

An Assessment of the Key Theological and Ethical Principles in Old and New Testament Texts – Exodus 20:11-27 & Matthew 5:1-49

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Assessment One

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Morally and Ethically

As we go about our daily lives, intrinsic to the majority are ethical and moral values. A world without the presence of these would probably result in utter chaos. Even within the animal kingdom, these principles appear to be present, albeit to a lesser extent from a human perspective; the practices of maintaining the food chain being an example of how the two differ - which is debateable if you ask any vegetarian. With the exception of extreme situations of self-preservation, moral and ethical principles are an unspoken natural law we all appear to adhere to. However, as with most things, there are levels or degrees of what specific societies, communities, religions and belief systems deem as morally or ethically acceptable. In addition to this, values change over time due to evolution, or in some cases, devolution.

So what is the distinction between morals and ethics? Ethical principles are a result of collective agreement upon what is considered to be morally proper and are developed to address specific values within a system. Organisations will have codes of conduct which incorporate ethical principles that reflect the nature of their service or product. Moral values on the other hand, although generally similar from one person to another, can also vary; it is a misnomer that if a person has 'morals' that they are good, as a person can also have bad morality. Morals are what direct a person to conduct themselves toward a certain behaviour.

When examining the following texts in respect of the moral and ethical considerations, we will endeavour to account for differences such as; natural evolution, development of thought and ideas, the political structure of the time, the environment, customs, philosophy, and the necessities which may have been present as a result of these.

Text 1 – Exodus 20:11-27 (NRSV)

Upon examination of this text, we see present a number of themes which can be explored in respect of moral and ethical considerations. In Exodus 20:11, God's provision for mankind is noted. It demonstrates briefly how God makes sure that he provides future mankind with all that is needed and did not rest until it was complete.¹ From today's perspective, there is both morality and ethical consideration present in this act as it ensured the welfare of mankind; it would not be ethical to bring life to a world with no provision. This can be argued as moral and ethical obligation, which is attached to any form of creation. In Genesis we are told that God views his creation as 'good', we know now however that evil exists, questioning the stochastic nature of creation.² We also see how God's creation relates to the sabbath, which he blessed. This can be viewed as an example of recognition and appreciation which is a moral principle.

Exodus 20:13, 'You shall not murder', has many moral and ethical connotations including respect for life, regard for those affected as a result, disregard for others physical pain, wrongful sense of entitlement, and obedience of God's will. For the majority of people murder is not

¹ Gene Greeson, *God Provides!*, Indiana: Xlibris, 2022).

² J.A. Scott Kelso & David A. Engstrom, *The Squiggle Sense: Sixth Sense of the Complementary Nature and the Metastable Brain~Mind*, (Cham: Springer, 2024), P.66.

something they would find themselves capable of. However, although there is distinction in law – and therefore the ethical concept – killing is not the same as murder. A person may accidentally kill another person yet not have committed murder. Ask the family of the deceased person however, and the response is likely to be that the person ‘murdered’ their family member. The moral and ethical principles in question between the two are intent. God is forgiving of sins as he gave mankind free will but considers murder as an act of disobedience. Another concept is that of God’s instruction on how to view your fellow man. As quoted from Laura Schlessinger and Stewart Vogel,

If you believe that the prohibition of murder is related to the verse “Love your fellow as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), or as Jesus taught, “Do unto others whatever you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12), or its rabbinic twist, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor”, then murder is wrong because we do not want to be killed.³

‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Exodus 20:14), is the next commandment, which of course has a moral consideration in relation to the pain which it may cause, but also from an ethical standpoint, it is an act which could be disruptive to communities through attempts at retribution, lawful stoning (of the time) of the individuals involved, and re-distribution of properties.⁴ ‘If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death’. (Leviticus 20:10). Over time, and through the emergence of Jesus’ teachings, an alternative view of adultery can be found,

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, men who engage in illicit sex,¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6: 1-11).

This text in 1 Corinthians demonstrates how ethics and morality can evolve and change through better understanding and compassion. In most of today’s societies, adultery – although still ethically wrong – does not seem to hold the moral burden that it once did.

The next commandment, ‘You shall not steal’ (Exodus 20:15); chosen for its relevance of today’s craving of material possessions, certainly has implications in regard to morality and ethics, but why was this important to God? Putting aside the lack of obedience to his will, God’s promise to provide for his children is put to question when someone feels the desire to steal. By following God’s will, the virtuous behaviours that follow would surely equip sufficiently, eliminating the desire to steal.

³ Laura Schlessinger & Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God’s Laws in Everyday Life*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), p.176.

⁴ Edward F Jr., Mrkvicka, Kelly H. Mrkvicka, *No Innocent Affair: Making Right the Wrong of Adultery*, (Oklahoma: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2011).

Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. (Proverbs 10: 2-4).

Exodus 20:16 discusses falsehoods; 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour'. The basis of this commandment seems to be 'do not lie', but that is not exactly correct when examined. There are instances where it is necessary to lie in order to keep someone or oneself safe. It seems that God's intention was to ensure no harm would occur to 'your neighbour' as a result of a falsehood being told and didn't include lying for self-preservation or the preservation of others. James Smith's account of the ten commandments recounts an example where God rewarded lies is found in Exodus 1, when the midwives lied to the King of Egypt and God rewarded them; so it is not simply about lies. He also finds a parallel in bearing false witness to murder,

Most people do not take slander seriously until they are the victim of it. This sin is serious.

It is a form of murder for it assassinates character. Slander is linked with stealing (Leviticus 19:11). It robs reputations, honor, status, standing and peace of mind.⁵

As we can see, the principle here is the morality of doing no harm, and the ethical principle of lying.

The commandment to not covet, (Exodus 20:17), like 'You shall not commit adultery' and 'You shall not steal', alludes to a sinful desire. In addition to sinful desire, it also suggests jealousy; wanting to possess something which does not belong to you. In Exodus 20:5, God describes himself as a jealous God, and did he not also ask us to embody his values? He also provided us with freedom to choose; so could it be that God being all, has to also be all things? We are human, God is not. Shubert Spiro wrote, 'Moral judgements only apply to human beings and their behaviour'.⁶

The moral and ethical significance of (Exodus 20:18-21) may be somewhat difficult to discern, especially considering the absence of moral judgement upon God as previously mentioned. The Israelites were afraid of dying before God and would only listen to Moses recounting what God had said. Is it ethical to seek obedience through fear? We would argue not, but when we look at ourselves, and how we endeavour to keep our children safe, we are also sometimes guilty of using fear to do so. 'Know then, in your heart that, as a parent disciplines a child, so the Lord your God disciplines you' (Deuteronomy 8:5). The concept of testing faith – as Moses had suggested to the people – is frequent within most religious texts, and may have some ethical standing; in modern day life, nearly every new job one acquires has a probationary period to evaluate whether the employee will be able to serve the company adequately, and is an ethically sound practice. A pertinent quote from Onu Godswill reads, 'You may say that you believe in Christ Jesus, that you have faith in the Word of God, that you love God; but it is when you are tried and tested that you will be proved'.⁷

⁵ James E. Smith, *The Ten Commandments Reconsidered*, 2nd edn. (self-published: lulu.com2016) p.312.

⁶ Shubert Spiro, *Morality, Halakha, and the Jewish Tradition*, (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc. Yeshiva University Press, 1983), p.4.

⁷ Onu Godswill Godswill, *Tests, Temptations, Trials, and Wilderness Experiences*, 2nd edn., (Nigeria: Godswill Christian Publications, 2014), p.21.

The remaining part of the text is concerning God's instruction upon worship. His instruction to not make idols (Exodus 20:23) is difficult to understand from a moral or ethical viewpoint. Although a discussion on paganism, Michael York provides a good explanation,

A bogus god is to be located whenever the deity is reduced to an idol, representation or reification and nothing more – it becomes something that one hides behind as a mask, cover or subterfuge. In other words, generous ethical behaviour is open and authentic; it cannot be camouflaged by disguise or buried within national idols for unethical purposes – whether as individuals, groups or nations.⁸

These themes were chosen from the text as both a parallel to modern day living, and to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to have faith.

Matthew 5:1-49 (NRSV)

There are a number of themes present in this text, many of which hold moral and ethical consideration. The text begins with Jesus reassuring the people amongst the crowd, who may feel lost or helpless, that God will bless them. (Matthew 5:1-12) Is this an indication of moral duty? When a person comes to you in distress, the immediate reaction is to assure them, telling them that everything will be ok. It would be ethically unsound to make promises to people knowing that those promises may not be kept. 'Jesus promises that the land will be of the meek, that is, those that evolve spiritually. Thus, the ethics of Jesus, is the pursuit of development and exercise of these moral values, as Jesus' disciples must practice meekness'.⁹

The next part of the text has been chosen as it has become a well-known phrase in part. Here we see Jesus describing the people as 'the salt' and 'the light' (Matthew 5:13-16). We have adopted the saying that someone is 'the salt of the earth', with the understanding that the person is 'good'. Similarly, we often say that someone is 'the light of my life', meaning the person brings them joy and purpose. In a sermon, John Stone describes 'the salt' as 'an antiseptic' cleansing and preserving life (salt certainly has properties conducive to preservation)¹⁰, whilst Riaan Engelbrecht writes that our light reflects God's glory.¹¹ Salt may signify preservation of

⁸ Michael York, *Pagan Ethics: Paganism as a World Religion*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), p.245.

⁹ Group of Ethics Studies, *The Ethics of Jesus*, (2015) Google Books, <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Ethics_of_Jesus_Christ/> [accessed 02 July 2025].

¹⁰ John Seely Stone, *The Church, The Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World, A Sermon [on Matt. V. 13-16] Preached Before the Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Pittsfield, Etc by John Seely Stone*, (1835),

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Church_the_Salt_of_the_Earth_and_the/piGo8go0cH0C?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=the+salt+and+the+light&pg=PA7&printsec=frontcover > [accessed 03 July 2025].

¹¹ Riaan Engelbrecht, 'Minister of Salt and Light', in Vol 5, *Discipleship Series*, <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Minister_of_Salt_and_Light/H8euEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=salt+and+light&pg=PT28&printsec=frontcover > [accessed 02 July 2025].

faith, and adding flavour to life, and light may represent illuminating belief and being seen. The morality pertaining to this would be simply to be 'good' and to provide a light to others so that they too can witness God's glory. Examining what is meant by this text seems to be an example of an ongoing ethical reflexive process.¹²

In Matthew 20:17-20, Jesus tells the people that his preaching is not in contradiction to the law and the prophets, emphasising that it is the responsibility of the people to abide by God's law and to teach others to do the same. This part of the text describes moral responsibility. William Schweiker writes, '...Christian ethics must be formulated as an integrated ethics of responsibility if it is to remain consistent with its basic commitments'.¹³ If the responsibility lays with the individual, it follows that it is the virtue of the person that concerns God, rather than the outcome.¹⁴ People without faith may argue that if there was a God, he wouldn't let bad things happen, but God tries to tell us that even the worst outcome – death – is only to be feared if you do not follow his laws.

Next Jesus talks about 'anger'. He reminds the people of the law, but also explains that God requires them to be truly loving in their hearts, not just in their words and acts. We see a similar concept in verses 27-30, where Jesus says that it is not only the act of adultery that is sinful, but also the thoughts a person may hold. Some accepted societal laws of the time are no longer so today, and therefore scripture needs to be understood as such.¹⁵ Consideration of these changing values can be seen as a moral assessment.

The last theme in the text discusses 'love' (Matthew 20:43-48). As the previous verses discuss, here we see Jesus trying to make the people understand that by 'turning the other cheek' and 'loving your enemy', that God will bless you, and that the suffering you experience on earth will be as nothing when reaching the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁶ The moral virtue of rising above, and overcoming adversity is still relevant, retaliation provokes, and we end up in an endless cycle of violence and chaos. As in Matthew 5:13-16, if collectively we keep our faith and shine our light together, it may become enough to touch everyone.

The textual analysis in relation to moral and ethical conduct has outlined many aspects which remain relative today. Too many of the principles today, however, seem to have diminished in their practice. It has also shown the development of morality and ethical principle's progression from the Old Testament to the New Testament and how societal law influenced their consideration. The texts' messages to mankind could be viewed as a template for harmonious co-existence, whilst also providing a guide on the virtues necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹² Angus Slater, 'Scripture and Authority in Christian Ethics', *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, UWTSD, (June 2025).

¹³ William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.213.

¹⁴ Jonathan J Sanford, *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Bruce C. Birch, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, 3rd edn.. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, (Review And Herald Publishing Association :Maryland, 1956).

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