

## Beyond an Ethics of Niceness: The Cruciform Practicality of Christian Love

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### ABSTRACT

Christian ethics must not be divorced from the practical implications of cruciform love. This article examines the ramifications of this premise in the pedagogy of Dr. Kristen Drahos' class, "Faith, Love, and Ethics." It argues against the concordance of a presupposed "ethics of niceness" with the gospel message, and it proposes that Christian love has concrete consequences that bear the fruits of active faith. This love reshapes perspectives of identity and embodiment—sexually, racially, and economically—and challenges Christians to stand in solidarity with suffering neighbors. It recalls and gives new power to oppressed narratives in the past, intersects the curation of identities in the present, and organizes new ways of living into communities in the future. In short, love is not the forgotten middle sibling of the course title, but rather its beating heart.

The thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one of the better-known New Testament passages. Beyond its role in wedding ceremonies, its message about love's hallmarks provides inspirational fodder for a wide variety of materials—from internet memes to greeting cards, home decor, and jewelry. Paul commends love as the greatest virtue. It enlivens faith and hope, remains after all else has faded, and comforts us with its ubiquity and endurance. We are reminded of moments where we have experienced love's warmth and shared its joy with those closest to us. Love shelters; it restores. Paul's words act as balm and tonic to a world that seems more likely to batter and oppress than show kindness and patience.

On the one hand, listening to Paul ought to elicit a kind of consolation. He enables us to discern that ersatz love is self-interested, jealous, easily angered, and to recognize the existence of real love as trusting, hopeful, and protective. Real love, not its counterfeit, is worthy of the acclaim Paul gives it. On the other, however, we ought to take hold of the context of Paul's words before we use them to knit ourselves cozy,

“love is patient” monogrammed blankets. Heightened eschatological imagery surrounds Paul’s central points. Love is above prophecy, the tongues of angels, and all of the world’s mysteries. It will exist after all things of the world and temporal existence have passed away, and it will present a true reflection of ourselves when we see God at the end of time. The descriptive declaratives that express what love is slip into active forms that love takes within the world in terms of protection, trusting, hoping, and persevering. The eschatological bent of the passage reminds us that love is more than a comforting state. It is an active presence that makes manifest the heart of the Kingdom of God, present but not yet, accomplished yet with work still to be done.

I inherited the title of my class, “Faith, Love, and Ethics” (FLE, for short). Although I designed the syllabus and determined its content, I questioned the label I was to use. Was love downgraded from its prominence and power in Paul, merely one in a list of three, or worse, was it replaced by ethics for contemporary relevance in collegiate classrooms? Or perhaps its role was the tacitly sinister function of clickbait, meant to entice students to linger a moment in the course catalog and sign up for a Christian ethics class. Professors try to choose words carefully, and I did not know what to make of this title that I had been tasked to receive and make my own. In crafting my syllabus and having taught the class multiple semesters, however, I have come to appreciate it. The Christian expression of love, and its relation to the cross, became central for my plan of the course material in exploring questions of ethics and Christian identity—as a personal decision and commitment, as lived through embodied existence, and as formed through neighborly relations. Love, rather than receiving a downgrade, serves as a practical center for and bridge between faith and ethics. Ethics is the testing ground for Christian faith, and it offers the parameters for discerning between authentic expressions of Christianity’s vital center and its simulacrum.

In general, my pedagogical inspiration comes from David Foster Wallace’s “This is Water” commencement speech.<sup>1</sup> In it, the question of “What do you worship?” provokes an introspective examination of personal values joined to the practical payout of those beliefs in everyday action. Wallace urges college graduates to pause and consciously consider their everyday default habits and whether they really give students the happiness and security that they promise. In FLE, Christian love has practical implications within the world, and its concrete presence reveals the activity of faith. As Luther himself pointed out, “it is clear that the fruit does not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit; but, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruit, and the fruit grows on the trees.”<sup>2</sup> To try to sever the idea of faith and works was as foreign to Luther as their conflation. Even Luther’s most strident Augustinian postures against sixteenth-century Catholic Pelagian complicity never remove the activity of Christian discipleship and concrete expressions of the faith’s fruits. In FLE, ethical practices flow from Christian faith, and students explore the transformative power of Christian love. It challenges us to stand in solidarity with our suffering neighbors. It reshapes our perspective of embodiment—sexually, racially, and economically. It recalls and gives new power to oppressed narratives in the past, intersects the curation of our identities in the present, and organizes new ways of living into communities in the future. In short, love is not the forgotten middle sibling of the course title, but rather its beating heart.

In brief, my syllabus begins with an interior question—“who am I?”—that radiates outward and impacts expanding circles of personal experience and the ways that experience necessarily involves others.

Love is that which links and develops each portion of the syllabus. Within this threefold design of (i) identity, (ii) embodiment, and (iii) relation to the neighbor, I include two interconnected yet distinct ideas for each of its units, and I conclude each section with two correlative “case study capstone” discussion days. For example, after our second unit that covers the ways that race and sexuality impact embodiment primarily through Martin Luther King Jr., M. Shawn Copeland, and Margaret Farley, students apply these thinkers to the contemporary issues in the Black Lives Matter Movement and a discussion of collegiate rape and sexual consent. Other capstone issues we cover include the clerical abuse crisis in the church, the Me Too Movement, policy and perception pertaining to political refugees, and the many faces of poverty within the United States. These discussions not only help students see the applied relevance of Christian ethics in what goes on in the “real world,” but they challenge underlying assumptions students carry with them. For instance, students learn to think more critically and interactively about the training on the issue of sexual consent they receive during their college orientation. While they appreciate that their school offers guidance, they quickly create scenarios where the lines that seemed clear blur. Applying the depth of Margaret Farley’s “justice in loving” from the unit offers further opportunity to create a safer community and a more just campus environment.

At the start of the semester, the idea of “Christian ethics” conjures an opaque and vague notion of niceness in most undergraduate minds. Students who have some background in Christianity recall a generalized notion of Jesus’ message of love, but to them, the idea of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31; Matthew 19:39; Luke 10:37) implies comfortable limits for those looking to enact the Jesus’ words today. During our first weeks together, the class outlines a broad ethics of niceness in command form that seems to sum up what many believe to be the extent of Christianity’s ethical commitments: do no intentional harm to one another; live and let live; be friendly; be courteous and respectful; be helpful. Overall, students collapse Christian love into a simplified form of Kant’s deontological ethics. They believe that ethical maxims ought to be universally applicable. Harming others is strictly prohibited. Benevolence has a place, but only insofar as it is limited to what does not [put] pressure on the giver.<sup>3</sup> Universal rational imperatives replace the ethics of love within Paul’s words, and that which Jesus teaches in word and deed, in the Gospels.

When we read Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermons in *Strength to Love*, however, students are surprised by the ethical commands King includes as authentic Christian injunctions.<sup>4</sup> His is not the benevolence of Kant expressed in the contemporary paradigm of racial reform. On the contrary, King meets students in the midst of their ethics of niceness and challenges them with a radical ethics of Christian love. Jesus’ forgiveness of his enemies and excessive love for those marginalized or in danger is not an idealist position in King. Rather, the command to love “is an absolute necessity for our survival...Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.”<sup>5</sup> In sermon three, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke acts as a template for King’s threefold ethics of altruism. Here “regard for, and devotion to, the interest of others” becomes the “first law of... [Christian] life.”<sup>6</sup> Its universality stretches beyond reason’s theoretical application to the actual neighbors one encounters on the street. It prioritizes the neighbor in danger rather than one’s own self-preservation. Its excessive generosity offers more than the right proportion, or what seems reasonably within one’s means to give.

I propose practical scenarios using a series of questions that references the time-capsuled Christian WWJD (“what-would-Jesus-do”) trend. I ask students to consider what differs between “What would Nice-You Do?” and what would an “altruistic-you” do (referencing King’s ideas)? We build from the mundane (what would nice-you do if you noticed your roommate felt left out on a Friday night? What would altruistic-you do in the same scenario?) to increasingly complex questions (what would nice-you/altruistic-you do if noticing a friend who lacked money for meals during the week, or if you notice several homeless individuals on street-corners during a class trip to Chicago?). At first, students who have cultural knowledge of the 90s chuckle at the exercise. After they explain the concept to those less familiar with it, we dive into the material dimensions and practical payout of each case. The application process draws out the radical nature of King’s altruism, which quickly separates from the vague generalities of “niceness.” The divide between the two clarifies just how far the generic lessons of filtered Christianity are from the Christian ethics of King and other course authors.

Teaching Christian ethics requires bridging this gap. Niceness is not synonymous with the diverse facets and actions of Christian love. In our class, we question how people build “authentic identity” through their actions, and what an “authentic Christian identity” looks like in ethical practice. Much of pop-culture revels in the seeming limitlessness of media-related identities—the ones formed on social media like Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook; those enhanced by Photoshop, camera filters, and phone apps; or the ones won through virtual applause in gaming, “likes,” and throngs of virtual followers. Many college students express themselves online as much, if not more, than with their friends. They eat meals while checking the latest tweets, posts, and videos shared with the world at large. However, even popular movies like *Ready Player One* have begun to question human life so intimately entwined with virtual identities. When you ask undergraduates if their social curations accurately depict their lives and the lives of those they follow, they readily admit that online identities present various degrees of fiction. Through a photographic mash-up, our class explores what an “insta-life” looks like—from waking up, work, workouts, and socialization every day to holidays, vacations, promotions, and future dream homes—and compares it to what “real-life” actually looks like. Students laughingly directed me in my last class to a new genre of online expression that some now produce—the “insta-fail” accounts. Here the “real life” fails are displayed to a select few (close friends and family), and a more candid online showcase emerges. But as students noted, “insta-fail” does not readily seep into one’s actual Instagram account. The buy-in to “insta-life” and its glamour, monetary, and emotional rewards, is far too strong.

To create and enjoy fiction is neither new nor inherently detrimental, but to create and enjoy fiction as though it were reality to such a large degree has become a hallmark problem of the technological age. Moreover, it creates an ethical problem when the veneer of niceness replaces the radical nature of Christian ethics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers students a vocabulary to discuss fictive ethics and authentic ethics with his distinction between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” The former is something we bestow upon ourselves—it is the self-fabricated “grace” of Christianity that justifies our desires and our own moral standard, whatever that might be.<sup>7</sup> Costly grace, on the other hand, is something else altogether. It is the grace given by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and it invites believers into a life formed by similar sacrifice. “It was grace because it cost so much, and it cost so much because it was grace.”<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer’s

costly grace plays upon a double reference, point both to Christ's sacrifice and its cost, and to the cost of grace involved in discipleship. The cost for Christ does not cheapen the cost of Christian discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, it fundamentally matters how we answer the question "who are you" as a Christian, which is not an identity or code you can bestow upon yourself. Rather, the authenticity of Christian discipleship turns to and conforms to the sacrifice of love and the cross.

This kind of ethical identity is indeed a far cry from Kant's vision of benevolence as that which follows upon reason's moral law. Bonhoeffer's ethics led him to leave the safety of the United States to rejoin those who resisted Nazi oppression in Europe. The costly grace he wrote about was a decision with immense practical consequences. King proclaimed an ethics of social rebuilding that wedded acute "toughminded" critique of racial injustice to tenderhearted compassion and forgiveness. His non-violent marches and inclusive calls for an integrated, unified society demanded his own embodied commitment. Both made a mark upon their time that lingers today by showing how Christian love has the power to change the world. Bonhoeffer writes, "the most urgent problem besetting our Church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?"<sup>9</sup> King warns, however, that "we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but...we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds."<sup>10</sup> Neither King nor Bonhoeffer succumbed to a hollowed-out expression of their beliefs, and both showed the cost of true Christian love in practice. The challenge for Christian ethics is that of unmasking the presence of costly grace and putting it into practice nevertheless.

Students admire the lived ethics of people like Bonhoeffer and King. They balk, however, at the thought that everyone who understands Christianity to be part of their identity must somehow follow suit. Our lived experiences are not so clear cut, they claim. We are not facing the Nazis, nor are we standing up to Jim Crow laws of oppression. Life is not black and white (no pun intended), and even if it were, surely, it's okay that most people won't make such intense sacrifices. Right? Christian ethics that make such a total claim on identity are not practical for us, they remark. They aren't practical for anyone. Beyond a reminder of King's words about Jesus' "practical realist" ethics of love, I redirect these questions into the applied ethical situations students face in their lives. Just because there are no Nazis at the door does not mean that Bonhoeffer's cheap grace will be less "costly" on campus.

When reading our class authors and taking up case study issues, it is important to scaffold scenarios so that students see a relevant application of Christian ethics. We move from the immediate to the larger picture gradually, and we discuss the ways that many individuals' actions contribute to bigger transformations. Christianity is not part of a sequestered, Sunday avatar. It must be a lived expression in routine matters, from the way one treats roommates, classmates, and teammates to the attention paid to janitors, cooks, and the faculty and staff who make up students' ordinary world. Doing this deliberate discussion work consistently throughout the semester begins to dismantle the security students feel in deferring ethical commitments to "heroic individuals". It reframes ethical commitments as a continuum of decisions and actions that populate their everyday.

The early momentum of the syllabus' first unit of pushes toward a two-fold discussion of expanded identity with the case study capstones on the Catholic abuse crisis and the Me Too Movement. Here

the individual responsibility for one's authentic identity that we worked to build connects to a broader discussion of communal identity and what it entails, especially in moments of crisis. Both discussion days emphasize the ways that telling stories—even fraught ones—matters. To hear such stories makes immediate and concrete the brokenness and wounds that, if discussed in statistics or historical terms, might feel far removed from students' sense of identity. By telling stories using first-person accounts and structuring discussions with role-playing activities, case study materials come alive in the class. These narratives pierce the security of ignorance and complacency. Niceness does not cut it, nor can students simply look the other way. Putting Christian ethics to work begins to assume concrete and challenging dimensions. Theory, real-life examples, and students' personal ideas begin to mingle and challenge initial presumptions.

We amplify this expanding range in our next unit as we shift to a discussion of the practical ethics involved for humans as embodied. We begin with a question of what it means to live well through and with our bodies in today's world. As Margaret Farley comments in her *Just Love*, “in contemporary Western culture we are preoccupied with the ‘body,’ even though we...[are] ‘body-alienated.’”<sup>11</sup> Farley argues that Western fixations with the body's health, youth, beauty, and perfectibility have not led to a deeper understanding of human beings as embodied creatures. Rather, this single-minded focus effects a twofold reductionism. On the one hand, it marginalizes that which makes human beings more than bodies. It eclipses and ignores whatever is “spiritual” within their embodiment. She points out that this revived dualistic mindset, albeit one that appears primarily in the visibility of the body that blocks sight to the spirit's presence, pressures all that does not conform to the body's idealized health and youth. Experiences of those who age, are ill, or otherwise fail to conform with contemporary standards become less valuable in such a world. On the other, she also signals that enshrining bodies without attention to a more holistic and unified experience ironically depreciates the very element elevated. Bodies turn into machines to be manipulated and objects to be owned, with limits to overcome and pleasures to be harvested. These enshrined temples of worship ultimately deceive and lead to a new enslavement of humanity. On our whiteboard, classes brainstorm the vocabulary they hear and use to speak about bodies, and we funnel it into various categories Farley proposes in her breakdown of objectification's facets. Her position, it seems, is an accurate depiction of the dominant linguistic framework that most students use.

One cannot outrun the body nor ignore its role in ethics. The body's glorified objectification circumvents the possibility of authentic Christian love. Both Farley and M. Shawn Copeland turn an investigative lens upon profound experiences of human suffering as the foundation for an ethics of love capable of restoring and repairing history's bifurcated wounds, as much as declaring and instantiating a new horizon for embodied Christian love. “Affliction is always both physical and spiritual,” Farley argues, “it is never only of the body...and it is also never only of the Spirit. With this kind of suffering the person suffers *as a unified whole*.”<sup>12</sup> When people suffer, they cannot ignore that they are more than their bodies, even as their bodies are very much that which suffers. For Copeland, the stories of human objectification and suffering present a powerful narrative-based authority that breaks into the present and makes demands upon the future. “Such work promises not only recovery of repressed religious and social history but release of those ‘dangerous memories, memories which make demands on us,’ memories which protest our forgetfulness of the human ‘other,’ our forgetfulness of what enfleshing freedom means.”<sup>13</sup>

Copeland draws upon the work of Johann Baptist Metz, and implicitly Walter Benjamin, as she articulates a Christian ethics able to account for the objectification and enslavement of black, and particularly female, bodies, as well as the ways Christian ethics challenges the powerful residual echoes of slavery's brutalization that oppress multitudes today. Solidarity becomes a significant feature of her ethics. Christians' love is an ethical task, but it is not fundamentally built on sentiment and emotion. Instead, it issues a command that cannot be evaded: it "mandates us to shoulder our responsibility to the past in the here-and-now in memory of the crucified Christ and all the victims of history."<sup>14</sup> This "here-and-now" articulation makes memory an ethical activity that joins past to the present and makes those living now responsible for the future. Christ's cross intersects history, and he invites those who follow him to embrace this task themselves as well.

To love in Christian solidarity is to bring forward the fallen of history into the present, remembering their stories and enacting justice on their behalf. It is the work of restoring time and the reduction of human beings throughout history. As a result, solidarity creates a new community in the present where those living align with and join those who make claim upon us. "Solidarity affirms the interconnectedness of human beings...Humanity is no mere aggregate of autonomous, isolated individuals. Humanity is one intelligible reality—multiple, diverse, varied, and concrete, yet one."<sup>15</sup> A new unity emerges that does not threaten the particularity of those who make it up. On the contrary, it affirms the unity of its members in tandem with its affirmation of the unity of their embodied, spiritual existence.

In class, we engage film to bring forward issues of sight, blindness, and blighted sight as problems we face in enacting a Christian ethics of solidarity. In one session, we take up the question of whitewashed history in film. After watching clips from movies such as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Little Colonel*, *Roots*, *Amistad*, *Django Unchained*, and *Lincoln*, we discuss what students see by asking: where are black bodies in relation to white bodies? What differences are there between black and white speech? What kinds of hierarchies exist between the characters on screen in terms of race, sex, age, and profession? Who appears as salvific, and how is the savior motif enacted? Students question the idea of "progress" through these films' racial portraits. Even the panache of Tarantino receives a strong measure of opprobrium as students ponder the violence Django embraces in order to liberate his wife from the cruel violence of the Candyland plantation. By the end of class, students not only see bodies in film in a new light, but they also begin to see the filters that film encourages, and various forms of solidarity's depreciation. Students next reflectively discuss what bodies they see and don't see in their normal routines, as well as multiple ways that their vision of embodiment might be colored by various factors in their environments. We probe the question of what racial solidarity looks like enacted. Examples in Copeland's text help students to articulate the expanse and measure of embodied cruciform solidarity in practice.

In the second half of this unit, we move from a racial discussion to embodiment's sexual component with an in-depth exploration of Farley. In Farley, the work of Christian solidarity applies as much to the objectifying slippage that seeps into experiences of sexual love as to the history of objectification with which Copeland grapples. She raises the potential objection that this kind of ethics—one that enacts a concrete and thick vision of justice as part of sexual embodied activity at its core—might seem too weighty for this kind of love. Such love, after all, involves affective attraction that emerges from the mysterious and

unconscious depths of human spirits. However, she points to the simple truth that no one, not even the most star-struck youth, would champion the negation of her argument's premise. As strange as it might be to affirm the idea of justice in relation to sexual love, it logically follows if one rejects the notion that humans ought to be unjust in sexual expressions and experiences. Moreover, Farley argues that the affective dimension of love is all the better for being repositioned within a framework of justice. Here each partner respects the full totality of themselves as an "inspired body" and treats the concrete presence of partners with similar regard. "*Things* are not to be loved as if they were *persons*, and *persons* are not to be loved as if they were *things*."<sup>16</sup> Sexual love opens people to intense vulnerability, both of body and spirit. Sexuality requires protection from harmful objectification, but this love also opens people to a new opportunity. "Being united to what is loved" creates a new reality in the activity of loving.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to popular culture's preoccupation with the two in love, Farley argues that love creates new communities for those who embrace it. Love bears fruit beyond procreative generation (although that too). "Love between two persons violates relationality if it closes in upon itself and refuses to open to a wider community of persons."<sup>18</sup> Love, she claims, is a socially embedded endeavor, and to deny its enmeshment with a larger social context reduces love to a mirage of the promise it holds. Christians, she argues, must not fall into the trap of a contemporary perspective that, in reality, offers little more than *égoïsme à deux*.<sup>19</sup> As Farley reminds us, "No love, or at least no great love, is just for 'the two of us,' so that even failure to share in some way beyond the two of us the fruits of love may be a failure in justice."<sup>20</sup>

The air in the classroom crackles with the charge of nervous energy that accompanies any undergraduate discussion of sex when we turn to practical examples. This room's tenor simultaneously signals reserve and excitement, since many students are actively grappling with forming a more independent sexual identity during their college years. We delve into Farley's seven-norms for enacting justice through love by discussing a series of test cases. Sexual questions surrounding masturbation, pornography, sex outside of marriage, adultery, sex with a sleeping or unconscious partner, and other examples prove ample fodder for lively debates about why Farley offers her seven norms and how breaking them might produce injustice for one or more parties. After various bouts of sniggering, averted gazes, and throat clearing, students zealously embrace this discussion—so much that I've even had students passing by the hallway poke their heads in to investigate the class. Whether or not they adopt Farley's position, students leave the day thinking deeply about what just love means for them and their college community.

Sexuality, though, impacts more than the sexual sphere, and Christian love crosses social divides to form a world in imitation of the authentic identity of the God become human—the one whose love sought out the lowly for exultation and brought those on the margins into the center of communities. The final unit of *Faith, Love, and Ethics* invites students to consider what a costly Christian response to contemporary borders looks like. This last outward press prompts students to engage in decisions having to do with the things they need, use, and desire. Christian ethics cannot pretend to be authentic while ignoring those who live next door and the way personal material consumption plays into neighbors' wellbeing. On a macro scale, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez redeploys the Marxist critiques of capitalism to challenge "*desarrollismo*," or the developmentalism model that prioritizes national economic progress as the watermark of authentic, ethical care for disadvantaged neighbors. Gutiérrez does not stand

against shifting the economic tide for those peoples and countries who suffer the burdens of poverty, but he warns that to see only the economic burden of poverty as that which needs change is shortsighted. For Gutiérrez, practical faith commits Christians to move beyond communities contented with relative isolation. All Christians are called to knit together the Kingdom of God, not because Christ's power is imperfect, but because our solidarity with his sacrifice demands it. The Kingdom of God as "already and not yet" in Gutierrez challenges believers to continue the material ramifications that attend making present the Gospel's good news.

Although many students nod along with this idea in theory, the personal enactment of a Christian ethics relating to wealth is harder to stomach. Many chuckle at both the humor and truth in a Colbert Report clip where Colbert concludes, "If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we've got to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition—and then admit, that we just don't want to do it."<sup>21</sup> It's one thing to say that material care should extend to neighbors; it's quite another thing to make it happen. Our final course author explores the depth and meaning of Christian charity from an oft-overlooked portion of the Bible. Rather than turn to Acts or gospel passages like Matthew 19 directly, Gary A. Anderson focuses on the Old Testament to impress upon Christians a deeper, ontological connection between faith and generosity. Such belief carries into the New Testament authors many Christians are more familiar with, but Anderson's work attempts to counteract the ubiquitous ethical reduction of contemporary Christian reflections on wealth. The significance and power of the New Testament's language emerges from a more profound and fundamental point that cannot easily be erased.

Turning primarily to authors in the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Tobit, Anderson argues that charity was a primary expression and index of Israel's faith in God. Biblical authors were well aware of human duplicity, fraud, and greed, as evidenced by numerous warnings issued to those with means to give. Nevertheless, readers find injunctions to act charitably—without delay or concern for repayment—embedded squarely within their words of caution. These authors confront the wealthy with direct commands: "lend to your neighbor in his time of need," "be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting," and even "lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend, and do not let it rust under a stone and be lost."<sup>22</sup> And as Anderson notes, Ben Sira's injunction to "lose your silver"... on behalf of the poor...[harbors] no pretense...that the funds will be returned."<sup>23</sup>

Charity in the Bible is more than a game of material arithmetic. As Anderson demonstrates, it has a much richer twofold function. First, it enacts practical love for neighbors. However, equally important, it concretizes practical love for God. As Anderson notes, "when one loves the poor with charity, one finds oneself before the altar of God."<sup>24</sup> Using Catholic vocabulary, charity acts sacramentally. It places one before the real presence of God, and it creates a path for communion with heaven. The generous giver simultaneously receives while giving. "Both the donor and the recipient stand to profit from this transaction."<sup>25</sup> While it is certainly true that charity is costly, it is equally true that charity's math is not merely a matter of addition and subtraction. Because it is love, charity generates more than its parts. Material giving produces more than material outputs, even as its material ramifications are tangibly felt both by those who give and by those who receive. Using clips from the recent TV show *The Good Place*—especially those where characters discover that the presumably fair "points system" that tallied who

deserved the good place over the bad place has been broken for years—provides a useful contrast and space for discussion about what emerges from genuinely Christian charity, rather than self-serving calculus.

In a recent iteration of the class, I decided to administer an oral final examination to the students. I told them that this final would center around a practical, contemporary issue that resembled their case study discussions, but was one we had yet to cover. After splitting the class into smaller sections to provide more opportunities for meaningful debate, students prepared for an unknown final topic by reviewing all the authors, concepts, and foundational principles we had covered in the semester. On the day of the final, I met with each sub-section and handed them each a different short narrative taken from the Marshall Project—a non-profit journalistic outlet that includes personal reflections by incarcerated individuals in the United States. I participated as a mere observer taking notes on my legal pad to give them concrete, oral feedback in time set aside at their conversation's conclusion. After taking a few minutes to read their particular Marshall narrative, students launched into the most thoughtful and robust debates they had had all semester. Through a discussion of inmates, guards, chaplains, family members, government officials, for-profit prisons, and socio-economic factors of race—and not omitting their own responsibility as members of a broader yet connected community—students grappled with the meaning of authentic Christian love. It transected personal, racial, sexual, and economic borders. Various course authors' ideas sprang to life, and class members hashed out the parts they might play in addressing multiple issues at hand.

In their final conversation, students demonstrated that Christian ethics is, fundamentally, about the real presence, power, and demands of Christian love. They took the lessons we worked on throughout the semester and adeptly applied them to a new issue. I am confident that when they encounter new challenges, they will have tools to analyze them and a way to think about the practical implications of Christianity. Of course, the best outcome will be for students to freely embrace and enact this concrete and costly love themselves—whether that be in small everyday applications or by standing as distinctive leaders within their communities. But at the very least, I hope they leave with a clear view of the limitations of an ethics of mere niceness and have a better way to approach the question—what else can we do?

## NOTES

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1 David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

2 Luther, Martin, *Concerning Christian Liberty* (Guttenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1911/1911-h/1911-h.htm>, accessed Dec. 30, 2019.)

3 Students include an oblique reference that goes beyond Kant's Categorical Imperative and accentuates his limited imperative of benevolence. This is not to say that students are strict Kantians—far from it. Rather, it is to see Kant's thought disseminated within a contemporary, liberally-democratic context that frames ethics in terms of reason's deontological commands, which students understand to include a limited sense of practical benevolence. For the original reference in Kant, see 4:423 and 4:430 in Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

4 Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

5 King, 44.

6 King, 23.

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 43–44.

8 Bonhoeffer, 49.

9 Bonhoeffer, 55.

10 King, *Strength to Love*, 32.

11 Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 110.

12 Farley, 120.

13 M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 28–29.

14 Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Group, 2007), 109–10.

15 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 100.

16 Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, 198.

17 Farley, 169.

18 Farley, 227.

19 Farley, 227.

20 Farley, 229.

21 Colbert, Stephen, host. *The Colbert Report*. Aired December 16, 2010, in broadcast syndication. <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/m38gcf/the-colbert-report-jesus-is-a-liberal-democrat>.

22 Ben Sira 29: 4-7, 9. As quoted in Anderson, 47-48.

23 Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 48.

24 Anderson, 32.

25 Anderson, 49.