

# “Jesus and the Moral Life”

a sermon by

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**Text: “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (Luke 16:8).**

Harvey Cox, who for a number of years has taught at the Harvard Divinity School, recently published a book entitled *When Jesus Came to Harvard*. In that book Cox brought to light a problem that was not only on the campus of Harvard, but it was on the campus of many colleges and universities in this country. A number of members of the faculty began to realize that while they were doing a good job in educating students in the humanities and the sciences, they were giving their students virtually no preparation on how to apply their education in a morally responsible way. This was certainly borne out in the Wall Street scandals that affected the business community during the past years as companies like Enron and WorldCom experienced huge scandals involving fraud and the misuse of corporate money. One of the alarming aspects of these scandals was that many of the people indicted were trained at some of the best business schools in the country, including the Harvard Business School. Another troubling aspect of campus life to Cox and other members of the Harvard faculty was the decline in student behavior on the college and university campuses. It wasn't just the underage drinking, it was the excessive use of alcohol and the attendant behavior that was painfully demonstrated on the campus of Duke University this past spring.

In response to these two crises: the University introduced a “division of moral reasoning” into the undergraduate curriculum. Harvey Cox taught one of the courses in this

division. It was entitled “Jesus and the Moral Life.” It was a course that attempted to use the teachings of Jesus as a way to help students make moral choices.

In his book Cox relates his great surprise at the response to this class. Within a short period of time there were eight hundred students who had signed up for this class. The attendance was so large that the course had to be transferred from a classroom to Memorial Hall, a venue usually reserved for rock bands and symphony concerts. The class was filled not only with young people from Christian backgrounds, but there were Jews and Muslims as well. For the first time the students had a chance to talk about things that were close to their hearts: the role of money in their lives, the moral questions about human sexuality that are so much a part of college life.

## I.

One of the most difficult sayings of Jesus is found in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke in the parable that is sometimes referred to as the “Parable of the Unjust Steward.” Harvey Cox called it “The Story of the Crooked CEO.” It is a parable about a steward or a “money manager” who did a very dishonest thing. He found out that he was about to lose his job. So, in order to provide for a “soft landing” this manager went to the people who owed his master money. In order to gain favor with these individuals he reduced the amount they owed his master. In other words, he “cooked” the books. The shocking thing about this parable is that Jesus did not condemn the manger for his dishonesty but praised him for his prudence. Jesus went on to say to his disciples that sometimes the “sons of darkness” are sometimes more shrewd than the sons of light.

Through the ages this teaching of Jesus has troubled many people. Some scholars have argued that it is not really a saying of Jesus but one that was later added on by Luke or another editor of Luke’s gospel.

In many ways, however, this parable demonstrates a critical aspect of the teachings of Jesus. On many occasions Jesus did not so much give answers as he encouraged his disciples to wrestle with issues and find an answer for themselves.

## II.

One of the most important aspects of looking at moral issues is to recognize that many moral issues are more complicated than we are sometimes willing to admit. Reinhold Niebuhr, when he was a young pastor in a working-class church in Detroit, Michigan, during the Great Depression, once told of a young boy that came to him with a question. These young boys were part of a Confirmation class. They were studying the “Sermon on the Mount” and particularly the sayings of Jesus about “turning the other cheek” or “walking the second mile.” Many of the young boys in his church had to work jobs after school to help make money to support their families. Some of these boys sold newspapers on the street corners to supplement the family’s income. Some street corners were more visible and more profitable than others and often the boys would have to fight among themselves over who got the choice spots. This young teenager

told his pastor that he was in a dilemma. His father had died and he was a big part of the support of his mother and siblings. He told his minister that if he did not fight the other boys for the best spots to sell newspapers, then his family would suffer. The question this young boy had for his minister was this: Should he try to get the best spot possible to sell newspapers to support his family or should he “turn the other cheek” and allow the others to have the best spot?

Niebuhr said that this young boy’s question forced him to understand that not all ethical dilemmas are between right and wrong. In some instances people are forced to choose between the “lesser of two evils.” War, for example, presents this kind of dilemma. No Christian should ever support a war. On the other hand, sometimes war is morally justified in the face of a great evil. This is true in other areas as well, including such issues as divorce and abortion. Often individuals are not faced with the choice of right versus wrong, but with choosing the lesser of two evils.

### III.

At no place is the issue of “Jesus and Moral Life” no more critical than in our attitude toward money. Students of the New Testament know that Jesus spoke more about the use of money than any other subject in the New Testament.

Harvey Cox noted that in his class at Harvard the most sensitive subject for the students was not human sexuality, but money. Cox noted that the scholarships at schools like Harvard were pretty generous and it is not just a school for the wealthy. Often he said the wealthier students were embarrassed by their family’s wealth, while the middle class students appeared to be envious and the poor students appeared to be angry with everyone.

Cox noted that at Harvard the richer kids tended to dress down. Often they spent more money to buy clothes that were made to look used and shabby. They didn’t want to flaunt their money, although most of them would fly to Switzerland for the Spring Break to go skiing.

One of the most difficult aspects of the life of the church is the issue of a person’s giving to the church. Stewardship is always more than one’s pledge to the church, but it is never less than that. Most of us know that our checkbook tells a lot about our real values. Jesus understood the intimate connection between a person’s true values and the way that person spent his or her money. “Where your treasure is,” Jesus said, “there is your heart.”

This morning begins the stewardship season at First Presbyterian Church. Over the next several weeks each of us will be asked to consider what contribution we will make to the operating budget of the church. In the Presbyterian Church giving to the church is an act of gratitude to God in terms of what God has given us. None of us is forced to give. There are no dues or assessments at First Presbyterian Church. Giving in the Presbyterian Church is proportional giving. We are not asked to give our “fair share” of the budget, but to commit ourselves to giving a portion of what God has given us. Each one of us is asked to assess our pledge to the church in light of what God has entrusted to us in our common lives.

But let us not deceive ourselves. This year, our church is facing some great challenges. We are in the process of adding new ministers to our staff, as well as continuing the many ministries in which we are engaged. Without the strong financial support of this congregation we will fail to live up to the opportunities that God has given to us.

#### IV.

Then, finally, if we are to take seriously the moral responsibilities that God has given to us, we will acknowledge that as Christians we are called to live under a certain tension. On the one hand, we live under the command of Christ “to be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). On the other hand, as Christians we live as those whom God has forgiven in Christ. Christians have always tried to hold in tension the notion of “justification” (being forgiven) with “sanctification” (living the Christian life). The goal of the Christian life is not being forgiven, but being transformed into the image of Christ.

As Presbyterians, we have always placed a great deal of emphasis on the guides to a moral life that are found in Scripture, particularly the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Teachings of Jesus. But we are also aware that no set of rules is ever adequate for every situation. As someone once observed, Jesus did not teach a series of rules or laws for conduct. He taught an absolute principle. Karl Barth once called the ethic of Jesus “an impossible possibility.” On the one hand, the love of Jesus is so perfect, so self-forgetting, that no one can fully obtain it. On the other hand, there is no situation where it cannot be incorporated. The ethic of Jesus always reminds us of our imperfection and calls us to a higher righteousness.

One of the people who understood this tension of the Christian life was Abraham Lincoln. He accepted the Civil War as a tragic necessity, the lesser of two evils from which he had to choose. But he also recognized that it was evil and because he understood that he was open to forgive and to rehabilitate at the first opportunity. Lincoln’s words in his Second Inaugural Address are relevant to us as well. “With malice to none and with charity to all” he enabled a nation to move beyond the pale of a terrible war.

In our own lives we need that same word. As Christians, we are forgiven for all our sins. But God calls us to the work of the church in this place.

And to that work we are called to respond with all our hearts, minds, and strength.

Amen!