

A PROBLEM WITH CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Richard Schoenig

Introduction

Christianity's claim of privileged access to correct morality has always been a key element in its ability to attract and retain adherents. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been considered the most complete and authoritative exposition of Christian ethics this side of the Ten Commandments. In this article I will argue that the moral authority of Jesus and some important aspects of Christian ethics can be called into question by a number of seriously flawed moral imperatives from the Sermon on the Mount.

Four Moral Prescriptions From The Sermon On The Mount

In Matthew 5:38-41 Jesus propounds four important and distinctive Christian moral prescriptions which I abbreviate as JEP (for Jesus' Ethical Prescriptions).

JEP: Love, don't resist, 'turn the other cheek to', and do good to your enemies.

It has been said that familiarity often dulls the critical faculty. This seems to be operative in Christians' stance toward JEP. They do not acknowledge that complying with JEP would not only be psychologically and socially problematic but also at times even seriously unethical. My case that there are major shortcomings with JEP starts with a pertinent counterexample to it.

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Counterexample (CE) To JEP

A morally accountable predator kidnaps a young girl whom he tortures and rapes for several weeks, after which he slowly and brutally murders her. Furthermore, he is totally without remorse. In fact, he previously committed similar atrocities and intends to commit more.

According to JEP it would have been immoral for the victim's mother or anyone else to have resisted the predator. What's more, the mother would have acted immorally if she did not love and do good to the torturer/rapist/murderer. Worse yet, the mother would have acted immorally if she did not hand over another of her daughters to the torturer/rapist/murderer in order to satisfy the turn-the-other-cheek imperative of JEP.

CE's sting is rooted in the fact that, first of all, the type of predation it describes is unfortunately not all that rare. Second, there is simply no rational justification for claiming that morality requires one to behave toward the child's torturer/rapist/murderer as JEP commands. On the contrary, moral propriety requires that innocents be protected. All other things being equal, anyone who could have stopped the predator should have, including by the use of force if necessary. If someone were to have done so, then, contrary to JEP, she would have been a moral hero, not a moral reprobate. It is noteworthy that throughout history Christians have rebuked people over violations of a wide assortment of Christian moral principles. Yet, aside from a few marginal denominations, Christians and their authorities have never castigated anyone for violating any JEP imperative in CE-type situations, though such violations have been the norm. This form of 'jury nullification' is evidence that Christians and their authorities have serious, albeit mostly unacknowledged, doubts about the moral cogency of JEP. So, CE presents a major challenge to JEP and, therefore, also to the moral sagacity of Jesus and the moral authority of Christianity.

Defenses Of JEP

Christians have offered a variety of defenses of JEP. Here follow a number of such defenses, together with my responses.

(1) *Adherence to JEP is defensible because it prevents resisters from becoming like the malefactors themselves.*

For example, Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, states: 'Don't resist one who is evil *probably* means something like, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Don't become what you oppose.' [Emphasis added]

The problem with this defense is that forcefully resisting murderers, rapists, terrorists and others rarely turns resisters into evildoers. One may cite the overwhelming majority of honorable law enforcers, military personnel, battered women, rape victims and the like who have forcefully resisted CE-type villains without thereby becoming morally tainted.

(2) *Adherence to JEP is defensible because it embodies a more elevated morality than previously practiced.*

For example, Ralph Wilson states:

Now let's consider what his [Jesus'] words [JEP] *don't* mean. They don't mean that we as a society should let criminals run free to do violence on any citizen. It doesn't mean we shouldn't call the police when robbed. It doesn't mean that we should stand idly by when someone is assaulted. Jesus' words aren't about crime or pacifism in war. They are about loving enemies in a radical way. If we seek to make a new law that overrides the civil law in Exodus against violent crime [the *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye etc.] we miss the point. Then we're trying to make a new law where Jesus intended that we look underneath the law intended to restrain sinful people. Having now a glimpse of love, don't try to legislate it.

I take the gist of Wilson's defense of JEP to be that we may resist evil persons, but we must also love them – a version of 'hate the sin, love the sinner'. The main problem with this interpretation is that the context and content of Matthew 5:38-41 neither explicitly nor implicitly supports it. The 'do not resist' command, like the other JEP imperatives, is given as holding unconditionally. Presumably, if Jesus had meant there to be hedging conditions, he could have easily spelled them out. That he chose not to do so warrants concluding that the prescriptions are categorical.

The remaining claims in Wilson's defense are veiled in obscurity. For example, it is unclear what he means by 'if we seek to make a new law...' To what 'new law' about what is he referring? Also, how and why do we find love as opposed to, say, justice or nothing at all 'underneath' the law (*lex talionis*)? In fact, to what sense of 'underneath' is Wilson referring? Finally, his last sentence adds more puzzlement: 'Having now a glimpse of love, don't try to legislate it.' What is the 'it' that we are not to try to legislate? Love? If so, then who would seek to legislate love anyway? If the 'it' is not love, then what is it? One would think that if love is to be brought into the moral response to malevolent actions, then instead of JEP's requirement that it be given indiscriminately to terrorists, rapists, batterers of women, child abusers, torturers and such, morality and victims would be much better served by rejecting JEP and acting on the basis of love of justice and love of those suffering predation. The Sufi sage Saadi of Shiraz sums up this up pithily, 'Merely doing good to the evil [malefactors] may be equivalent to doing evil to the good [victims].'

I would add that Saadi's remarks are even more pertinent when 'the evil' are CE-level perpetrators.

(3) *Adherence to JEP is defensible because Jesus was actually just speaking in hyperbole to enhance the clarity of his message. He meant JEP to apply only to modest infringements of morality, not to severe CE-type situations.*

Wilson suggests this in the following two excerpts:

Hyperbole has a respected place in teaching. Don't make the mistake of expecting every word Jesus says to be LITTERALLY true. What he says IS true, of course. But we must take it as it is meant. And we must take it very seriously. He *probably* uses hyperbole only to highlight a concept that his hearers are likely to miss without it. When Jesus speaks in hyperbole, we must be a thousand times more careful to listen. But we'd better discern when Jesus is speaking in hyperbole, or we'll make big mistakes in interpreting Scripture. [Emphasis added.]

The only notion of hyperbole with respect to defending JEP that makes any sense is that Jesus exaggerated when he implied that JEP was to apply to *all* enemies. He did not intend it to apply to CE-type predators. This interpretation seems to be what Wilson is getting at when he lists the kinds of enemies we face when adhering to JEP. He says:

Who are your enemies? ... Often they are the people close to us who have been hurt. A spouse or former spouse. A parent. A son or daughter. A co-worker at the job. An enemy of God who takes it out on you. Someone whose evil action you have exposed and is now out to get you. ... Remember, the context is enemies, those who insult us and seek to embarrass us.... We need Jesus to do a heart change ... toward our enemies ... God haters, vulgar, foul-mouthed, unfaithful to spouses, lying, cheating, stealing, selfish [people] ...

Noticeably absent from Wilson's list of enemies are CE-type malefactors, suggesting that he feels that Jesus' use of hyperbole involved using the universal claim, 'Resist not evil persons', when he really meant a more restrictive claim like 'Resist not lesser evil persons', such as those Wilson lists.

There are a number of difficulties with this interpretation however. First, there is no evidence that Jesus was

speaking hyperbolically in giving JEP. In fact, the claim of hyperbole seems suspiciously ad hoc, put forth merely to inoculate JEP from charges of being unreasonable – especially when applied to CE-type depredations. If Jesus meant JEP to be applied only to lesser slights and harms, then, once again, he could have easily and clearly said as much without having to use hyperbole. In fact, hyperbole would likely have unnecessarily confused his largely uneducated and rhetorically unsophisticated audience. It is frankly implausible to think that Jesus, as God incarnate, would have given such new momentous moral imperatives by solemnly intoning one thing but really meaning another, so that it would take later human expositors to clarify what he *really* meant.

A second problem with Wilson's defense is that even in cases of lesser harm than that which CE describes there is no obvious reason why one should be morally required to not resist, to love, to bless, to seek the good of, and to turn the other cheek for, an immoral enemy. Granted, there may be something to be said for forgiveness and mercy considered on a case by case basis, but this can be done without morally requiring people to adhere to JEP. It is interesting to compare Jesus' views with those of Confucius on these matters. In the *Analects* it is written: 'Someone inquired: "What do you think of requiting injury with kindness?" Confucius said "How then do you requite kindness? Requite injury with justice and kindness with kindness."'

(4) *Adherence to JEP is defensible because the nonresistance part of JEP does not proscribe resistance per se but only retaliatory or vengeful resistance.*

Patrick Rose gives voice to this defense as follows:

When the Lord commands us "not to resist evil", He is, then, speaking of a universal law. His words might at first seem puzzling. On the surface they might seem to be advocating an extreme and impractical form of pacifism. "But I tell you not to resist evil. But whoever slaps you on your right

cheek, turn the other to him also.” In the light of the Writings, though, the true meaning of this becomes clear. The Lord is not forbidding people from defending themselves and their rights. Rather He is talking about something quite different. He is talking about revenge. Indeed, He refers directly to what is sometimes called the *lex talionis* or law of retaliation or revenge in the Old Testament. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist evil . . .” The Lord is talking of the need to avoid a vengeful spirit if we are to come into charity.

Let us suppose that Jesus (like many before and after him) did oppose acting vengefully. It is still unlikely that his purpose in commanding JEP was only, or even primarily, to proscribe vengeful resistance to evil persons. Once again, if that were his purpose, he could have very simply said something like: ‘You may resist evil persons, but only in a non-vengeful manner.’ But, of course, he did not. He forbade *any* resistance. To make this perfectly clear he described three brief scenarios (Matt. 5:39-41) involving absolute non-resistance. They include turning the other cheek to one who has unjustly assaulted you, giving your cloak to one who has unjustly taken your tunic, and volunteering additional servitude to an unjust authority. These scenarios are not examples of refraining from vengeful behavior. A battered wife who does not turn her other cheek to her abuser is not acting with a vengeful spirit; a person who has had some of his possessions unjustly taken is not acting vengefully if he refuses to turn over the rest of his possessions to the robber; a kidnapped person who takes the opportunity to flee from her kidnapper is not engaging in vengeance. These three scenarios are not examples of people foregoing vengeful resistance to enemies. Rather, they are examples of people who are practicing Jesus’ radical ethical prescription to eschew *all*, not just vengeful,

resistance. Noted conservative biblical scholar, R.T. France, says as much in the following:

Jesus' position is shockingly radical: not only no retaliation, but even no resistance to one who is admittedly "bad".

Jesus is often quoted as opposing retaliation, a stance for which there are several parallels in the OT and other Jewish writings . . . and among pagan philosophers. But Jesus' words go further than that: even resistance is forbidden, and no distinction is made between active and passive resistance, violent and nonviolent, legal and illegal.

(5) *Adherence to JEP is defensible in that it should not be understood literally because doing so would contradict commands and actions of Jesus in other parts of the Gospels.*

Doug Apple expresses this defense as follows:

For example, First Timothy 5:8 says that I must provide for my family. So what if an evil person wants to take my provision for my family? Or what if someone simply asks for everything I own. Am I supposed to give it to them? . . . So should I just let them (harm me or my family), not resist them?

That's not what Jesus did, so that must not be what He meant by, "Do not resist an evil person" and "Give to everyone who asks." So what *did* He mean? What did Jesus mean by *anything* He said? We find out by looking at the entirety of His teaching, not just by pulling one thing out here and there and treating it like a blanket statement. Yes, we do what Jesus said – within the context of all that He said.

Unfortunately, Apple doesn't explain what Jesus *did* mean by the 'resist not' imperative. In Apple's defense Jesus

comes across unflatteringly as inconsistent in violating his own imperative. Apple concludes, therefore, that we too are thereby warranted in violating JEP. Note that Apple's remarks implicitly concede that, literally understood, JEP is morally counterintuitive. So Apple infers that what it says must not really be what Jesus meant. But then why did Jesus command 'resist not' in the first place? We are still left with the questions of what Jesus intended and why he didn't just say it straight out.

It is interesting to note that, although Apple claims that we don't have to adhere to JEP because Jesus didn't, other Christian commentators have argued precisely the opposite, namely, that we do have to adhere to JEP because Jesus did, as exemplified in his response to his maltreatment by the Romans. These conflicting claims highlight that even after two millennia Christians still lack a consensus about how they should understand and act with regard to JEP.

(6) Adherence to JEP is defensible in that its prescriptions are to be understood more as suggestions applying to private individuals rather than public authorities.

The following excerpt from the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (NCE) supports this defense.

His [Jesus'] pronouncement on nonresistance to evil is taken as a counsel rather than as a precept, and for private individuals rather than for public authorities, since these latter would fail in an essential duty were they to offer no forceful resistance to violent aggressors from within or without.

One can reasonably surmise that the NCE employs this defense in order to block the otherwise unavoidable conclusion that JEP requires an indefensible pacifism which would be exceedingly objectionable to the vast majority of Christians (among others). The problem with the NCE defense, as we've seen time and again with defenses of JEP, is that there is no indication whatsoever that Jesus did, in fact, intend it to be merely 'a counsel rather than a

precept, and for private individuals rather than for public authorities'. Yet once again, if this were what Jesus meant, why wouldn't he have just said it? There is no precedent for the counsel vs. precept or private individuals vs. public authorities distinction in any of Jesus' other Sermon on the Mount prescriptions. One would think that, as with any unqualified imperatives, unless there are clear indications to the contrary, Jesus' imperatives should be understood as applying to all moral agents, public or private, and as strictly binding rather than merely suggestive (if that is indeed what the NCE means by 'counsel'). Note finally that the NCE defense still leaves unanswered all the difficulties exposed by the CE that are associated with even a limited application of JEP only to private individuals.

(7) *Adherence to JEP is defensible in that its prescriptions do permit one to resist evil, but only non-violently.*

Walter Wink, for one, expresses this as follows:

In the past, we have thought we had only two choices, either resist evil or don't resist evil. Jesus seemed to be saying, "Don't resist evil", and, therefore, non-resistance seemed to be the only alternative. Be supine, submit, surrender, flee, give up. It seems as if Jesus were asking us to be a doormat for God, to give up all concern for our own justice as well as the justice of others. Now we see in this passage interpreted in a new light, Jesus is not calling on people to be non-resistant. He is calling on them to be non-violent. He is calling on them to resist, yes, but to resist in a way that is not injurious or harmful to the other person.

In response to this defense I will first of all repeat the pertinent comments of France presented above.

Jesus is often quoted as opposing retaliation, a stance for which there are several parallels in the OT and other Jewish writings . . . and among pagan philosophers. But Jesus' words go further than that:

even resistance is forbidden, and no distinction is made between active and passive resistance, *violent and nonviolent*, legal and illegal. [Emphasis added.]

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument assume, contrary to fact, that proscribing only violent resistance was what Jesus had in mind. That assumption would still not rescue JEP from charges of implausibility or worse. History records that in the vast majority of cases resisting CE-type malefactors nonviolently has proven to be ineffective in stopping, countering, or ameliorating the great evil that they do. For example, resisting Holocaust Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, or the murderer from the CE 'in a way that is not injurious or harmful to the other person' would not only have been unavailing but in some instances would have been a substantial dereliction of moral duty. Add to this the other requirements of JEP to love, do good to, and 'turn the other cheek to' Nazis, Khmer Rouge, and CE murderer-rape-torturer types, and the unacceptability of JEP becomes even more manifest. It is very likely that if either the non-violence or the literal interpretation of JEP were normative and followed, no reasonably just society could survive for long. France put it this way:

Those who have understood the true thrust of Jesus' teaching here [JEP] have often declared it to be not only extreme and unwelcome, but also practically unworkable in the real world. You cannot live like this. It would be to encourage the unscrupulous and the feckless and so to undermine the proper ordering of society.

(8) Adherence to JEP is defensible because its prescriptions were not meant to be taken literally but simply as exhortations to us to strive for moral perfection.

In support of this interpretation one might cite Matthew 5:48: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Obviously, there is no way a human being can be

perfect like God; but Christians could argue that JEP should be understood as a call to use the ideal of God's perfect moral character, partially embodied in JEP, to guide and encourage our best moral efforts.

The problem with this defense, however, is not just that socially and psychologically JEP is nearly impossible to live up to, but that there is insufficient justification for claiming that it even *should be* lived up to. This was argued for all along in the article by defending the efficacy of CE by showing the weaknesses of the various Christian defenses of JEP. In short, JEP is by no means an ideal standard that should be followed.

Conclusion

There are two salient conclusions to be drawn from this analysis. First, if the defenses of JEP examined above are the best that have been mustered and if my assessments of them are sound, then CE is not defeated. The result is that the credibility of Christian morality, Jesus as moral sage, and even Christianity itself is significantly tarnished.

Second, given the emblematic status of JEP within Christian ethics, it is rather surprising that after nearly two millennia the best minds in Christendom still have not presented a probative defense of JEP or even come to a consensus on what Jesus meant by it. It is quite unexpected to hear Christians talk about what Jesus 'probably' meant by this or that JEP imperative. And they are the honest ones. Most of the others are really dispensing conjecture even though their language is categorical. This level of disagreement and uncertainty likely accounts for the relative diffidence of Christians to comment much on JEP. The strategy, for the most part, seems to be to benignly ignore the JEP tar baby as much as possible – out of sight, out of mind. If this article's forceful critique of JEP doesn't fully expose the absence of Imperial raiment, then perhaps it

may at least be the pulled thread which eventually unravels what he has been wearing.

Richard Schoenig is a Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, ESLA and Philosophy, San Antonio College. rschoenig@alamo.edu