confidence in the power of love as against all use of force. He had fought that out in the wilderness; he would not use the kingdoms of this world. To that principle he remained true. When they laid hands of force on him at last, he bowed to it; he knew that it was coming. He himself met alike the love of his friends and the deed of his enemies with love alone in return. The years since then have shown which was stronger, his weapon or that of his foes.

Directions for Reading and Study

The relation of religion and ethics: Matt 22:34-40; 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-5.

The law of reverence: Mark 8:36, 37; 9:42; Matt 5:21, 22.

As to the law of grace and good will, read Matt 6:12-15; 18:21-35; 5:38-48.

As to the law of service and sacrifice, read Luke 14:12-14; Mark 9:33-41; 10:35-45; 8:31-37.

What indications do you find in history and in modern social and legislative reforms of the reverence for human life which Jesus represents? Is this growing?

From concrete incidents in Jesus' own life, show that his actual method was the use of love and good will rather than force? How was that foreshadowed in the temptation experience?

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