Religion 274: Jesus and the Moral Life
Draft Syllabus for Spring, 2017

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Course Description

This online course examines the ethical teachings of Jesus with close attention to their historical, literary, and theological contexts. It also sets Jesus’ moral teachings in the context of the Western ethical tradition, and brings them to bear on the task of contemporary ethical reflection. Issues examined may include non-violence, social and economic justice, sexuality, and racial and ethnic conflict.

Course Goals

➢ To introduce (or delve more deeply into) the task of critical ethical inquiry in both its theoretical and practical dimensions: What is ethics? What is the good? What are some of the basic frameworks in which these questions have been addressed?
➢ To consider different models for understanding how the Christian scriptures might function in ethical reflection and practice
➢ To give students the opportunity to examine closely a major aspect of the Christian normative framework for ethical reflection: What did Jesus actually teach (and how do we know)? Do his life and teachings provide a coherent set of principles? What role has the “imitation of Christ” played in the Christian tradition and life? What role should it play?
➢ To examine and debate current ethical issues in light of these perspectives: How are Jesus’ life and teachings relevant to contemporary ethical concerns (e.g., war and peace, social and economic justice, human sexuality)? Are they to be understood as a sectarian ethic, or can they be applied more broadly? Can one be a Christian and disagree with a particular teaching of Christ? How do Jesus’ teachings inform your own moral life and perspective on these issues?

Course Requirements

• Significant weight (15%) will be placed on (informed) participation in class discussion and debate through Moodle forums. There will be one topic/question each week of the course; each student will be expected to write one substantial entry and at least two responses to other student entries.
• An essay examining an ethical teaching of Jesus in historical context (20%)
• An essay examining the contemporary implications of an ethical teaching of Jesus (20%)
• A review of one of the course books (10%)
• Occasional short response papers, as assigned
• A digital presentation on a contemporary ethical issue (15%)
• A final exam(20%)
Course Texts (Representative)

The Bible. Any good study Bible (e.g., the Oxford Annotated)
Rhoads, David. The Challenge of Diversity. Fortress, 2004

Course Outline

I. Foundations: An introduction to major ethical frameworks and questions in the Western Tradition
II. The Bible and Ethics: How do, and should, the Bible and Christian faith function in ethical reflection?
III. What did Jesus do? The Ethics of Jesus
   A. Jesus’ Life and Teachings
   B. The Sermon on the Mount and the Radical Demands of Jesus
IV. What Would Jesus Do? The Ethics of Jesus and Contemporary Ethical Issues
   Issues to be addressed:
   A. Social and Economic Justice
   B. Non-Violence, Non-Retaliation, and Forgiveness
   C. Racial and Ethnic Conflict
   D. Sex, Marriage, Homosexuality
I. Foundations: An Introduction to Major Ethical Questions and Frameworks

Week One (Feb 6-12)
Preli minary Questions: What is Ethics? Why should I be moral? Is Religion necessary for Morality?

• Pojman, Chs. 1, 5, 11
• Personal Moral Dilemma and Background Paper
• Forum Discussion: Response to either Ch. 5 or Ch. 11

Week Two (Feb 13-19)
Is Morality Relative or Absolute?
• Pojman, Chs. 2-3
• Forum Discussion: Ethics in a Global Context (issues related to relativism/absolutism)

Week Three (Feb 20-26)
Decisionist Ethics: Deontological and Utilitarian Frameworks
• Pojman, Chs. 7-8
• Forum Discussion: Ethical Issues through Deontological and Utilitarian Lenses

Week Four (Feb 27-March 5)
Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Person do I want to Be?
• Pojman, Ch. 9
• Forum Discussion: Decisionist vs. Virtue Ethics

II. The Bible and Ethics: How do, and should, the Bible and Christian faith function in ethical reflection?

Week Five (March 6-12)
The Bible, Christianity, and Ethics
• Stassen/Gushee, Chs. 3-4
• Grimsrud/Nation, Chs. 1,3,5
• Forum Discussion: The Bible and Homosexuality

III. What did Jesus do? The Ethics of Jesus

Week Six (March 13-17)
The Context of Jesus’ Ethics
• Fredriksen, “The Idea of Israel” (pdf)
• Claiborne, 15-60
• Forum Discussion: Greco/Roman and Jewish Ethics in the first Century

March 18-26: Spring Break
Week Seven (March 27-April 9)
The Ethics of the Four Gospels
• Rhoads, Chs. 1,3-5
• The Gospels (selections)
• Forum Discussion: Four Gospels, One Jesus?

Week Eight (April 10-16) [Essay 1 due April 10]
The Ethics of Jesus of Nazareth
• Stassen/Gushee, Chs. 1-2, 5-7
• Claiborne, Chs. 1-3
• Forum Discussion: Responses to Papers

IV. What Would Jesus Do? The Ethics of Jesus and Contemporary Ethical Issues

Week Nine (April 17-23)
Poverty and Wealth
• Group I Digital Presentations Due
• Stassen/Gushee, Ch. 18
• Claiborne, Ch. 6
• Forum Discussion: Response to Digital Presentations

Week 10 (April 24-30)
War and Peace
• Group 2 Digital Presentations Due
• Stassen/Gushee, Ch. 16
• Claiborne, Chs. 7, 10
• Forum Discussion: Response to Digital Presentations

Week 11 (May 1-7)
Sexuality
• Group 3 Digital Presentations Due
• Stassen/Gushee, Chs. 12-13
• Forum Discussion: Response to Digital Presentations

Week 12 (May 8-14)
Racism
• Group 4 Digital Presentations Due
• Stassen/Gushee, Chs. 11, 20
• Forum Discussion: Response to Digital Presentations

Week 13 (May 15-16)
Wrapping Up: Do Jesus’ Ethics Provide a Viable Moral Framework?
• Essay 2 due May 16
• Final Forum Post: Jesus’ Ethics and Me