

Jesus' life provides model of morality

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Courier columnist

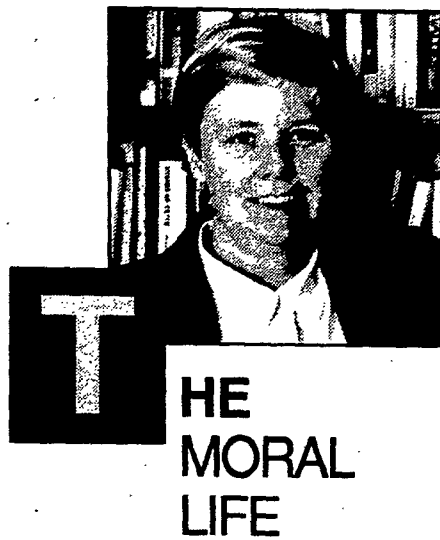
I was struck recently by a passage in a book dealing with the Beatitudes. The passage, by Michael Crosby, is part of an introduction to Evelyn Mattern's "Blessed Are You."

In his introduction, Crosby explains that he often begins his classes by asking students to write down the beatitudes. The outcome of his request most often is that people simply don't know the beatitudes of Jesus.

Crosby goes on to ask: "Why is it that in such a large group of people only one or two might know the eight beatitudes, while only one or two would not know the ten commandments? Is our moral life and discipleship still defined by the Mosaic code rather than the core teachings of Jesus?" (p. 9).

Crosby's question startled me in a way, probably because so much of moral theology manages to avoid Jesus! Oddly enough, it is very often the case that when we begin to discuss morality, even religious morality, we turn to rules, laws, commands, demands, customs and mores, and forget to recall the One who is the foundation and focus of it all.

Part of the reason for this, I suppose, is that we long for a "quick code" that provides us with a shorthand ver-



THE MORAL LIFE

sion of precisely what is required of us so we don't go astray. We don't much relish having to wrestle with an entire life to discover what is truly important for our own lives — even if that life be the one lived by Jesus! Instead, we very often want just the bare essentials, and then without complication or ambiguity.

The Gospels, of course, give us a record quite different from that. They present views of a Jesus who seems to go against the grain of what we might call "decent moral living." You can read a book by Adolf Holl titled "Jesus in Bad Company" if you don't believe me on that one!

In fact, there is much about Jesus that makes us question many of our own assumptions about the goals we take for our own lives. In contrast to standards praised in our own society, for example, Jesus identified with the poor and oppressed, and made it clear that wealth is an obstacle to entering the Kingdom of God (Mt. 19:16-30, Mk. 10:17-31, Lk. 18:18-30).

Jesus seemed actually to practice a kind of "downward mobility" in terms of his own career path by challenging many of the accepted standards of his own day. He spent time with and touched lepers (Mk. 1:40-41). He conversed with women (Mk 7: 2430, Jn. 4:4-30), which was not acceptable at the time. He cured on the Sabbath (Lk. 13:10-17), defended an adulteress (Jn. 8:111), condemned the hypocrisy of religious officials (Mt. 23:136), put the love of neighbor on a par with the love of God (Mk. 12:28-31), and even claimed that our response to people in need will be God's standard of judgment for us (Mt. 25:31-46). He told us to forgive those who hurt us and to have mercy on those who need it.

It's no wonder, then, that we find it awkward to introduce Jesus into our discussions about morality! In the view of all this, it's hardly surprising that the Second Vatican Council actually had to tell moral theologians to include the Bible in their thinking and writing about the moral life! The story of Jesus

in the New Testament and the story of Israel in the Old Testament challenge many of the standards we ordinarily associate with moral codes and the rules and laws that guarantee our own "goodness."

In his book called "Spirituality and Justice," Donal Dorr offers a summary of Jesus' teaching and ministry. He reminds us that Jesus challenged oppressive religious authorities; called into question religious rulers' assumptions that their power entitled them to impose their will on others; proclaimed that to be open to God involves being willing to share our wealth with the poor; condemned the rich who were unwilling to share; had friendly relations with outcasts; insisted that his followers see themselves as servants rather than lords; and refused to abide by traditions that led "respectable" religious people to despise certain categories of people, including Samaritans and women (p. 94).

Michael Crosby's observation above indicates that we are far more ready to examine our consciences according to laws we haven't broken than we are to measure ourselves according to the life and teachings of Jesus. After 2,000 years, we still seem to be looking for codes of morality that oversimplify the moral life and actually serve to distract and shield us from what we have been told is truly the way, the truth, and the life.

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