

The Ethics of Jesus: Goin' whole hog.

While Huckleberry Finn and his companion Jim drifted down the Mississippi River, Jim had been able to avoid capture by bounty hunters. Then one day, after Huck had left Jim alone on the raft by the riverbank, Jim was caught for possible transfer to the deep South. When Huck found out, he was filled with remorse. He began to regret he had helped Jim escape from Miss Watson up in Missouri in the first place, because she certainly would have treated Jim better than whoever else might get hold of him.

It just went to show (he thought): it doesn't pay to break the law. Missouri law said Jim was Miss Watson's property and helping Jim escape to the free states was simply stealing somebody's property - and stealing was an offense against God. The more I studied about this, he mused, the more my conscience went grinding me . . . Here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven. Finally he tried to relieve his guilt by writing a note to Miss Watson telling her where she could retrieve Jim. This made him feel a lot better. It's never too late to obey the law and avoid hell!

Obviously Huck must have somehow heard of Matthew's Jesus saying: Do not think I have come to abolish the law . . . I have come not to abolish but to fulfill and whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments . . . will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. And indeed the early Jewish Christians, who were Matthew's initial audience, would have fully agreed with Jesus on this affirmation of Israel's ancient Law with its many do's and don'ts and "or elses" – for their Law signaled their superior status within an idolatrous world. But let's admit that Matthew's version of the teaching of Jesus, taken as a whole, does contribute to some confusion because along with this strong support for the old Law, Matthew has Jesus also advocating an ethic of extravagant graciousness that could render the Law obsolete by our living far beyond its limits.

So which is which, because Jesus ultimately meant our becoming gracious beings to an excess: to love your enemies, to turn your cheek, to go the extra mile, never to turn your back on anyone . . . to be so much more than you have been. St. Luke's version is so much clearer: . . . love your enemies, do good to those who hate you . . . Stop judging . . . Stop condemning . . . Forgive . . . Give and gifts will be given to you . . . overflowing . . . for the measure you give will be measured out to you. Or as Luke sums up: Be merciful [viscerally compassionate] , just as your Father is merciful [viscerally compassionate]!

. . . then Huck got to thinking about Jim. He thought of their conversation, their singing and laughing. He thought of how *I'd see him standing my watch 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see how glad he was when I came back out of the fog;* . . . And Huck then looked at that note and wondered, should he send it, should he do the right thing or the wrong thing by Missouri law. He held his breath and then said, *All right, then, I'll go to hell* - and he tore up the note. He figured that if caring about Jim's freedom was wicked by Missouri standards, then *I would take up wickedness again, . . . And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.*

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