



Matthew's Manual for Disciples

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Matthew: A Manual for Disciples
—
The calling to a higher righteousness

David A. Fraser

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ISBN: 5800138938849

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Printed in the United States of America

v.2.0

✿ Dedication ✿

To disciple makers everywhere.

But especially to Cash and Ann Godbold who first disciplined me

And to my wife, Elouise Renich, who has journeyed with me many years

And to my companions: John Kennedy, Russ Nelson and Mike Morrison who encouraged
and prayed with me in this project

 Preface

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19–20).

This commission lies at the heart of the meaning of Matthew. The content and form of this Gospel are oriented to instruct in the way of Jesus, to prepare disciples who are able to make other disciples. The genre of ancient biography sought to teach by example as well as instruction. The messianic and social mission of Jesus is on full display as well as accounts of what he taught his first disciples. To modify Jürgen Moltmann’s “addition” to the ancient creeds (in the blank space between birth and death): “After ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ or ‘and was made man’, we should add one line to his:

Baptized by John the Baptist,
filled with the Holy Spirit:
to preach the kingdom of God to the poor,
to make disciples and send them out
to heal the sick,
to receive those who have been cast out,
to revive Israel for the salvation of the nations, and
to have mercy upon all people.”¹

In the times in which we live, filled with the news of clergy abuse, declining numbers identifying as practicing Christians in the global north, denominations “modernizing” by conforming to current social mores and cultural tides, citizens adopting authoritarian ideologies, communities shattered by self-seeking individualism, the public being stripped of shared values – all accompanied by manifold global crises and massive climate change – the Church needs to renew and reinvigorate its practice of making disciples.

In the face of pluralism (the presence of competing points of view about fundamental beliefs and values) and uncertainty (the challenges of determining which of many competing views is true or right) it is even more imperative that Christians become clear on what are the founding sources and content of their identity. Too often “Christian” or “evangelical” has become a cipher, filled in by cultural currents that are popular and powerful. The personal and corporate lives of so-called Christians is often as bad and sometimes worse than those who profess no religion. Matthew’s Gospel speaks clearly

¹ Jürgen Moltmann (1993) *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimension*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press (p. 150). (Italic phrase added).

into that situation, with its confrontation between Jesus and the religious establishment of his day.

We face a day when we are offered the false choice between a private, personal faith that affirms the full authority of Scripture or a socially active faith that has a deeply troubled relationship to Scripture, seeing it as full of historical, theological and ethical errors. The one is focused on personal guilt, personal morality and getting into heaven, while insisting the “gospel” has little to do with economics, politics, international relations, unless it speaks the language of some conservative or libertarian ideology. It creates a truncated portrait of a “Lord” relevant to personal affairs but hardly related to social righteousness, justice or issues of poverty and oppression.

The other offers the liberal “gospel” of the left: it is all boiled down to a generalized “love” campaigning for inclusiveness and against racism, poverty, sexism, political oppression etc. It is focused on fighting structural evil. It creates a procrustean Jesus gerrymandered into current ideas and causes of liberty, equality and happiness in this world (since all already have free passes into “heaven”).

In reading Matthew, we discover the Kingdom of heaven claims all of life and time, all aspects of personal and social life. It is entered through a narrow gate and provides a difficult path of discipleship. It encompasses the “spiritual” and personal as well as the “social” and political. To “obey all the things” Jesus commanded includes the areas these truncated “gospels” have sought to emphasize. Both/and is the only option, but in ways that are surprising to both the conservative and the liberal versions of a cultural Christianity tamed by contemporary passions.

This commentary seeks to be in dialogue with some of the best of current scholarship while aiming at emphasizing the way Matthew offers resources and insight for the contemporary Christ follower. For those who have heard the call of Jesus to become his disciple, this Gospel is a sober, challenging manual for living in a way that conforms all of life, emotions, intentions, words and actions to the will and way of the Kingdom of heaven.

Life is an adventure. Its difficult path is strewn with tragedies and failures as well as successes. What complicates things is that its successes are as dangerous as its failures. Life’s mysterious unfolding, despite the best intentions, is often obscure in the ways it relates to the path of discipleship. Sometimes the choice we face demands we resolutely abandon the direction we have been taking, the life we have been carefully building, and launch into a completely surprising and different existence and endeavor. That is what confronted the early disciples of Jesus. It confronts us as well.

Listening carefully and repeatedly to the text of Matthew will help us do just that.

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“The New Testament tradition does not speak only about this royal man; it speaks from Him. As its theme He was also its origin, as its theorem its axiom. And so it is one single demand, not merely to hear what it has to say about Him, but to obey the One of whom it speaks, i.e., to do the same as it does itself, to think from Him, to desire to follow Him.”²

“Who was this Christ, after all? I wondered. As I wrote, and edited the writing of others, a tiny dybbuk of doubt hovered just to my side. Do you really believe that? Or are you merely dispensing the party line, what you’re paid to believe? Have you joined the safe, conservative establishment—modern versions of the groups who felt so threatened by Jesus?”³

“To be trained as a disciple is to learn why this Jesus, the son of David, the one true king, must suffer crucifixion. Matthew’s gospel is meant to train us, his readers, just as Jesus had to train his disciples, to recognize that the salvation wrought in the cross is the Father’s refusal to save us according to the world’s understanding of salvation, which is that salvation depends on having more power than my enemies.”⁴

“What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today?”⁵

“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.” (1 Cor. 2:6-7 TNIV)

Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew stands at the beginning of the Christian New Testament. It is the second “front door” of Christian sacred scripture. There is no existing canonical collection or listing that does not put Matthew as the first book in the New Testament. Over the generations it has been commented on by a substantial number of writers.⁶ In modern days, there is a surplus of excellent commentaries and monographs. The flood of sermons, devotionals, commentaries, papers and articles only continues to increase (in both number and length). This is for good reason. At the heart of the Christian movement is Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah. Matthew contains more of his teaching than any other document. It also has more connections with Judaism and

² Barth, *CD*, Vol. 4.2. London; New York: T&T Clark. (p. 166)

³ Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. (p. 6)

⁴ Hauerwas, *Matthew*. (p. 27)

⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. (2003). *Discipleship*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (Vol. 4, p. 37).

⁶ “In the early Church, the Gospel according to St. Matthew received more commentary and sermons than any of the other three Gospels. At least twenty-five patristic writings deal with Matthew at length, and some forty other writers give it extensive attention.” Williams, *Matthew* (p. xxiii).

the Hebrew Scriptures (the first “front door”), providing the strongest link to the new scriptures of the Jesus movement and its apostolic extension.⁷ Matthew links the fulfillment of the promises and hopes of Israel to their extension to the Gentiles. As Blomberg notes:

“Above all, Matthew thus wants to demonstrate God’s work in Jesus to bring the fulfillment of his promises to his chosen people, the Jews, and, through (or even in spite of) their reaction, to offer identical blessings and judgments to all humanity.”⁸

These notes on Matthew are an attempt to encounter Matthew as a “manual for disciples.”⁹ That is, as instruction in the Christian life. Ancient biographies and histories were written with an eye to communicating a moral message. They were not simply a log of people, places and events, written as grist for modern historical interests. They instructed as much as they reported and entertained. In fact, biographies had more than one function. R. A. Burridge identifies seven discernible ones: eliciting praise, providing a model, informing, entertaining, preserving memory, instructing, and providing material for debate and argument (apologetic and polemic material)¹⁰

Matthew stresses the characteristics and requirements of discipleship in a more prominent way than other Gospels. The teaching sections set forth both personal and social practices as well as conduct that is to mark those who claim Jesus as their Lord. Discipleship requires a “higher righteousness” that involves obeying all of God’s commands as fulfilled in Jesus. Saving faith is essential to spiritual wholeness. The apostles are commissioned at the end to make disciples by “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20). Obedience is a manifestation of saving faith. Like James, Matthew threads the needle between workless faith and works-righteousness. The authentic disciple will not only confess Jesus as Lord but follow his dictates. This is information for formation.

This moral and spiritual goal does not lead us to conclude the narratives were fictitious, as a reading of the ancient biographies demonstrates—they were written about real people and events.¹¹ There is an overlap with ancient historical writing in that biographies were meant to be

⁷ Matthew repeatedly cites Old Testament scriptures, introduced with a “fulfillment” formula, more than half of which are not found in the other Gospels. Five of these unique references are found in the first two chapters as part of Matthew’s establishing the identity of Jesus.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*: p. 26.

⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*: “In light of the mission charge with which it ends, and which includes ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’, the Gospel is clearly intended to function as a manual for discipleship.” (p. 20).

¹⁰ Burridge, Richard A. *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Second Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004 (pp. 149–52, 214–17).

¹¹ The assertions that the differences between the Gospels lead either to the conclusion that they were not based on eyewitness testimony or are fictionalized to make theological or formational points are unconvincing. For example – Carter, *Matthew*: “One unconvincing approach claims that the gospel provides a historical account of the life of Jesus. But discrepancies with the other gospels and the gospel’s own distinctive and consistent emphases (observed in detailed comparisons with the other gospels) rule this out.” (p. 7) “It is no longer possible to see the gospel’s genre as an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus.” (p. 42). See also Carter, W. (2004). *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Revised Edition). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers. (pp. 40-42). In contrast: “The Gospel writers, in their different ways, present their Gospels as based on and incorporating the testimony of the eyewitnesses. The literary

more historical than novelistic. Nonetheless, there was flexibility in how stories of people were told. Authors always betray different perspectives and agendas, offering selective narrations of a life. They also use the conventions of a literary genre to communicate well with their intended audience, conventions that we need to be aware of or we will misread Matthew.

As for the genre, I am persuaded (as indicated above), by the recent research considering the Gospels as fitting the mode of ancient biography. Many current New Testament scholars seem to agree.¹² In that case, we should expect the sort of biographical narrative that fit the interests of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish world of that day.

Our own modern-day sensibilities for knowing details about childhood and development, inner psychology of emotions and intentions, personality, and family dynamics combined with a passion for a type of precision not entertained in the ancient world can mislead us in our reading expectations. The goal of ancient biographies was to reveal the character of their subject through recounting their words and deeds.¹³ In reading Matthew or the other texts of the Bible, we need to remember that, while the Bible was written for us it was not written to us. This has consequences for us as modern readers. While human nature is universal, culture is not.

The conventions used (and understood by hearers and readers) in that era need to be respected.¹⁴ What appear to us to be “liberties” taken with the facts of the case may well only reflect legitimate compositional techniques used by writers of that day. In such Greco-Roman biographies, we find paraphrasing (though less so in the Gospels than in other ancient biography), compression in time, transferal (attributing words or deeds that are connected to one person to another person), displacement (placing an event in a different context than in which it originally

and theological strategies of these writers are not directed to superseding the testimony of the eyewitnesses but to giving it a permanent literary vehicle.” (p. 472) from Bauckham, Richard (2006) *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

¹² Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* op. cit. p. 339: “Genre analysis shows that the gospels are written in the form of an ancient biography, with a concentrated focus on the person of Jesus of Nazareth.” Keener, Craig S., and Edward T. Wright. *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biography?* Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2016, see the introduction by Dr. Keener (pp. 1-45). “...the essential twofold thesis remains clear: biographies of recent figures are intended to recount historical information (normally for edifying purposes); and biographers could exercise a degree of flexibility in how they recounted that information.” (p. 44). Hagner, *Matthew*: “Matthew is of course preeminently a Gospel, i.e., an account of the life of Jesus, an ancient type of biography though not a biography in the modern sense.” (p. lvii); Luz, *Matthew 1-7*: “The most widespread view today is that the Gospel of Matthew is a *biography*.” (p. 14). Keener, Craig S. (2019). *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

¹³ The common conviction of the day was that morality was learned more from imitation of examples than maxims and exhortation. The writing of a “life” (*bios*) was seen as a way of providing instruction in character ethics (*ethos*). The novel did this by fiction, often showing how love (*eros*) could survive the rigors of chance (*tyche*). The history was focused on the deeds and words of great nations and generals. The biography focused on the individual, showing the development and deployment of that person’s character in disposition and deeds. One thinks of Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* (King Cyrus), Philo’s *Life of Moses*, Jamblichus and Porphyry who each wrote a *Life of Pythagoras*. The most prolific is probably Plutarch in his many biographies. For example, *Demosthenes, Cicero, Lycurgus, Numa, Alexander, Caesar*.

¹⁴ Licona, Michael R. *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

occurred), spotlighting (focused attention on a person in a situation while neglecting to mention others present), simplification of material by omitting details that may complicate the story, and expansion or contextualizing of narrative details to make the account more vivid or understandable.

Most have noted that a strict chronological sequence is not found in Matthew. The parallels with Mark and Luke indicate these biographers often grouped material thematically. So, it is not wise to assume that events that follow one another in the sequence of the telling of the life, words and deeds of Jesus are always chronologically ordered.¹⁵ At this distance in time it is impossible to know precisely whether we are viewing a teaching or parable that was told on several occasions or are simply gathered and inserted into the narrative at points the biographer felt suited his communicative purpose. Nor are we sure that the placement of events is meant to suggest a given chronological order.

Biography, no less than history, is not a completely precise record of everyone present, everything happening or said in each episode. It is selective and written for a given audience, adapted to that intended audience's assumed knowledge, cultural perspective and shared linguistic world. In reading Matthew as an ancient biography, we need to enter that world and respect its literary conventions, if we are to learn from it. The preoccupation since the 19th century with a historical reconstruction behind the current text is not the task of these notes. Much of that focus leads to an interminable, undecidable, speculative endeavor marred by large portions of subjectivity (and there are massive amounts of it available, if that is what is desired).

Part of that reconstruction involves seeking to discern the community within which or to which the Gospel was written. This can get as elaborate as one is willing to speculate about what this or that aspect of the text tell us about the assumed audience.¹⁶ The minimal assumption I am making is that Matthew was written to a largely Jewish Christian audience, including Gentile God-fearers, and other converts to the early Christian movement, though not restricted to them. Biographies often had a wide audience in mind. Still, there are clear clues that Matthew is informing his audience of the continuity between Jesus as Messiah and the Hebrew Scriptures—and assumes that his audience has some significant prior acquaintance with those Jewish writings.¹⁷

¹⁵ Carson, *Matthew*: “Jesus was an itinerant preacher who said the same things many times in similar words; the evangelists rarely claim to present *ipsissima verba* but almost always claim to present *ipsissima vox* (see comments at 3:17); their discourses are very substantial condensations in line with their own interests; and they do not hesitate to rearrange the order of presentation of some material within a discourse in order to highlight topical interests.” (pp. 282-83).

¹⁶ Examples of this can be found in most introductions to Matthew commentaries. See also: Balch, *Social*, pp. 264-5, gives a list of 11 characteristics the essays of that volume think are discernable. The more skeptical end assumes the Gospel tells us more about the community of the writer than it does about the actual historical ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The events and instruction, on this account, are simply created to address particular needs of the community addressed. Much of the time this is a vicious circle: one reads the text to discern the community's profile and then confirms that reading by citing the same text as evidence for that profile.

¹⁷For a detailed argument that Matthew was written in Antioch to a Jewish Christian group, see David C. Sim (1998), *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark). As to the claim that the particular community addressed

I am also assuming that its early popularity up to the time of Irenaeus was due to its suitability for introducing the person and teachings of Jesus to new converts. As Ralph Martin puts it:

“Early Christians were drawn to this Gospel because of its practical serviceability in showing the intimate connections between Jesus and his Old Testament Jewish heritage and in providing a compendium of his teaching which could be used with obvious convenience in training and teaching young converts. Its apparent comprehensiveness, embodying much of Mark and some of Luke’s narrative sections, gave the impression that it was, in Augustine’s phrase, the fullest of the Gospels, and when tradition appended the name Matthew to it or its chief source, the stage was set to ensure its popularity.”¹⁸

It is impossible to date the Gospel with any precision though anytime from about 58-80 seems to fit, though I tend to lean toward an earlier than later date.¹⁹ I am persuaded that author is likely the one the early Church uniformly identified as the Apostle Matthew, the tax collector from Galilee. The arguments against that attribution do not seem to explain the firm, uniform, early identification of this gospel with Matthew as its author.

I am also assuming that, at the point of its composition, the Christian Jews were still engaged in an intra-mural dispute over the nature of authentic Judaism. The obvious conflict between Jesus and the dominant elites of Israel is not a form of anti-Judaism but reflects the multi-party conflict that involved a number of distinct Jewish understandings of identity.²⁰ Matthew writes

or within which Matthew wrote is the dominant determinant in what is written, it is good to keep Bengt Holmberg’s observation in view: “One original social situation can lead to several different results [in terms of the ideas and texts produced].... And the same end result can, at least in theory, have been reached by several different routes. It seems inevitable that, once we leave the primitive idea of strong, direct correlation between ideas and social basis of an almost deterministic kind, we are bereft of the possibility to say anything much about correlations at all [between a text and the social factors in the community that hypothetically motivated their writing].” *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, p. 139. There is significant enough ambiguity in identifying the community to warrant caution here.

¹⁸ Martin, Ralph P. (1999). *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students: The Four Gospels* (Revised Edition, Vol. 1). Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers. (Pp. 225-226).

¹⁹ There are hints in Matthew that he was writing before AD 70: France, *Matthew*: “It may be remarked in passing that if, as many claim, Matthew was writing after the event, it is strange that he could not produce a clearer and more convincing account of this preliminary sign [the “devastating pollution” 24:15]. What had he to gain by writing so cryptically, and by failing to achieve a satisfying tie-up with what would then have been quite recent history? It makes better sense of the enigmatic nature of the sign to believe that Matthew was not only recording what Jesus said some decades before the event, but was also himself writing at a time when events were yet to unfold to the climax of the war with Rome.” (p. 913).

²⁰ This concurs with Keener, *Matthew*: “Concurring with the perspectives of what is still probably the minority view, I find in the Gospel an author and audience intensely committed to their heritage in Judaism while struggling with those they believe to be its illegitimate spokespersons. On this reading, Matthew writes to Jewish Christians who, in addition to being part of their assemblies as believers in Jesus, are fighting to remain part of their local synagogue communities.” (p. 49); and Turner, *Baker: Matthew*: “[This commentary] is written from the perspective argued by Overman (1990b), Saldarini (1994), and Sim (1998b) to the effect that Matthew was written to a group of Christian Jews who were still in contact with

as a Christian Jew whose telling of the story of the Messiah is in dialogue with other Jews and critical of Jewish leadership, not of Jews in general.

Most modern scholars conclude Matthew utilized the writings of Mark in his composition. Some say this shows Matthew was not the author since the Apostle was his own eyewitness and would not need to use the writings of a person (Mark) who was not such an eyewitness. Yet, this hardly counts against this attribution. The early Church tradition is that Mark acted to capture the Apostle Peter's recollection of the life and words of Jesus. If so, Mark is Peter's eyewitness in Mark's words.

Among the Apostolic band, there would be no need to recreate what had already been captured in writing from a fellow Apostolic eye-witness, material that could be easily incorporated within a different biography and which corresponded to what the second Apostle recollected. Such use would instead function as a confirming witness to the events and words, doubly recounted by two Apostles. Luke's Gospel incorporates much of material found in Mark as well, suggesting a strong affirmation of the adequacy and accuracy of the account Mark had written by a non-Apostle whose aspirations were clearly as much historical as biographical.²¹

This use of prior materials should not surprise us. It is the pattern we see with other ancient Greco-Roman biographers—they utilize materials already in existence at the time of their biographical composition. So, if the supposition is the case that Matthew use Mark (and a sayings documents called Q), it only points to another instance of the common practice of Greco-Roman biographers of drawing on prior accounts of the figure they are recounting. It hardly counts against the identification of Matthew as possible author.

In dealing with Matthew, it seems unlikely that his original readers would have a copy of Mark in one hand and Matthew in the other. While it is useful to compare the Gospels where they overlap, it is not an essential task for understanding Matthew. It may help us see some of his own intentional emphases (and Mark's as well) in their differences. But whether Mark was the earliest Gospel and Matthew used his testimony to Jesus in his own writing, Matthew needs to be read on his own merits. Not much attention will be paid to the contrasting ways in which Matthew engages in revisions, additions, paraphrasing, compression, transfers – all the sorts of things biographers do with prior materials, other than when they are particularly illuminating to

non-Christian Jews in the synagogue. This view avoids the anachronistic reading of Matthew as promoting Christianity as a new religion for Gentiles in opposition to Judaism, a monolithic old religion for Jews. Matthew and his community were part of a process in which Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, followers of Jesus, and others were presenting somewhat diverse competing versions of Judaism.” (p. 3) See also: Dunn, J. D. G. (2015). *The Making of Christianity: Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Vol. 3) Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. (pp. 24–26); Hagner, *Matthew, 1-13* (pp. lxxv–lxxi); France, *Matthew* (pp. 17-18); Davies, *Matthew Vol. 1* (pp. 23-24); Carter, *Matthew* (p. 36). Nolland takes the evidence as inconclusive: *Matthew* (pp. 15-16). To the contrary: Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (p. 54)

²¹ Eddy, Paul Rhodes and Boyd, Gary A. (2007). *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. Even Origen recognized there were many so-called “gospels” but only four that were reliable: “Certainly Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke did not take *in hand* to write, but wrote their Gospels filled with the Holy Spirit. *Many have taken in hand to compose a narrative of the events that are certainly familiar among us*. The Church possesses four Gospels, but the heretics have many...” Williams, *Matthew* (p. 2).

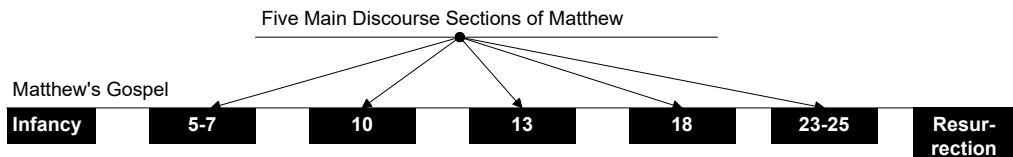
Matthew's emphases.²²

Another assumption being made is that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. Matthew's biography is not fictive. The overgrown and thriving industry of the "third quest" for the historical Jesus has its own merits and validity. But I will not spend time justifying the decision to take Matthew as a reliable (though not exhaustive) account of the Christ of history and the Jesus of faith. That is for a different project, one many others have taken up in great detail.²³

Structure

We must acknowledge that any "outline" of Matthew is not definitive. Matthew himself offers no clear "outline" and various careful scholars and readers of Matthew have offered different divisions, based on various observed "clues." At times we may need to remember this: narratives normally don't yield themselves easily to topical arrangements. So, any outline will be only as good as its ability to help identify the flow of thought and major themes that seem to dominate the narrative and must not be a procrustean bed to separate sections from each other.²⁴

Without reading far in Matthew, the reader notices a dramatic contrast with Mark: the large increase in the teachings and sayings of Jesus (five major sections of teaching/preaching) The beginning also is quite different. Instead of a very short, abrupt beginning, Matthew provides a genealogy followed by the story of conception, birth and infancy. The end of Matthew also greatly expands what we know from Mark. There is a full chapter on the resurrection and the commissioning of the Apostles for ministry to the uttermost parts of the earth. Even the tone of this account differs. There is a much more concern to relate Jesus to Old Testament scripture and to trace his relationship to its great bodies of discourse.²⁵



While David Scaer's thesis may be overly precise as to the purpose, the claim that this enlarging of discourses concerning Jesus' teaching is designed to teach disciples points in the right direction:

"...Matthew's Gospel was written as a catechesis or summary of what believers were taught before being admitted by Baptism into the full

²² In this I echo the sentiment of Morris, *Matthew*: "I am not so much concerned with how he wrote his Gospel as with its meaning as we have it." (p. 241).

²³ For summaries see: James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Eds.) (2009) *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Keener, Craig S. (2009). *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; Wright, N. T. (1996). *Jesus and the victory of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Dunn, James D. G. (2003). *Jesus Remembered*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

²⁴ For five approaches: McKnight, S. (1992). "Matthew, Gospel of." In J. B. Green & S. McKnight (Eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (p. 529-532). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

²⁵ One continuing debate is over whether the fifth discourse includes chapter 23 or is just the Olivet Discourse (24-25). I am convinced of the former. See Hood, Jason (2009) "Matthew 23-25: The Extent of Jesus' Fifth Discourse" in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* (pp. 527-543).

eucharistic membership of the church.”²⁶

Matthew’s structure seems to turn around chapter 13, the major section of parables of the Kingdom. In the larger scheme of Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 13 can be taken as the center of the whole work. One indication of this is the shift from Jesus interacting with the crowds to a stronger focus on disciples. This highlights one of Matthew’s themes: discipleship. The very end of the book climaxes with Jesus’ great commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:18-20). The whole of Matthew has a concern with the issue of who are true disciples and what it takes to embody the “greater righteousness.”

Matthew 13 is a key turning point: true disciples are those who recognize Jesus as fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament, as the one who reveals the mysteries of the kingdom of God as prophesied in Psalm 77:2. Isaiah’s complaint about Israel is also fulfilled in Jesus’ experience: many in Israel remain hard hearted. They do not see or hear with understanding or, if there is understanding, do not make an unqualified commitment to the kingdom of God as it has now come into human history. While Jesus continues to deal with crowds after Matthew 13, the focus shifts from a more public ministry to a more private ministry. More of Jesus’ time and energies now are given to the inner circle of disciples, preparing them for their future task as disciple-makers among all peoples of the earth.

For example, C.H. Lohr outlines the whole Gospel in this manner (note the alternation between major sections of narrative and major teaching sections—five teaching sections altogether).²⁷ The whole looks like a “ring composition” with the turning point of the whole gospel to be found in the parables of the kingdom in Chapter 13. This is not fully persuasive, but it does highlight the way in which Matthew provides us with a great deal more in the way of Jesus as teacher. This pattern is dramatized in the following chart:

1-4	Birth and beginnings of Jesus	Narrative
5-7	Blessings, entering and living in the <u>kingdom</u>	Discourse
8-9	Authority and invitation	Narrative
10	Mission <u>discourse</u>	Discourse
11-12	Rejection by this generation	Narrative
13	Parables of the kingdom	Discourse
14-17	Acknowledgement by disciples	Narrative
18	Community <u>discourse</u>	Discourse
19-22	Authority and invitation	Narrative
23-25	Woes, coming of the <u>kingdom</u>	Discourse
26-28	Death and “rebirth” (resurrection) of Jesus	Narrative

The book might be best read through its ending. The Great Commission gives the theme: the disciples are now to make more disciples, from all peoples on the earth. The material prior to the Great Commission shows Jesus making disciples and in various ways give an exposition of what a true disciple is. The task they are commissioned to do is demonstrated in the words and

²⁶ Scaer, *Matthew*, p. 9.

²⁷ Lohr, C. H. (1961) “Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23:403–35. See also: Derickson, G. W. (2006) “Matthew’s Chiastic Structure and Its Dispensational Implications.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:423–37.

deeds of Jesus.

In addition to Lohr, Peter Ellis suggests the book be ordered by a “chiastic” form, with the turning point in 13:35 where Jesus turns from pseudo-Israel to the true Israel. Until then Jesus spends time with all people. From then on, he concentrates mainly on those who have responded and become serious disciples.²⁸

His is only a brief outline. It is easy to see that each of the discourses generally sounds its own distinctive note in its teaching. Only the Sermon on the Mount focuses on “righteousness” and ends with the multitude astonished because Jesus taught as one having “authority” (with his “I say to you...” set against the understandings of the law and righteousness common in his day). The following narrative tends to pick up that theme and give stories that have a somewhat similar point. Thus Chapter 10 stresses conflict and persecution that awaits the disciples who are sent out to preach and heal. The stories in Chapters 11-12 tend to be stories about opposition or potential opposition: from John the Baptist and his followers, from Chorazin and Bethsaida, from the “wise and understanding,” from the scribes and Pharisees.

Whether Ellis is right or not, the material does break down into units in a manner that is similar to what he suggests in the following chart:

- A. **Narrative:** Jesus, Son of David, Son of Abraham, Messiah, New Moses (1-4)
- Minor discourse: John the Baptist on the One Coming (3:8-12)
- B. *Major Discourse:* Surpassing righteousness of the true Disciple (5-7)
- C. **Narrative:** The authority of Jesus shown in ten miracles (8-9)
- D. *Major Discourse:* Persecution inevitable in the work of the disciple (10)
- E. **Narrative:** Jesus opposed and persecuted (11-12)
- F/F'. *Major Discourse:* **Parables of Kingdom—understanding separates false and true disciples** (13)
- E'. **Narrative:** Jesus is understood and misunderstood (14-17)
- D'. *Major Discourse:* True disciples bound together in community by mutual acceptance based on humility and forgiveness (18)
- C'. **Narrative:** Acceptance of various groups (unmarried, children, the handicapped, the publicans and sinners, Gentiles) and rejection of the Jewish leaders by God (19-22)
- B'. *Major Discourse:* Warning: judgment on false disciples when the Son of Man returns (23-25)
- A'. **Narrative:** Judgment falls on Jesus—Crucifixion and resurrection (26-28)
- Minor discourse: Make disciples until the end of the age (28:16-20)

Ellis' theory of the structure also suggests continuities and contrasts existing between his various corresponding parts. On his theory the first Major Discourse (5-7) is matched with the fifth Major Discourse (23-25).²⁹ They both are about the same length, both associated with a

²⁸ Ellis, Peter (1974) *Matthew: His Mind and His Message*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. (p. 12). See also H. J. Bernard Combrink: “The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative” in the *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983) 61-70.

²⁹ Note the analysis of David J. Clark (2019) *Analyzing and Translating New Testament Discourse*. Dallas: Fontes Press (pp. 17-19, 78-89) that argues for this division. So also Keener, *Matthew* (p. 535); Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 339); N. T. Wright (1992). *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (pp. 386-387). Alternatively others separate 23 from the fifth discourse and see it as only chapters 24-25: Carson, *Matthew* (p. 528); Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 654); Turner, *Baker: Matthew* (p. 308); Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 46);

mountain, with Jesus taking the seated position of a teacher. The one has beatitudes, the other woes. Both close with a judgmental scene in which the condemned address Jesus as “Lord, Lord.” Similar sorts of parallels and contrasts can be drawn between other sections.

Matthew appears to be written in a time of persecution, when persecution might lead to squelching evangelism and disciple-making because Christians were tempted not to confess Christ publicly or to receive into their homes those fellow Christians who were being persecuted (10:34-42).³⁰ Matthew focuses on the nature and meaning of discipleship. True disciples are distinct in that they not only say “Lord, Lord” or do miracles, but by the fact that they obey all Christ has commanded and make it known despite persecution (7:15-23; 25:31-46).

Matthew also appears to be constructed to serve the purpose of instruction of Christians (catechumens). Some see it as having a structure that aids memorization within an oral community. While the structure is still complex, the major part of the book is an alternation between a narrative section (which might have some brief discourses) and a discourse or sermon section. In between these major sections is a transitional sentence that is virtually the same: “When Jesus finished saying...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).³¹

It is unlikely that any outline can capture all the connections that exist in Matthew’s text. What is important is some organizing heuristic that notes thematic commonalities that reasonably group discourse units in a meaningful manner without it becoming a rigid framework.³² Matthew may write with at least a partial eye to memorization, knowing that a significant number of his hearers would not be literate. Even those who were, often memorized significant amounts of sacred stories and teaching. Written scrolls were expensive to produce and were hardly in circulation the way contemporary books are.

One of those devices may have been the use of chiasm (a symmetry based on a word or phrase order that is parallel and reverses order). For example, Borgman and Clark see the discourses as ordered in a chiastic manner:

1 Kingdom: law as covenant attitude and action, blessed are you	to all (Matt. 5–7)
2 Kingdom: mission and opposition	to disciples (Matt. 10)

Morris, *Matthew* (p. 593); Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (p. 9); Talbert, *Matthew* (p. 264); Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 59); France, *Matthew* (p. 857). My analysis agrees with Clark, Keener, Blomberg and Wright.

³⁰ The subtitle of Gundry’s Matthew commentary focuses on this: “His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution” (Gundry, *Matthew*). Keener, *Matthew*: “The Christians faced persecution (10:17; 24:9), counterfeit prophets (7:22; 24:11, 24), apostasy (13:21–22; 24:10, 12), and an incurable need for more laborers with Jesus’ heart (9:37)—in short, the hostility of their society and the apparent inadequacy of their church to transform the situation for good.” (p. 70)

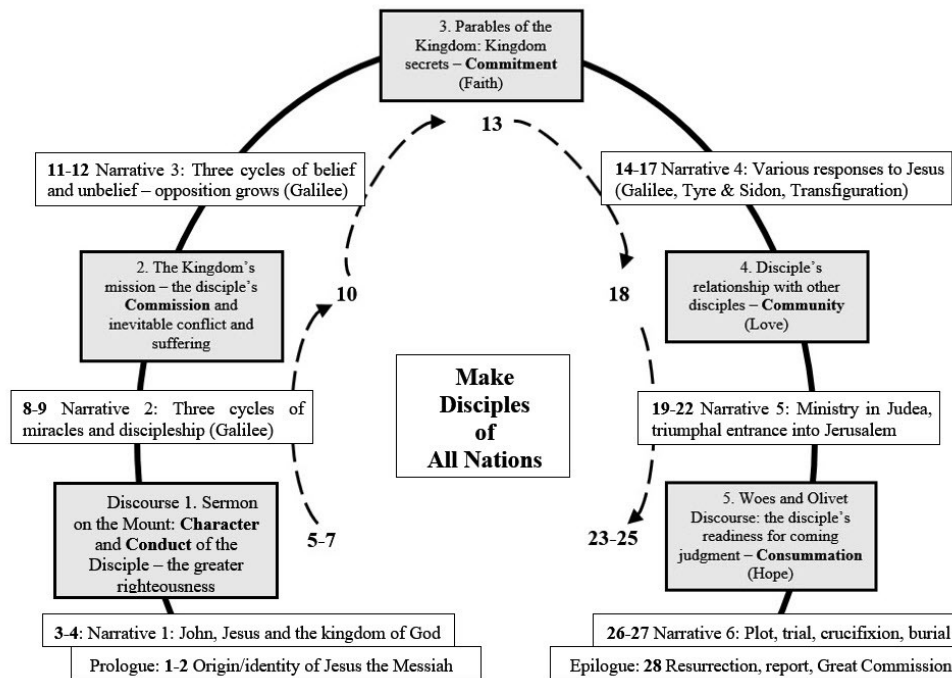
³¹ The Greek has some variation: Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους (7: 28– 29) Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς διατάσσω τοῖς δώδεκα μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ (11: 1) Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὰς παραβολὰς ταύτας (13: 53) Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους (19: 1) Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πάντας τοὺς λόγους τούτους (26: 1). Quarles, *EGGNT* (pp. 47-49).

³² Another productive outline is that suggested by Jack Dean Kingsbury: a threefold outline (1:1–4:16: the presentation of Jesus; 4:17–16:20: Ministry and opposition in Israel – who is this Jesus?; 16:21–28:20: The road to the cross, resurrection and great commission). *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (1989) Fortress Press. Aquinas, *Matthew*, also sees three sections: (a) entrance, 1-2; (b) Course of life, 3-20; (c) Departure, 21-28. (p. 7).

3 Kingdom: snapshots and responses – Kingdom distilled	to all (Matt. 13:1–52)
2' Kingdom: mission and opposition	to disciples (Matt. 18)
1' Kingdom: law as covenant attitude and action, woe to you	to all (Matt. 23–25) ³³

In reading Matthew through its ending commission (“Make disciples, teaching them all I have commanded you”) an emphatic emphasis is placed on the teaching sections of his biography (without discounting what we learn from the narratives of his deeds). There is some symmetry in the discourses. For example, the second and fourth are the shortest and both focus on the disciples, the Christian community. Both have a christological center (10:24-25/18:19-20). The second sends the disciples out on mission (the church in the world); the fourth deals with internal relationships within the community of faith. The first and the fifth are both three chapters long; both end in pictures of the coming judgment of God. The Sermon on the Mount begins with beatitudes, the fifth discourse with woes. At the center, the third is filled with the parables of the kingdom of heaven, the reality that encompasses world history and the life of all disciples.

In brief we can summarize the five discourse sections:



1. The major structural pivot is formed with a prologue combined with narrative 1 as well as narrative 6 and epilogue. The main body of the story about Jesus falls in between these two sections. The main “cycle” details the ministry of Jesus making disciples. The five major discourses are the main curriculum for making disciples, though reinforced and enhanced by the

³³ Paul Borgman and Kelly James Clark (2019). *Written to Be Heard: Recovering the Messages of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (p. 71, 84 combined in chart).

for they will be called the children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of **righteousness**,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew’s Author and Audience

Unlike an ancient letter, ancient biography most often does not specify the author or recipient(s) of that writing (Luke’s Theophilus being the exception, though even in that case it may simply be a dedication to the patron who sponsored the writing). So, if we are to discern that audience, we can do it only by reading the clues in the text itself as to the sort of audience that would be able to hear or read it and make sense of it. We must also infer the sort of author who could write this level and type of discourse as well as the sort of “ideal” hearer the author seems to take for granted.

These inferences are made by discerning things such as:

1. The prior events, geography, traditions and persons that are known by author and audience and mentioned in the narrative.
2. Those things that are taken for granted as already or likely known and not needing an explanation, so they are passed over with no clarification (vs. things that are mentioned and explained).
3. The level of literacy assumed using a type of language suited to the assumed hearer (the style, literary vs. popular; educational level).
4. Cultural competencies (artistic, literary, historical, aesthetic).

These matters are notoriously difficult. The result has often been what is called a “mirror” reading of the text: assuming a given story or instruction is there because there is some issue or challenge the intended audience is facing that elicits that text (or even creates it). The basic notion is: “The biblical text is always reacting against a certain set of assumptions, beliefs, or presuppositions, so when interpreting any biblical text, you must always ask, ‘What is this reacting against in its context?’”³⁷

This is not a bad instinct. It can be helpful to probe the context to see if one can understand more of what is left “unsaid” but implied. But it can overread a text, leading to a sort of circularity: you assume that there is something in the context or community in reaction to which this text is being written. That hypothetical becomes the rationale for inclusion of this sort of story or instruction from which you inferred that background situation. You infer the situation (*sitz im leben*) from the text and then read the text in the light of the situation you’ve inferred, confirming the inferred situation.³⁸

Yet biographies are not simply written to address known or imputed issues. They are

³⁷ Naselli, Andrew D. (2017). *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing). p. 172.

³⁸ An example of this is the question of Matthew’s attitude toward the Roman Empire. Is it anti-Roman (seeing Rome aligned with Satan) and looking toward an eschatological overthrow of the political powers (Warren Carter and David Sim) or critical of Rome (but not linking it to Satan or an eschatological overthrow) but still to be won over by evangelism and discipleship (John Riches and Dorothy Jean Weaver)? Elements of Matthew are interpreted in the light of each beginning point. See Riches. *Imperial*.

accounts of a person's words and deeds. They have a primary historical impulse. To be sure, the protagonist is held up as exemplary and instructive.³⁹ But that does not mean one needs to find something in the later writing context to explain why this or that story is told in a certain way (or even made up). The instructions in the Sermon on the Mount may be simply outlining the sort of life-style and inner motives that were to govern those who were seeking the righteousness of the Kingdom of heaven, as taught by Jesus in his day. Along with the conflict stories in Matthew, it need not be read as a sort of template of the specific debate the "Matthean community" was having with a hypothetical Pharisaic Judaism in the early to late A.D. 90s.⁴⁰ One can note the added emphasis Matthew places on this side of the Jesus story without creating a detailed, inferential and speculative set of detailed specifications for what is attributable to some later context or community standing behind the text rather than in the original events surrounding the protagonist.

Another issue resides in the interests and biases of current day readers. Reading ancient texts is affected by the concerns and presuppositions of the contemporary reader. Our own sensitivities (and blind spots) foreground elements of the narrative we are reading and push to the background other facets we may not even notice. So contemporary post-colonial concerns often highlight the imperial nature of Rome and read the writings of the New Testament as responses to the status quo under Roman domination.⁴¹ Such readings take Matthew to be a counter-narrative to the Imperial ideology and system of Rome and, by analogy, a resistance document for those currently marginalized and oppressed in the present day. Matthew becomes a manual for resistance.

By this interpretation, even within elements that promote resistance, there remain other facets that further the oppression that was pervasive in the first century Roman and Jewish world. So, we must separate the kernel of liberation from the husks of oppression that remain in Matthew's account. An internal critique must be undertaken, identifying Matthew's putative anti-Semitism, andro-centrism (male centeredness), patriarchalism, and violent imaging of the Kingdom of God's judgment and rejecting them. Matthew's portrait of Jesus is seen as itself

³⁹ Turner, *Baker Matthew*: "If John 20:30–31 provides a model, the theological purposes of the evangelists guided their editing of tradition, leading to literary narratives, not historical chronicles. Their purpose was not to satisfy intellectual curiosity by compiling historical data but to disciple their respective communities by bringing selected episodes from the life of Jesus to bear on the communities' needs. The Gospels continue to teach the church by narrating reliable words and deeds of Jesus." (p. 5).

⁴⁰ E.g., Alan F. Segal, "*Matthew's Jewish Voice*" in David L. Balch, ed. (1991) op. cit.: "As we have seen, Matthew's theme of Pharisaic persecution is combined with his interest in Jewish law. This distrust goes beyond anything in Luke and Mark. As I have already said, I see this emphasis as *necessarily explainable* in the social setting of Matthew's community, *not* in the circumstances surrounding Jesus. Matthew has *greatly augmented* the conflict stories and emphasized that Jesus' opponents are Pharisees, in places where the other Gospels are less sure of the opponents." (p. 23) Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Warren Carter's writings (op. cit.) on Matthew display this reader-oriented hermeneutic. See Carter, *Matthew*: "The gospel asks us to agree with some very questionable assertions... The point here is that the authorial audience is assumed to 'go along with the story' and to accept its violence, hatred, and oppression, warts and all. But those of us who are readers from the Christian tradition must be careful not to be uncritically co-opted by our respect for this text." (pp. 5-6). Such a selective sifting of the Jesus tradition raises the question whether the criteria used to sort acceptable from non-acceptable is simply "Christian," syncretic or a misreading of the text.

infected with elements of oppression, bullying and domination that must be challenged.⁴² On such accounts, as a manual for contemporary practice and life, Matthew must be read selectively and critically with a reconstructed “Jesus” mobilized against inadequacies in Matthew’s (and other Gospel writer’s) account that falsified the true historical Jesus.

The danger of reading our contemporary cultural biases and agendas into and out of the Gospel does not excuse us from bringing as many of them to self-awareness as we read. Nor does it get us out of the messy job of seeking to understand, in its own terms, the linguistic, socio-cultural and political world of the Jesus movement. Documents such as Matthew had meaning within their own world and age. As all authors do, Matthew takes for granted certain culturally shared understandings and presupposed elements that he does not need to express or explain – but modern readers need them to be expressed and explained or they misunderstand.⁴³ Sometimes, what is left unsaid is as important as what is “said” in the words on the page. Given the disjunction between our modern cultural worlds and the ancient Greco-Roman worlds of the New Testament, we need some bridges between our and their day.⁴⁴

I am assuming there is a determinate meaning intended by the original author, even though there are texts that are ambiguous, with several legitimate ways of understanding the intent. In addition, texts escape the full control of their author as different audiences, in different cultures and times read the words (often in translation). Well-grounded hypotheses about the original intent are possible through an integrated approach. At the same time, humility is called for in our

⁴² This is another reason given for not seeing the Gospels as eyewitness. Their accounts are asserted to be unhistorical in that they have distorted the gospel and Jesus by incorporating these attributed elements. Jesus was subversive in ways that his biographers have somehow missed due to their inability to throw off the mental grave-clothes of their imperial, patriarchal, violent cultural world. Yet one cannot help but think this is another trimming down of Jesus, an image of Jesus that fits some modern self-portrait created by excising unwelcome (and possibly misunderstood) elements found in the Gospel portraits. It assumes prior misuses of Matthew’s account were justified (viz. that he was and is anti-Semitic and affirming an androcentric viewpoint). It not only trims Jesus down but reads into Matthew cultural dynamics and meanings that are anachronistic and ethnocentric. For an account of many recent attempts to describe an “historical” Jesus: Witherington, B., III. (1997). *The Jesus quest: the third search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: “Yet by the end of the [19th] century various scholars, especially Albert Schweitzer, had come to the conclusion that most of these fresh attempts to say what we could really know about the historical Jesus actually told us more about their authors than about the person they sought to describe.” (p. 7).

⁴³ “...the text of Matthew routinely assumes knowledge of something without explaining it: who the Pharisees were, where Nazareth is, the use and purposes of synagogues in first-century Palestine, what teachings were current in Second Temple Judaism, and so forth. The implied reader knows the things assumed by the narrative. ... Matthew’s implied reader is also thoroughly conversant with the OT; the narrative repeatedly offers OT citations as the Word of God, and the reader is expected to believe and understand the import of those citations.” Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*, p. 34.

⁴⁴ Green, Joel B. and Lee M. McDonald, eds. (2011). *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. Stegemann, Wolfgang, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen, eds. (2002). *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Horrell, David G., ed. (1999). *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark. See virtually all the many writings of Craig S. Keener for such bridge building. Most recently his work on the genre of New Testament Gospels: *Christobiography: Memory, History and the Reliability of the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2019).

endeavor to become good readers of ancient texts. Gadamer's account about the fusion of horizons (the way we read texts against the horizon of our modern worlds and "fuse" it with the horizon of the text) is well taken.⁴⁵

Communication is about something, some 'reality' that stands behind the words. It is this subject matter that connects the author, text and reader. Manfred Oeming organizes schools of interpretation by means of what he calls the hermeneutical square – underlining four matters involved in interpretation:⁴⁶

- The authors who intend to communicate something about their experience or world.
- The text or words which at least partially contain the insight or concepts the authors aim to convey (and that assumes readers/hearers already know and share meanings signaled by the words as well as things left unsaid and taken for granted as known).
- The readers or audiences who encounter the text or words and must deal with the words of the authors and their worlds.
- The subject matter is that reality which touched the author, inspiring the articulation in words, which is referred to by those words, and which finally reaches some readers or audience. Texts are read in the light of the reality or realities that inform the text (with concern for the coherence between the words and the reality).

The comprehension and understanding of meaning can be located "behind" the text (in the author's subjective and objective world), "within" the text (in the grammatical, syntactical, and literary features), and in "front" of the text (in the activity and world of various readers or audiences). These three are essential in developing meaning.

Much of 20th century interpretation focused on the world "behind" the text in practicing historical-critical exegesis. The results were an endless and indeterminate set of conflicting conclusions that created various hypothetical histories of the current text and reconstructions of the "sources" behind the final texts as they have come down in history. Recent literary criticism sought to restore much of the actual unity of the "final text" and focused attention again on the text. Reader-focused criticism has tended to shatter the final text by making it more of a Rorschach, aesthetic object that elicits very different responses depending upon the reader.

In some cases, as in deconstructionist analysis, there is no determinant meaning in the text. Yet all these approaches are limited without an encounter with the "subject matter" toward which they point (see graph below). The testimony of Scripture is focused on engendering a transformative encounter with God that issues into a living and life-long relationship with God through Jesus Christ, a discipleship within the kingdom of heaven. For that the work of the Spirit is indispensable.⁴⁷ We can think of these in terms of what many have called "the hermeneutical"

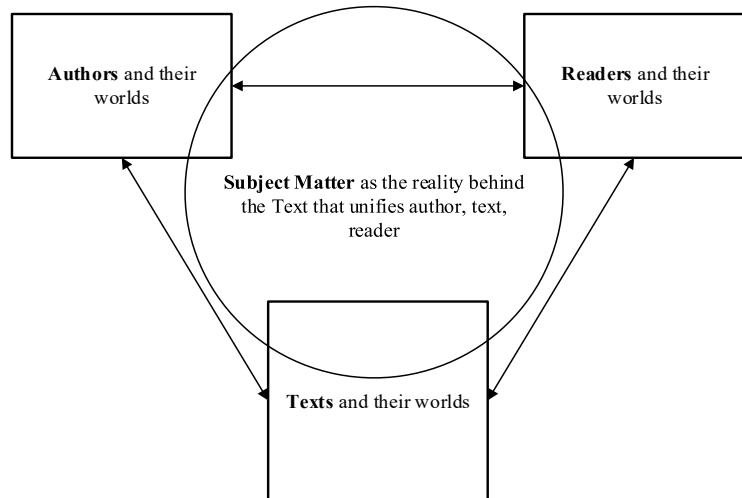
⁴⁵ Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1989) *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition. New York: Continuum Publishing, Warnke, Georgia (1987). *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press: "Gadamer therefore claims that 'the literary text, the linguistic work of art, meets us not only as a barrier but is also accepted with an agreement that is the beginning of a long, sometimes of an often repeated attempt to understand.'" (p. 89)

⁴⁶ *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.

⁴⁷ Keener, Craig (2016). *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in the Light of Pentecost*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

triangle (which normally does not include the subject matter or object about which the author has written).

All four of these aspects are engaged in making sense of the narrative of Matthew. His subject matter is Jesus Christ. It is that subject matter we want to engage in ways that produce a real encounter between us (as modern readers) and it by means of Matthew's text.



Insofar as we are considerate listeners to his text and his words and world, we can take his Gospel as a manual for our discipleship under the tutelage of Jesus Christ by the Spirit who is given to us.

If the horizon of a reader's socio-cultural experience is always engaged in the reading of any text, then there is no such thing as a purely "innocent" or "objective" reading. We always interpret texts in the light of and within the horizon of our prior cultural conventions and knowledge.⁴⁸ Does this mean that interpretation is hopelessly subjective? Or are there normative or rational guidelines that enable us to distinguish between bad or inadequate interpretations and good or accurate interpretations?

Reader-oriented theories raise the issue of the obligations of readers when they seek to understand a given utterance. Just as we might speak of considerate authors (who write in a way that considers the abilities and knowledge of their intended readers and adjusts the communication), we can speak of considerate readers (who seek to acquire the competencies and knowledge essential to access the maximum meaning the author encoded into a message). In reading Matthew, we must be considerate readers of his text, generous in our assumptions about motives and open to hearing what he encoded in his text rather than simple confirmations and additions to our own agendas.

There are numerous aspects of a text that must be recognized when one intends to read it carefully and closely. What is primarily at stake is not the degree of understanding but the ability to justify a specific understanding of the text. There is a danger of not seeing enough of the meaning encoded in the text (under-interpretation). But over-interpretation (more common in biblical scholarship) is equally dangerous.

While many considerations dealing with the para-linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of a text enable a reader to go behind a text, the linguistic aspects of a text are the best beginning point to discipline any reading from going beyond the meanings embedded in a text. Justifying what one understands the text to mean is a process of showing that a given understanding

⁴⁸ See the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1989).

comports well with all the aspects of the discourse analysis of a text: linguistic, para-linguistic, and extra-linguistic.

Matthew and Discipleship

The importance of discipleship is signaled by the end of Matthew: “Go and make disciples...” (28:19). In addition, Matthew contains more of the ethics of Jesus than any other book of the New Testament. The character and calling of the disciple are the focus. The essential demand of discipleship is a life that obeys Jesus’ teachings. Jesus’ ethical imperative is summed as the righteousness of the Kingdom of heaven (5:17-20, 41-48; 7:12) whose heart is love (22:37-40; 25:31-46). Profession of Christ as Lord is insufficient. Only the engagement in faith that generates obedience to the pattern of righteousness Jesus taught and modeled is sufficient. As John Yieh puts it in his overview of Matthew. “...Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the supreme teacher to inspire his readers to become faithful disciples.”⁴⁹

If Matthew is approached as a manual for discipleship, it must be read both within our own day and time as well as within the day and time it was composed. As a “life” (bios), we can expect it to be written to instruct and form us ethically and morally. That was a common purpose of such a genre in its day. Given the difference in time and culture, that task entails finding a compelling understanding of the relevance of Matthew’s words for our modern everyday life and communities. This is not automatic. For that matter it is not an easy thing given the mindsets that frame much of contemporary Christian discourse in the Western world. It was written for us but not to us. We must bridge the gap between the time and audience for which it was written and our own day.

On the one hand, today, there is a conservative “gospel” of getting into heaven after death as the target of divine and human efforts. Personal sin-guilt is the problem. God’s arrangement in the work of Christ can get us into heaven. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the goods delivered in response to faith alone. Evangelism is the central imperative of the Church. But beyond that (and coming to church and giving your “tithe”), the “gospel” is not about things such as economics, business, politics, international relations, health care systems, science – in other words, about most of the other matters of life. The exception are private matters surrounding sexuality (abortion, contraception, infidelity, sexual harassment, gender orientation and roles, stem cell research etc.) and personal morality (gambling, drugs, drinking, foul language, bullying etc.). The public world and the private are largely divorced. Faith is a personal, private matter.

On the other hand, we have the “gospel” of the progressive left – the reduction of the gospel to social ethics (racism, sexism, poverty, political oppression, civil rights, ecology, gender rights etc.). Structural sin (social sin) is the paramount problem. Commitment to liberation, equality and the community becomes the central imperative of the Church. The “essence” of Christianity becomes a generalized “love” that overrides everything else. The “real” Jesus is not the one portrayed in the Gospels (who is mistaken about a number of things or who is hidden behind distorted, non-historical portraits the early church projected), but the Jesus of “love.” The “real” Christian is whoever is committed to “love,” regardless of whatever else it is they believe or do. The larger notion of “Christlikeness” in terms of all the features of personal and interpersonal

⁴⁹ Yieh, J. Y. H. (2012). *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Matthew*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. (p. 41).

virtues is lost. You are “Christian” so long as you are active in campaigning for equality and the political and social ideals of the Western liberal tradition. The “gospel” ideals become reduced to equality, liberty, and happiness in this world.

The common feature of both these reductionist “gospels” is the practical irrelevance of the Jesus of the Gospels to human life as a whole.⁵⁰ Both sides seem to fill in the gap with contemporary political ideologies of one sort or another. One side has a high view of Scripture and Jesus. But it does not see his life and teachings as relevant for most of their public life (or society). Salvation is “spiritual” and personal. The other has a low view of Scripture and the flawed packaging of Jesus by the Gospel writers. So, it writes off the Jesus of the Gospels as a product simply of his own time. Large swaths of his teaching are irrelevant to our day. Both have a tendency simply to rewrite Jesus so that he mirrors the socio-political and economic ideology they have derived from elsewhere. Dallas Willard captures this divide well:

“Historically, conservative Christians became suspicious of any talk of Jesus as ‘teacher’ because liberals, or ‘Modernists,’ used it as a way of saying that he was not the divine Son and supernatural savior but ‘just a good man.’ In addition, their understanding of salvation by grace alone cut off from the ‘essentials’ in Christian faith his teachings about life and God’s kingdom....

The Modernists, by contrast, professed to regard him as a great teacher. But then they presented him as fundamentally mistaken about major elements of his own message, such as when his kingdom would come, and they explained away all his sayings and deeds that required supernatural interaction—his teaching and practice of prayer, for example. Thus, they made it impossible in practice to take him seriously as a teacher.”⁵¹

The net effect is the difficulty of taking the Jesus of Matthew seriously in the contemporary world in part because of these common reductionist “gospels.” In addition, much Christian ethics finds its dynamic and rationale in patterns of reasoning more influenced by secular philosophers than Jesus. Even when the ethics of the New Testament is lined out, most start with Paul and take the Gospels as the ethics of the Gospel writers. Jesus may have been the stimulus for Christian ethics, but he is not central to it. Often such accounts do not even attempt to bridge the gap between the first century and the present.⁵²

⁵⁰ We could add other ways Jesus is made irrelevant to everyday life when teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount are considered as unrelated to Christians today (as older dispensationalists did, referring it only to Israel and the Millennial Kingdom) or to most Christians (as Tertullian and Origen did by restricting it to the “perfect” or to those in monasteries not engaging the larger society). Others practice this division: Protestant liberals such as Johannes Weiss made it an “interim” ethic, meant for a short time before the full Kingdom of God arrived in power (Jesus was mistaken in this timing), an ethic completely inadequate and irrelevant for a long-term ongoing world. What was needed was an ethic for a settled, long term community, which we get from Paul and others. Others simply see his teaching as idealistic impossibilities, maxims that cannot be implemented in the sort of world in which we live.

⁵¹ Willard, *Conspiracy*, p. 56.

⁵² Burrige, *Imitating*. See his overview of New Testament ethics (pp. 1-16). “As we shall demonstrate shortly, many surveys of New Testament ethics remain simply that – surveys—and never grapple with how they might be applied to the contemporary world.” (p. 3) “Thus this survey so far has

If discipleship is about the whole of life, about character as well as conduct, intentions as well as actions, the private and the public, the individual and the social, personal integrity and political engagement, work and family, nature and culture, science and faith etc. then the task of thinking about discipleship in Matthew necessitates a return to confessing Jesus as Lord of all matters bound up in our lives and world, including what he taught his original disciples. The kingdom of “heaven” is not some ethereal realm beyond space and time or a dimension of the inner life of every human. It is not simply some future this-worldly kingdom that has not yet arrived. It already is the very world that always surrounds us, just as the “heavens” surround us and provide the largest frame of reference within which we live.

When Jesus proclaims the arrival and nearness of the kingdom of heaven, he is not talking eschatological gibberish or mystical mumbo-jumbo. He is talking about a rule and realm that is always available, present, active, and real. It is not a symbolic way of talking about some peculiar human experience or brain activity. It is the real presence of God in his creation, interacting and infusing it with possibilities not imminent within its own mechanisms. To be sure, it is not the fullness of the kingdom but a kingdom that is unseen except by the eyes of faith, vulnerable and weak in that it can be rejected and contested or denied.

In taking Matthew as a “manual for discipleship,” we are focused on the relevance of his biography for contemporary readers. We aim at reading it for formation, not principally for information as many critical commentaries do, centering often on reconstructing the world behind the text and giving relative judgments as to the historicity of the events described. This is not to say it is unimportant to consider traditional critical questions. The goal is simply very different than contributing to the long and complex arguments over the text and context of Matthew found in many detailed and lengthy commentaries. The major focus will not exclude some interaction with those sorts of questions but will not be the primary goal.

In reading Matthew in this way, we must acknowledge it is only one avenue into the life and meaning of Jesus for us later disciples. Matthew was writing to equip Christ followers of his day for the issues of their day. Mark, Luke and John do much the same, but for somewhat different audiences and purposes. So, Matthew does not give the full picture we might gain from a more synthetic reading of all four Gospels with their distinctives and overlaps. We will reference the other Gospels at times where it is important to acknowledge some of the differences between them.

In addition, given the function of the biography to form character by displaying the deeds and words of its protagonist as well as its contextual embeddedness in the first century world, moving to decision making requires more than simple reference to Matthew’s portrait. Bridging to the present means considering the whole of Matthew, not simple pericopes.⁵³ Beyond all of Matthew the verses under consideration must be placed in the context of the whole New Testament and

shown that there was an explosion of books and articles about New Testament ethics in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, but that the majority contain only analyses of the ethical material found in the books of the New Testament, often to the neglect of Jesus himself...Yet the paradox is that people today, outside the Christian church as much, if not more, than within, still go on talking about Jesus as a ‘great moral teacher’, up there in the popular pantheon with Socrates, Buddha and so forth. On the other hand, many books on contemporary ethical dilemmas fail to include, let alone grapple with, the New Testament material at all.” (pp. 12-13)

⁵³ A selection of verses that form a single unit of thought.

finally the whole Bible. Much of the misunderstanding and misuse of Jesus' teaching is due to quoting him without reference to the larger context of the Old Testament (which was his "Bible") and to the interpretation and practices of the Apostles after him.

When he commissions the Apostles to make disciples, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20), he is not limiting that teaching just to direct "commands." What he articulated in parables as well as wisdom and interactive responses with people are also formational of character. His deeds and words fit together in a coherent whole. For example, whatever the command about "oath-taking" means (Matt. 5:33-37), it must be contextualized within what we see Jesus and the Apostles practicing. Its implications and applications need to be understood within that larger context (just as the "ban" on praying publicly in Matt. 6:6 cannot be taken as a blanket, literal ban on any prayer except those done in private, in your storage closet). Ancient biographies were written in part to display an exemplar of good conduct by giving not only the words but the actions of a figure. Together they form a coherent whole in shaping character.⁵⁴

In addition, discipleship is not a matter simply of getting clarity on morality, so one lives a life and engage in conduct that conforms to the highest ethical standards. It is even more a matter of maturity, of character. Securing the principles and patterns of what is ethically desirable is an important endeavor, especially in a world that is changing and introducing novel questions that have not been faced in the past (e.g., in medical ethics, warfare technology, globalization, climate change). But it is not enough.

Character involves more than information and truth. In a word, it is formation. It involves the inner motivation and a wisdom that enables disciples consistently, easily and with pleasure to live out those principles and patterns in the messiness of everyday life. It requires the mature prudence that comes with experience, knowing how to live well with people and situations that vary, and even knowing when the current set of principles are not applicable and new ones are needed. By making character and maturity central does not rule out or diminish the importance of commands, rules, intentions, consequences or role relationships. It simply folds them into a more comprehensive, living whole that involves who we are and not just what we do or say. Conduct always engages the inner and outer worlds of the disciple.

Yet discipleship is not simply a matter of character formation, as central as that might be to the process. The training and learning have a purpose and goal in mind: becoming a fruitful, productive member of the body of Christ. Differing in gifts, calling, personality and style, roles and responsibilities, disciples are fit together in the Spirit into the service of the Kingdom of God. These are the "living stones" that make up "the church" Jesus said he would build.

Relationships in a community are foundational to the formation as well as the maturing process. Living well is not simply a matter of an individualistic formation of one's character but equally a matter of forging and living well with others who range from the immature and poorly formed to those who are fully mature and well formed. Character formation always takes place

⁵⁴ Burridge, *Imitating*: "Therefore, although ethical instruction may not be the primary aim of ancient biography, it is clear that such Lives share the purpose of *mimesis*, or imitation, in common with much other classical literature." (p. 29) "Both the biographical genre of the gospels on the one hand, and the ancient idea of imitation and Jewish rabbinic precedent on the other suggest that Jesus' teaching must be earthed in his practical example, both of calling people to repentance and discipleship—but also his open pastoral acceptance of sinners, with whom he spent his life and for whom he died." (pp. 78-79)

within a community of people who are also in the process of being formed in the image of God.

Character formation is located within the Kingdom of God. That is a reality larger than the Church and not restricted to the Church. The Church is the place where discipleship takes place. The Church engages in evangelism, the proclamation of the good news of God's grace and reign, as well as spiritual formation of those who come to confess Jesus as Lord. The Church also engages in social action, seeking the righteousness of the Kingdom in the civic arenas of everyday life. Gushee and Stassen are on the right track when they say:

The kingdom is something we do, not just wait for. We “enter the kingdom” as we do kingdom praxis such as justice, peacemaking, healing, community building, and deliverance. Jesus did such praxis, and we must do the same.⁵⁵

Matthew's biographical gospel is about the shape of life, the dynamic of community, the character of disciples that means faithful participation in the salvation God is at work enacting in human history. It displays deliverance from false spiritualities, self-deceived “righteousness”, and unjust social arrangements. It reaches into the deepest recesses of the human person to reshape motives and reform character and into the broadest arenas of human life to reconstitute the community. With the inauguration of the Kingdom of heaven, all things have begun to be made new.

⁵⁵ Gushee, *Kingdom* (p.13).



I. Introduction: Jesus the Messiah (1:1–2:23)

A. The Family Line of Jesus (1:1-17)

(1) A Family History

This is the record of the origins of Jesus, the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham. This is a genealogy, the book of the origin, *biblos geneseōs* (Βίβλος γενέσεως) of Jesus Christ.

At the front of his account, Matthew begins with a family line. This phrase may a title for the book: ‘the book of the new Genesis wrought by Jesus the Messiah’ (though this theological reading of Matthew may be an “over” interpretation, even though a Jewish reader would hear “Genesis”). It is the case that this phrase echoes that found in Genesis 5:1, “the book of the generations of” (Heb. סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת *sēper tôlēdôt*) – a genealogical family history.⁵⁶ Or it may simply be the heading for the introductory family history before the Gospel moves on to the words and deeds that characterize Matthew’s subject.

For moderns this strikes us as a strange way to begin a book. For many of us, this is not the way to catch our attention or suggest a rousing read to come. Genealogies are lists of relatives. We want to get on with the story of the family dynamics, the personalities and events that make their lives worth attending to, not read a long list of names. So, we must put ourselves into the sandals of the ancients as we read this biography.⁵⁷

The question of who this “Jesus” is still haunts us. Any ancient Jewish reader of Matthew would know right away who Abraham and David are – as well as many of the other names and

⁵⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Fortress, 1979): “It has long been recognized that the present form of the book of Genesis has been structured into a whole by means of a repeated genealogical formula, ‘these are the generations (*toledot*) of....’....it is certain from the Hebrew syntax that the formula is always followed by the genitive of the progenitor and never of the progeny....” p. 145. For Childs this means that its first occurrence (Gen. 2:4) serves as a superscription for what follows, not as a subscription to 1:1-2:4a. Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans, 1990): “Few books of Scripture reveal the lines of demarcation between their individual units as clearly as does Genesis. This is due to the presence of the formula ‘*elleh toledot*, used ten times throughout Genesis.” p. 2. Gordon Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1: Genesis 1-15* (Word, 1987): “More precisely, the author or final redactor of Genesis has arranged the material so that each new development in the history is introduced by the phrase אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת “This is the (family) history of.” There are ten sections with this heading (eleven if the reduplication of 36:1, 9 are counted separately), with 1:1–2:3 acting as an overture to the whole book.” p. xxii.

⁵⁷ Holy, Ladislav, *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship*. London: Pluto Press, 1996. “Kinship ties which people acknowledge and distinguish determine whom to marry, where to live, how to raise children, which ancestors to worship, how to solve disputes, which land to cultivate, which property to inherit, to whom to turn in pursuing common interests and many things besides.” (p. 13). It should be noted that genealogies conform to the socially recognized ties of kinship so that the genitor (biological father) and the pater (the legally or socially recognized father) may not be the same. The essence of genealogy is not kinship itself but the interpretation of kinship.

stories associated with them. This beginning would immediately connect with those prior famous and revered names and immediately make the astonishing claim that Jesus is the long-awaited messiah. That would be an attention getter and set up a desire to know more about why this one, why him? It would also raise the question as to what he is “anointed” as Messiah to do.⁵⁸

Several things stand out immediately. This genealogical record describes a human. Genealogical references in the other gospels go further than this. Luke takes the whole line back to Adam, the son of God. Mark simply names Jesus the son of God, skipping all the human interlinkages. John goes even further back to the pre-existence of Jesus as the articulate expression of the God who created all things. John makes clear this one is of equal glory and power with God, was God, and now has become an incarnate God, becoming what he was not before all time to manifest the grace and truth of God. So, each Gospel stresses something a bit different about the story they are embarking on telling.

Matthew stresses more than that Jesus was a human being. He is a Jew, a son of David and son of Abraham.⁵⁹ As son of David he stands in the line a promise: that God was to act in human history, bringing a king whose reign would last forever. Time would not mark the limit of his significance and influence, gradually eroding and then erasing whatever effects he produced. As Messiah, this Jesus marks the fulfillment of the Davidic promises and the Israelite hopes. He is the forever King.

As son of Abraham, Jesus marks the definitive fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham. A seed would come through whom God would bless all the peoples of the earth. Earthly space would not mark the boundaries of his influence or power. Not a single culture, not a nation or subculture lies beyond his compassion or his intention. This one comes the only way any real human comes: from a single womb into a single culture and ethnicity. Yet he is not the nationalistic validator or legitimator of any single culture over against all others. He is the All Nations King, the blessing of God to all people. The plan of salvation through the descendants of Abraham is finally fully deployed.

Verse one of Matthew quickly alerts us to the reality of the sort of God who is active in our affairs. It is a God who has been engaged in a millennia-long project of rescue and restoration. The generations and centuries may fly by as though pushed by inexorable fate or by irresistible law. Yet behind it is the hand of a God who loves the world and seeks to bring it back to himself. Abraham left his ancestral home two thousand years before the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. The promise to build a nation took a thousand years. It was another thousand years before the promise to David came to fruition. God works slowly, yet surely.

This is a God who works through and with human beings. Not just with the perfect, but the imperfect. Abraham’s faith was not a perfect faith. It was a perfected faith, taking repeated promises and repeated inadequate responses before God found what he needed to move forward. He “justified” Abraham, declaring him righteous when he found a faith that accepted God’s word

⁵⁸ Carter, *Matthew*: “There was no standard expectation of a messiah, nor did every Jew look for a special anointed figure. Thus, to call Jesus ‘messiah’ or Christ does not evoke a fixed checklist of what ‘the messiah’ is to do. Rather, the term raises a question. For what special task or role has God anointed or designated Jesus?” (p. 56)

⁵⁹ This is a distinctive title for Jesus in Matthew. It is found nine times, eight of which are found only in Matthew. Mark uses it three times; Luke four. It is often on the lips of the outcasts and despised who are seeking healing from Jesus.

for what it was.

We know David as both a passionate lover of God and a notoriously dramatic sinner. His violence and his lust broke the boundaries of righteousness—yet God embraced him and found in him one with whom he could weave the tapestry of messianic hope. Within a generation after his death, the kingdom of Israel was divided and the decline of both north and south moving already toward the tragic story of judgment and exile.

Jesus comes from these roots. The promises and hopes that shimmer from the past now begin to shine with the reality and solidity of flesh and blood. The God of the past is the God of the present and future. Matthew's account is about the God who does not abandon his prior actions or neglect the salvation he promised and displayed to Abraham or David.

We may also say that these two stand in for a multitude of unnamed others—women and men, parents and children, kith and kin, neighbors and enemies—who make up the larger story encapsulated by these two names. Their history is done. So too is that of the earthly Jesus Christ. Matthew writes to invite us to place ourselves within this genealogy and the story it carries.

In gathering the various documents that came from the Apostolic Church, the early Church placed Matthew at the beginning of its collection. Speculation is that his Gospel was thought by them to be the earliest written by an Apostle, the apostle Matthew. His Gospel also is filled with Old Testament quotations that are fulfilled in Jesus, thus stressing the continuity between Jesus and the whole history of the Jews. This is unlike the letters of Paul which are put in order from the longest to the shortest.

Still, we may take a clue from this ordering of the Gospels to note that Matthew reminds disciples of the major history of the Israelites, from whom come Jesus as the promised King and Messiah who will bless all nations. To understand the nature and meaning of this Jesus, one must also understand the story of Israel, from Abraham to Jesus. The Old Testament story from Genesis 12 to Malachi 4 is an essential tale to be told as the backdrop to the appearance of Jesus in that story. To understand Jesus, we must understand the history he fulfills.

Matthew begins with a triad: the story to be told (and learned) has three “acts” (three fourteens) – from Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian captivity, and the captivity to the birth of Jesus. So, the Old Testament materials can be interpreted in four units:

1. From creation to Abraham (Genesis 1-11:26)
2. From Abraham to David (Genesis 11:27-II Samuel)
3. From David (Solomon) to the Babylonian exile (I Kings-II Chronicles)
4. From the exile (Shealtiel) to the Christ. (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel)

Understanding the major elements and meaning of each of those four parts of the Old Testament is an essential part of understanding this new fifth part that centers on the words and deeds of Jesus as the Messianic figure. Making disciples is rooted not only in the good news of Jesus Christ, but in the sacred Hebrew Scriptures Jesus used to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' genealogical heritage includes the message and meaning of the stories of the Old Testament. By beginning with Abraham in this lineage, the stress already points to a horizon larger than the nation of Israel. The promise to Abraham, that he was chosen to bless all the peoples of the earth, now reaches its climactic fulfillment.

His appearance does not negate nor diminish that which came before him or after him. Jesus may be the great Light of the world, but he also points to the lesser lights that illuminate the reality of God's mighty acts and articulate words in history. What was said before in the Old

Testament directed at Israel and what comes after in the New Testament documents focused on the Church is woven tightly into a single fabric of salvation history.

(2) Culture: Status and Honor Signals⁶⁰

From a cultural viewpoint we can recognize the importance of pedigree and genealogy. They locate a person in terms of honor and status, providing an initial map for social interaction. People's social standing was largely a function of the family into which they were born. Genealogy preserved ethnic solidarity and related a person backwards to family and cultural traditions.

Jesus was born into this and not another family. Later he will note that it is not the fact of physical relationship that marks the most important realities ("Who is my mother or brother or sister?"). He may belong to the priestly order of Melchizedek who was a man without a genealogy to establish his social location or spiritual rights. Nonetheless, Jesus has a heritage codified here by Matthew. Jesus may not make much of his sonship back to David or to Abraham, but others will. Theologically such a parentage roots him in the center of the story of God redeeming the peoples of the world and renewing creation.

It is significant that David is mentioned first for Jesus is the messianic figure, the King promised of old. Only then is Abraham mentioned. Jesus is the ideal Jew – unlike Abraham, Jesus is born a Jew whereas Abraham is the "first" gentile convert – chosen out of non-Jewish roots to establish the Jewish people.

This also is a list of "fathers"—until we arrive at Joseph. The potency of men, their ability to sire children, especially sons, marked a critical performance capability in a clan-based, agrarian society. Women were the field in whom the seed was sown—but it was men who "begat" children. Yet Jesus is tied to the patrilineal line only by his mother being married to Joseph. Mary is the one of whom Jesus is born. There is no indication that Joseph is directly related to Jesus other than as the husband of Mary.

This biological surprise will have its explanation very shortly. But not yet. For the genealogy what we are given is a neat set of names to remind us of a history we know a bit about along with a list of names and history about which we know next to nothing. The story down to the carrying away to Babylon is in our Bibles. Most of the story after that lies in shadows we cannot penetrate.

The three sections of the genealogy mark the growth of Israel to its highest point in David; a subsequent decline to its lowest point in the Babylonian captivity, and then Israel's awaiting the coming of redemption as promised by God. These names would stimulate the memory of the larger story, reminding biblically literate listeners of all those characters and events that flow from the past up to the names of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. It is not a pristine story of "righteousness" and "justice." But it is real history.

This interlinks the older covenants with the new. This binds the Old and New Testaments together in a way that Marcion and his imitators cannot understand. In his butchering of the New Testament Marcion cut the genealogy out of Luke to remove all its "offensive" elements.

⁶⁰ Luz, *Matthew 1–7* "It belongs to the type of the so-called linear genealogical lists (without branches!) that in antiquity often functioned to give legitimation. It may have served that function in the church before Matthew: Jesus is descended from the progenitor Abraham through Israel's royal dynasty. He is not only an authentic Jew; he is a descendant of David." (p. 81)

Matthew puts a genealogy at the front of his account that does just what Marcion seeks to undo.

As we read the genealogy, we realize that it is selective, incomplete, designed both for ease of memory and for suggesting the significance of certain parts of the history of Israel leading up to the appearance of the Messiah. It is not always clear what governs Matthew's selection or even the wording, other than the desire for fourteen names in a section to aid memory. It may be that the equality of names not only helps memory but signals a completeness: that this birth comes after three "epochs" and is not a random or chance birth. It comes because of God's plan and purpose. To achieve the balanced list with three fourteens, Matthew drops some names. Between Zerubbabel and Joseph Matthew offers nine names where Luke gives us eighteen.⁶¹

We may assume for very good reason that he had access to genealogical records, even for that part of the record for which we now have none. Jumping generations and omitting names was not a problem. Many of the names parallel those found in Old Testament records so that we can follow Matthew's own selection. For the final fourteen, we are dependent only on Matthew.

Unlike the Old Testament genealogies in Genesis, the list of generations is not ordered from descendants back to ancestors but ancestors to descendants. Matthew is indicating that just as Jesus is located ethnically and spiritually in the line of David and Abraham, so his ancestor's find their true meaning only in his appearance in their line. He is the culmination, the emphatic high point. In choosing to include the names of women, especially gentiles – Tamar of Canaan, Rahab of Jericho, and Ruth of Moab – Matthew alludes to the end of his book. All nations (ta ethne) will be encompassed in a mission to the Gentiles. The Gentiles also find their true meaning only in their relationship to Jesus.⁶²

(3) The First Fourteen: Act 1—God builds a Nation

The first fourteen names in the genealogy move from Abraham to King David. The promise to Abraham was clear: God was to bless him and through him bless all the peoples of the earth. This would happen by making of him a great nation. The movement from Abraham to David, a period of about a thousand years, is the account of this process, step by step – from multiplying the families, establishing the people in a land and finally instituting a full kingship to rule the twelve "tribes" of Israel. With David's accession, Israel is a nation with its own culture, religious center, legal framework, territory and set of officials governing its political and religious life.

What is stunning is what lies between the lines. How simple it is for Matthew, two thousand years after the event to write the words, "Abraham was the father of Isaac." How many years passed between the promise and the fulfillment! By the time God was ready to produce the child, Sarah was decades past menopause and Abraham was virtually dead sexually. The child is Isaac

⁶¹ deSilva, David A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. "First, the differences [between Luke and Matthew's genealogies] show us that there are a variety of options for the person composing a genealogy. Where one begins and ends is clearly a choice. One may also skip generations if the author's purpose is something other than completeness. Who is included and excluded are choices, not necessities, so that these decisions should be viewed as carrying significance." (p. 160)

⁶² Keener, *Matthew*: "For Matthew and his circle of Jewish Christians, Jesus was not an afterthought to Judaism, a distinct and unexpected addition to God's plan in the Old Testament. Jesus was the goal to which Israel's lovingly remembered history pointed." (p. 77)

(“laughter”) because Sarah laughed at the thought that this extinct promise, long dead and impossible, was now to be fulfilled.

This whole genealogy begins with an impossible birth and ends with a miraculous one. God is in the business of cleaning up the mess of human sin. That is not an imminent possibility within human affairs. If God does not act outside the bounds of human “normality,” the job will not be accomplished. God begins the task with aged and wavering people, people who sin in the process of trying (on their own) to insure the conditions and timing of the promise’s accomplishment. It ends with a young woman and her husband when conception and birth are most likely yet without sexual intercourse.

The list is no more problematic once Isaac is on the scene. He is the father of Jacob – the scheming, lying, manipulative cheat of a man, not even the first born. The muscling out of Esau is not mentioned. Jacob’s children are no less a scandal. Judah likewise is not the firstborn – the fourth of Leah. He is mentioned in connection with his brothers. The twelve-tribe division of Israel is noted here – just as the new brotherhood will be constituted by the choosing of a new twelve by the Messiah. Judah appears side by side not only with his brothers but with the first woman in this section.

Until now no women have been mentioned - not Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel or Leah. Here suddenly is Judah’s daughter-in-law, by whom he bore twins, through whom the messianic line continued. She “played the harlot” to get Judah to keep his promises after her husband died without children. Not only that, but Tamar was also a Canaanite, outside the bounds of good breeding for a “pure” Israelite. The “less acceptable” side of this story is being recited as a means of reminding the hearers and readers of divine freedom. God does not work according to our own time tables or boundary markers. What we imagine as a good, solid example, as the spiritual and moral way to do things is shattered again and again in this lineage.

The struggle over purity boundaries and the definition of who is to be considered a true Israelite in a gentile world of imperial powers was not a minor issue. It lies at the heart of the conflicts we see in the synoptic gospels, especially in Matthew as Jesus confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as the teachers of the law. Already in the re-telling of Israel’s history, Matthew signals the continuity between Jesus’ violation of boundaries and the same “irregularity” in God’s actions. By underlining the mixed nature of Jesus’ own heritage, stressing three ancestors of David are gentiles (and the mother of Solomon as well), Matthew is indicating God’s purposes encompass gentiles. Gentiles are not an afterthought but integral. Jesus’ birth is marked by acknowledgment of the gentile Magi. The Great Commission reminds disciples that Jesus is for all people, gentiles as well as Jews.

Two more women figure in this first list: Rahab, the Jericho prostitute who harbored the spies, is named as the mother of Boaz. This Canaanite also stands in the line of ancestry. Then there is the Moabitess, Ruth, the great grandmother of King David. The Moabites were declared by the law to be unclean to the tenth generation because of their origins in the incest of Lot and his daughters.⁶³ In this mention of four women, Matthew prefigures the reality that Jesus will ignore

⁶³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, “The sovereign plan and purpose of God are often worked out in and through the most unlikely turn of events, and even through women who, though Gentiles or harlots, are receptive to God’s will. The virgin birth and the importance of Mary are just such surprising and scandalous (though in Mary’s case only seemingly scandalous) ways through which God brings his purposes to

the standard contemporary notions about legitimacy, purity and power to bring the salvation of the Kingdom of heaven to all, including the most socially degraded.

This list moves through the golden years of Israel and takes several detours to emphasize the openness of Israel to sinners and to gentiles. The central line leading to the glorious pinnacle of her history is patterned with people and events that were better kept in the closet, so far as the purity focus of contemporary Israel was concerned. The beginning of Matthew models the end. The God of mercy and redemption, the God who set forth the purpose and destiny of Israel as a light to the nations, as a blessing for the nations, draws gentiles into the ancestry of its greatest King and its Messiah, several of whom have dubious moral credentials.

The men themselves are rather dubious characters as well. Faith is present, but so is the personal sinfulness and weakness that creates, at times, almost life-time detours into cul-de-sacs that only God's power can remedy. The beginnings of Jesus Christ are rooted in this history and ancestry. Jesus is the son of Abraham, the father of faith and blessing of all nations.

(4) The Second Fourteen: Act 2—God disciplines and dismantles the nation

The second group of fourteen names introduces us to the problem at the start. David heads the list with the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Without mention the complete dismantling of the kingdom is foreshadowed. God has fulfilled the promise of making a great nation of Abraham only to have it begin with the sins of David and end with the carrying away of the whole nation into exile and captivity. This line runs headlong into judgment.

One of the things that may be emphasized in this list is how close this whole story came to a dead end. David threatened the nation's foundations at the very beginning with his killing of Uriah the Hittite after his adultery with Bathsheba. The dynamic of his sin foreshadowed even worse to come. The list of names skips over some of the worst (Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah—all of whom suffered violent deaths because of their wickedness, all illustrating the Old Testament misrule of the kings—the sins of king Ahab rebound upon the third and fourth generation).

One other is omitted: Jehoiakim, who was deposed in favor of his son, Jeconiah (who himself was displaced after three months in favor of his brother Zedekiah). These changes enable the number to remain at fourteen. Yet they are not simply arbitrary omissions. Any child who had memorized the names of the kings would know that this schematic change had occurred and wonder why.

It left a list with very mixed characters: some good (such as Asa and Jehoshaphat) and some evil (such as Rehoboam, Abijah and Manasseh). The point of this set of fourteen is not to trace without omission all biological ancestors. It is to provide enough of a genealogy as to demonstrate the status claims of the one whose character and nature is to be validated in Matthew's story.

If Jesus is the royal son of royal David, then he is part of an ancestry of very dubious as well as very dependable characters. Grace and the promises of God are not outmaneuvered by the powers of sin or the results of judgment. No royal family had impeccable qualities in it. Read the biographies of the Julio-Claudians. It is a horror story of intrigue, murder, plotting, venality and cruelty. Being royalty was not a matter of connection with an ideal family. It was nonetheless a royal connection.

What the exile did to all these royal figures was reduce them to commoners. Temple, king,

realization in the story of Jesus. The women then serve as reminders that God often works in the most unusual ways and that to be open to his sovereign activity is to be prepared for the surprising." (p. 10).

land, cult, autonomy – all are lost with the carrying off into Babylonian captivity. Not mentioned by this genealogy is the alternate history of the northern Kingdom, carried off into exile 161 years before Judah's demise. The rending of the kingdom that began with Rehoboam is not even noted. It is as though the fate of the larger part of Israel is passed over unnoted. Yet it is suggested simply by saying Rehoboam. When Judah is carried away by the Babylonians, they will meet many of their former tribal cousins, already spread and struggling in the various hamlets and villages of what has now become the Babylonian Empire.

These names are given as a genealogy. So, the conjecture that Matthew has creatively changed Asa to the psalmist Asaph and Amon to Amos the prophet is not to be credited. There is enough evidence for the variation and errors in spelling in the LXX that we should not reach for theological explanations of what are puzzling spellings of the names of kings from the Old Testament.⁶⁴ This is a list of kings. The point of this second fourteen is that Jesus is of kingly descent—from a dynasty that lasted for five hundred years and was in place long before Rome was founded. Its antiquity would give such a kingly line significant honor.

The striking thing about the story that begins at the end of this genealogy is that we are faced with a commoner. Whatever was kingly or royal in his history has now been effaced by centuries of subjugation and poverty. The one born in this story does not look like a king, nor the child of a king. Yet that descent is nonetheless present. For the Jew who looked forward to their God doing something redemptive and liberative, it could well come from the line of David. The promises had not changed. Their God had not changed. This one of Abraham and David comes after more than five hundred years of political and economic difficulty. The exile had been the beginning of one trouble after another.

Jesus comes not as the son of exile and subjugation, but as the son of promise. He comes as the Messiah, the son of David, the promised one who is heir to the throne of David and to the promises of Abraham. He comes to reinvigorate and reinvent the graciousness of God amid the results of God's judgment leading to the exile. He comes as a nobody on the edge of the mighty empire of Rome. Rome will vanish, but his kingdom will know no end.

(5) The Third Fourteen: Act 3—God scatters the nation and preserves a remnant in Judea

The last fourteen names bring the genealogy to its climax. In comparison with the other pair of fourteens, this list is a group of unknowns. We plunge from a list of people whose lives are recorded, whose good and evil is memorialized in two sets of books, to a group of people about whom we know nothing. We can only imagine them against the tapestry of five hundred years of history that brought Mary and Joseph together in Galilee at the end of Herod the Great's life. There are other kings whose lives are memorialized, whose character and deeds are enshrined even today in buildings and stones that still stand. Yet this one comes in an immediate line of undistinguished commoners.

This third movement of Israel's story is one of scattering among the nation – and the struggle for survival (as told in Esther). It certainly would not be clear in the day that Israel as a distinctive

⁶⁴ See Metzger, *Textual Commentary* (pp. 1-2) for textual variation here. Quarles, *EGGNT*: "The textual var. in the genealogy are not exegetically significant. Some mss. have Ἀσά rather than Ἀσάφ (1: 7–8) and Ἀμόν rather than Ἀμόζ (1: 10), but these appear to simply be different transliterations of the same Heb. names." (pp. 60-61).

people would survive the destruction of their central city and Temple – or their scattering among other nations where they might well intermarry, set up shop and assimilate, taking on new gods and customs. Centuries pass with the list of these names without comment.

This is the account of the root of Jesse—a dead root at that, so far as most can tell. The late history of the Jewish temple state seemed to frustrate any Davidic hopes once and for all. The Hasmonean dynasty established itself as claimant to whatever sort of kingly power might be wrested amid powerful empires. Then the half-Jewish, mongrel Herod kings were forcibly installed by the Romans. This Idumean family sought to ingratiate itself to the Jewish population by rebuilding the Temple and other monumental endeavors.

By the time Jesus is an adult, the traditional land of David was divided among the Herodian kings. The heartland was controlled by a roman procurator with the cooperation of a high priestly clique. Hardly the soil for a lively dynasty rooted in David to reclaim and reestablish itself. From this sort of soil, the faithfulness of God is demonstrated. The Messiah comes! Not among the Hasmoneans, the Herodians or the temple hierarchy. Nor among the Essenes, the Pharisees or other movements of response to the cultural assimilation forces of Hellenism. He comes to a once-royal but now poor peasant family living in the backwaters of Galilee.

It is often noted that this last “fourteen” is actually “thirteen.” This conclusion rests on the assumption that Matthew counts the way we count or that his method must be consistent. There is no good reason for supposing that he could not count in this limited sphere – or that he ran out of generations in this last movement. Given his earlier omissions, we cannot be sure some are not omitted in this part as well.⁶⁵

He signals that something is different in this last list by departing from his “begat” formula. This genealogy sets up the details of the conception and birth of Jesus. Matthew presents Jesus as virgin-conceived and born. So, he is an adoptive son of Joseph. It appears he might have counted Joseph and Mary to make his fourteen. She was involved in this unusual birth in a way no other woman mentioned, though the other unusual conceptions and births prepare for this most astonishing one.

This also may be a clue as to the reason for the inclusion of the four other women mentioned in this genealogy. On the one hand, all are rather scandalous: women whose initiative and riskiness pushed the normal boundaries of propriety and morality of Israel. The striking thing about them is that they all had faith when their men did not. Their initiative came from a position of powerlessness. They are among the ignored, the excluded, the despised. Yet God included them in the messianic line.⁶⁶ In this day the Pharisees glorified these as part of their own

⁶⁵Mounce, *Matthew*, offers one among several common solutions: “Schweizer is probably correct in his observation that, since ancient reckoning always included the first and last elements of a series, the sequence should be (1) Abraham to David, (2) David to Josiah (the last free king), (3) Jeconiah (the first king of the captivity) to Jesus (p. 23). This would place fourteen generations in each division.” (pp. 7-8)

⁶⁶ John Chrysostom. (1888). *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*. In P. Schaff (Ed.), G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle (Trans.), Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew (Vol. 10). New York: Christian Literature Company. “Yea, it was for this cause He came, not to escape our disgraces, but to bear them away. Therefore as He is the more admired, in that He not only died, but was even crucified, (though the thing be opprobrious, yet the more opprobrious, the more doth it shew Him full of love to man,) so likewise may we speak touching His birth; it is not only because He took flesh upon Him, and became man, that we justly stand amazed at Him, but because He vouchsafed to have also such kinsfolk, being in no respect ashamed of our evils.” (pp. 15-16)

traditions about messianic expectations. Matthew includes them as part of the Christian argument with the Pharisees' purity boundaries. It is part of his own theology that God fulfills Scripture and does so in surprising ways. God often acts at the margins of official, formal religion.

On the other hand, Matthew is not concerned with counting generations in the sense of naming every biological link or including a person from every zone of time. His skipping over four of the kings of Israel is clear demonstration of that. So, he does not do genealogy the same way we do it in the modern day. His concerns and purpose are not the same. The inclusion of Mary as fourteenth on this last list is indicative of his departure even from the norms of his own day. Jesus, as virgin-born, could be a son of David only by adoption. So, he was, as Matthew suggests by this technique. His genealogy sets this argument up by listing both Joseph and Mary as two names to be counted in this last list.

Through this genealogy Matthew reaches the point of his whole presentation. Jesus Christ is the one who has come through the mists of history by the hand of God. None of the ups and downs of Israel, none of the human twists and turns, none of the surprises or scandals blocked the way. In his own time, God has fulfilled the scriptures that promise the coming of the seed of Abraham, the son of David. The story he tells will be the astonishing account of the one whose origins are rooted in this way.

These stories that are signaled by the names act as does the prologue in Genesis (1-11) – the story of a good intended by God's grace and promise that has been spoiled and decimated by sin bringing judgment. The good creation of a covenant people of God in Abraham and his descendants is followed by a history of sin and injustice, leading to judgment.

Strikingly, Matthew will focus on "righteousness" as an essential quality for disciples of Jesus.⁶⁷ The associated word, "right" or "just" (*dikaiois*) occurs 17 times in Matthew, more than all the other times in the three Gospels combined. At his birth, he will be name "Jesus" because he will "save his people from their sins" (1:21)⁶⁸ To an informed Jewish or Gentile god-fearer, the genealogy would resonate with echoes back to a history of salvation that was well known—even memorized.

The genealogy breaks from its pattern with the reaching of Joseph and Mary. Instead of signifying that Jesus is the one begotten by Joseph, Joseph is only the husband of Mary. But Jesus "was born" (passive) of Mary. No mention of Joseph as the genitor. Joseph had a legal but not a physical role in the generation of Jesus. It will become clear in the following narrative that the passive ("was born") is a divine passive, the agent of life in this case was the Holy Spirit.

⁶⁷ Hagner, Donald A. (2012). *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. "A term of key importance for the Evangelist is "righteousness" (*dikaioisynē*), which occurs among the Synoptic Gospels only in Matthew (except for Luke 1:75)" (p. 203).

⁶⁸ Wright, N. T. (1992). *The New Testament and the People of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge "The very sentence which is found to be thematic for the main plot—the prediction that Jesus 'will save his people from their sins'—presupposes a previous story as well. It assumes that the plot of the gospel comes towards the end of a larger and longer plot, in which 'his people' fall victim to 'their sins'. And it does not take much imagination, much reading in Matthew, or much knowledge of the Jewish background, to see what story that is. It is the story of Israel, more specifically the story of exile." (p. 385).

❖ Discipleship and a Genealogy

From this beginning we draw a few conclusions for disciples.

1. Knowledge of the Old Testament

To grasp the meaning and importance of Jesus Christ, we must know the story line of the Hebrew Scriptures and many of its key characters. To know our own location within salvation history, we need to see ourselves as part of that larger story. Within this short list the glories and tragedies of Israel's history is evoked. The first fourteen end goes from Abraham to David, a story of mercy and blessing. The second fourteen plunge into inevitable judgment with the exile to Babylon. The third fourteen is a long march through an unwritten history that shows God's patience and faithfulness in bringing promises to fruition. In a short capsule: humans were born for greatness and blessing; humans lost that greatness by their disastrous conduct; the solution to their plunge into judgment and misery comes in Jesus Christ. The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Churches of Germany rejected the claims of the larger, more powerful German state. In its second thesis it captures the movement of this genealogy (merciful forgiveness and a rightful claim on our lives that, neglected, leads to judgment; yet salvation and deliverance comes with the son of Abraham, the son of David).

“As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.” (8.14)

2. Space and time

The promises to Abraham (a blessing to all nations – spatial) and David (a king forever – temporal) are now transferred to Jesus, son of Mary. While Jesus is firmly anchored in humanity by this genealogy, hints of his “more-than” human status are given. He will be the everywhere for everyone Savior; he will be the everywhen, everlasting Ruler of the world. The future belongs to his disciples because the past belongs to them. In him they are given the key to all space and time in God's faithful grace.⁶⁹ Jesus is also firmly anchored in human history. This is not a “never-never” fairy tale, an imaginative fictional narrative made up to undergird important values and calm troubled brows in a difficult world. This is a flesh and blood person who is the right one, come at the right time, to do the right thing to put human destiny and history right. Where Abraham was supplied a lamb to substitute for his son in sacrifice, Jesus is the sacrifice that bridges the gap between a humanity gone disastrously wrong and a righteous God. That is the first coming. Where David did not usher in an eternal, righteous kingdom, Jesus will do so in the second coming.

3. Gender

Gender has been and remains a highly controverted and difficult issue. The striking thing in

⁶⁹ Garland, *Matthew*: “The reason is that Matthew understands Jesus to be the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel who therefore overshadows all those who came before him. While Abraham marks the emergence of Israel and David stands at the royal pinnacle of its history, it is Jesus who is the completion of Israel's national heritage and hopes. The promise of a great nation and the promise of an eternal kingship find their fulfillment in Jesus.” (p. 17).

this genealogy is that the “worst” sinners are the men (think of Judah and David), not that any in the list aren’t sinners. But the women come off rather well in comparison: “Inoffensive Ruth (and, properly understood, victimized Tamar, converted Rahab, and used Bathsheba) protect us from an unintentionally racist, sexist, or exclusively ‘sinners’ interpretation of the women.”⁷⁰ When we remember the way Jesus related to women, we can look back at this list and remember God’s verdict about women as disciples and actors in salvation history. Cultures may marginalize. God does not. We should not either. More than half the Church’s disciples are women.

4. Ethnicity and race

Any claims to “purity” of race or pride in race is scotched by this genealogy. Jesus is fully Jewish and yet, buried in his genetic and genealogical line are non-Jews—aliens and even banned ethnicities so far as the strict provisions of the law are concerned. His is not a pure line of royalty, neatly traceable biologically from only Israelite stock. There are no distinctions in him between Jew and Greek, slave and free, or male or female. All are welcome as disciples; all qualify to be full followers of Christ.

5. Saint and sinner

Along with the barriers between men and women, Jew and gentile, the barriers between saint and sinner are bridged by this genealogy. About half the kings mentioned are wicked. The conceptions of several key ancestors come under ethically questionable circumstances. God’s purposes are not simply accomplished through pious, “nice” people. In this list are thoroughly passionate, disreputable people whose scheming, lying, and murders are as much a part of this story as those of faith, hope and love. This is a line not only of faith, but of murderers, cheats, adulterers, cowards and liars. Somehow, none are excluded from what God is up to in redeeming the world. Whether male or female, Jew or gentile, saint or sinner – all are included in the line that leads to Jesus.

6. Hope

Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, foretold in the prophecies of Israel.⁷¹ We are increasingly people of doom, buffeted by political and corporate corruption, terrorism, global militarism, famines and floods, global warming, species extinctions, diseases that are virtually incurable. Yet this genealogy shows history is not a road to disaster or nowhere. Prophecy still unfulfilled looms large in the horizon of followers of the Christ. In God’s time the world is not on its way to doom but redemption. Israel had waited 400 years for the fulfillment of the final prophesies about the coming Messiah. That we wait in hope even longer is not a problem. Matthew’s genealogy with its 46 names spans 2,000 years. We live just over that span of time since Jesus the Messiah appeared in hope of the coming kingdom of God in its fulness.

7. Identity

This genealogy (and the rest of the prologue) is about identity – who is this one and why is he

⁷⁰ Bruner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 11.

⁷¹ Davies, *Matthew*, Vol. 1: “That the second major break point in Matthew’s genealogy is the Babylonian captivity gives us a clue to the evangelist’s eschatological orientation. The first break point was the establishment of the monarchy while the culmination of the genealogy is Jesus Christ. Is not the reader to infer that the kingdom that was inaugurated with David and lost at the captivity is restored with the coming of Jesus, the Davidic Messiah?” (p. 180)

important? The genealogy is meant to locate this one within human history before going on to tell the amazing story of his words and deeds. This one, on the edge of a mighty, wide-flung empire full of extremely powerful and significant people (whose names and lives we still know), from an insignificant place, nonetheless comes from a regal line that has been plunged into obscurity. He will raise that line to even greater heights than was dreamed of in its past.

8. Politics

One cannot help but hear the footsteps of power and politics in this genealogy.⁷² The story accompanying these names is one of powerlessness at times and the heights of power at others. To be a descendant of a regal line is to be a threat (at least to the Roman client King, Herod the Great). But this lineage and history also suggests that Jesus as Messianic King comes to confront the political as really as the spiritual. His gruesome end will be at the hands of the Roman Procurator, Pilate, at the instigation of the ruling elite of Jerusalem. The political overtones of his descent already signal something is afoot that is more than just religious. We not only have the disrepute of “private” family matters on display, but the disgraceful “public” conduct of political affairs. Both find their “solution” in Jesus Christ.

Notes on the Genealogy

The genealogy as prologue⁷³

Ancient works often included a prologue meant to indicate the purpose or scope of what was to follow. Aristotle said a preamble (πρόλογος προοίμιον) gives an “indication” (δείγμα) of the subject matter that is to come so they are not confused or ignorant. It is a word before all the other words, orienting the hearer or reader as to what to expect.⁷⁴

Ancient biographers often began with matters such as birth, ancestors, prenatal prophecies. So, it is not surprising that Matthew begins at this point in a narrative meant to demonstrate that the messianic figure foretold in the Hebrew scriptures is none other than Jesus of Nazareth whose ancestors were Abraham and David.

Readers who remembered the narrative attached to the names in the genealogy would be oriented to a history that includes migration from the City of David (Bethlehem) to Egypt and thence to Galilee of the Gentiles (in chapters 1-2). In Matthew 3 and 4 we have further echoes of the journey of Israel: baptism in the Jordan river and 40 days in the Wilderness being tempted.

What is less clear are the boundaries that make up the beginning and ending of the “prologue” to this

⁷² Hauerwas, *Matthew*: “Too often the emphasis on the incarnation leads some to focus on the birth or the crucifixion and resurrection as the defining events of Jesus’s life. To emphasize the birth as the central event of Jesus’s life is often associated with Eastern Christianity, whereas the West is thought to have focused on the death and resurrection.... Too narrow a focus on either his birth or death can become one of the ways that Jesus is depoliticized. Incarnation rightly reminds us that Jesus is very God and very man, but that formula does not mean we do not have to attend to Jesus’s whole life.” (p. 30)

⁷³ In all this probing we need to keep in mind Luther’s comment: “The evangelists thought it was enough to demonstrate in rough and simple terms that Christ had come from Abraham and David, for their gaze is fixed upon the promises of God rather than on the exquisitely subtle computation of generations.” Luther, *Works*, Vol. 67 (p. 8).

⁷⁴ Aristotle. (1926). *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, (Vol. 22,). Medford, MA: Harvard University Press; “But in speeches and epic poems the *exordia* provide a sample of the subject, in order that the hearers may know beforehand what it is about, and that the mind may not be kept in suspense, for that which is undefined leads astray; so then he who puts the beginning, so to say, into the hearer’s hand enables him, if he holds fast to it, to follow the story.”

Gospel. The opening words can be variously translated as: “record of the genealogy,” “of the origins,” or “of the history.” Proposals have been to limit it to 1:1-17 (noting the inclusio of Christ, David, Abraham, vs. 1, 17). That neatly packages these verses tightly together. Others see the genealogy and birth narratives (1:1-2:23) as logically sounding the themes for the rest of the text; while others take it as far as Matthew 4:16. The reality is that there are integral connections between the front parts of Matthew and the themes that recur throughout his gospel. However, one takes the “prologue” (if one does not take the initial words as a “title” for the whole work), it is likely more important to see the thematic connections between this beginning and the later various parts.

Confused names?

Matthew’s genealogy appears to follow that in Chronicles with a few exceptions. The name Asa (1 Chron. 3:10) becomes Asaph (the Psalm writer – Matt. 1:7-8); Amon (1 Chron. 3:14) becomes Amos (the prophet – Matt. 1:10). This is apparent in the earliest Greek manuscripts and Greek editions of Matthew that follow them, though English translations often correct the names.⁷⁵ Greek editions of Matthew that follow the majority texts use the same spelling as the LXX.

Matthew vs. Luke

Many have noted that the two genealogies we have of Jesus do not fully correspond. They are ordered differently: Matthew moves from the past to his present; Luke moves from the present to the past. The last section of Luke (Terah to Adam) is not in Matthew. Luke’s middle names from David to Abraham corresponds to Matthew’s list. It is Luke’s first part (from Joseph to David) that differs. The line from David goes through Nathan rather than Solomon. In addition, Luke does not create a balanced set of names. For example, in the centuries between Zerubbabel and Joseph, Matthew has nine names, Luke eighteen. Ancient genealogies often skip generations. Matthew seems to have done so freely to accomplish his three-fold fourteens (as a memorization device or a gematria?).

Some think the two are simply irreconcilable by any scheme, that the two Gospels follow completely

⁷⁵ The NRSV, ESV and CEB transliterate the Greek names as Asaph (the Psalmist) and Amos (the Prophet); the KJV, NIV, NLT, NASB, NAS, NCV, REB, TEV “correct” the names. The Latin Vulgate also “corrects” the names. The LXX has the names as Ἀσά and Ἀμός. This reflects differing conclusions about the original text. Asa and Amon are found in the Textus Receptus (the majority Greek text) and Vulgate; Asaph and Amos are found in the earliest Greek manuscripts. The issue with King Amon is not difficult to explain: “... Ἀμός is well attested as an LXX reading for Amon. At 1 Ch. 3:14 Ἀμός is the reading of A B^c, with Ἀμὼν in B and Ἀμὼν in Lucian.” (p. 81) in Nolland, *Matthew*. The addition of Ἀσά to Ἀσά is more difficult to explain since the LXX spelling is much more consistent. Yet: “Orthography was not as consistent in the ancient world as it is today. Josephus (Ant. 8.290–315 [12.1–6]), for instance, uses Ἀσανός (Asanos), but in the ancient Latin translation, Asaph is presupposed. ‘Mary’ varies in the NT between Μαρία (Maria) and Μαριάμ (Mariam). In 1 Chronicles 3:10 (LXX), most MSS read Ἀσά (Asa), but one offers Ἀσάβ (Asab; see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1 n. 1). In short, Matthew could well be following a MS with Asaph even though Asa is quite clearly the person meant.” (pp. 94-95) in Carson, *Matthew*. See also: Metzger, Bruce M. (1994). *A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament, second edition: a companion volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* (4th rev. ed.). London; New York: United Bible Societies. (pp. 1-2). In the end, we can only speculate on why we find these differences in the Greek manuscripts of Matthew. If Asaph and Amos are from Matthew’s hand, we cannot be sure what his sources or motivations might be for these spellings rather than the more common Asa and Amon. For a different solution, see Davies, *Matthew*, Vol. 1: p. 175 on Asaph. Davies notes the LXX reading of Amos for Amon (p. 177).

independent traditions and we have no way of knowing which is correct or if either is the case.⁷⁶ Luther harmonizes them by arguing that Matthew gives the biological line of Joseph and Luke of Mary. But that has not been persuasive to many. Others suggest Matthew follows the line of Joseph through Joseph's father, Luke through Joseph's maternal grandfather. Still another line is to suggest they can be harmonized by assuming Matthew provides the legal royal line with Luke's lineage reconcilable with two adoptions that send it in a different direction from Matthew. Augustine suggests Joseph might have had two fathers, one biological and the other adoptive.⁷⁷

What makes this even more complex is the fact that the kinship system and preferential (or permitted) marriage partners functioned within a patrilineal structure that permitted polygyny (as well as concubinage or secondary wives, and at times Levirate marriage). Much of the legislation in the Old Testament seems aimed at regulating a familial pattern that was aimed at preserving property within a clan or extended lineage. So preferential rules favored lineal endogamy (marriage within the clan lineage) including all cousins. We do not know the actual kinship relation between Joseph and Mary. Marriages were normally arranged by the elder or eldest male of an extended family. So, they well could have been parallel or cross cousins, with common ancestors that were shared at certain points.⁷⁸

In the end we simply don't have answers for the differences. We know a few possible resolutions. But which resolution is the case, if any, cannot be known unless further evidence turns up to answer the question. It means we need to concentrate on the thematic emphases of the two Gospels and how those themes are manifested in the sort of genealogy produced and its placement within their biographies.⁷⁹

Note on Matthew and Papias

In Hebrew, Greek and Latin, letters were used for numerals. The interchangeability of letters and numerals led to the practice of gematria: the letters of a name were given their numerical equivalent and then that number was a code for the name itself. Thus, for the Hebrew name "David," *dwd* (דָּוִד) *dale*

⁷⁶ Brown, Raymond E. (1993). *The Birth of the Messiah: a commentary on the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Updated Ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press. Brown concludes that the two genealogies are irreconcilable. His conclusion: "Of the options mentioned before we made the detailed comparison of the two narratives, one must be ruled out, i.e., that both accounts are completely historical." (p. 35) Still: "It is possible to have conflicting genealogies of the same person if those genealogies have different functions. Only one or neither of them may be historical in terms of traceable biological lineage, but both of them may be accurate in terms of the function they serve, e.g., Matthew's intention to show that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah, and Luke's intention to show that Jesus is the Son of God." (p. 85). Aquinas disagrees: "But it ought to be said regarding this that the two were of the same stock but not of the same family, namely, Mathan and Mathat. For they were of the stock of David; but one descended from the stock of David through Solomon, namely, Mathan; the other descended from David through Nathan, namely, Mathat. Therefore Mathan took a wife by the name of Estha, of whom he begot Jacob." *Matthew*. (p. 35).

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Works*, Vol. I/15 and I/16 (p. 170-171).

⁷⁸ This means a man such as Joseph could marry his father's sisters or brothers' *daughters* or his mother's sisters or brothers' *daughters*. At times parallel-cousin marriage was clearly preferred: when a man had only daughters and thus no male heir to inherit property. By such a daughter marrying her father's brother's son, inheritance of a property would be kept in the extended family/clan. In addition, for a man, even the daughters of his own sister or brother were also eligible marriage partners. Under the rules of Levirate marriage, a man could be required to marry his brother's widow and raise up children in his brother's name (functioning as *genitor* but not social *pater*).

⁷⁹ Johnson, Marshall D. *The Purpose of Biblical Genealogies with special reference to the setting of the genealogies of Jesus*, Second edition. (1969, 2002) Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock. Johnson sees Matthew's genealogy as Midrashic rather than historical, though the basis for his conclusion is weak.

= 4, waw = 6, dalet = 4: the sum being 14. There has been speculation as to whether Matthew's genealogy chose 14 as such a code for David. If so, only those who knew Hebrew would have recognized the play on David's name using gematria. Yet this notion has its difficulties since the name "David" came to be spelled in the fuller way in late Old Testament books, as Gibbs notes:

"First, 'David' came to be spelled plene, דָּוִד, in the late OT books (exclusively so in Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles) as also in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the numerical value of that spelling adds up to twenty four! Second, an obvious objection is that the proposed solution only works in Hebrew (or Aramaic), whereas Matthew is written in Greek. Are his readers supposed to know that much with that little an indication?"⁸⁰

Whether David's name in Hebrew functions here to motivate Matthew's fourteen has been highly debated. But it might have a link to the claim of Papias that Matthew was the first biographical account and was written in Hebrew.⁸¹ If this is the case, then the Greek version of Matthew retains the structure of a gematria that might have been evident to its original Hebrew readers – and provide an explanation for why Matthew chose 14 as the number of relatives to put into each division of his genealogy. Yet most scholars point out the fact that Matthew in the Greek does not read like a translation of a Hebrew original. But that conclusion itself makes assumptions about translator skills and even Matthew's own bi-lingualism as a tax collector. In the end we have to say many questions remain beyond our modern ability to settle decisively, but unfortunately, not beyond our modern ability to speculate.

B. The Birth (1:18-25)⁸²

(1) A Savior for private and public sins

Joseph was a righteous man, a son of David (connecting him to the genealogy). This is the only time in Matthew that "son of David" does not refer directly to Jesus. Jesus' connection with David comes from the adoptive action of Joseph, refusing to put Mary away. Before they shared a marital bed, Mary "was found" pregnant. But the agency is immediately indicated, something Joseph did not know – "by the agency of the Holy Spirit."

His plan was to use divorce as an act of righteousness and mercy. Betrothal was a legally binding status – equivalent to being married in modern terms but usually lasting a year before the public wedding and ceremony when the bride is taken into the home of her husband. Torah-observant Joseph considers the situation confronting him. He decides to act beyond the strict demands of the law, or the offense given to his honor by the pregnancy of Mary. He planned to dismiss her quietly and privately. Righteousness in this case embodies mercy and kindness as well as law observance.

What changes his course of action after this decision is the appearance of an angel with the first indication of the special case he was confronting. Virgin-birth stories are present in other

⁸⁰ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 85.)

⁸¹ Bauckham, Richard (2006) *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, op. cit., Chapter 9 "Papias on Mark and Matthew" provides one account accepting Matthew as first written in Hebrew. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16: Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο, ἡρμήνευσεν δ' αὐτὰ ὡς ἦν δυνατὸς ἕκαστος. "Matthew, on the one hand, ordered the accounts in the Hebrew dialect, and on the other hand each one interpreted them as he was able" quoted in Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*, p. 14.

⁸² After the genealogy, the nativity is organized in 4 sections. See Varner, William (2007) "A Discourse Analysis of Matthew's Nativity Narrative" in *Tyndale Bulletin* 58.2 (209-228).

literature of this time. But they were not part of the Jewish traditions about the Messiah—even though there are prophecies that lend themselves to marking out this event as coming from God.

A dream-angel appears to Joseph. How angels can come to us in dreams is not clear. Joseph somehow knew it was a dream-angel and that the message given was reliable. We are not told how he came to that conclusion. The effect was sustaining the marriage to Mary. With that he tacitly adopts her child as his own, thus conferring the ancestry of David on Jesus (this is a patrilineal culture).

The dream message was startling, not in contradicting the righteousness of Joseph, but by telling him to do something that surpassed the ordinary (even unordinary) decision he had already made—and by addressing the fears or anxieties he felt about the whole situation and how to handle it. Nor was it startling in its assertion of the miracle power of God: that the Holy Spirit was the causal agency behind this pregnancy. Not a few have tried to attribute it to the spirit of sexual passion with a Roman soldier or some other scenario. The holiness of God is operative in a surprising and unexpected way.

The most stunning thing is the assertion that this one, to be named “God saves” is the one who will actually save his people from their sins.⁸³ Others held the name Jehoshua, Joshua—Jesus—but this one will correspond to his name. He will not simply witness to the power of God. He will be that power and bring about the promises of God. He will intervene in such a way that people are saved—he, himself (autos). The implication is that God is present in this one in a way different from the Joshua of old, chosen then by God to finish the task of Exodus and entrance, begun by Moses.

This is a new Joshua—also one who will save. Many hopes at this time may well focus on liberation from the bondage and oppression present in the power and troops of Rome. Jesus does not focus on the sins of those whose actions and structures destroy and devastate Palestine. He focuses on his people and their sins.⁸⁴ What he comes to save from are the sins his own people are involved in, not the sins of others whom they hate. This is not the rallying cry that saves us from others. It is the cry that saves us from ourselves.

There are two contemporary perversions of the gospel. The liberation theologies are excellent on diagnosis, laying bear many of the structures that hold people in oppressive captivities that debilitate and decimate the goods of the abundant life. Their prescription often runs amok of the means God has provided. It inflames an “us” vs. “them” mentality, a hatred of enemy, a reaching for the sort of violence that enslaves those who engage it, even for “righteous” ends. It complains against all the portraits of Jesus (often rightly so) that make him into a solely a-political, other-worldly spiritual teacher. Then it remakes Jesus into someone not recognizably correspondent to the Jesus of the Gospels. Consequently, we are offered a Jesus who “saves” the public world by becoming another political actor wielding worldly power while marginalizing the private and often letting it go to hell.

⁸³ Sound wordplay (paronomasia or puns) is a device that uses familiar sounds (words that differ in one or more of their consonants or in the order of their consonants) to create an effect. The name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς, Iēsous) is a Greek form of the biblical name Joshua (יהושע, Yēhōshūa‘). The word יהושע, sometimes shortened to ישוע (Yēšūa‘). Hebrew names were often theophoric, containing a form of the name of God as well as acting like a condensed sentence.

⁸⁴ Psalm 130:8 is a close parallel: “He will redeem Israel from all their sins” (LXX ἐκ πασῶν τῶν ἁνομιῶν αὐτοῦ rather than Matthew’s ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν).

The other side is the conservative captivity of Jesus by the “nothing but the gospel” folk who protect their wallets and themselves from costly discipleship. They attempt to make Jesus into a purely spiritual teacher whose salvation has little impact on anything but the interior feelings of his followers and congenial rapport with others. This Jesus makes “nice” people with strong personal ethical codes governing private and family morality. But Jesus has no relevance for business decisions, for political oppression, for military budgets or policy decisions affecting the poor and the marginal of society. A religious patriotism is substituted for the surpassing righteousness demanded by Jesus of those who follow him. We are given a Jesus who saves us in our private worlds and allows the public sphere to go to hell.

Jesus will save his people from their sins, both public and private. The real Jesus deals with the realities of the whole of life, society and the world. The Greek emphasis is on “he, himself” will save his people. This is something that only he can do. None other.

What is meant by “his people”? We should see this in light of the rest of Matthew and the New Testament: first, the Jews, of whom he is one; and then Gentiles who also are folded into God’s people as they too become disciples and part of the people of God. As John Chrysostom said:

“But wherefore, one may ask, did he say, ‘His people,’ and not add the Gentiles also? That he might not startle the hearer yet a while. For to him that listens with understanding he darkly signified the Gentiles too. For ‘His people’ are not the Jews only, but also all that draw nigh and receive the knowledge that is from Him.”⁸⁵

(2) Both true God and true human

Matthew’s genealogy turns in a Christological direction: Jesus is introduced as the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and David. Its fullest conclusion is stated: Jesus is “God with us.” In case there might be unclarity in this opening passage, Matthew offers element after element to demonstrate the nature and quality of this person. He is “from the Holy Spirit,” the son of David, the one who saves his people, and the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. His words and deeds will demonstrate that he is “God with us.” Even at the ascension and commissioning, he reiterates that reality: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20)

It is a classical confession of Jesus Christ as more than an ordinary human (though not less). The mystery pointed to is that Jesus is at once fully human and fully God, God with us in human form. The entirely human and entirely divine do not cancel each other out or dilute the other. Neither entirety is to be denied or compromised. We learn from Jesus what true humanity entails (viz., that sin in all its forms and effects is a parasitic non-necessity). We learn from Jesus what true divinity entails (viz., that God seeks to live with his creation in such a way that creation is established in its own integrity and freedom).

Jesus manifests the duality of the human-creaturely and the divine-creator. So, does the prophetic word he brings to its fullness of meaning. The Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah. God’s voice finds its articulation through the lips of human vocal cords, now written. In both cases we have a mysterious conjunction and cooperation, a coordination and confluence of the two.

⁸⁵ John Chrysostom. (1888). In P. Schaff (Ed.), G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle (Trans.), *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Vol. 10). New York: Christian Literature Company. (p. 26)

Throughout this we have the activity of the Spirit of God. The role of the Spirit is to bring God into human life, in this case in definitive form. The Spirit is Christophorus, the Christ-bearer. At times this role is denied by the way in which Christ is removed from the fleshliness and actualities of human life. Either he is made so human he can hardly function as divine. Or he is made so divine, he floats above human experience and history as some Jesus-movies portray him: his feet never touching planet earth, floating in some spiritual ether above the fray of human life.

The constant problem in either case is to acknowledge and articulate both together—to say both without the one drowning out or controlling the other. The sin of the liberal has been to reduce God to human experience. The only agents and forces are natural law and human action. The humanizing of Jesus and the Word of God leads to an immanent philosophy of history that leaves us in our ignorance and our sin.

The sin of the conservative has been to reduce the human to a cipher, an empty shell and puppet dancing on the strings of the divine. God becomes “the All” with no room for human struggle or responsible agency. The divinizing of Jesus and the words of the Bible leads to an other-worldly, unreal irrelevance that likewise leaves us in our sin and ignorance.

The tendency has been a polarization with the liberal yelling “Humanity” so as to counterbalance the conservative shouting of “God.” Those who seek to live at the center of biblical tension are pushed and pulled, denigrated as wishy-washy, excluded from proper intellectual or creedal circles. Amid the debate the truth is sacrificed to the petty consistency of a thorough-going humanism or equally stringent “godism.” The truth of the story of God is that there is no God other than God-with-us. The truth of the story of human beings is there is no Human other than the Human-with-God. That is the starting and ending point of any faithful reasoning.

The history of this couple starts with a bang. How stunning a beginning for a marriage: the dream-time voice of an angel stilling doubts about the character of a woman, pregnant but not by her betrothed. The offense of this is erased by words received in a dream! Hardly the method most of us would use to make sense of a life-long commitment in marriage. There is nothing easy about the beginning of this story. Yet it is enough for Joseph. He has lived long and closely enough with the living God that he recognizes that voice even through the appearance of an angel in a dream.

This is the equivalent of the spiritual “Big Bang” (as F. Dale Bruner puts it). Out of the impossibility of human capabilities comes one who partakes fully of human limits and abilities and yet who brings God into human existence in a unique way. God may be with us all in that we do not exist or continue apart from the creative word of the living God. God is with us in every moment of life in that sense. But Jesus is God with us in an altogether different sense. God indwells this one. This is God incarnate. This is **God** with us.

To those who suppose Jesus is less than human for not having a human father, for not being exactly as we are in the way in which God is with us, we can only point to Adam and Eve. Here are two without human parentage, two who did not even come from the womb of a mother—yet they are fully human. The creational possibilities of God are not limited by our imagination or lack of it. Our theological imagination is to be stirred up by the astounding things God did and does in the world of creation. His “let there be” provides all the room for a real world, standing alongside yet not without the God-with-us.

(3) Matthew's Biography: History or Fiction – or mixture?

There is a great deal of discussion of the issues of historical basis vs. theological creativity surrounding the “virgin birth”—and, underlying the debate, the differences of detail and emphasis between Matthew and Luke. Both tell details of the story not told in the other. Some see the two accounts as ultimately incompatible. Gundry takes Matthew as a sort of theologically motivated account based on historical events and words yet incorporating midrashic meditations pointing to a truth that is finally unhistorical but no less true for all that. Gundry sees Matthew as reinventing the story by conflation, reassignment and reshaping of traditions known to both himself and Luke but told more historically in Luke.⁸⁶

This case falters and collapses once one can show as plausible reasons for finding the two accounts as compatible with each other as not. The bad taste of some harmonization should not be the basis for throwing out all harmonization. We already have seen Matthew leaving out names in a genealogy, names he and every well-trained Jew would know by memory. The absence of “critical” details or even major elements of a story told by another does not automatically signal ignorance of them or error. Redaction criticism has at least suggested that what an author includes or passes over is in part a function of presentation and thematic emphasis. We cannot judge Matthew based on silences read according to contemporary imagination and criteria as to what an author must or surely would have done.

There is nothing surprising when startling events occur in people's lives without their telling each other. We are not told (for example) how Joseph discovers that Mary is with child. During this time of betrothal, we have no indication that they were “dating” in the contemporary sense, exploring feelings and exchanging ideas. Is this a discovery that was told to him by her family? Are we to suppose that there would have been opportunity for Joseph and Mary to meet and exchange this sort of information in a society that protected the virginity of daughters and the honor of its men? There is nothing implausible in two annunciations—one to Mary before conception and one to Joseph after the conception—unknown at the time to each other. This

⁸⁶ Gundry, *Matthew*: “It might be thought that I neglect other explanations, especially historical ones, in favor of hypertheological explanations of Matthew's textual peculiarities. I do almost invariably take those peculiarities as theologically motivated; but as a whole, Matthew consists of historical data plus *unhistorical* redaction, both having theological import. That is to say, Matthew was *unconcerned* to write a purely historical book or a purely unhistorical one.” (p. xviii) emphasis added. “The massive transformation of a physical genealogy into a Christological statement has prepared us for the similar change of a historical report (cf. Luke 1:1–4) into a theological tale (see the Theological Postscript on the question of scriptural inspiration in this kind of writing). We only have to suppose that Matthew had the traditions that later went into Luke 1–2 to see what happens under his artistry.” (p. 20) See pp. 623–40 for Gundry's defense of his position. For a different approach, see Varner, W. (2007). “A Discourse Analysis of Matthew's Nativity Narrative” in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 58(2), 209–228. Varner writes: Gundry's “... observations were applied primarily to the infancy stories [as midrashic commentary] and he argued that this approach is consistent with an evangelical view of inspiration. However, the characteristics that we have seen in our analysis of Matthew's language support the position that Matthew intended to write a record of events that actually took place.” (p. 227). For a review of the first edition of Gundry: France, D. (1983). “Review of Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art by Robert H. Gundry.” *Themelios*, 8(3), pp. 31–32. “...the commentary is essentially on Matthew's use of his sources, rather than on the text of Matthew as such. Every verbal variation from the source is explained, even if it be only a *de* for a *kai*.” (p. 32). This comment remains true of the second edition.

sort of lack of communication is the sort of thing that happens in average human life.

This has midrashic elements, applying the Old Testament passage to Jesus.⁸⁷ Such texts are present as part of the fulfillment theme of Matthew. This first quotation in Matthew is not clearly something Matthew inserts to interpret and give significance to these events. It could be a quotation of the words of the angel who appeared to Joseph.⁸⁸ The Scripture gives a basis for Joseph's surprising decision. He acted beyond the permissible dictates of the Torah. His action finds its ultimate justification in that Jesus' conception and birth is in accord with the prophecy of Isaiah. Matthew or the angel cites the Scripture to give force and power to the words of assurance given to Joseph. Whatever its source, the quotation is meant to indicate the events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus was foretold in the Old Testament.

The theological force of this passage is that God's word is having its effects. Isaiah's prophecy in 7:1-9:7 follows a pattern signaling a future confirmation of God's work. Ahaz rejected a present sign—yet the disastrous judgment still happens. The future coming Immanuel will possess the land, thwart all opponents, appear in Galilee as a great light for those in the land of the shadow of death. His name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of peace. The passage the angel (or Matthew) quotes is part of a larger pattern of prediction referring finally to Jesus Christ whose life and character is the focus of the story this gospel tells.

Matthew narrates the story in such a way as to emphasize the connection between these early events and Jewish scriptures. His use of those scriptures is as much typological as midrashic. It is a close binding of Jesus to the deeds and words of the God of the Old Testament. The history of salvation is such that the patterns and words of God are "repeated" in the events that surround the conception and birth of Jesus. This is showing how key texts are completed or fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Both Joseph and Mary display human "inactivity" in the face of divine initiative. Neither determines the role they play. They do not claim to be victimized by the divine activity that potentially affects them negatively. Both are asked to take on a burden of dishonor and shame (or its threat). The spotlight is on Joseph. He is obedient, taking Mary as his wife and not having sexual relations with her until after the birth of this first son.

"...when the event indicated by the name Emmanuel takes place, when God comes to us as one of ourselves to be our own, to be ourselves in our place, as very God and very Man, this is a real event accomplished in space and time as history within history. In it God's revelation comes to us, in it our reconciliation takes place; yet it is such an event that to every Why? and

⁸⁷ For a detailed examination of the use of this Old Testament Scripture to reference Jesus' birth, see Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1*, pp. 105-114; Blomberg, C. L. (2007). *Matthew. In Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. (pp. 3-7).

⁸⁸ It is difficult to say where the quotation marks for the angelic message should be set. As the angel's words: Carson, *Matthew*, p. 102. Those who take it as Matthew's aside or explanation: Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 20; Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 90; France, *Matthew*, p. 58; Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 1*, p. 211; Turner, *Baker: Matthew*, p. 68; Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1*, p. 99. Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 78 sums up the consensus: "The words spoken here may be a continuation of the angel's message in the dream to Joseph, the only time in Scripture an angel quotes Scripture to clarify how these events fulfill an ancient prophecy. Or, more likely, these words are an interpretive aside by Matthew, clarifying for his readers how the preceding events relate to Old Testament prophecy."

Whence? and How? we can only answer that here God does it all Himself.”⁸⁹

One might ask: Why is it important for stories such as these to be historical? Why not be content with “fictional” or “mythological” stories that, though unhistorical, are “true”?⁹⁰ The answer is that we exist finally as historical creatures within space and time. If God is to make changes to the reality of our being, God must deal with us as embodied creatures living in an actual not fictional history. The sort of “timeless” universal truth that can be conveyed by fictive-like stories is not useless or unimportant. But we are not saved simply by encountering what is true regardless of what has ever happened in history. There are genres in the Bible that communicate by fictional material (Jesus’ parables). This account is not presented as fictive. Nor is salvation. We are not saved by a set of doctrines or fictive stories, but by an encounter with the living God.

These are real people, real events, real effects. History is moved by historical events and causes, even ones that transcend history. This is about a real baby, born into human history in a specific place and time. If “theologically true” but “historically false” is sufficient, why not go the whole way and say Jesus never existed? It is not simply his virgin birth that is fiction: the whole notion of a Jesus who actually walked Palestine, did miracles, was crucified and was raised from the dead is a “just so story” (yet “theologically” true). Some do go this far.

There are other good scholars who, looking at this story within historicist assumptions and evaluating the “historical evidence,” conclude that the virgin birth is unsupported.⁹¹ This tends to discount the fact that it is part of the authentic New Testament witness, a reality recognized from the earliest Church writers. As Donald Bloesch puts it:

“The virgin birth is a powerful witness to the paradoxical reality of God in human flesh, a paradox that is not merely useful but indispensable in the affirmation of the historic faith. The virgin birth does not prove the incarnation of Christ but serves to communicate this event. In the first centuries of the church it was used to protect the true humanity of Christ in

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD*, Vol. 1.2 (p. 177) Cf. *CD*, Vol. 4.2 (p. 324).

⁹⁰ For one argument as to why it being historical is both reasonable to believe and is important to embrace, see C. Stephen Evans (1996). *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Blomberg, Craig, (2017) *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* Second Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

⁹¹ Davies, *Matthew* Vol. 1: “The origin of belief in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus remains unclarified. Yet, this being said, it should be plainly stated that to say that no satisfactory mundane explanation has so far procured a critical consensus is not to say that the historical evidence clearly confirms the miraculous conception of Jesus. The apparent silence of most of the NT, particularly Mark and John and Paul, the number of possible even though imperfect parallels in the history of religion, the fact that Mary and her family show no special understanding of Jesus during the ministry, and the non-historicity of so much in the infancy narratives all point rather strongly in one direction: affirmation of the virgin birth entangles one in difficult dilemmas. Hence if the traditional belief be maintained, it will have to be on the basis of strictly theological considerations; historical reasoning offers little support.” (p. 216); “Yet, while Luke stresses the supernatural element in the “How” more eloquently than Matthew does, neither author has the kind of biological interest in the virginal conception that marks subsequent discussions. In my judgment, both Matthew and Luke think that Jesus was conceived without human father, but are more interested in theological import than in historicity.” in Brown, R. E. (1993). *The birth of the Messiah*, op. cit. (p. 140, fn. 22)

the face of Docetism and Gnosticism.”⁹²

(4) Mary

What about Mary in all this? Since about 350 A.D. there have been strong currents that have moved far beyond the labels given her in Scripture (Matthew calls her the betrothed, the virgin, Joseph’s wife and most frequently the mother of Jesus). Over the centuries she has been designated the co-redemptrix, the mother of God, the blessed virgin (perpetually) and so on.⁹³ She is venerated in ways that mark her out as so close to Jesus in dignity and status that it is often difficult not to confuse her as a co-mediator with Jesus.

We need to protect the freedom of the Scripture to mean what it says without being forced into procrustean molds of later Church tradition. It does not matter whether Protestants from Calvin to Wesley sustained notions such as perpetual virginity. Textually that idea faces insuperable challenges from the words of the gospels themselves. They must be taken in rather strange and unnatural directions to sustain ideas not found in the Bible. It is difficult to suppose that the “until” of this passage means never.⁹⁴ That “until” clearly suggests that after Jesus was

⁹²Bloesch, D. G. (1997). *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (p. 90) Cf. Barth, *CD*, IV.1: “In the exposition of this dogma—and thoroughly in the sense of its New Testament presuppositions—it has been frequently and energetically explained that it might have pleased God to let His Son become man in some quite different way than in the event of the miracle attested as the Virgin Birth. It did in fact please Him to let Him become man in this way, but this event is not the basis of the fact that the One who there became man was the Son of God. It is the sign which accompanies and indicates the mystery of the incarnation of the Son, marking it off as a mystery from all the beginnings of other human existences. It consists in a creative act of divine omnipotence, in which the will and work of man in the form of a human father is completely excluded from the basis and beginning of the human existence of the Son of God, being replaced by a divine act which is supremely unlike any human action which might arise in that connexion, and in that way characterised as an inconceivable act of grace. ... It means that God Himself—acting directly in His own and not in human fashion—stands at the beginning of this human existence and is its direct author. It is He who gives to man in the person of Mary the capacity which man does not have of himself, which she does not have and which no man could give her. ... He gives to her what she could not procure for herself and no other creature could procure for her. This is the miracle of the Virgin Birth as it indicates the mystery of the incarnation, the first attestation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus of Nazareth, comparable with the miracle of the empty tomb at His exodus from temporal existence.” (p. 207).

⁹³ Aquinas, *Matthew*, “As to what is asserted, that she consented to carnal intercourse, it ought to be replied that she did not. She did, in fact, consent directly to marriage; however, she would have consented somewhat implicitly to carnal intercourse, if God had willed this.” (p. 36) No biblical text is offered in evidence of this assertion that she and Joseph took a vow and then practiced continence once they were a married couple after the birth of Jesus.

⁹⁴ Contra Chrysostom, cited in Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*: “So it is necessary to learn what Matthew teaches: that the Virgin was untouched by man until the birth. But the rest is left for you to perceive, both as a consequence of the previous narrative and what was later acknowledged: that not even after having become a mother and having been counted worthy of a new sort of travail and a childbearing so strange, could that righteous man ever have permitted himself to have sexual relations with her.” (pp. 19-20). John Chrysostom should have taken his own counsel: “Do not speculate beyond the text. Do not require of it something more than what it simply says.” (p. 12). Blomberg, *Matthew*: “The grammatical construction

born and named normal sexual relations were taken up. The later references to Jesus' brothers and sisters are just that, not cousins.⁹⁵

Morally and ethically the issue at stake is the dignity and purity of marriage and normal sexual relationships. Mary was called to her office after she had taken a vow to enter marriage (with the normal sexual relations that entailed). Her dignity is not lessened by acknowledging the implications of this text that, after Jesus was born, she entered normal sexual relations with Joseph (and bore several other children). How does this notion lessen her purity, faithfulness, obedience, or dignity? Only if sexuality is seen as problematic can her normal marital relations as wife be construed as putting her on a level lower than what she ought to be.

As it is, the perniciousness of this notion is reflected in the polarization of ordinary life that occurred in the medieval Church between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the regular. Paul's words in I Corinthians 7 about the advantages of singleness were combined with the repudiated words of the Corinthian ascetics. They were taken out of context and turned into an edifice that institutionalized a sexist and anti-sexual priesthood, monastic practices and sexual ethics. The strictures about birth control and the vaunted superiority of perpetual virginity remain problematic to the present day. The tenor and direction of the debate that occurred over various population conferences are confused. The unscriptural doctrines about birth control (however correct and needed are the concerns about abortion as a means of birth control) scramble logic.

It is true that Jesus might have come another way. The virgin birth is not about protecting Jesus from sin, as though a male's sperm or the act of intercourse is the necessary way sin is passed on. Mary was a sinner, a sinful individual needing the redemptive forgiveness and grace of God. She was full of grace and blessed because of what God did, not because of her own perfection of character and moral achievements. The work of the Holy Spirit worked a genuine miracle in creating in her the "holy one of God." The miracle of virgin conception and birth points to the larger miracle of incarnation, to the reality of the dignity and uniqueness of the one who is born.

Pastorally, the threat is to the dignity and status of Jesus Christ as the one mediator as well as a distortion of sexual ethics and gender relations. With Mary placed so close to the trinity and functioning practically as the compassion of God, Jesus' glory is diminished. It is sobering to enter many a Roman Catholic cathedral or church and see the visual representation of Mary. Or to see prayers directed to Mary, as though she were semi-divine. It presses upon one the realization of

translated 'until' strongly suggests (but does not prove) that Mary and Joseph proceeded to have normal sexual relations after Jesus' birth." (p. 61) See Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 21); Luz, *Matthew 1-7* "In sum, although it is indisputable that 'until she bore a son' does not exclude the possibility of a continuing virginity for Mary, Matthew did not need to exclude this possibility, since it was totally foreign to him." (p. 99); France, *Matthew* "There is nothing in his text to suggest that he subscribed to the later idea of Mary's 'perpetual virginity,' and indeed the 'until' most naturally indicates that after Jesus was born normal marital relations began (as indeed the straight-forward sense of Jesus having "brothers and sisters" requires, 13:55-56; cf. Luke 2:7, "her first-born son")." p. 59.

⁹⁵ There are terms for "kinsmen" (συγγενίς) and "cousins" (ἀνεψιός) in the Greek and found in the New Testament to describe people who are kin, neither of which is ever used to refer to the "brothers" (ἀδελφός) and "sisters" (ἀδελφή) of Jesus. James is called "the brother of Jesus" (Gal. 1:18). Without the tradition found in the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy, such scriptures would not be thought to refer to something other than they do in the ordinary discourse of the first century which had well-used terms for relatives that were not brothers or sisters.

how powerfully attractive she is within the social psychology of the approach to God in the ancient and modern Churches.

Yet the objection to this must not be fed by a sort of sanctified sexism. The problem is not that Mary is a woman. It is that Mary is human—honorable as a woman with a special vocation and response to God. But she cannot be placed into a service to which she was not called. She is not the one who mediates our longings and struggles to her son. Her son is the one who mediates us to God just as he is her mediator. We do not need additional links in the chain of communication with God, whether it be Mary or this or that “saint.”

The focus of Matthew is strongly upon the obedient Joseph (as Luke’s focus is upon the obedient Mary). Both together stand before us as exemplars and channels through whom God works to bring Jesus into space and time. We do not need to make more of them than they were. There is no encouragement at all in the New Testament to enroll them as conduits for our prayers to Jesus. Jesus is not so busy with other business or so distant from us that he needs to be interrupted by Mary to mediate our prayers and longings.

❖ Discipleship and the example of “righteous” Joseph

Joseph is signally presented as an exemplar of righteousness in Matthew. It is the first time we encounter this central theme directly. While the genealogy, eliciting knowledge of the checkered history of Israel, implicitly and indirectly evokes the theme of righteousness,⁹⁶ this is the first time we encounter the actual term. The ethics of righteousness are modeled in the narratives as well as taught in the discourses. Biographies frequently use the moral exemplar as a way of instruction in character.

In what ways is Joseph “righteous”? If we assume he knew nothing at this point of the virgin conception by the Spirit, then the context seems to be this. He could not in good conscience marry her since that would be a tacit acknowledgment of his own guilt and contrary to law. But he was also merciful and did not want to expose Mary to the full extent of the law (which could lead to stoning) or to the shame of a public divorce. This joined conformity with the law and compassion. He could obtain a certificate of divorce in private before two or three witnesses.

Craig Keener suggests several ways Matthew portrays Joseph as righteous:⁹⁷

(1) In the relationship during the year of betrothal and after marriage until Jesus was born, there was sexual self-control. Though likely a poor couple who were sharing a bed after marriage, the marriage was not consummated until after Jesus’ birth. Jesus’ parents are portrayed as Torah-observant and responsive to the revelation of God. We learn about sexual fidelity from Joseph.

(2) Divorce was a step to be taken, even when betrothal had not been capped with the

⁹⁶ Matthew is particularly fond of “righteousness” or “justice” (δικαιοσύνη, δίκαιος) and its word group. See Evans, C. A. (2011). “Fulfilling the Law and Seeking Righteousness in Matthew and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.” In D. M. Gurtner et. al. (Eds.), *Jesus, Matthew’s Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton* London. New York: T&T Clark. (pp. 102-114); “The outline from Matthew would suggest the following five points: he was a man (1) of justice, v. 19; (2) of discretion, v. 19; (3) of piety, v. 20; (4) of obedience, v. 24; and (5) of self-discipline, v. 25.” Augsburger, Myron S. (1982). *Matthew* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc. (p. 18). Case-Winters, *Matthew*, “The theme of “higher righteousness” that is drawn out in the larger Gospel of Matthew is first illustrated in Joseph.” (p. 26).

⁹⁷ Keener, *Matthew*, pp. 89-95; *Matthew IVP*, comments on Matthew 1:18-25.

wedding ceremony. Nor was divorce a simple choice to be made by the couple or the husband. As Keener points out:

“Adultery had long been grounds for divorce in Greco-Roman and Jewish law. In fact, Roman and Jewish law compelled the husband to divorce his wife if she were found to be in adultery; Roman law since Augustus had included penalties for the husband who failed to do so, since he was considered to be ‘pimping’ his wife. In both Roman and Jewish law, an adulterous spouse forfeited her dowry.”⁹⁸

Joseph’s decision to go through with a divorce was already the “natural” thing to do. In addition, divorce would protect his own honor and reputation. Mary’s unfaithfulness would be seen as impugning the adequacy of Joseph as well as the poor choice made by his family.

What we see are several ways in which Joseph combines “righteousness” (justice) with discretion and compassion. By planning a private divorce he minimizes the impact on such a drastic blow to a young woman’s prospects in a male-dominated society. In addition, by not acting publicly he also would forfeit his claim to retain the dowry that had been transferred from her family to him. In his shock and anger over what he confronted, he acted selflessly (an early embodiment of the Golden Rule). He showed his treasure was not something he sought in earthly goods. He was a person of authentic piety. He manifests what we call thoughtfulness, in both senses. He did not act out of immediate disappointment and anger.

(3) When the truth is revealed to him (as unbelievable as it might seem, and only in a dream), he is obedient. He values God’s honor more than his own. By going ahead with the wedding there would be no wedding night confirmation of Mary’s virginity – and suspicions that would follow the couple in the small village where they would live out life. In this way he demonstrates obedience to a command of God, even one that came simply in a dream.

(5) God speaks

God speaks in this first chapter in five ways, demonstrating the reality expressed at the beginning of Hebrews: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...” (1:1-2). A fundamental element of the righteousness of the disciple is hearing and obeying the voice of God. The example of Joseph is indicative of the mysteriousness of the ways of God. His well-meaning and just thoughtful incomprehension of what was happening is only illuminated by revelation. Without that revelation, he would have never understood the significance of his moment in history. He “repented” of his planned course and took Mary as his wife.

1. Through history: The genealogy reminds us that what God is doing in the present is not a sudden irruption of activity, as though most have lived without the knowledge or activity of God. God has been busy in the past, bringing the various threads of human decision and indecision, human wisdom and folly to the point of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. That story begins even before Abraham—and continues after Jesus. But it is a story that assures us God desires relationship and redemption for us amid the tragedies and corruptions of our own history.

A purely human history offers little in the way of assurance. A human history intertwined with

⁹⁸ Keener, Craig S. (2012). ... *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. p. 31.

that of God's intervention offers precious little more (when we read the two-thousand-year span from Abraham to Jesus—or the two thousand years since). This assertion requires faith: God is at work amid human history, in space and time, in the very midst of global inequities and national violence, amid empires rising and falling, amid the petty family struggles of Job, Jacob and Jeremiah. God speaks through history because he acts in history to move toward redemption from sin.

2. Through dreams: God speaks to Joseph three times in dreams and once to the Magi (and later Pilate is warned by a dream, 27:19). One wonders why such a mode of communication is necessary.⁹⁹ We have so technologized and psychologized dreams that we no longer see them as a voice from God: only a voice from our own subconscious, an echo of emotions not yet fully acknowledged, the voice of evolutionary archetypes of our universal condition. How to take this sort of communication in this text is not clear. Were Joseph and these Magi too dense for God to speak to them in any other fashion? Why not approach them while they are awake? Or are they so focused on the normal affairs that God's voice is crowded out? Or is it that they are so familiar with God's voice that they can recognize it among all the voices that come to us in dreams?

Whatever the case, the assertion is that God spoke, giving concrete guidance through dreams. This speaking was more articulate than that of history—yet it was not about the character of God or the dynamics of theological truth. It was the word that gave decisive direction in contexts where ordinary wisdom (and fear) might lead people into dangerous actions. In tracking the dreams, we see a pattern:

Dream: Joseph should marry Mary and name the child Jesus (1:18–25)

Treachery: Herod enlists magi to find Jesus (2:1–12)

Dream: Joseph should take Jesus and Mary to Egypt (2:13–15)

Treachery: Herod murders the male infants of Bethlehem (2:16–18)

Dream: Joseph should return to Israel (2:19–23)¹⁰⁰

3. Through angels: These messengers and servants of God appear to Joseph in his dreams. They mark the distinctiveness of the communication. In this case it is “the angel of the Lord” who appears. There are other angels than this one. This one comes from the Lord and bears the imperative and important communication the Lord sends to Joseph. God watches over his Son and provides the sort of critical advice and directive needed to bring him to adulthood and later through the temptation sequence. Jesus later will express his own awareness of the availability of angels to intervene in the redemptive history God is enacting.

4. Through Scripture: The prophet Isaiah is quoted (as are numbers of other Old Testament writers throughout Matthew). What God said then and there has continuity with what God says and does here and now. The authority and vitality of the words from the past are asserted in the here and now. We may not always be sure what God is doing in history, whether the voices that speak to us in our dreams or the help we are being supplied by angels are from God. One thing we can be sure of: God speaks in the written word. He spoke through it in the past and repeatedly

⁹⁹ For more detail on dreams in the ancient world: Keener, *Matthew*, p. 95f. In the Old Testament, this was one of the means of revelation: Gen. 28:12; 37:5–9; Num. 12:6; Judges 7:13; Dan. 2:3; 4:5; 7:1. Also, Keener, Craig (2012–2013). *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* 1 & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28 (pp. 911–916); (2014); 15:1–23:35 (Vol. 3, pp. 2342–2350). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

¹⁰⁰ Turner, *Baker: Matthew*, p. 88.

speaks through it in the present. This is not to say we always hear it correctly or understand what God is saying any more clearly than we do dreams or history. Our problem is that we are god-deniers, god-killers, god-desecrators. We do not hallow the name of God and so we even corrupt the Bible. We misuse it and create the conditions for the scandal of people who claim the written word to be infected with greed, imperialism, sexism, anti-Semitism(!), racism, superstition. In the written word God spoke and continues to speak. We need to listen carefully.

5. Through the Son: Matthew does not tell us much in this first chapter. What God will say is that he saves and that he is with us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If we hear that through the various biographical accounts, we will have understood this living Word aright.



Discipleship and a Birth

1. Identity: the whole of Matthew 1 focuses on who Jesus is. The birth narrative interprets the genealogy. This one who is son of David, son of Abraham is not just another one in a long line of royalty come on hard times. This is the specific one foretold in prophecy to be the Messiah.¹⁰¹ He is Emmanuel, God with us, the one who will save his people from their sins. If the genealogy recalled the brokenness of the history of Israel among the nations, the birth of this one is the solution, the final and decisive birth that is the goal of that history and its recapitulation.

If we are not to have this Jesus, we will not have the Jesus of faith or history, but some figment cooked up by projecting our hopes and fears onto this ancient one. This preoccupation is because there is no other identity so basic to the rest of our identities. However unique and special we may be, born at a given time with a specific genealogy, our identity is to be shaped by this one. Many others will enter and exit our lives, leaving their marks because of their constellation of gifts and contributions to our own journey and sensibilities. But none will be more profoundly impactful than this one.

2. Virgin birth: there should be little doubt that Matthew presented the conception of Jesus as a miracle, coming without sexual intercourse with a man. Some see Matthew's account as from Joseph's perspective (while Luke tells it from Mary's experience). He could only conclude that Mary had been made pregnant by another man. And yet...an angel appears to tell him that is not the case but that what has happened is a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

The naming of this child as Jesus and tying him to Isaiah's prophecy (7:14) and the name Emmanuel points clearly in the direction of the incarnation of God. This beginning of "God with us" will find its echo in the end of Matthew in the "I am with you always" (28:20). What is only hinted at here is made explicit by the rest of the Gospel stories: this is the birth of one who is God incarnate. As R. T. France puts it: "Matthew's overt interpretation of 'Immanuel' thus takes him close to an explicit doctrine of incarnation such as is expressed in John 1:14."¹⁰²

3. Sexuality and piety: the challenges faced by uncelibate priests in the Roman Catholic church exposes both a theological and ethical problem. If all those called to be priests and pastors within the organized Church must be single, celibates, then those who do not have a gift of singleness and celibacy are ruled out. But what about those who strongly feel the call to such ministry but do not also have that gift? Unfortunately, they have followed their calling only to be

¹⁰¹ Note that 1:18 puts the full title first for emphasis: Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν.

¹⁰² France, *Matthew* (p. 49)

caught by the passion of sexual desire. Consequently, we find ourselves awash in a sacramental system that considers ordination irrevocable having to deal with a significant number of ordained priests without the gift of celibacy. We wind up with sexual abuse and coverups—and no way to revoke the indelible mark of a sacrament that is considered permanent.

One wonders: why this insistence? It is neither necessary nor required. The full married life is affirmed with Mary and Joseph. Joseph was never warned not to touch Mary but rather to take her as his wife (not his celibate companion). There are numerous clues that, after the birth of Jesus, normal marital, sexual relations were taken up, with Mary bearing more children. In addition, it leads to the restriction of the formal priesthood to celibate males. The notion of perpetual virginity (not to speak of the other Marian doctrines of immaculate conception and assumption) has perverse side effects. It damages both the ethics of sexuality and the orderliness of the calling to ministry, not to speak of its contribution to the perception of the female as lustful, polluting and sinful in ways that place her below the male.

4. Thoughtfulness: Both Joseph and Mary are held up as exemplars in how they respond to the word and work of God in their lives. Joseph is described as a “righteous man” (1:19), which seems to mean one who is observant of the word and ways of God as embodied in the law. In reacting to the situation and then the dream-vision of the angel, he turns out to be thoughtful in both senses. He had already decided to exercise mercy and kindness toward Mary and make any divorce quiet and private, thoughtful in considering the impact of his actions on Mary and her family. He was also thoughtful in the sense of turning the matter over in his mind and trying to think through the ins and outs of it. At the end of his reasoning, the angel appears to him to give him insider information that would move his conclusions and actions in a very different direction.

In this case he did not lean on his own understandings but acknowledged the wisdom of God was superior. For many such a dream-vision, with its astonishing content would be dismissed as having eaten some bad cheese for dinner. But this man was connected to God in ways that left him open to the work of the Spirit just as Mary had been open to the work of the Spirit in her. This is not to suggest we always need a dream-vision as the means to consummate our thinking process about difficult matters. This means of divine communication is rare in the record.

5. The Miraculous: In modern day skepticism (even from within the Church), the notions in this account and the following concerning the Magi are incredible. Miracles don’t happen. Another “rational” explanation is needed.¹⁰³ To be sure, there are enough contemporary “hucksters” who mime miracles by ruses and sleight of hand to generate skepticism. At the same time, the closing of the “Western mind” to the miraculous means an inability to read these texts within their own terms – and even a misunderstanding of miracles as “contradictions of universal, natural law.” This is not the place to develop an argument defending the notion of the miraculous. Rather I simply observe that the story of the birth of Christ and the events narrated that surround it put forth claims that a purely naturalistic mindset will not be able to assimilate.

On the one hand, we can say there is no way to definitively prove it happened this way. But that is a double-edged sword: nor is there a way to definitively prove it did not happen this way.

In this case, the choice is not made on purely evidentiary bases. Reading through all the gospels, it is dramatically clear that Jesus is presented as a miracle worker – mighty deeds of

¹⁰³ A good example is Robert J. Miller (2003) *Born Divine: The Birth of Jesus and Other Sons of God*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press.

power, healing, exorcism, and control of nature. Whatever else we may think of Jesus as a great teacher, the miraculous is as intrinsic to his portrait as his human ancestry. One either takes the Jesus of the Gospels or some modern pastiche of ancient texts and modern prejudices. There is no “historical Jesus” who is non-miraculous. As Craig Evans puts it:

“...his healings and exorcisms were an intrinsic part of his proclamation of the kingdom (or rule) of God. The mighty deeds and the proclamation must go together; neither can be understood without the other.”¹⁰⁴

Augustine notes the God who created us without us is the God who will not save us without us.¹⁰⁵ Yet the God of creation does not need to “intervene” in creation since he has never been absent from creation. To believe the virgin birth is not to believe some mythical nonsense or ancient ignorance. It is to believe in the creator God. Just as we cannot explain creation, we cannot explain this birth in naturalistic terms.

C. The Powers and the Magi (2:1-12)

Contrasting reactions to the birth of Jesus foreshadows the great division that is to come. In this case, those closest geographically and religiously to him will reject, while those distant will embrace his redemptive gift. Those immersed in the revelation of God and his chosen people will miss the event while those far from the covenant and the promises will see the great light on the horizon of human history. Conflict over his identity and role in history will mark his public ministry until it leads to his death at the hands of the religious and political elite.

(1) Politics and Religion

Two locations: in place (Bethlehem of Judea) and time (the days of Herod the king). Both echo with the boots of the imperial power of Rome. At this time, in this place, Jesus is born. On the edge of the greatest power the Mediterranean had ever known, among a troublesome people, under the thumb of a client King. This time and location would lead to his crucifixion by Roman authority, instigated by the ruling elite of the Jewish province. Jesus will not be considered simply a religious nut, a spiritual guru whose movement was simply irrelevant to the real issues of the day since religion is a “private” matter. As though it had no implications for the larger powers of the day. In the Roman world, “religion” was not a “private” matter as it is often today. This day saw more clearly than many in our own that the “religion” of the kingdom of heaven is profoundly threatening even to political business as usual in all societies.

There is a great division in the human response to God’s action. Jesus, the long-awaited, long-heralded, prophetically foreshadowed messiah arrives. The provision God makes for human salvation, the remedy for the human mess, is packaged in this person. The Magi come from a great distance to acknowledge this cardinal event in cosmic and historical time. They come to worship and salute this person. Herod and the religious elite of his day join hands and actions in

¹⁰⁴ Evans, Craig A. (2006). *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books. (p. 141) See also, Keener, Craig S. (2011) *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, Vol. 1 & 2. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, *Works Vol. III/5*: “But God made you without you. You didn’t, after all, give any consent to God making you. How were you to consent, if you didn’t yet exist? So while he made you without you, he doesn’t justify you without you. So he made you without your knowing it, he justifies you with your willing consent to it.” (p. 231).

rejection.

These Magi “priests” apparently were among the elite in their culture (given their resources to travel and the gifts they bring to give to the new king). They were literate, learned leaders in their own religious context. This portrait of the origin of Jesus is not (as some have said) simply a portrait of the wealthy and the powerful oppressors who reject the new King vs. the marginalized poor and weak who embrace him.¹⁰⁶ This is rather an indication of the corruption of Israel under Herod the Great – and the fearsome presence he imposed on the religious elite of Jerusalem.

The great contrast between humanly designed rulership and divine kingship is also implicit. Herod, rapacious and paranoid at this time of life, came to the throne over Palestine at the age of thirty-three.¹⁰⁷ His soldiers and power repressed resistance. His taxes were burdensome; his family life tragic. Like many of the ancient kings of Israel and Judah, he is a wicked ruler, following in the footsteps of the forerunners of this son of David. This king and his kingdom were not ready for the arrival of the great King.

By the time Jesus comes into his horizon, Herod was a man who had married ten women, executed one of them and three of his sons. In fact, the last son to be executed died only five days before Herod the Great expired. Jesus dies at the age of about thirty-three. He comes in weakness; never marries. No crime of violence can be laid at his feet. Herod the Great is best known for his attempt to kill Jesus; Jesus was the one who died with the complicity of the political powers and religious elite that governed Palestine.

The great commission is foreshadowed in this section just as it was in the genealogy. Matthew ends his book with the command of the risen Lord to make disciples of all peoples. In the genealogy Matthew included notices of gentile women who became a part of the line of ancestry of the Jewish messiah. The boundaries of the people of God are decisively expanded. In this story gentile Magi seek, find and worship this King of the Jews. It is pagans who properly seek the King, not the believers.

The Roman puppet and half-Jewish Idumean usurper King also seeks Jesus.¹⁰⁸ But his goal: to kill him. The very people who knew the prophecies provide Herod with the intelligence necessary to find him. In this story it is the pagan astrologers who demonstrate the meaning of faith. The faith-saturated guardians of the oracles of God are passive, subdued by the violence and rapacity of Herod and finally complicit in it to retain their power, status and wealth. When the scriptural scholars answered “Bethlehem,” it was the chance for both Herod and them to join

¹⁰⁶ Contra Carter, *Matthew* “...the division consists of a sociopolitical dynamic between the powerful settled center (Herod, the religious elite) and the apparently powerless, insignificant, and mobile margins (magi, Joseph and Mary). (p. 73).

¹⁰⁷ Marshak, Adam K. (2015). *The Many Faces of Herod the Great*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Richardson, P. (1996) *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans*. Columbia: University of South Carolina. Kokkinos, N. (1998) *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

¹⁰⁸ While this incident has only this witness to this particular rapacity of Herod, it rings true to his character. Wright, *Matthew, Part 1* (p. 14): “Herod the Great, who thought nothing of killing members of his own family, including his own beloved wife, when he suspected them of scheming against him, and who gave orders when dying that the leading citizens of Jericho should be slaughtered so that people would be weeping at his funeral—this Herod would not bat an eyelid at the thought of killing lots of little babies in case one of them should be regarded as a royal pretender.”

these Magi who were aliens and strangers to the covenant of Israel. But they did not.

This story shows God's mercy. There is the mercy that occurs in the surprising sensitivity of these superstitious astrologers from afar. The heavenly bodies were interpreted within a strange complex of ideas (that might have been influenced by the large Jewish population in Babylon) and led them to Jerusalem.¹⁰⁹ There they are led to God's son by an interpretation of the Old Testament prophets. In Bethlehem they encounter the saving revelation of God in the form of a vulnerable, inarticulate baby, the child of a peasant family. Everything in the equation seems wrong. Yet the meanings they read into nature brought them to the meanings read out of the written Word of God. Following the written Word, interpreted by Jewish scholars, brought them to the one place on earth where God was with humans in a unique and saving way.

God takes the unusual in history (the gentile women of questionable honor in the genealogy), the unusual in nature (a virgin birth, a star), the unusual in personality (angels appearing in dreams) to put together the pieces of the origins of Jesus the Messiah. People search for meaning and significance in many things in our world—whether it be the power of political position and intellect, the status of ancestry and heritage, the mysterious influence of the constellations, or the depths and wonders of the unconscious. Yet the final place to which all these things point and are satisfied is Jesus Christ. It is the one Word of God present in Jesus Christ. This one born in obscurity and poverty in Bethlehem, sought by Magi and King, is where we find the core meaning of the universe and our own lives. History, politics, nature and personality meet around this one and there find their destruction or their fulfillment.

One can only imagine that the disruption produced to personal life by the political was experienced as having a tinge of the unavoidable yet absurd we feel today. The Magi provide an opportunity for an elderly Herod to rectify all the devastation and hypocrisy of his life. At this hour he did no more than simply secure the name of a city from the prophets. He could listen—really listen and hear—the message of the God of the Old Testament. The wisdom of God brought those who were far off instead of those who were nearby to see the living Word of God. Those who engaged the written word of God and were on the doorstep of Bethlehem were both deaf and blind.

Herod had married into the Hasmonean line to legitimate himself (and then killed it off). He had started the rebuilding of the Temple in 22 B.C. He could do more than dress the political windows with designs to meet Jewish sensibilities. He could become a god-fearer himself. Instead, he read the Bible politically and turned it into another means of protecting his own status rather than seeking a righteous status before God. He has a number of modern followers. In all this he becomes the counter-foil to righteous Joseph: the self-seeking, unrighteous, murderous ruler.

In contrast Jesus and his parents become homeless – refugees without power, the hunted who

¹⁰⁹ There have been dozens of speculations as to the physical manifestations that led these astrologers to Judea to inquire, most of which are clearly refuted. Perhaps the most sophisticated and plausible is that of Michael Molnar (1999). *The Star of Bethlehem : The Legacy of the Magi* (Rutgers University Press). As astrologers, their referencing the heavens would be to read the signs. With the “star” in the East, Molnar reasons that they had a “natal horoscope” based on the conjunction of a variety of heavenly bodies involving the occultation of Jupiter in Aries, signaling the birth of a great king in Judea. Running simulations, Molnar found that the date 17 April 6 BC had a horoscope that fit that sign. Seeing that “star” it led them West to Judea to inquire at Jerusalem and discover their destination.

must flee, hungry, homeless, leaving all behind, subjected to state-sponsored terror and oppression. This family experience portrays one of the evils from which Jesus came to save. History is a slaughterhouse of innocents, often at the hands of powerful political and religious leaders.

(2) Truth and Understanding

On the last day these pagan Magi will rise in witness as evidence that those closest to the truth may be among those who are farthest from understanding and obedience. Jesus was born to be king of the Jews. He will die with a sign over him calling him “king.” But he was born also to be king of the gentiles. Scribes and teachers of the Jewish law were disturbed, as was Herod, that gentiles come to the capital of Judea with the belief that such a king has been born. They know where such a one is prophesied to be born. Yet they, like Herod, stay put within the capital’s walls. Only the Magi go and find the one the star and scriptures signified.

We know next to nothing of these wise men: how many there were, where they came from, what ethnicity and nation claimed them, what the nature of their science was. They come seeking and find. To them as to Joseph, God comes in a dream to warn them of the danger they face. They give us the hint that outside the boundaries of the ordinary way of salvation stand those with whom God’s striving is not in vain.

We do not know how it was between them and God. They are instruments of God’s dramatic gestures that signify that this insignificant couple’s child transcends ordinary human calculation. God uses them to point to the reality beneath the appearances. Think of how far they came, based on so little, to find one whom the star seemed to foretell. Already the calculus of power and privilege is being subverted: the center is little Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, a crib not a throne, a Jew recognized by gentiles, not an Idumean standing at the head of the Jews. Awareness of this one will not come from the center of power and piety in Jerusalem. It will come with those who endure the hardship of a great trek. Only those who seek him earnestly will find him.

We know that astrology and divination were common practices, often consulted by the powerful. A stray comet or other unusual astronomical event could signal the death of one ruler or rise of another.¹¹⁰ Eclipses could startle generals or kings in the field of battle and lead to bad strategic decisions (as was the case with Nicias in Syracuse).¹¹¹ For a paranoid, ethnically mixed Herod, one “born King of the Jews” would stir a range of fears. The depth of those fears can be measured by the brutality of his butchery of the children of Bethlehem.

These Magi seem to belong to a priestly group of Eastern astrologers (from Persia or

¹¹⁰ Keener, *Matthew* “That Herod is dismayed by the Magi’s announcement is not surprising (2:3); astrology was widespread, especially in Greco-Roman paganism. The Roman world respected astrological confirmations of its rulers (cf. Oster 1982), and emperors feared astrological predictions of their demise (Tac. Ann. 14.22; Suet. Nero 36).” (pp. 100-101).

¹¹¹ An eclipse on August 28, 414 B.C. led the superstitious Athenian general, Nicias, on the advice of a priest to delay sailing home to Athens for 27 days. It was the chance the Syracusans needed and they destroyed the bulk of the Athenian fleet of 86 boats, making escape impossible and leading to the worst military disaster in Athenian history.

Babylon).¹¹² These gentiles follow in the line of that mysterious early king and priest of Jerusalem, Melchizedek, to whom Abraham paid tithes. It is a line that continues through the pagan Balaam, whose oracles are said to come from God, even though he was a diviner, conflicted in his inner motives and a later misleader of Israel into idolatry. Yet from him is the prophecy that “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” (Num. 24:17).

Their mixture of truth and falsehood was penetrated long enough for us to see that the wisdom and truth they carried came from the wisdom of God. God shares the gifts of light and life with all his creatures, not simply with the denominationally or ethnically correct. As it turns out people can hide from God behind truth as resolutely as they hide behind falsehood. Yet it is the case that their celestial revelation in the form of a star was only partial, not definitive. Even they needed additional guidance to make sense of the light they were following. In an irony, those religious experts who gave them the guidance to find the Messianic King rejected him while the Magi accepted the testimony of their sacred scripture.

Their coming to Jesus is a picture of the reality in which we all live. Our religions and science, our popular cultural conventions and vaunted experts, our signs and securities—all are confessions of need. We display in a thousand ways that we are in need. The supply of that need is in Jesus Christ. In some mysterious way we don’t fully understand, Jesus is the fulfillment and answer to the vast longings and quests that drive our cultural passions. At bottom, the quests lead us to the question: Where is he? Where is the God who is personal, who can rule and shepherd us in the world we live in? Where is the point of coherence and meaning? Where is the measure of morality and ethics? Where is the logos behind the chaos of chance and randomness? Where is the peace and wholeness that fuses the pieces of life together?

The answer is this peasant child, suckling and crying at his mother’s breast. If there is anything we learn as we begin to plumb the depths of Christian faith, it is that the answer disappoints at the same time as it fulfills. The Magi do not express shock or disappointment when they enter this humble house in Bethlehem. But they could only have noticed the dramatic contrast between the grandeur of the buildings of Herod they had visited and the humility of this habitat. Nonetheless, they worshipped. But this must have left them something to talk over in the weeks that followed on the way home.

We worship the Christ who came in humility and plainness, in lowliness and weakness. We should not be surprised to find that the slick formulae that seek to dress up all that lives at the core of Christian faith instead falsifies it. It is not that the written and spoken Word of God are to be despised. Yet they can be. They too are less and less impressive, as we come close to them and open the treasure chests of our lives before them. We still must live and eat another day. We still must figure out what to do with diseases and disasters, with kings and killers, with corruption and corporations, with leisure and learning. There are no direct or cheap answers. We acknowledge Jesus Christ as the goal of our searches and then we must continue to live. Then we discover the slogging hard task of putting the questions, the quests and the solution together.

¹¹² The choice of these as the “first” outside witnesses to the identity of Jesus does not endorse their astrology or give it standing as a means to finding the will of God. This is not an invitation or permission to practice astrology or conclude that our fate is written at birth by the heavens. God’s choice of pagans is not an endorsement of their paganism. See Barth, *CD 3.1* (pp. 163-168).

❖ Discipleship, the Private, the Public, the “Pagans”

1. Private vs. Public: there are advantages to have some distinctions in law and custom between what resides in the public commons and what is authentically “private.” Yet it is a moveable boundary.¹¹³

For western societies, the distinction was first drawn by the Greeks. The public was the realm of the “polis” (politics) where citizens gathered to debate ideas and make decisions binding on the city-state. It was the realm of males. The realm of freedom, of speech and action. The private in contrast was the smaller world of the household and its economic activities. It was a world of biological necessities: food, shelter, sex. This was the realm of women, child-bearing and rearing, and slaves. With most of the population involved, the agrarian household was a dominant economic reality.

With the rise of modern democracy, the public sphere has become more inclusive as women and excluded minorities have gained access – and much economic activity has moved into the public sphere. This includes both public and “privately” held corporations and businesses.

The boundary between the two is flexible and permeable, evolving and being contested. Still the private is seen as a sphere relatively free from the influence of government and other social institutions. Responsibility is focused on self-management and the interactions between members of a household.

We distinguish public organizations from “private” organizations (such as businesses, private schools, agencies etc.), with both existing within a framework of regulations and norms often defined by governmental and professional associations. But the boundaries are not clear cut. In modern times “unemployment” can be viewed as a personal, private matter (individual factors such as lack of skills, low self-esteem, personal decisions, laziness – that is, as a personal problem). Or as a public issue when the job market is marginal and large numbers of people can’t find wage-paying work (as in the depression or large-scale recessions or in emerging markets).

In this story we see how the “private” is interconnected with the “public.” Joseph’s decision about marriage with Mary was a “family” matter yet involved public social institutions in enacting it. Religion was a public matter (in public ritual) and a private matter (in personal practices). While the birth of a child did not have to be registered in a birth certificate or an identity card, its occurrence in this case could not be kept private.

Modern Christian ethics seems to be affected by the division between the private and the public. On the one side are “conservative” Christians who see religion as a mainly a private matter, and Christian ethics as prioritizing “family” issues (contraception, sex, child rearing, faithfulness). Personal ethics and integrity are foundational: personal piety, self-control, temperance, truthfulness, self-discipline etc. But matters of the heart are not matters of the political and public. On this account the Sermon on the Mount and the Kingdom of heaven are about the inner life and personal relationships and have no claim on the economic and political institutions (or alternatively, in dispensationalist accounts, does not apply to the contemporary

¹¹³ Clifford Ando and Jörg Rüpke, eds. (2015). *Public and Private in Ancient Mediterranean Law and Religion*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter; Rüpke, Jörg (2016) *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual* (Townsend Lectures Series/Cornell Studies in Classical Philology). Cornell: Cornell University Press; McDonough, Christopher M. “Roman Religion” (pp. 96-106) in Michael Gagarin and Elaine Fantham, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, Vol. 6. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Christian but only to a restored, political Israel).

On the other side are the “liberal” Christians who see the implications of the Sermon on the Mount and the language about the Kingdom of heaven as “political” language – dealing with the “polis” – the whole life of the city, including institutions, not just individuals. Economic inequality, racism, injustice in laws and public practices, housing, conflict management, war, sexism – a host of “public” issues seem to come into play, often at the same time downplaying the “private” personal issues.

This either/or is a both/and in the Kingdom of heaven. The son of David is born to redeem his people from their sins, including both private and public sins. The reverberations of his birth are, in part, clearly seen by the powers of his day: his Kingdom threatens theirs in ways no legions of Rome could. The “leaven” of the Kingdom of heaven was inserted into human civilization in the form of a baby in Bethlehem. The powers have never been the same since. It is a leaven that threatens all idolatry of power and prestige, all misuse of law or privilege, all clinging to advantage at the expense of others. The powers of the public had good reason to be disturbed. The great disturbance of the Kingdom of heaven had arrived.

2. “Pagans” and worship: What are we to make of pagan¹¹⁴ astrological priests as among the first worshippers of this King of the Jews? Were we to write a scenario to reinforce our neat spiritual boundary lines, we would have those scriptural scholars and pious Jewish temple practitioners as the ones who come face down before their King. Instead, we have pagan Gentiles bringing their gifts.

Does this mean it doesn’t matter what sort of mélange of spiritual, philosophical or pseudo-scientific ideas you hold? From close to the beginning of the Christian movement, some have supposed God’s mercy and love are such that, when time is ended, not a single molecule of the universe, not a single human in history will be “lost.” Somehow, all will be reconciled to God. All the warnings we hear later in this story about the tragedy of being separated eternally from the embrace of God is, well, only symbolic of a this-worldly tragedy of not knowing God’s love in its fullest in the here and now. Whatever “hell” (hades) is, it is only temporary. But the “hound of heaven” will not give up his pursuit and in the end every knee will bow willingly and fully to God’s greatness and kindness.

The Magi are taken as an early indication of this. They return “by another way” (2:12) to their home country and take up their priestly astrology in a renewed manner. There is “another way” into the kingdom of heaven than by a here and now acknowledgment of Jesus as the only way. The boundary line between those with explicit faith and those with only “implicit” faith is completely permeable. All that is “implicit” in astrologers, gurus, other religions, secular atheism, religious indifference – all that “pagan” thinking will see his “star” and finally join the Magi at the foot of Jesus.

But that is not likely the message we are to take from this. What we recognize here is a pattern visible in the rest of scripture. God takes the despised, the foolish, the weak, the things that are not to nullify the things that are (I Cor. 1:26-29). There is a warning in this to those who

¹¹⁴ “Pagan” comes from the Latin “paganus” and meant rural or rustic since the early Church was largely a town or city movement and the rural population retained polytheism longer than the urban areas. These Magi were from urban centers, non-Jewish, so in modern terms “pagan” which has come to mean non-Christians.

consider themselves “in.” No matter how far “in” or “up” we are, we can be lost. We can engage in unspeakable acts and likely justify them by scripture. No matter how far “out” or “down” we may seem, God may redeem us. Later, Jesus will talk about the prostitutes as entering the Kingdom of heaven ahead of the upright, uptight Pharisees (Matt. 21:31-32).

Can we see in this a hint at some permeability of the “gate into heaven”? Are there genuine seekers of God who exist informationally before Christ? Or whose rejection of the brutal bearers of Christianity and their distorted Christ is just that: not a true rejection of the living Christ but of an idol in Christian clothing? Are there figures like Melchizedek and these Magi who stand outside the chosen people yet who are more responsive to the light of God’s works and will? After all, these Magi offered worship.

This narrative doesn’t answer all these theological questions. Rather, it raises them. Later in Matthew 25:31-46 we discover there are those who seem to be “unconscious” Christ followers. Is this enough to confidently affirm the notion of “anonymous” Christians as articulated by Karl Rahner?¹¹⁵ Probably not. But it leaves the door open as to the status of these.

D. Flight to Egypt (2:13-18)

This section is structured by each of three parts ending with a fulfillment quote (2:15, 18, 23). The first and third are initiated by a dream of Joseph, giving the overall narrative an ABA’ format.

(1) A Dream Nightmare (2:13-15)

Once again, we see the responsiveness of Joseph to the communication of God. Another angel-messenger appears in a dream, warning the young family of imminent danger. We are not told whether they knew the dream that warned the Magi not to return to Jerusalem.

Those in political power are the primary agents of death in this story (and later). Innocent children die. In the middle of Matthew, we will learn of the death of another innocent (John the Baptist). At the end of the story Jesus, the completely pure and sinless one, will be judicially murdered with the cooperation of Imperial authority. It is a story we also find in the Old Testament. Before the deliverance of Israel from slavery, the paramount political power engages in a calculated genocide among Hebrew slaves. Moses escapes only under the protective hand of God.

There are other parallels. Like Israel of old, Jesus goes from the promised land into exile in Egypt—only to be called back. Jesus is a descendent of the long line of heritage from Israel. He comes to be Israel in concentrated form, Israel represented in a single individual. When humanity

¹¹⁵ “Anonymous Christianity” means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity. A Protestant Christian is, of course, ‘no anonymous Christian’; that is perfectly clear. But, let us say, a Buddhist monk (or anyone else I might suppose) who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity.” (p. 207) in Imhof, Paul and Hubert Biallowons, eds. (1986) *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982*. New York: Crossroad

failed, God chose a single family and made a nation to bless all nations through it. When that nation failed, God came himself into the midst of that nation and did what all of Israel and original humanity failed to do.

Egypt was a logical place to go. Estimates think one-third of Egyptian city of Alexandria was Jewish. Such a large Jewish diaspora in Egypt was a place where Joseph and Mary could blend in and not be noticed. With Joseph's skills and the valuable gifts of the Magi, a sojourn in Egypt could be managed for some time.

(2) The Fury of Politics and the Death of Innocents (2:16-18)

The horrific response of Herod to the sudden and secret departure of the Magi brings the nature of politics to sharpest focus.¹¹⁶ The "great" King goes after the "little" king. The beginning of the life of Jesus is marked by the death of "innocents." Herod, nearing seventy, is so frightened for himself and his dynasty (which he has already decimated) that he slaughters all male children two years and younger. His own life was in its last days. Yet he is fearful of those whose lives are just beginning. It is a sad yet penetrating commentary on the irrationality of power held too long and pressed far beyond its legitimacy. Herod seeks to guarantee the future his own children.

Without the coming of Jesus and his perfections we might well suppose that Herod and the Magi represent two poles of human possibility: the evil and the good. What we learn in him is that the relative distinctions (as critical as they are) are overwhelmed by a larger pattern. Who wouldn't prefer the Magi to Herod? Yet are the Magi the answer to the human dilemma?

Our tendency is to take the ambiguous experience of ourselves and history and read it according to our inner emotional stance. The pessimists see the good as superficial. The optimists see the evil as exceptional. In facing Jesus Christ, we can believe the impossible notion of original sin, that our fundamental and persistent tendency is toward evil and away from God. We can dress it up with religious or spiritual accoutrements, but we cannot jump out of our own skin and remake ourselves. Scripture teaches the hard truth that we cannot help ourselves. Only the coming of God's fully anointed savior, only God's being with us rectifies the wrongness at the heart of our being and life.

Both Herod and the Magi represent our human need. The worst of us and the best of us, those passionately involved in power and those permanently devoted to knowledge fall short. They play different roles in human history. Yet neither can provide the finality our nature and condition require. Proximate and significant solutions come from the exercise of power and knowledge, but not the decisive solution. Every generation recapitulates the theme of corruption, sin and evil, even if in differing technological and cultural formats. To be sure, proximate solutions and ameliorations come via good politics and excellent knowledge. This is not a counsel to despise power or knowledge. Only to know their limits and corruptibility.

The quote from Jeremiah pictures the lament over the Israelites who were carried into captivity by Nebuzaradan. There north of Jerusalem, on the way to Bethel near the tomb of Rachel, is Ramah. Rachel is pictured as weeping that her children are vanishing from the land. Her descendants, so long in beginning in her womb, are now being wiped off the promised land. Yet these tears come amid a prophecy of hope that they will return from exile. The mothers of

¹¹⁶ "One may deceive tyrants (just as one may also deceive the devil) if they command us to do something against God." Luther, *Works*, Vol. 67. (p. 17).

Bethlehem cry as well and refuse to be consoled. The Messiah has escaped. The worship of the Magi cost them their children. It cost Joseph and Mary a time of exile in Egypt among the large Jewish population there. Yet there is hope but the sort of hope that will be years in coming and will provoke the same two responses we have seen so far: the obstinacy of many insiders and the worship of some outsiders. The “collateral” damage is immense and inconsolable.

One theme is already strongly displayed. The life and fate of Jesus is wrapped up in the meanings and trajectories of the Old Testament scriptures. The larger revelation about God’s goals and patterns is applied again and again to Jesus. He is the keystone for building an understanding of what God is doing. Look at this person, at this life, at this history. There God spells out what he is doing. It is a pattern woven from very dark threads.

What does mass murder and the butchery of innocents indicate about “civilization”? Or for that matter about the providence of God? How do we come to terms with the “collateral damage” caused by the reality that Jesus birth at Bethlehem brought about the deaths of many small children? Is history nothing but the long tale of the slaughter of innocents?

People have always struggled with the terror of what appears to be a silent heaven in face of horrendous suffering. How can the world we live in be governed by a God who loves his creation and creatures? How can God look upon the dark side of the birth of his Son? The simple fact that it happened in Bethlehem, in the reign of a rapacious ruler, led to the death of many children. Matthew only hints at the terrible acts of Herod and his minions. The angel warns only Joseph and Mary who escape to Egypt. But what about the other parents and sons? Why should any be put to the chopping block because powerful elite feel threatened?

Some cannot stomach any view of a god that doesn’t immediately intervene and stay the hand of the slave owner, the sexual predator, the mass murderer, the bully, the drug lord, the mafia don, the political tyrant – the host of people who practice the “slaughter of the innocents.” Why couldn’t god, if there be a god, create a world where such evil is impossible?

On the one hand this raises a broader question: what is the justification, if any, for the long terrors of history that have come post-Eden? If redemption was to be accomplished by the counsels of God in Christ, why wait millennia to bring it about? Why the long, sorry history of suffering, brutality, tragedy and struggle? Why, when God’s redemption is afoot, is it marked not just by the star, the Magi and their worship, but by the death of innocents? What is the meaning of this “punctuation” of the beginning of the story of the Messiah? Since Herod the Great was to die not long after this event, why not have him die before he can send his assassins to do their bloody deed?

At one level, we can only confess that we have few if any good answers to these questions. We simply must confess that we are not in control of the larger shape of history. It is what it is and railing against it will do little good. God is God and we are not. In the infinite wisdom of God, the choice was thus and not else. Complain and lament all we want, we cannot change this history. Yet the Psalms give us ample permission to rail and rage in the face of the pain we and those we love experience. One third of the 150 Psalms are laments or complaints at God for what seems a mismanaged universe causing suffering.

All of this raises a powerful, persistent and poignant question. In the end, as is the case in Job, there is no final, definitive answer other than the revelation of the character of God. Job’s cries of anguish about evil (as is the case with Habakkuk) are answered only by a revelation of who the true and living God is. If we know and are known by the God of infinite love who sent his son to deal with this very sort of evil, we can wait for the fuller and final answer.

Theologians have not always waited but offered a variety of answers, some better than others but none fully definitive or satisfying to all within the fold of the Church or outside it. Somehow, all the suffering, all the injustice, all the horrendous evil (both moral and natural) will be one day be redeemed. That redemption began with the suffering of God's unique son. One day what began in this story of Jesus and his parents will be consummated and all shadows and vestiges of evil will be overcome and rectified.

To have the very sort of world we live in and enjoy, is to have a world where we are vulnerable – and where the best personal and social powers of human life are corrupted with a virulent virus that distorts and destroys the best of God's world. One of the commonest answers as to why God's power and our world's evil has to do with understanding God's choice for this sort of world. The theologian, Anna Case-Winters, writes:

“We may still ask, Why does God not prevent it? God's power, however we understand it, is apparently sufficiently subtle and self-limiting to permit genuine freedom—even at the risk of allowing evil. Freedom is the risk that divine love takes. It may be that God's perfect power is best displayed as vulnerability and suffering love, such as we see expressed in the cross of Jesus and the resistance to evil that we see in the life and ministry of Jesus.”¹¹⁷

This story plunges us into theodicy, the small human attempt to reconcile a good and loving God with the permission given to his creatures to act freely, indeed, even to engage in horrendous evils such as genocide, mass murder, brutal warfare with little consideration for the human lives that are destroyed. Or permission given to greater powers such as fallen angels to afflict human life to make a point (Job). Is this all a sort of cosmic contest between God and the devil? Are those like the Manicheans correct to think the whole messy lot is an unending struggle between some eternal division between the power of good and evil?

First, the Bible's starting point is not the reality and grotesqueness of pain and suffering. It begins with the assurance that the only God there is, the only real God is a God of goodness. That is the one thing that can be counted on and must be the starting point for any account that seeks to “make sense” of this senselessness. If we start at that point, then making God out to be divinely cruel or petty in the way the Olympian gods are is simply false and nonsense. It can only be a false appearance. Still, for many of us the starting point is our acute awareness of our own intense pain or the pain, even death, of others.

Even with a starting point and sure foundation that begins with a good God, we still must lean into the stark reality of the pain and suffering that is so prevalent in our world. For some it is so overwhelming that they lose their faith.¹¹⁸ For others, it is a stimulus that deepens and

¹¹⁷ Case-Winters, *Matthew* (p. 39).

¹¹⁸ An example is Ehrman, Bart D. (2008). *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. San Francisco: HarperOne. “The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time. It was what led me to question my faith when I was older. Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith.” (p. 1) “What I find morally repugnant about many such books [providing a theodicy] is that they are so far removed from the actual pain and suffering that takes place in our world, dealing with evil as an ‘idea’ rather than as an experienced reality that rips apart people's lives.” (p. 20)

matures their faith.¹¹⁹ In the end, one chooses to live in a vulnerable, pain-ridden, tragedy-prone, evil-ridden world with God or without him. The God we can live with in this broken world lives in that same world with us in the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified savior. The story of his birth and this immediate brutality tell the story of a God who chose to suffer with us to redeem us from suffering. This is a God who models the response to the senseless suffering imposed by injustice, corruption, power-seeking – and even what comes from a distorted and broken creation.

In the final reckoning on this one, God seems more focused on helping us amid suffering than in giving us an explanation for it. We experience shattered assumptions when we suppose only bad things happen to bad people and only good things to good people (despite all the evidence in the Bible to the contrary). Theodicy is not simply an intellectual question. It is a burden in all our experiences of trauma. When trauma is our personal experience, we are shaken to the foundations. If we go into tragedy already knowing a loving God is at our side, we will come out the other side with a deeper awareness of what that love means. If we don't have that faith, we will conclude either that God is cruel, incompetent, or simply does not exist. We may suppose we are on our own in a pitiless, even perverse universe, with no help to our pitiable cries of pain.

In this model, we are set in motion to do our small part in addressing and alleviating suffering and evil. While we are shouting, "Where are you God?", we discover God whispering back: "Where are you? What are you doing and saying to draw the sting of evil from my creation and creatures?" Theodicy also becomes anthropodicy. Our "blaming" God can be an escape from our own responsibility and a justification for our silence and inaction in the face of evil. If we are to be "salt and light" (Matt. 5:13-16) we will be busier doing something about it than complaining.

"Immanuel," God with us, is a name for this sort of salvation. It means accountability (for all acts of evil) and solidarity (with all sinners suffering the effects of evil). Jesus' coming as he did makes faith our first obligation. A faith that shapes our whole view of the world and actions in it, not simply lip-service to an easy and Pollyannaish trust in ourselves and our leaders while subordinating God to our worldly agendas. Part of "counting the cost" of discipleship is that we live by faith, not by shrewd utilitarian calculations about what will further our power and prosperity (even at the expense of others). If we live by the latter, we join Herod in his slaughter of the innocents. If we live as "Immanuel" did, we will be accountable and live in solidarity.

¹¹⁹ Yancey, Philip, *Where is God When It Hurts?* (1977, 1990) Grand Rapids: Zondervan. "The record of Jesus' life on earth should forever answer the question, How does God feel about our pain? In reply, God did not give us words or theories on the problem of pain. He gave us himself. A philosophy may explain difficult things, but has no power to change them. The gospel, the story of Jesus' life, promises change." (p. 230) Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "A Love So Fierce," *The Reformed Journal* (November 1986): "We do not refer each other to the cross of Christ to explain evil. It is not as if in pondering Calvary we will at last understand throat cancer. We rather lift our eyes to the cross, whence comes our help, in order to see that God shares our lot and can therefore be trusted." (p. 6) With C. S. Lewis we have both words and actual pain and suffering: *The Problem of Pain* (1940, 1996). New York: HarperCollins; and *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. (1970) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, especially the interchange between C. S. Lewis and C.E.M. Joad: "The Pains of Animals: A Problem in Theology" (pp. 161-171); and *A Grief Observed* (1961). New York: Seabury Press. Other very personal experiences: Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Lament for a Son* (1987). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Sittser, Gerald, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss* (1995). Grand Rapids: Zondervan. These deal with more than "evil as an 'idea'" but as a lived experience.

The “good news” is not “good” for all. It is the great disruption of the evil of all types that inhabit this world and its history. God “with us” is “with us” to help us and deliver us from our own personal evil, our social evils, and even natural evils one day.¹²⁰

E. Return to Galilee (2:19-23)

The last piece of the story of Jesus’ childhood is the return from Egypt. Its occasion is the death of Herod the Great and the assurance of an angel in a dream that it was safe to return. He did not return to Judea (to Bethlehem where one who is to be the special child, the anointed of God might be thought to be raised as he was born). Rather he goes to Nazareth. Matthew does not use this as the beginning point of the story, as Luke does (though it may chronologically be different). Luke omits the flight to Egypt just as Matthew omits the beginnings in Nazareth.

Matthew’s stories keep circling around any possible fulfillment of scripture, either particularly or generally. He includes the flight to Egypt because it recapitulates the experience of Israel and underlines the special protection of Jesus as God’s son. The striking difference is that the life of Israel’s male children was sought by the ruler of Egypt. Egypt is the place of refuge and protection from the ruler of Israel.¹²¹ It lies only about 80 miles to the south from Bethlehem.

The story of settling in Nazareth is tied to two things: the fear of Archelaus and a warning that came in a dream.¹²² It is not tied to family connections (though it could have been another consideration—as it is in Luke). It is tied to a decision that came out of the desire to return to Palestine. Nazareth offers another confirming indication that this person fills out the possibilities foreshadowed in the prophetic words of the Old Testament.

To be called a “Nazorean” is to be designated as a person from a small, despised village. Instead of Jesus from Bethlehem (with its Davidic, messianic overtones), he is Jesus from Nazareth. This draws on the larger theme from the Old Testament that the messianic figure

¹²⁰ Barth, *CD*. Vol. 4.1 (p. 6): “We are reminded of this remarkable name in Mt. 1:21f. The reference here is to a single, final and exclusive act of the God of Israel as the goal and recapitulation of all His acts. But this act, the birth and naming of Jesus, is similar to the events in the days of King Ahaz in that once again we have come to a change in the relationship between God and His people. As the Evangelist sees it, it is this time the great change compared with which what took place before was only from his point of view a prelude. And now it is the equally unexpected change from perdition to salvation, from an age-long judgment to a new and final blessing. And the Emmanuel-sign has it in common with the name of Jesus that the latter, too, although this time in the reverse direction, is a sign for both: a sign ‘for the fall and rising again of many in Israel’ (Lk. 2:34), a sign both of the deepest extremity imposed by God (as in Is. 8:6f.) and also of the uttermost preservation and salvation ordained by God (as in Is. 8:9f.). Over and in both it is Emmanuel, ‘God with us,’ and now therefore (ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος) Jesus, Jehoshuah, ‘God helps.’”

¹²¹ France, *Matthew*, “As Moses escaped from Egypt to Midian for a period when his life was in danger, so Joseph and his family have escaped to Egypt. Now the danger is over, and just as Moses in Midian received a divine call to return to Egypt, so now does Joseph in Egypt, using the same words as God had used to Moses in Exod 4:19. The “new Moses” can now return to the place in which his work of deliverance will be launched.” (p. 89). For a fully developed argument, see Dale C. Allison (1993). *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

¹²² Blomberg, *Matthew*: “His oldest son Archelaus ruled in Judea and was notorious for his cruelty. Not long after his father’s death, he too ordered a massacre (Josephus, Ant. 17.9.3).” (p. 69).

would be despised. He arises from humble obscurity (as did David), yet becomes the King, the messianic King. He is the humble Servant of the Lord. He is from Nazareth. He is the branch out of the root of Jesse, the surprising appearance of the solution so long hoped for, now present. None of Herod's ten wives and their children will be that solution. They will maintain much of the problematic pragmatics of politics. Only Jesus will save his people.

These first two chapters of Matthew introduce the person who will serve as the focus of his narrative. The major points are clear. This one is a human being, born of a woman and adopted into a line of Davidic and Abrahamic origins. His destiny and status are not simply a function of his social indicators. He is born from obscure parentage, threatened by the political power of the day, celebrated by pagan astrologers from afar, a refugee among the Egyptians, a resident of a despised small village of the north. Yet he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and themes. In him the failed history of Israel is repeated, only successfully. He is to be the one who saves his people from their sins, who embodies the presence of God with us.

Nazareth is off the beaten path. At this time, it seems to be a village of 1600-2000. Looking downward one could see Herod Antipas' first capital, Sepphoris (3.7 miles distant). From what we can glean from sparse sources and hints, it was a conservative, wholly Jewish settlement. The New Testament tells us it had a synagogue. That may be where Jesus learned to read and debate the meanings of Hebrew Scripture. By age twelve he was a prodigious and skilled dialogue partner in conversing about the meanings of those scriptures. Nazareth may have been a good place for reconnecting to family, for remaining obscure and safe from the Herodian family, and for beginning the most significant human life in history.

❖ Discipleship: hardships and faith

1. The prosperity "gospel"

These texts must be difficult for the prosperity gospel. Jesus with his obedient, faithful parents, are threatened by Herod's attempted infanticide, chased far away to Egypt, and finally back to Nazareth. This hardly looks like the scenario painted by the health-wealth-prosperity preachers. Luther described this modern day distortion long ago:

"The essence of their teaching was this: 'If a man is successful here on earth, he is blessed and well off.' That was all they aimed for, that if they were pious and served God, He should give them plenty upon earth and deprive them of nothing."¹²³

If anything, one would expect "first class" treatment for this particular and exemplary family. Surely, if any family should experience the 'blessings' of 'prosperity,' it is this family. We don't have a cheat of a father like Jacob, working his deceits to succeed. Or a Tamar tricking her father-in-law into a situation of prostitution (or a Rahab whose profession was prostitution). These are exemplary, law-observant, righteous parents. Yet they suffer a very real death threat and years of being refugees.

If there is an iron-clad correlation between faith and prosperity, this must be proof of their faithlessness. And yet, we remember Job. We remember all the Psalms of lament and complaint of the righteous. We remember the crying prophet Jeremiah. We remember Jesus and Paul. Pain, suffering, difficulty, distress and danger – all of these are part of the shaping and perfecting of

¹²³ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21 (p. 11). Luther attributes this outlook to Jewish leaders of Jesus day.

faith. Is this not what we learn from Hebrews 11? To be sure, the valuable gifts they were given by the Magi would have provided funds for the sojourn in Egypt. But it is hard to imagine them on the Nile, sipping sweet drinks in a first-class hostel, enjoying the soft breezes of the beach in Alexandria or some other Egyptian city.

Then when this family returns to Judea, they do not purchase a palace in the hub of Whereitsattown and Whereitshappeningburg but go to live and work in an obscure small village that might as well be Nowheresville in Galilee. In the kingdom of heaven, the way up is down. Entering the kingdom is not checking into a five-star hotel and being whisked comfortably to the Presidential suite. In this world, we will have trials, and not all of them will leave us unscarred or even alive.

What the “prosperity” people see clearly is that cultural power tends to flow from the top down. It is not the obscure, the poor, the homeless or unemployed who have cultural influence. Yet the opposite is true when speaking of God’s kingdom and work. Revivals and renewals tend to go from the margins to the centers. Too often we mistake what is famous in our time for what is famous in heaven. Not all that glitters is gold. There is a reality that is bigger than this world

2. Refugees and immigrants: the “hospitality” gospel

Our contemporary world is awash in refugees – desperate migrants fleeing violence, warfare, drought and famine, natural disasters and the effects of climate change. At present it also seems we have extraordinary push-back from those with comfortable existences who feel threatened by this influx. Many of them have forgotten their ancestors who fled horrendous conditions in search of a better future.

Christians need to remember that their savior was a refugee from political violence and not be quick to build the walls of exclusion to modern day migrants. Just as Joseph, Mary and Jesus found refuge in Egypt, so we must advocate for those marginalized by the conflagrations and crises of our day.

Later Jesus will underline how important it is to view our world from the vantage point of the hungry, the homeless, and the harried: “Inasmuch as you have done it to even the least of these, you have done it to me” and “inasmuch as you have not done it to one of the least of these, you have not done it to me.” (Matt. 25:40, 45). In the kingdom of heaven, small things loom large. Even a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name will not be forgotten (Matt. 10:42). Even a bed for the stateless and desperate will not be forgotten. Even a welcoming home for the persecuted and plundered will be remembered at the right time. The opposite of the “prosperity” gospel is the “hospitality” gospel.

Notes on Nazareth

(1) The words of the prophets: “that he would be called a Nazarene.” This is somewhat of a conundrum.¹²⁴ Part of the solution may again be that this was originally from a Hebrew (Aramaic) original. Punning and wordplay were part of the way argumentation and rhetoric was practiced. Jewish exegesis even might repunctuate texts to yield new interpretations.]

There are clues that this is a wordplay. Unlike other Old Testament fulfillment quotes, there is no pointing to a single prophet (here the word is plural: prophets). In addition, this is the one place it is not

¹²⁴ This appellation is found in two forms: Gk Nazōraios, Nazarēnos (Ναζωραῖος, Ναζαρηνός). In most cases they seem to be used as equivalents. Acts 24:5 is the exception where Paul is accused of being a ringleader of a sect, “the Nazarenes” (Nazōraios), clearly a derogatory epithet for Christians.

introduced with the Greek “saying” (λέγωντος) but instead “that” (ὅτι) is used to introduce the “saying.” Suggestions have been made referring “Nazarene” to the Nazirite Samson, suggesting Jesus is a second Samson (see Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17, where the LXX has Naziraios as opposed to Matthew’s Nazōraios). Other commentators connect this to the Hebrew nēšer נִשֵּׁר (“branch”) of Isaiah 11:1 (as well as Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12).¹²⁵ It may be that there was no specific text in mind other than the theme that the Messiah, though David’s son, would rise from humble, lowly circumstances, a “shoot” from the “stump of Jesse.” This theme of a despised, messianic Servant of the Lord is widespread (cf. Psalms 22:6–8, 13; 69:8, 20–21; Isaiah 11:1; 49:7; 53:2–3, 8; Daniel 9:26). To be “from Nazareth” would be to come from nowhere important (“Can anything good come out of Galilee?”).

Other links for the nšr Hebrew root links it to Jeremiah 31:6 where it is used for “watchmen” (nāšar) who will declare that God is saving his people. Or Isaiah 42:6–7: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep (nšr) you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” These allusions and wordplays might well be heard by those well trained in the Hebrew Scriptures but would be rather obscure to a Greek audience.

(2) **Nazareth:** The first settlement goes back to the 7th century B.C. In Jesus’ day it seems to have been a small village of about 60 acres, inhabited by about 500 persons, devoted largely to agriculture. The Mediterranean is about 20 miles distant to the West; the Sea of Galilee is 15 miles East. It possessed a synagogue, one in which Jesus was well known. From this hillside town one could see the one capital of Sepphoris, four miles NW. Herod Antipas had been granted Galilee and Perea on the death of his father, Herod the Great. During the childhood of Jesus, Herod Antipas did a great deal of rebuilding and beautifying of Sepphoris, hiring craftsmen from the region. Josephus rated it as “the ornament of all Galilee” as well as the “strongest city in Galilee”.¹²⁶

While there are clear signs of “Hellenization” in the urban centers of Palestine, there is little indication of its reach into the small farming villages and towns which were not nodes on the major trade routes of the day. Sepphoris and Tiberias were the dominant cities of Galilee. Sepphoris included a palace, a theater that seated 3000, an upper city (largely Jewish) and a lower city, both with markets. It does not figure in the ministry of Jesus, though one route to Cana of Galilee ran through this city. Some have speculated that this might have been where Joseph and other carpenters (Jesus included?) found work. But there is no mention of it in the Gospel writings.

Notes on the chronology of Luke 2 and Matthew 2

Even a quick reading of these two Gospel chapters raises the question of harmonization. “The accounts in Matthew and Luke are apparently independent and highly divergent.”¹²⁷

Luke has no mention of the sojourn in Egypt and “exodus.” Matthew tells us nothing of where Mary and Joseph resided before Bethlehem. Luke’s account reads naturally as though their return to Nazareth took place shortly after circumcision and dedication of the baby Jesus in the Temple. Matthew’s account seems to describe at least some months, if not years, in Egypt. On return after Herod the Great’s death in 4 B.C., they go to Nazareth due to a dream warning them not to settle in the territory of Archelaus, Judea.

All harmonization accounts consider the two authors as having differing agendas for what they leave in or omit (or don’t know). What is omitted is not denied.¹²⁸ But we have to say we don’t know the full

¹²⁵ This messianic interpretation of Isaiah 11:1 is found in rabbinic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

¹²⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.511; *Antiquities* 18.2.1.

¹²⁷ Carson, *Matthew*, p. 96.

¹²⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, “But Luke was presumably under no obligation to write his own narrative in such a way that it could be harmonized with other historical traditions, even if he knew about them. In

account so are left to speculating on how the events are to be reconciled chronologically, unless we conclude they are irreconcilable on any account and cannot both be either accurate or true.¹²⁹

1. One proposal is to argue much of Luke 2:8-39 takes place before Matthew 2:1-8. The family returns to Nazareth after the 40 days of purification. Jesus was born in Bethlehem about 2 years or less before the Magi arrive in Jerusalem. Having inquired, the star led the Magi, not to Bethlehem but Nazareth where Jesus was currently living. Being warned not to return to Jerusalem, the Magi leave for home. When Joseph is warned, he takes the family from Nazareth to Egypt where there is a large diaspora of Jews. (See Gibbs, Matthew Vol. 1: p. 145ff). Or an alternative on this is that, when the Magi finally arrive, Joseph, Mary and Jesus are in Judea, staying at a home in Bethlehem (perhaps Elizabeth's). They have come from Galilee to observe Passover in Jerusalem or some such festival. While there the Magi visit, the warning is issued, and the family flees to Egypt only to return after Herod's death.

2. A variation on this is that sometime before Jesus' second birthday, Joseph and Mary return from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Perhaps there was some difficulty in setting up house in Nazareth and they returned for better prospects in the Bethlehem surroundings. There they take up residence in a house to which the Magi come and from which the family flees to Egypt. When they return on Herod the Great's death, they are warned not to settle back in their home in Bethlehem (which is in Judea under Archelaus' rule) so return to Nazareth. One element involved in this is that the Magi are said to visit Jesus when he is labelled a child (παιδίον) rather than an infant (βρέφος). Paidion is a general term for a child below the age of puberty so it does not rule out Jesus as an infant. But it leaves the door open that this was some time after the birth.

3. One common harmonization simply sees the two independent accounts fitting together as J. Gresham Machen suggested:

“(1) annunciation to Zacharias, (2) annunciation to Mary, (3) visit of Mary to Elisabeth, (4) return of Mary to Nazareth, (5) discovery of her condition, (6) annunciation to Joseph, (7) marriage of Joseph and Mary, (8) journey to Bethlehem on account of the census, (9) birth of Jesus, (10) visit of the shepherds, (11) circumcision at Bethlehem eight days after birth, (12) presentation in the Temple at Jerusalem forty days after birth, (13) return to Bethlehem, (14) visit of the magi, (15) flight to Egypt, (16) return to Nazareth. No doubt this order of events is in a few particulars not altogether certain; but it is at least perfectly possible; and if other arrangements also are possible, that is not at all derogatory to the harmony between the two accounts.”¹³⁰

The problem we face is that we cannot interview Matthew or Luke – and our conclusions rest only on prior assumptions about the genre and methods used to compose the Gospels, not evidence. Instead, we create our own stories out of ambiguities in the two texts. It reminds me of a modern story told by Dr. Kenneth Kantzer that illustrates the sort of real-world accounts that happen and seem

short, disagreement (which is different from formal contradiction) between the evangelists says nothing about the historical value of the traditions, since neither writes with the expectation that readers will eventually be concerned to fit everything together into one harmonious whole.” (p. 35)

¹²⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*, “In this verse it first becomes evident that Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives cannot be fully harmonised.” (p. 122). Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, considers the narrative, starting with the story of the Magi, as legend without concern for historical actuality: “Our story is a briefly and simply told legend that is not interested in the laws of historical probability.” (p. 105) Again: “Neither Herod's infamous cruelty nor the fact that Egypt has always been a refuge for Israel's persecuted helps much: every saga or legend makes use of historical data and relates events that could have happened. The many connections with the Moses haggadah show that our story is also a haggadic narrative inspired by it.” (p. 120). For these writers the endeavor to harmonize is misguided from the start.

¹³⁰ *The Virgin Birth* (1930, 1987). Cambridge: James Clarke Lutterworth. (p. 197).

irreconcilable.¹³¹

“Several years ago the mother of a friend of ours was killed. We first learned of her death through a trusted mutual friend who reported that the woman had been standing on a street corner when she was hit by a bus; fatally hurt, she died a few minutes afterwards. A little later, we learned from the grandson of the dead woman that she had been involved in a collision, was thrown from the car in which she was riding and was killed instantly. The boy was quite definite; this was all the information he had. His story was not only clear and positive, but he had secured his information directly from his mother.

“No further word was available from either source, so which were we to believe? We trusted both our friends, but we certainly could not put the data together. Much later we learned that after the woman was hit by a bus and fatally hurt, a passing car picked her up and headed for the nearest hospital, on the way colliding with another car. The injured woman was thrown from the car and died instantly.”

Early Days of the Kingdom in Word and Deed (3:1-7:29)

A. Narrative 1: John and Jesus and the kingdom of God (3:1-4:45)

Matthew leaps over years of Jesus' childhood and early adulthood. Only Luke tells us of one incident when he was about 12 years of age. Only in the second century did interest peak in those “silent” years – and many novelistic legends circulated. Some people cannot leave gaps alone and fill them in with imaginary hints to show the later powers were already present in the child.

All four gospels treat the sudden appearance of John the Baptist as the beginning of the gospel. Before Jesus, John already preaches the reality and nearness of the kingdom of heaven. The Jews expected God's prophet to arise in their midst (Deut. 18:18). Jesus later tells us that one is indeed John.

This also is the first time “kingdom of heaven” appears (3:2).¹³² It is a central (and contested) term that epitomizes the ministry and message of Jesus. The five major discourses will explicate the meaning of that phrase and its various relevancies to life in that time and this. The preference for “heaven(s)” seems best explained as a way of avoiding the name of God.

“The use of “heaven” in place of “God” is simply a pious Jewish periphrasis to avoid constantly naming the Deity in the oblique case of a set formula.”¹³³

¹³¹ From “Christ and Scripture,” *His Magazine*, Jan. 1966, pp. 16-20.

¹³² ἡγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν Carter, *Matthew*. The translation of βασιλεία (“kingdom” or “reign”) has been contested by those who see it as signaling an alternative to the Roman Empire. Carter translates it thus: “I will use “empire” or “reign” throughout to highlight God's empire as resistance to and as an alternative to Rome's empire.” (Ftn. 8, p. 91). But it is not clear this is how John or Jesus used the term. While they confront the religious elite in particular, their call was not for political reformation or revolution, but for a spiritual revolution that would lead to a moral transformation. Matthew 13, 23-24 seem to make that clear. Still “reign” is a way of capturing the more active, dynamic sense of an ongoing ruling.

¹³³ Meier, J. P. (1994). *A Marginal Jew, rethinking the historical Jesus: Volume two, Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press. (p. 239).

(1) John the Baptist (3:1-12)

(a). A Startling Identity

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness in those days, the days while Jesus was living in Nazareth, the days when Scripture's promises are being fulfilled. John was a real person, in time and space, doing very specific things. All four gospels place the baptizing-preaching activity of John in the wilderness. Before Jesus the Messiah appears, John the Baptist takes his place on the stage of history. His message is simple. People must turn around. They are looking and going in the wrong direction. The great visitation of God has begun. The God's kingdom stands near and this means people must get near to God.¹³⁴ God's nearness is what makes it possible for us to be near to God.

John's prescription is a public washing in the Jordan river. No quiet hiding or veiled secrecy. He yells and shouts in the desert and all of Jerusalem and Judea come out to see this spectacle. By his dress and lifestyle he assumes the marks and appearance of the prophets, especially Elijah. If Elijah must come before the Messiah, then John dramatizes that reality. Whether he considered himself that one is beside the point. What we make ourselves out to be is unimportant beside what God designates us to be.

Yet there are several markers of his identification with Elijah.¹³⁵ Elijah took refuge in the wilderness and was taken up in a fiery chariot near the Jordan (1 Kgs. 17:3; 19:3–18; 2 Kgs. 2:1–12). The clothing John adopted echoed that worn by Elijah (2 Kgs. 1:8). But what was most important was his message: he is a “voice crying out in the wilderness.” (3:3). His function is to prepare the way for the Lord's coming. He is the one Malachi foreshadows:

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” (3:1)
and “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.” (4:5)

The problem John addresses is that people are taking their lives in wrong directions. They entertain false identities for themselves. With the coming of the kingdom of God a whole new world is happening. The kingdom sums up the intention of God to bring a new way of life to earth, to create a new community living by a new love, justice and mercy. It is the real hope that the sorry history of individuals, families and communities can be changed. A new “nation” within all nations, a new set of “citizens” within all citizenships, a new “life-style” within all other life-styles is at hand. The kingdom of God is arriving in the midst of all other kingdoms – and even the liberation of all creation from its bondage to foreign powers.

We must turn around if we are to meet God in the right direction. The way to God does not begin with denying our desperate condition and behavior. We are done with sin only when we own up to it. The ones who will not confess their sins deny their need for forgiveness. This is not a matter of gaining a bad self-image or feeling a certain way. It is opening our eyes to see what we are and do in the light of the kingdom of God. That comparison, and that alone, will show us how unready and unworthy we are for the nearness of God.

¹³⁴ The perfect indicative active form (ἤγγικεν) of the verb ἐγγίζω (to draw near, approach) expresses an ongoing resultant state of affairs. The messianic age has begun. So, it *stands* near.

¹³⁵ Carter, *Matthew*, “Like the prophets, John performs sign-actions in his baptism, location, diet, and clothing.” (p. 91). Carter sees this as socio-political: “In his preaching and confrontation with the local Jerusalem elite, allies of Rome, John proclaims judgment on the world dominated by Rome.” (p. 91).

Peter expressed this when he realized who Jesus was in the boat (“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Lk. 5:8). Isaiah felt it when he saw the Holy God high and lifted up (“Woe is me! I am lost...” Isa. 6:5). It is the closeness of God that elicits from us the awareness of our uncleanness, our unworthiness, our sinfulness. With all the possibilities we have resident within us as the imagers of God, we live poor, mean, narrow lives, hardly shaped by the coming reality of God’s overlordship in the cosmic kingdom.

What is happening is a cosmic shift of universal scope. It is the great event of time and space, the final fate of all things. The gathering together of all things around God and under God’s searching evaluation is near. Only those things and those people who are going God’s direction will be given welcome into God’s kingdom. Get ready—get set, says John: God’s kingdom is arriving and is already near, at hand.

John’s location in the wilderness and using the Jordan for baptizing his fellow Israelites was a way of symbolizing their continuity with the faithless Exodus generation. It was not enough to say that “we have Abraham as our father.” Being born into the ethnic people to whom the treasures of the covenant with God was given was insufficient. God could raise up children of Abraham from the stones. Somehow the current generation, despite its religious zeal, required repentance and a reentrance into the promises of God.

Despite John’s seriousness, his contemporaries came by the droves. Even the Pharisees and Sadducees came to see this drama. We are not told that they repented or confessed their sins. We are told that John addressed them directly with amazingly acidic language. These are the religious elite. The separatistic Pharisees, devout, rigorous, disciplined, zealous for the way of the Lord: were they here to repent or simply to check out the orthodoxy of John? Were they here to give or withhold their approval? Were they here to see if John’s movement might threaten their own? Were they guarding the boundaries of purity to be sure that nothing would lead thousands astray in these days? Or had they realized the rottenness of the roots of their very being and way of life?

The sophisticated and powerful Sadducees, rich, well-connected, calculating and wary: were they here to see what potential John had for leading a popular uprising? Did they wonder how their Roman and Herodian allies might react if a movement of revolt and messianism broke out in the wilderness? Were they worried that this open preaching about the kingdom of God might force their own action and that action might backfire?

John calls them a bunch of snakes: these serious, devoted laypersons and these powerful holders of the top ministry positions in the worship of God. These people were the core, the *creme de la creme*, the major devotees of serious religious thought and activity. John attacks their pride and security of position. Those who thought of themselves as chiefly responsible for carrying the name, law and righteousness of God were called the chief enemies of the coming of God’s kingdom. They had the most to lose if it came. They were morally armed against any claims that they needed forgiveness.

John does not tell these people to accept themselves, to say that they are doing the best they can in difficult times, that they are balancing as wisely and carefully as they can on a tightrope not of their own making. John cuts beyond all rationalization and all social illusion. They feared the wrath of the Romans more than the wrath of God. The kingdom of God is wrath upon those who meet it going the wrong direction. The leaders of Israel are the first to be singled out as needing to stop in their tracks and turn around—or face the wrath of God. They would have none of it (Luke 7:29-30).

What would be inadequate was a “show” of repentance. John articulates the same demand we find at the end of the Sermon on the Mount: only producing (ποιήσατε) “fruit in keeping with repentance.” (3:8) It is not enough to hear or to say the words “I repent.” One must “do” repentance by changing one’s conduct to conform to the righteousness and rule of the Kingdom of heaven. The mere act of being baptized does not mean those who go through it acquire a right to forgiveness. They look forward to the removing of all their sin and guilt. But their posture is not people waiting for their rights to be fulfilled but simply the penitent with sorrowful hands lifted awaiting a freely given gracious act.

The baptism of John is only preparatory. Coming after him is one who baptizes in the Spirit and fire. Jesus will do far more for those he baptizes than John can do. The coming King will act in a twofold manner: (1) the promised salvation signaled and sealed by the Spirit for those who are righteous, a baptism of purification; (2) fiery judgment for the wicked, a baptism of destruction. Like Jesus after him, John indicates there are only two paths, two outcomes, two gates, two ways to respond to the kingdom of heaven. In the religious and political elite vs. the crowds, we see the two responses.

(b). A Startling Indictment

With his lifestyle, John’s words of judgment could be taken as the overactive externalization of a guilt-ridden neurotic. Perhaps he is seeking to deal with his own hyperactive conscience by accusing everyone around him of excessive levels of sin and evil. Some would say he is a classic authoritarian personality, a rigid legalist whose other-blaming is a function of his own inability to stave off the inner accusers that are over active in his conscience.

Yet his words of law and judgment are the very ones that provide the proof of the love of God. This is not the preacher of a patriarchal, angry God whose irritability and arbitrariness are grounds to celebrate the overthrowing of orthodox Christianity. God’s love is not loving when it accepts injustice and oppression. To call religious and political elite “snakes” is to offer divine reality amid the mists and illusions of power. These leaders didn’t consider themselves to merit the wrath of God.

Rather, they acted as privileged heirs of a great tradition, whose guardians they were. They set themselves up as the responsible guides for others, the exemplars and pathfinders for the weak and the ignorant. Others might not know the word and ways of God. But they did. They were the children of Abraham, not some dog-gentile whose idolatry and sins were manifest to all. They didn’t deny the wrath of God. What they denied was the relevance of that message for them. John was letting them know that if the gentiles were dogs, vermin before the face of God, they were snakes (in God’s garden)!

John’s words are not a legalism. His message is not a fiery sermon of judgment without grace. It is not law without forgiveness. It is not perfection or else. This is the message of getting ready for the coming kingdom of God. It is an invitation into the presence and love of God. But it is a realistic invitation. It spells out what is necessary from our side. It is true that God accepts us as we are—but he does not leave us that way. Nor can we suppose the love of God is indifferent to the poisons we are taking. The great physician wants us healthy, hale and hearty. For that to happen we must act decisively regarding our sins.

There must be fruits worthy of repentance: a style of life and pattern of actions that match our gestures of closeness to God. God’s gestures match his intention. To be near us as sinners he came in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and went to the cross to atone for our sins. The baptism

of fiery judgment was absorbed into his being that we might not have to experience that event. Instead, we are offered the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The holiness of God can be imparted to us by the inflowing of the holy God, purging us of uncleanness and giving us the change agent needed inside of us. God does not demand of us perfection and then condemn us for not having the inner resources to match the demand. Instead, our willingness is met with his willing Spirit.

It is not the heritage we claim—whether Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Pentecostal or Anabaptist. There is neither liturgical nor low church before God. We are all one in our sin and one in our baptism in the Spirit who makes holy—or we are none of God's. The choices are stark and clear. Either we will be gathered as good grain into the household of God or we will be blown away by the breath of the Spirit of judgment, as chaff to be burned in the eternal fire.

To call those snakes who are snakes in this garden of the household of God is to inject reality into a confused and confusing world. Those who are acceptable to God are those of a contrite and humble heart. If it means leaving seats of power and positions of strength to be baptized by a wild man in the wilderness, if it means publicly admitting wrongdoing and wrong thinking, so be it. The only way onto the difficult and narrow way is through the door of John's preaching.

This is tough love. This is the demand for integrity of relationship. We must see ourselves as we are and who we are. We cannot afford the modern mess. The fundamentalists preach hell-fire for personal sins (and accuse the rest of the world of committing them). The liberationists preach hell-fire for structural sins (and accuse the rich and powerful as culpable). The mainstream tells us there is no hell (God accepts us all as we are so long as we are sincere in whatever we do). We are confronted with a John who calls us all to a baptism of repentance for our own sins, leaving us no room to be hell-fire preachers to others or hell-fire deniers for anyone and everyone. We are not in charge of God or God's good news. It is repent—God's kingdom is arriving. Period, the end.

(c). A Startling Imperative

Guilt and shame have become such a pervasive cancer in Christian circles that it is next to impossible to make sense of the notion of repentance. How can we hear the message of John and not turn away from him to a sanitized Jesus made out to be a preacher only of love? Love—"onlyism" has become a theme song of some Christian discourse. The notion that a final judgment is coming, that we face a decisive making our character permanent—this is what Scripture indicates. That it might forever include or exclude us from the presence of God, seems to many harsh, rigid, and unworthy. Yet it is respect for our freedom. It simply is God saying to us all: 'Your will be done.'

Of course, if this reductionism of God simply to love is correct, then John the Baptist was quite wrong to issue a warning. What is there to fear if, in the end, the whole of history will be an acquittal for one and all? No evil deed however heinous, no dedicated rebellion against God, no perversion of creation however twisted will succeed. This is the notion that one of the roles of the King of heaven as 'judge' is simply theological blather meant to bully people into ethical straitjackets. There is no eternal fire. Only eternal love that sweeps all resistance aside.

Part of this reaction is a justifiable rejection of the legalistic, moralistic, condemnatory judgmentalism that is more rooted in a lust for self-righteousness than a longing for the righteousness of God. The perversion and subtlety of sin are such that, when one seeks to change allegiance from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, it is easy to bring along the old

flashlights. A former zeal toward pleasure and partying becomes a passion to censure all who continue to be so engaged. Anything that echoes the old music is shouted down. The flashlights are used to highlight the sins of others.

A joyless, humorless preoccupation with ensuring that others are repenting turns the focus of repentance away from the graciousness of God and from our own outrageous need for forgiveness. The central demonstration of God's love is forgiveness. For forgiveness to occur there must be a violation of relationship, a harm done, an obligation shirked, a boundary transgressed, a promise broken, a loyalty betrayed, a standard flaunted, a slander repeated, a potential squandered. Repentance is the gesture that acknowledges and faces up to the reality of the pain inflicted and the guilt incurred.

If forgiveness is real, then sin is real as well. The obverse is not necessarily true. There can be sin and be no forgiveness. But if forgiveness is at the heart of the love of God, then sin is real. Repentance is a reality check within our consciousness. Without it we live in a world of illusion and denial. Without it we will not take the decisive action internally or externally to rectify the evil that endangers us. What is amazing is that such gracious favor includes us—us who have so gravely and horrendously sinned against the very source of our life and world.

What moralism and legalism do is to point to the fire to come. At the same time, they produce so much smoke that it is not clear what one must do to save oneself. People get lost in the hacking, choking, dense atmosphere of a condemning judgmentalism. The censoriousness does not attract the hopeless nor relieve the guilt ridden. It drives the sensitive soul to despair and the sincere into the cycle of downward self-condemnation. Once internalized, judgmentalism undermines forgiveness and falsifies the nature of sin. It is an intense form of alienation from God particularly well known in religious circles.

John's call to repentance came within a history of victimization. The Jews of his day had been sinned against for centuries. They had been too busy surviving to believe that a much greater danger lay within. The Roman dogs and gentile pigs were the issue. The demonic powers that invaded the land with them were the issue. The sin of idolatry was the issue. Since the Pharisees and Sadducees were none of these, the more serious sin lay on the side of the Gentile oppressors. They came astonished at the thousands who flocked to the Jordan to this "fire-and-brimstone" preacher.

John's admission was that his own capabilities were severely limited. He was not the powerful One who might deliver the Jews from their humiliation and oppression. He was not the one who could offer them the Holy Spirit and create a nation of Samsons or Davids who would throw off the yoke of Rome. His baptism was in water only, a washing to affirm and enact the cleansing asked for from God through repentance for sin. His baptism was a gate into the awareness that Israel's greatest danger and slave-master was within their own gates. Whatever they thought the Romans needed to do to get right with the true and living God, they needed it equally, if not more so. This was not the message of political revolution.

What made John's preaching more than moralism, and less than legalism was its connection with the coming One whose baptism would be more than a getting ready or making straight. It would be the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the fire.¹³⁶ Only then would the authentic and true,

¹³⁶ Barth, *CD, Vol. IV.4*: "This divine judgment which John expected did not tarry. It came in the person of Him who according to John was to baptise with the Spirit, of Him who came to kindle a fire on

the genuinely repentant, those made right with God, survive. The Romans left room for all sorts to continue to live and pursue their hopes and activities. The coming One holds the ax handle—and it is set already at the root of every tree. What issues from one's whole life (the fruit) is the sign for the axe handler: to save or to cut off. Repent or else. That is the imperative.

In calling for the fruits of repentance, John asks for no more than what God's covenants always have called for: subordination to God and solidarity with our fellow humans; the practical outworking of submission to and doing of the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven. The "works" of repentance are finally and fully loving God and loving the neighbor as oneself.

❖ Discipleship: Sacrament of Baptism

1. Baptism

Water and purification rituals were not unusual in the Jewish and Roman world. It was used as a sign of purification from the impurities that clung to one from the daily push and pull of life. The Essenes weren't the only ones to have Mikvehs (מִקְוֶה), a bath for immersion in order to experience cleansing from impurities. Immersion was also practiced when a Gentile proselyte was admitted into the Jewish community but was not administered to those born into Judaism. What is unusual is John's demand that even Jewish persons, including Jewish religious leaders, needed to undergo this ritual. They needed to undergo a change in identity and status. In this context, John indicates the water baptism is no more than a sign of a greater baptism: of the Spirit and of fire, a baptism John admitted he could not perform.

2. Sacramental

In this context there is no language of "sacrament," if by that is meant some permanent mark of grace that is necessary for salvation or sanctification. What is necessary is repentance. Baptism is simply the outward sign and public acknowledgment of one's sinfulness before a holy God. When baptism is accompanied by the faith of the one being baptized (or in the case of infant baptism, that of the parents and congregation), it is a means of grace. But there is nothing here (or elsewhere) that indicates baptism is what effects salvation (baptismal regeneration) or that the unbaptized (such as infants who die) are disadvantaged in the Kingdom of heaven.¹³⁷

the earth (Lk. 12:49). As He offered Himself and was obedient to the death on the cross, as He accepted the baptism of His death (Lk. 12:50), as He thus bore in the place of men the judgment which pertained to them and threatened them. He did not rule out the actual kindling of that fire on the earth. Indeed, it was the goal of His whole history. 'Yahweh thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God' (Deut. 4:24), is a statement which is found not only in the Old Testament but also in the New: 'For our God is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:29). Just because God establishes and reveals Himself once and for all in the person and work of Jesus Christ as ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν [our God], just because He fulfils in Him His covenant with men, and fulfils it in such a way that only the existence of a man who is obedient to Him is meaningful and possible, He also reveals Himself herewith as the Judge, and now for the first time His judgment on the sin that is plainly robbed of any possible basis, acquires a truly consuming and painful severity. Hence there can be no Pentecost, no baptism with the Holy Ghost, unless one receives Him ὡσεὶ πυρὸς [as of fire]. (Ac. 2:3)." (p. 80)

¹³⁷ Contra Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1*: "The most natural way to understand the grammar of John's words, 'I myself am baptizing you with water *for repentance*,' is that the goal of John's baptism was to produce repentance, and that the baptism itself, by God's power, in fact did produce repentance.'" (p. 156) Rather:

Baptism does not result in the forgiveness of sins; it is an outward expression of the repentance that results in the forgiveness of sins. That Jesus sets the example by accepting baptism is significant.

That the great commission includes baptism into the triune God's name is significant. This is not trivial. When Jesus pressured John to baptize him, he was identifying with sinful humanity. He assumes the posture of a sinner, the very sort he came to save by laying down his life. It is that act and our participation in it that has saving power, not the ritual itself. "This connection [between baptism and repentance] is threefold in that baptism assumes repentance, expresses repentance, and through God's grace issues in ongoing repentance."¹³⁸

That the commission is given initially to the Apostles is not an indication that only those Apostles or in apostolic succession or only men are permitted and empowered to administer baptism. This is not the beginning of a bureaucratic hierarchy but the continuation of what John, Jesus, and the disciples had been doing: calling people to the confession of sin and repentance, in view of which they took the definite step of signifying that stance in the washing of baptism. As Karl Barth puts it:

"At any rate there is in the New Testament no trace of the later bureaucratic concern for validity in the administration of the sacraments, including baptism. The action of the community is thus indispensable to baptism. But like that of the candidate himself it can only be a humble action, raising no claim, modest in relation to the Lord of both the candidate and the community. Indeed, in the last resort it takes second place to the action of the candidate and simply assists this."¹³⁹

3. Vocational

Baptism initiates the disciple into a life-long calling that makes them participants in the grand narrative of universal history. The story of Jesus and the Kingdom of God is the story of the universe – past, present and future. Learning one's "role" to play on that great stage is a process of listening and learning from the Master. It means learning a new vocabulary, a new mindset that sees and feels the world and events in a new way, a new pattern of conduct that integrates body, mind and heart in a love for God and neighbor.

Repentance is a way of saying: "I've been acting as though I was in the right play, speaking the right words, moving about the stage of life properly. But now I discover it to all be completely mistaken." It reminds me of a passage from Malcolm Muggeridge's autobiography:

Blomberg, *Matthew*: "The phrase 'for repentance' could suggest that one must be baptized to be saved, but this interpretation flounders on New Testament teaching elsewhere (e.g., Acts 3:19; Rom 3:23–24; Eph 2:8–9)." (p. 79). The expression "for repentance" (εἰς μετάνοιαν) is best understood of "because of repentance." Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*: "Few realize how much injury the dogma that baptism is necessary for salvation, badly expounded, has entailed. As a consequence, they are less cautious. For, where the opinion has prevailed that all are lost who have not happened to be baptized with water, our condition is worse than that of God's ancient people—as if the grace of God were now more restricted than under the law! For men will think that Christ has come not to fulfill the promises but to abolish them, seeing that the promise (which was then effective enough of itself to confer salvation before the eighth day) now would not be valid without the aid of a sign." (*IV, 15, 20*, p. 1321).

¹³⁸ Turner, *Baker: Matthew*, p. 115.

¹³⁹ *CD, 4.4* (p. 50).

“A scene that has often come into my mind, both sleeping and waking — I am standing in the wings of a theatre waiting for my cue to go onstage. As I stand there I can hear the play proceeding, and suddenly it dawns on me that the lines I have learnt are not in this play at all, but belong to quite a different one. Panic seizes me; I wonder frenziedly what should I do. Then I get my cue. Stumbling, falling over the unfamiliar scenery, I make my way onto the stage, and then look for guidance to the prompter, whose head I can just see rising out of the floor-boards. Alas he only signals helplessly to me and I realise of course that his script is different from mine. I begin to speak my lines, but they are incomprehensible to the other actors and abhorrent to the audience, who begin to hiss and shout: “Get off the stage!”, “Let the play go on!”, “You’re interrupting!”. I am paralysed and can think of nothing to do but to go on standing there and speaking my lines that don’t fit. The only lines I know.”¹⁴⁰

Repentance is a way of not simply standing there and speaking lines that don’t fit the kingdom of heaven. It is a way of learning new lines, of joining on the great stage of universal history and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not only discovering you’ve in the wrong play playing the wrong role. It is doing something about it. Baptism is the transition into a new vocation.

(2) Baptizing the One who didn’t need it (3:13-17)

2a. Showing the way

So why does Jesus accept this baptism? How does he differ from all the others coming to John? Only Matthew tells us of John’s objection to baptize this one. He had not expected this. He had predicted one who would come to inaugurate a baptism of Spirit and fire. Instead, this one appears along with the mass of penitent sinners seeking forgiveness and he asks for baptism.

John objects. As Carson puts it:

“Earlier John had difficulty baptizing the Pharisees and Sadducees because they were not worthy of his baptism. Now he has trouble baptizing Jesus because his baptism is not worthy of Jesus.”¹⁴¹

Jesus deflects the objection from John with a strange phrase: “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (3:15). The least we can say is that Jesus identifies with and approves the message and meaning of John for the dilemmas and dangers of sinful human life. Jesus does this not because he is a sinner in need of forgiveness or setting things in good order for the visitation of God. Jesus does this to share in the need sinful humanity has before a righteous God. He does not come with the consciousness of personal sin in order to confess his sins, but with the consciousness of public righteousness. What is essential to encourage and model the posture we humans must take before God? Optics matter.

All the signs and parts of righteousness are present and dramatized. What does it take to have all the righteousness God seeks from us and offers to us? It takes faith in the word of God and

¹⁴⁰ Malcolm Muggeridge, (1972/1973) *Chronicles of Wasted Time: An Autobiography*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway. (p. 17)

¹⁴¹ Carson, *Matthew*, p. 135.

repentance from death-dealing ways of being and living. John articulates that word in the announcement of God's sovereign governance a-coming. He calls upon people to get ready for that by cleansing themselves from their sins. Jesus identifies with that message and that stance before God. God does not despise a contrite and humble heart. In humility, the Righteous One assumes the posture of all humanity, identifying with the sins first of Israel (his own kind) and then with the sins of the world. With his sin Adam closed the door to heaven. With his obedience Jesus reopened it.

In response to this we see the full architecture of righteousness displayed: the opening to heaven, the voice declaring the love of God for his humbled Son, the descent of the Holy Spirit. All righteousness finds its fullness of reality and meaning in the opening of heaven, the voice of God and the in-filling of the Holy Spirit. All these gifts are given first to Jesus in his baptism and then they are tied to the baptism that is part of making disciples of all peoples.

We too are folded into the love of God, removed from the effects of God's wrath against all unrighteousness when we believe the good news of the Kingdom and repent, humbly submitting ourselves to the mercy of God, seeking forgiveness. The granting of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ empowers us to bring forth the life patterns and attitudes that match authentic repentance. Yet this will happen only because of Jesus' taking upon himself our sins and guilt. Just as he stands in for repentant sinners in baptism, so he will stand in for them on the cross.¹⁴²

This strange phrase of Jesus is in fact an appropriate understanding of what is occurring in this event. This is not the adoption of a good human for the mission of Messiah, now removing sin and bringing him to a state of sinlessness from here on out. Because he already is the Messiah, Jesus comes to mark with his own body the way back to the glory and favor of God. It is through the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus expresses the way of humility that will end with him on the cross.¹⁴³ He has come to identify with and bear the sins of the world. The meaning of his person and work are already displayed in the event of his baptism.

One thing we learn from the baptism of Jesus is that God validates the baptism of John. This

¹⁴² [In the arrest, trial and crucifixion] "the sinless one will offer up his own life as the ransom payment in the place of the many. That's why it is 'fitting' for Jesus to come and stand in the Jordan and be baptized, to stand (literally) in the place of the many. Later Jesus will perform the judgment, the separation, the baptism with Holy Spirit and fire of which John spoke (3:11); but not 'at this time' (3:15). Jesus' willing Baptism in the Jordan is a sign that points forward." Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*, (p. 181).

¹⁴³ Barth, *CD 1.2*: "In 2 Cor. 5:21 we have it in a way which is almost unbearably severe: 'He (God) hath made him to be sin who knew no sin'. He has caused Him to be regarded and treated as a sinner. He has Himself regarded Him and treated Him as a sinner. He was made a curse for us, as Paul unhesitatingly concluded from Deut. 21:23 (Gal. 3:13). What this means is reflected in all the dreadful things which the Evangelists report were said of Jesus: 'He is beside Himself' (Mk. 3:21), 'He hath Beelzebub' (Mk. 3:22), He is a 'gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners' (Mt. 11:19), 'He deceiveth the people' (Jn. 7:12), 'He blasphemeth God' (Mt. 9:3, 26:65). There is unmistakable reference to the suspicion which surrounded His birth (Mt. 1:19). His first public appearance is that of a penitent in unreserved solidarity with other penitents who confess themselves to be such in the baptism of John, and can look only for the remission of their sins in the coming judgment (Mt. 3:15)—a clear anticipation of the story of the passion, towards which the narrative in all the Evangelists hastens with a momentum recognisable from the very first, and at the climax of which Jesus is crucified between two thieves (Mt. 27:38)." (p. 152). See also, *CD 4.1* (p. 165).

strange religious figure, living in the wilderness and shouting a startling message is in fact not a psycho-neurotic personality, working out inner tensions by means of a religious, apocalyptic vocabulary. This one bears the appropriate message of God, given in a Spirit-directed manner. Jesus' participation legitimates John's message of repentance in a way it could not be by the masses who also came. The signs from heaven equally validate both Jesus and John.

Furthermore, Jesus will take up the identical message of John, moving it from the wilderness of the Jordan to the towns and villages of Galilee and later to the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem. Jesus is not some rival, some jealous competitor also in the religion-racket. He does not feel he must find some market-niche that is distinctly different and superior to John. His humility extends to taking up John's very message and declaring it in loud and broad tones within the normal lives of ordinary Jews. Jesus received all John had to give and passed it on. To be sure Jesus extended it and elaborated it in surprising ways. He and his disciples also baptized, yet Jesus did so in such a way that the Holy Spirit is now offered to all. We all are invited, as Luther put it:

The Son of God Himself here stands
In tender human nature;
The Holy Ghost on Him descends,
Clad in a dove's fair vesture.
We therefore should not doubt at all,
When to the font we're wending,
That all three Persons us do call,
To earth in grace descending,
With us to make their dwelling.¹⁴⁴

2b. The work of the Holy Spirit

What about the ministry of the Holy Spirit? How does this event in the life of Christ set us up for understanding what being Spirit-filled or baptized in the Spirit might mean?

(1) Spirit-baptism **connects to the message and necessity of faith and repentance**. It comes with the fruitful receiving of the Word of God into our inner being and hence in a response that credits that Word. Only those who repent and believe that God intends to rule and seek that rule will know the work of the Spirit. Word and Spirit go together as partners in what God is doing.

(2) This **is not a second work of grace**, a sort of completing of an incomplete in the life of Christ. Conceived and born by the Holy Spirit, he was never lacking the fullness of the Spirit. Jesus is not like other humans who is subsequently gifted and guided by the Spirit. From the beginning he has the Spirit at first hand and from the very beginning. The words from heaven are not "this one has now become" but this "is" my Son. The meaning of the descent of the Spirit in the life of Christ was the inauguration and confirmation of his identity and role as the beloved Son and servant of God. Just as his water baptism by John did not signify a sinful past being repudiated in readiness for the coming of God, so his Spirit-baptism was not the adding of something new that was lacking. The Spirit's coming here was also part and parcel of identifying with sinful humanity (who are lacking in many ways, most definitively in the absence of the Spirit

¹⁴⁴ Verse 4 of Martin Luther's hymn: *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam* (Christ our Lord to Jordan Came, 1541)

in their lives).

(3) The Spirit **descends in a visible, bodily form, as a dove**. The dove-likeness is not a detail that is there for no reason. It reminds us of God's Spirit hovering over the chaotic waters at creation, of Noah's sending forth of the dove to see if the waters of judgment had receded, of the name of the prophet Jonah ("Dove") who preached repentance at Nineveh. Doves were used in the sacrificial system of Israel for purification and as a substitute for more expensive animals. Doves were raised in large dovecotes, carved into the limestone. In the Shephelah region of Palestine, raising doves was a common experience. Jesus later teaches his disciples to be as "wise as serpents and as harmless (innocent) as doves" (Mt. 10:16). What seems to be in view here is the dove as the messenger of good news in the story of Noah. There the waters had run amuck in God's judgment. Here the Jordan waters are used as a baptism to inaugurate the New Exodus, the new creation, the new beginning and visitation of God with his people. The dove descending is a picture of that good news.

(4) The dove imagery **may also refer to the gentleness of this coming**. There are times the Spirit descends in the Old Testament to empower military deliverers (e.g., the Judges, most dramatically Samson; the seizing of Saul by the Spirit to bring deliverance to Jabesh-Gilead). The fiery judgment of God's triumph will come by the Spirit one day. There will be a rod of iron to break the nations who resist. But this time, in accord with Jesus' own "redefining" the messianic expectations, the Spirit comes to work gently, quietly. The Spirit-baptism of Jesus is not yet the eschatological rectification of political liberation. It is the humble and meek form of invitation. John is a voice. Jesus will be a voice as well. No legions of angels. No marching soldiers.

(5) This connection with the Spirit **echoes back to Old Testament prophecies**. The mark of the coming servant of Yahweh and the messianic deliverer is the powerful Spirit's work:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. (Isa. 11:1-3)

(6) The work of the Spirit **is to produce what is pleasing in the sight of God**. The Spirit is not isolated from the ordinary affairs or abilities of human talent (as we put it). The exquisite creativities and accomplishments necessary for human life to reach its pinnacle and display its full powers are enhanced by the work of the Spirit. God is pleased with whatever that means in an individual life. This one, conceived and born by the Spirit, is nurtured and raised to maturity in the Spirit. The Spirit's descent is a picture of what had been true and remains true of him. He pleases God by the Spirit. That is the secret of his being and life.

❖ Discipleship: Righteousness

1. The goal of discipleship

The sum of discipleship: righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount focuses on righteousness. The fruit John the Baptist looks for is righteousness: the accomplishing of God's good will in the lives and conduct of the repentant. The Gospel of Matthew is a manual in that way of right living. If Jesus sends his apostles out to "make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..." (28:19-20), the actions, disposition, character, and words of Jesus captured in Matthew give the pattern that fills out the meaning of "righteousness."

Matthew 3:13-17 Baptism of Jesus

It is the baptism of the Spirit that enables that righteousness to be active and alive in disciples. The initiation of that righteousness is signaled in the baptism of Jesus. When he comes up out of the water, he is affirmed by the Spirit's descent and the voice from heaven: "This is my son whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (3:17) The genealogy indicated he was a son of Abraham and David. This baptism indicates he is also the son of God. Jesus came from the Spirit (in conception) and now the Spirit comes to him in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled.

What God wants from and for human beings is brought into focus and fulness in this true human. The external ritual of baptism as an expression of the need for cleansing from the sins being confessed is not the goal of righteousness. Righteousness does not consist in accurately performed rituals. Water baptism itself points to a more fundamental "baptism": that of the Holy Spirit leading to righteousness.

2. The means of discipleship

The first step of discipleship is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – to fully identify oneself with the sinfulness of humanity—and with Jesus in his baptism. The gate into the kingdom of heaven is Jesus Christ. Being "buried" with him in baptism and raised to new life with him is the means by which the Spirit comes to us – as well as the affirming heavenly voice. But it is not the only means. It is the initiation but not the termination. With the descent of the Spirit, Jesus is empowered to face the tests of faith and to begin his public ministry.

(3) Testing of the Messiah in the Wilderness (4:1-11)

In this biography, if Joseph is the first model and exemplar of righteousness, Jesus is presented as the premier example as well as its accomplisher. Immediately after his baptism, he who was conceived by the Spirit is led by the Spirit to be tempted/tested by the Devil in the wilderness. In the triad of tests, we have the replication of the temptation in the garden of Eden as well as the tests of Israel in the wilderness.¹⁴⁵ Where Adam and Eve failed and Israel squandered its liberation, Jesus succeeds.

The structure of the temptations seems to follow a chiastic structure:¹⁴⁶

- a Wilderness: stones into bread to satisfy his hunger
- b Jerusalem temple: Jumping from the pinnacle to test God's promises that the angels will save him
- c High Mountain: The offer of the kingdoms of the world and the dismissal of the devil
- c' The devil left him
- b' The angels came
- a' His needs are served

A variety of proposals about this event have been advanced. Some see it as a test of Jesus as fully human in the same manner as Adam and Eve, temptations that befall all humans in one way

¹⁴⁵ "This temptation is a sample of our Lord's whole state of humiliation (*exinanitionis*), and an epitome of all the temptations (not only moral, but still more especially spiritual), which the devil has contrived from the beginning." Bengel, J. A. (1860). *Gnomon of the New Testament*. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. (p. 148).

¹⁴⁶ Garland, *Matthew*, p. 38.

or another.¹⁴⁷ He then emerges as the true human, having resisted all temptations, the perfect exemplar of the full stature of humanity in the face of a world of evil. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus comes to the testing time without prior sin so that the parallel to the original humans is direct.

Luke's account seems to underline this way of taking it, paralleling the temptations of Eve in the Garden. Note the completeness and order of the temptations (I Jn 2:16):

Need	Incentive	Appeal
Physical appetite	Bread	The lust of the flesh
Desire for things	Kingdoms of the world and their glory	The lust of the eyes
Desire for recognition	Indicate unique relationship with God	The pride of life

This Lucan order of temptations is what we see with Eve ("good for food," "a delight to the eyes," and "desired to make one wise"), in Psalm 106 and in I Cor 10:6-9 (food, false worship, putting the Lord to the test).¹⁴⁸ It is the self that is put to the test. Without satisfying hunger, having some power and possessions, without some recognition and success in life, humans tend to wither and grow into distorted beings. None of the elements are illegitimate.

Matthew's order puts the temptation of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor as the climactic test. It means Jesus winds up on a high mountain for the final temptation. This seems to be another echo back to Abraham being tested on a mountain (Gen. 22)¹⁴⁹ or Moses, on the other side of the Jordan (Deut. 32:48-52) looking at the land God promised Israel.

Some take these temptations to be a test of his understanding of his role in salvation history. As the messiah, so designated by the anointing of the Spirit and the voice from heaven, what is his identity and function within God's kingdom? The whole of the meaning and accomplishment of salvation depends on his obedience. This is the decisive struggle between Jesus and the Devil.

Another line of interpretation stresses Jesus as the true "Israel," avoiding the pitfalls that sidelined ancient Israel after the Exodus in the wilderness.¹⁵⁰ The tests replicate those of Israel in the wilderness (hunger and idolatry). The forty days echoes the forty years of Israel in the wilderness after their exodus from slavery.¹⁵¹ Matthew's order puts the offer of the kingdoms of

¹⁴⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia (Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 56);

¹⁴⁸ For the argument for Matthew's order being original: Marshall, I. Howard (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text*. Exeter: Paternoster Press. (pp. 166-167). France, *Matthew*: "The majority of recent interpreters think Matthew's order, which also brings the two 'Son of God' temptations together at the beginning, more likely to be original." (p. 126)

¹⁴⁹ Talbert, *Matthew*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁰ France, *Matthew*: "The most significant key to the understanding of this story is to be found in Jesus' three scriptural quotations. All come from Deut 6-8, the part of Moses' address to the Israelites before their entry into Canaan in which he reminds them of their forty years of wilderness experiences." (p. 127). Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 62. Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1*, p. 191-192. Beale, G. K., and Carson, D. A. (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker: Craig Blomberg on Matthew 4:1-11 (p.14).

¹⁵¹ Tertullian in Souter, A. (Trans.). (1919). *Tertullian's Treatises: Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism* (p. 71). London: SPCK.

the world last. In Matthew the order of the temptations goes from the lowest point to the highest (desert, pinnacle of the Temple, mountain). The exact phrase “forty days and nights” echoes the time Moses spent fasting on Mt. Sinai before receiving the ten commandments confirming God’s covenant with Israel.

As the true “Israel” he repeats, successfully, the testing that Israel failed.¹⁵² Just as he has passed through the Jordan (as Israel did the Red Sea), so now he is tested in the wilderness. He is there for 40 days. Perhaps Deuteronomy 8:2–3 echoes in this account:

“And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger ...’

As such this also is a refutation of several false ideas about the messianic role current in the Jewish world of his day. He sets himself against a few ways messiahship was seen. He is messiah despite not fitting the expected models that eventually led to the uprisings against Rome.

Another take on the temptation is that it follows the Shema (Deut. 6:5): to love God with all your heart, soul (life), and strength, a testing Israel failed in the wilderness. This takes the first temptation to test Jesus/Israel’s heart for God (Deut. 8:2); the second to test the desire to save his soul/life by trusting God even if it leads to loss of life; and the third to draw strength from God rather than to rule the world by himself.

There is a “double motivation” of behind the wilderness sojourn: the Greek word, πειράζω (to tempt, try), has the twofold meaning of temptation and test. Satan’s action is a temptation to lead the messiah astray at the very beginning of his ministry.¹⁵³ God’s action by the Spirit is a testing or trial to strengthen the identity and obedience of Jesus. Satan tempts. The Spirit tests. This repeats Israel’s wilderness testing.

Reportedly, Malcolm Muggeridge quipped that ‘all new news is old news happening to new people.’ He was right. In the garden Adam and Eve listened to the temptation “hath God said?” They chose autonomy over obedience, their own desires over revelation. Since then we might well agree that this same test/temptation has been repeated in all generations, with the same results. The devastations are not new, only the victims are. But Jesus is the divine interruption to this seemingly unavoidable repetition of old news. Suddenly with have new news happening to a new person. History will never be the same.

The temptations of Jesus come in concentrated form at the beginning of his public ministry. These are tests of the validation and authentication of his person at the baptism. It is equally the demonstration of the meaning of his ancestry as pointing to him as the son of Abraham and David,

¹⁵² France, *Matthew*: “The story of the testing in the wilderness is thus an elaborate typological presentation of Jesus as himself the true Israel, the ‘Son of God’ through whom God’s redemptive purpose for his people is now at last to reach its fulfillment.” (p. 128); “The point of sonship fits here: Jesus is representative Israel and so the faithful Son of God, providing the quintessential contrast to Israel’s disobedience (see 2:15; 3:17; 4:3).” in Brown, Jeannine K., and K. Roberts. (2018). *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. (p. 49); Davies, *Matthew Vol. 1* (pp. 402-403)

¹⁵³ The Evil One receives three different names in the account of Jesus’ temptation. He is “the slanderer” in 4:1, 5, 8, 11: ὁ διάβολος; “the tempter” in 4:3: ὁ πειράζων; and “the adversary or accuser” in 4:10: σατανᾶ. Elsewhere he is ὁ πονηρός, “the evil one” (5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 38); ὁ Βεελζεβούλ “Beelzebul” (10:25; 12:24, 27), and ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων “ruler of demons” (9:34, 12:24).

the promised deliverer and seed through whom the blessings of God are offered.

This story is also a test of interpretive reflexes and assumptions.¹⁵⁴ The devil is present in a most clearly personal manifestation. The Bible is quoted as a sufficient response to his insinuations and urgings. We are shown the extremes of spirituality and asceticism in one whose life pattern will be far more normal. All the temptations that afflict religious leaders as they succeed in climbing the pinnacles of popularity and success are present. So too are the temptations that faced Adam and Eve in the Garden.

1. The Holy Spirit is the initiator of these events. Jesus was conceived by the Spirit and attested as the Son of the Heavenly Father by the descent of the Spirit at Baptism. In like manner the encounter with the devil comes because of the forceful activity of the Spirit in Jesus' life.¹⁵⁵ Even as the unique son of God, Jesus did not act as an independent agent, apart from the mysterious working of the Spirit and will of God. He is "led" by the Spirit.

2. We must ask: who was this upon whom the Spirit of God descended and was able so to work as to bring about a decisive defeat of the evil one? One answer is that only God can do the work of God. This is God's doing. Salvation means that we cannot provide the definitive remedy for the disasters that we create, that spring out of the depths of our being and the breadth of nature's infinite mysteries. Only a person who is willing to fulfill all righteousness, to acknowledge and identify with humanity's dire need to repent and seek the forgiveness of God, to hunger and thirst after righteousness—only such will have the Spirit at work in this way.

3. Then there is the Bible in all this. Jesus was not out in the wilderness seeking what he had already been given, only more and better spiritual fireworks. This was not a quest set off by the vision and voice at the Jordan river. Jesus is not an early-day Corinthian, lusting after spiritual experiences that might outshine those of his compatriots and peers. He did not pursue spiritual achievements that could be trotted out as put downs for the merely ordinary and drab lives of others. Jesus' prowess is displayed in the proper use of the words of Scripture. He knew those words well enough to correct the interpretation and application made of them by the devil just as in the Sermon on the Mount he will correct the ways Scripture was misused by his contemporaries. He knew what words from Scripture were applicable as well as the precise lines of reasoning needed to say with clarity and truth what the will and way of God might be. There was no challenge by the devil challenging: "hath God said?"

4. The impressive thing is that the word of God on the lips of the Messiah of God carried a force adequate to dethrone the efforts of the devil. The speaking of God by and through this one is the definitive voice we need to listen to if we are to find the solution to the evil that has succeeded so well with us all. Not even Jesus appealed to his own personal authority to find the

¹⁵⁴ One question has to do with genre and historicity. Bruner, *Christbook*, argues "the Temptations of Jesus present pictorial rather than literal truth, that the Temptations are historical in the sense that they happened like this in Jesus' life but that they are not historical in the sense that they happened exactly like this in desert, temple, and high mountain." (p. 134). Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* sees this as midrashic Haggadah in that the Scripture quoted is designed to bring out the deeper meaning of the story told. He argues: "This does not, however, necessitate the conclusion that the story has no historical basis. Haggadic midrash here, as elsewhere, is not necessarily incompatible with the respect for and use of historical tradition by the author." (p. 63).

¹⁵⁵ The parallels between the agency of the Spirit and that of the devil is clearer in the Greek: ἀνήχθη ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος "led...by the Spirit"; πειρασθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου "tested by the devil."

platform for dealing with the opposition to God in this world.

This was not a rationalism of the Enlightenment or scholastic sort, a syllogism driving bad reasoning from the field. This is the committed incarnation of faith in God's word and obedience to it, even when it is neither obvious nor convenient. This is not the trivial or semi-magical recital of that word, as though saying certain words with special emphasis or accent might produce an effect simply due to psychology, conviction, or rhetoric.

The power unleashed by these words was not in the words. It is the authenticity of one who speaks truly and lives aligned with those words. That is what carried the weight of the day. Jesus knew himself, his heavenly Father, the Spirit, the words of Scripture and his enemy. No bluff here. Just the perfect alignment of word, deed and life.

5. While sin has many residences and manifestations, this is the face of evil. Evil is personal and individual, rooted in and active within each of us humans. Evil is also supra-personal, parasitic upon institutions and structures, manifesting itself in unexpected, unintended ways in the systems and organizations we put together to order culture and social arrangements. The Enlightenment and Romantic movements have reduced evil simplistically to these two manifestations—personal agency and corporate socio-cultural powers. What this story tells us is that there is another agency other than psychological or sociological. It is a spiritual agency, a purposive center that actively initiates and defies God within his own creation.

❖ Discipleship: The Devil

We exist in an age within the Christian church where the presence, power and personality of evil has become vivid for many. In this account the Evil one is named as “accuser” (διάβολος, devil), “tempter” (ὁ πειράζων) and “enemy” (σατάν). He is all of those. Because of that, once one admits there is a personal agency that stands behind the world of evil we find in and around us, the temptation is to become Satan-centered.

The angelic world is focused upon. Dark angelic overlords are given credit for the difficulties in the spread of the gospel. Spiritual warfare imagery has become a popular way for making sense of the disorder and disintegration of society. Recent history makes us feel we are embattled from every front. The guarantees of science and the palpable advances of technology seem to pale beside the continued rapaciousness and intransigence of ethnic groups and political powers.

What seems important and vital in this response is the awareness that personal, purposive agency stands at the center of the moral and political evil we see. The meaning of salvation is implicated in the conclusions one reaches here. Christ saves us, not simply from the remnants of hyper-aggression left over from misty millennia of evolution, nor from the neuroses of disappointed libido, nor from the distortions of class oppression, racism or sexism. All those may have salvific relevance. Yet none of them penetrates to the depth of the problem.

It is not simply that we humans find deficiencies in difference or reasons to ignore the patent consequences of our greed and self-justification. The earth's biodiversity is threatened by our gluttonous grab for profits and power. The sky is falling apart even if it is not falling upon our heads. Bridges collapse because of shoddy short-cuts meant to fatten someone's portfolio. Corruption and strong-arm tactics rob us all. Corporations routinely lie at the urging of lawyers to retain the illusion of caring for people and environment. Every time we seek to address or redress the evils of our world, we find the crusaders are as culpable as those they oppose, only at different levels and about different issues.

What stands at the center of the mystery of iniquity is what stands at the center of the mystery of righteousness: there is an irreducible personal agency present. It cannot be finally mastered by rational models or reduced to naturalisms that suppose the twisted mind is the result simply of twisted molecules. Yet some biblical scholars do see the notion of an Evil One, a personal spiritual agent acting in and through human history to be passé and needing to be demythologized. Secularist rejection of a spirit world is simply that: a different worldview that sees this language of Matthew (and Jesus) as an outdated and discredited way of understanding life.¹⁵⁶

Many contemporary self-identified “Christians” in North America have followed the larger cultural and naturalistic trend of culture. In a 2009 survey by Barna:

“Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan ‘is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.’ An additional two out of ten Christians (19%) said they ‘agree somewhat’ with that perspective. A minority of Christians indicated that they believe Satan is real by disagreeing with the statement: one-quarter (26%) disagreed strongly and about one-tenth (9%) disagreed somewhat. The remaining 8% were not sure what they believe about the existence of Satan”¹⁵⁷

This reflects both the weakness of the Church’s ability to inculcate a consistent Christian worldview and the great power of the surrounding culture and media. At the same time, those who considered themselves “born-again” Christians were twice as likely as those who are nominally “Christian” to disagree with the statement. In other statements it was clear many respondents held inconsistent and even contradictory notions. Their unclarity is countered by Matthew’s clarity.

Christ’s salvation is a saving **from the devil**. The demonic and angelic cannot be used to push out the mechanical and natural. We cannot say, “The devil made me do it,” and mean by that we have no personal culpability. This is not an either/or. Many turn the devil out to some pasture of pure linguistic symbolics. The devil is remade as the metaphor for the depths of human sin or for malevolently structured oppression and repression. The consequence is a consistent underestimating of the power of evil. Moderns then must turn some humans into the devil. If there is no “devil” some other agency must be held accountable. So, they create monsters whose deeds are so horrendous we make them over into a moral category from which we can separate ourselves and pledge ourselves to a “better” sort of evil.

¹⁵⁶ For example, Bart Ehrman’s naturalism following Rudolf Bultmann: “I do not think there are actual cosmic forces in the world – the Devil, demons, cosmic powers of sin, and death, other principalities and powers that are wreaking havoc here.... I think that the entire framework for Jesus’ teaching was a form of Jewish mythology distinctive of Jewish thinkers in Jesus’ day, and that our modern world (again, except for modernized fundamentalist forms of apocalyptic thought) has a different way of looking at history, the powers who make things happen in this world, natural forces (that lead, for example, to disaster and devastation), and so on.” Accessed April 27, 2019 at <https://ehрманblog.org/in-favor-of-demythologizing-the-ethics-of-jesus-for-members/> For another modern demythologizing of this language–Walter Wink: *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament, Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence and Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984-1992).

¹⁵⁷ Accessed April 27, 2019 at: <https://www.barna.com/research/most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist/>

Christ's salvation is a saving **from the devil**. Until and unless we understand that we will not understand what sort of muck we are stuck in and why these events come at the beginning of the ministry of Christ. All the sorts of things he does from here on out are rooted in the reality of this initial victory over the devil. Does this clean up all the consequences and strong-holds of the evil one? No. But it provides the platform from which Christians understand the activity of God in his fallen world. "The friction between Jesus and the Jewish leaders throughout the Gospel, already anticipated in the conflict with Herod, the high priests, and the scribes (and even the hesitation of John to baptize Jesus) is actually a clash of kingdoms."¹⁵⁸

Christ's salvation is a saving **from the devil**. Neither the devil nor we are removed from the stage on which we find ourselves. This is not the obliteration of the devil. God's salvation is in the face of and despite the machinations of the evil one. God has no partnership with the works of the devil. His word cannot be subverted into the service of iniquity where Christ and the Spirit are present. But where they are not present, even the Word of God can become a sharp sword of the Evil One.

To dismiss the reality and potency of the devil is to devilize human beings or God.¹⁵⁹ There is no other option. The testimony of our own inner distortions and evil, the witness of the tortured course of history, the continuing outbreak of new and more pernicious forms of evil, all with one voice tell us there is something very devilish about the whole matter. If there is no devil, the only other agents of evil are "mother nature," God or human beings. Take your pick.

The good news in the heart of this story is that there is a loving, personal power who has given us intelligible words that are enough for effecting this salvation. No matter the power and genius of the devil. No matter our own ignorance and weakness. Jesus Christ stands beside us and within us by the Spirit to face whatever modern testing may come from this archenemy.

The spirit world is one modern Western materialistic medicine has pushed to the side. The assumption of the Western world has become we are nothing but atoms in motion. All sorts of traditionally understood conditions attributed to "spirits" are now "correctly" attributed to genetic and chemical disruptions of a personality rooted in bodily structures. Teasing apart disorders that once were thought to be caused by the devil has led to a modern Western denial of evil spirits. One error of discipleship is to think all that is going on is simply people and their arrangements having their effects. But the opposite is equally damaging: every situation and relationship has a hidden evil party, alive and active. Anything that goes wrong is attributable to that malign presence. Instead of being "secular" Christians, we become Satan-centered Christians.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Boring, *Matthew*, p. 162.

¹⁵⁹ Boring, *Ibid*, "Such imagery provides a way of acknowledging the reality of an evil greater than our own individual inclinations to evil, a supra-personal power often called 'systemic evil' today. Another valuable aspect of such language is that it can prevent us from regarding our human opponents as the ultimate enemy, allowing us to see both them and ourselves as being victimized by the power of evil." (p. 165)

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Bruner, *Christbook*: "Christians learn from this text [Matt. 12] on the devil to see the world in two ways: (1) as occupied country wherever faith in Christ has not yet occurred, and still (2) as liberated country wherever Christ is working the obedience of faith. Distortions enter Christian teaching wherever either (1) the world's thralldom to the devil or (2) Christ's defeat of the devil is absolutized undialectically. (1) A fatalism or defeatism occurs where the devil is thought too much of, and (2) a romanticized

But we should not be naïve in this matter. Times of very real temptation and testing will come to us, brought into our lives not only by our own sinful passions but by the Spirit of God bringing us to the powers of darkness. Just as Job was tested by traumatic experiences, so we too may well have our faith and trust in the goodness and wisdom of God stretched to limits unimaginable. We will find ourselves in situations where we too are subtly posed with choices to accomplish the goals of life by illegitimate means. We need to be Christ-focused. As Craig Blomberg puts it:

“...Matthew warns against two common errors—blaming God for temptation and crediting the devil with power to act independently of God. In the New Testament, God is always so dissociated from evil that he is never directly responsible for tempting humans (Jas 1:13). Yet the devil is never portrayed as an enemy equal with but opposite to God; he always remains bound by what God permits.”¹⁶¹

It is significant: the first thing Jesus did after his baptism before engaging the world of people he came to save was to confront the power behind that world and its dire distress. Salvation is not simply straightening out of the crookedness within the human spirit and body. It also means confronting a power that infects human culture and oppresses the human spirit and body. Before plundering the household of the “strong man,” the Savior must bind him (Matthew 12:28).¹⁶²

We should not forget the portrait of this “strong man” in Matthew: wherever Satan or his legions appear, it is in the guise of one who is defeated (4:23; 8:16, 28; 9:32; 12:22; 13:39; 15:22; 17:18). The reality is the devil or demons are only as strong as we are weak in our righteousness. The stronger we are in God the weaker is the devil vis-à-vis us. The more we cling to the word of God, the less the words of Satan have effect on us. Yet we must not underestimate this one: he the “strong man” and we are not. All hope we have is that our Savior is stronger.

(a) The First Test – Mis-valuing Legitimate Human Need (4:3-4)

The first test asks Jesus to prove and display the powers of his sonship by making bread out of stones. The adversary of the God (who is completely good) poses alternatives for the decision and action of the so-called “son of God.” The “slanderer” seeks to redefine the way the messiah will use his power, thus redefining his mission.

This enemy is designated as the one who tests (the tempter), the slanderer (devil), and the accuser (Satan). All three of these functions are combined in this dialogue. He slanders the word of God by first designating Jesus as the beloved son of God (and assuming it is true) while simultaneously suggesting he act against that authentic identity.¹⁶³ His point of attack is the suggestion that messianic destiny cannot survive the death of the Messiah, so he should take his

universalism occurs along with a certain secularism and unmissionary optimism whenever the devil is thought too little of (as, e.g., in Barth’s doctrine of the devil as *das Nichtige*).” (p. 564).

¹⁶¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 83.

¹⁶² The early Church uniformly understood Satan as a real being, likely an angel. See Thomas J. Farrar, “New Testament Satanology and Leading Suprahuman Opponents in Second Temple Jewish Literature: A Religio-Historical Analysis” in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 70, Issue 1, April 2019, pp. 21-68.

¹⁶³ The Greek “if” (εἰ) presupposes that Jesus is indeed God’s son. It is a first-class conditional sentence that assumes what is being stated is the case. But here it is used in a process seeking to manipulate Jesus. Cf. Wallace, *Grammar*, pp. 701-12.

destiny into his own hands.

Forty days of fasting have left Jesus hungry and weak. The implicit accusation is that the Spirit is not properly caring for him. The temptation is to acknowledge that he has power to meet his own desperate need. Jesus is to act as magician, using his God-given power to transform one substance into another. He is not being asked to prove anything to anyone (this is in the wilderness loneliness, not in the midst of Jerusalem). This is about the misuse of his power.¹⁶⁴

Jesus' condition is not that of the energetic person, made strong by fasting. That might be true of those who fast during the first week or so. This decisive encounter occurs at the end of the forty-day period. The way Jesus brings righteousness to fullness of meaning within Israel is more clearly shown in temptation than in the baptism. Israel's forty-year experience in the wilderness is paralleled by Jesus' own. The Spirit leads him into this wilderness testing that he might display how he walks the path of obedience and righteousness, unlike Israel after the Exodus.

The forty days and nights is reminiscent of Moses on Mount Sinai. The experiences are quite different. Moses received the revelation of the law of God. Jesus displays obedience to the word and will of God. Moses came down to find a disobedient Israel. Jesus will come back from the wilderness into a world where John the Baptist is seized by the political power of the day. Moses declares the law of God to Israel. Jesus will call Israel to repentance and the belief that God is bringing his kingdom into their midst. The fate of John foreshadows the ultimate fate of Jesus as well. He too will be seized and executed by the political powers of his day.¹⁶⁵

The contrasts that mark the life and experience of Jesus begin here. He, the son of God, is hungry, yet he works miracles to feed others who are hungry, not himself (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:29-39). Later he will be called the devil, but he casts out demons. He is sold for thirty pieces of silver but gives his own life as a ransom to redeem others. This is not a powerful, supra-normal son of God who is not subject to the tests and challenges that form the matrix of ordinary life. There are many ironies in his life.

As the son of God, he does not always appear or act as many models stereotypically demand. One of the things we learn from the beginning is that demands upon Jesus to fit a mold of messianic behavior come initially from the devil. The challenge is very subtle here. The devil approaches Jesus as one would some august person deserving of respect and reverence.¹⁶⁶ In posing the expectation, the devil refers to his sonship, not principally in a doubting mood (though that is not beyond the intention). What he wants Jesus to do is reflect on his role as the messianic son of God, led into the wilderness after his baptism. What does it mean to be the son of God other than to have all needs met by the power of God?

The test at the heart of this has been variously seen as using improper means to make bread, leading Jesus to authenticate his identity by miraculous signs (the Pharisees and Sadducees will

¹⁶⁴ This echoes one of the failures of Moses: the striking of the stone to bring water out of it (Num. 20:1-13).

¹⁶⁵ See Quarles, *Theology*, "Part 2: The New Moses: Jesus as our Savior."

¹⁶⁶ Gk. *Proserxomai* προσέρχομαι: "approach to something." But is used for approach to deity: "approach to or entry into a deity's presence, transf. sense of 1a: approach (Cass. Dio 56, 9, 2 τοῖς θεοῖς προσερχόμεθα; PGiss 20, 24=Mitt-Wilck. I/2, 94; Jer 7:16; Sir 1:28 μὴ προσέλθῃς αὐτῷ [=τῷ κυρίῳ] ἐν καρδίᾳ διανοῆς; Philo, Plant. 64, Deus Imm. 8; Tat. 18, 2; Ath. 18, 1) προ τῷ θεῷ Hb 7:25; 11:6; cp. 1 Cl 23:1; 29:1. W. dat. of place τῷ θρόνῳ τῆς χάριτος Hb 4:16." Arndt, *Lexicon*, p. 878.

later ask for similar validation), and to act selfishly, without thought to others. Yet it appears more adequately thought of as a temptation to act outside the boundaries of his role as the son of God. It asks him to act independently and autonomously—even to act as though the material world into which he had come was to be given a primacy and finality that goes beyond what it has within the purposes and promises of God.

There is no religion as materialistic as the Christian. This world in all its physicality is a creation. God made it, called it good and retains it for eternity. Salvation is climaxed for the Christian in the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul. The human being is not finally a divisible body-soul duality, in which release and redemption means the freeing of the soul from the confines of an imprisoned, bodily existence. The wholeness of existence is a body-soul union whose destiny is for such a union to be reestablished in a transformed creation.

Jesus' refusal is not a refusal of the material or its denigration. Bread is essential for human life as we know it. He refuses to act as though bread alone is enough. Not without bread, but not by bread alone. It may be that the deepest need of the human is not bread but the word of God. But Jesus came to meet the full spectrum of human need and physical bread without the manna of heaven is incompatible with his mission.

[1] Reductionism

One fascinating aspect of this passage is how heaven opens and God speaks—only to be followed by hell opening and the devil speaking. Jesus' answer is not to ignore the devil but to counter his thrust by the word of God: "Humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

1. We confront one of the great mysteries here: what life is and what it takes to live it. Like the other words in the event, life is not defined (as God and devil are likewise undefined). We can grope our way to a definition. Life means to retain bodily processes that allow us to act and interact. Life is the absence of death, the going on in continuity with body, mind and spirit. It is the state in which all my organs continue to function sufficiently well that I can consume air, water and nutrients.

Life is in so much that surrounds us—the flowers and trees that bring such delight in the fall season, the rabbit that consumes the flowers in the front yard, the worms that tunnel through the earth beneath the grass, the maggots that appear in the carcasses, the microbial viruses and bacteria. Life abundant and overflowing. Yet what is it in the human? What does it mean to be alive, to live? Is it more than to function biologically, to exist? Why is it such a puzzle, such a mixture of pleasure and pain and perplexity? So often why do we see people turn a corner and say: "Now I'm finally really living"?

2. This reply also refers not to the son of God only and what it means for him to live—but to human beings. This one places himself alongside us in all our paradoxical wretchedness and wonder. Bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, Jesus acknowledges the material. Life is at least assimilating bread and other nutrients. Any account of human nature that does not value the biological does not deal with the human.

Yet there is far more to the human life than bread. The physical is the condition of the possibility of human life. It is not the definition nor the sufficient quality of that life. We live beyond the purely physical. We live by a normative world of culture and world view. To live as human is to exist by and through the word of God—whether we live in rejection or acceptance of that word.

We dare not accept the reductionism of our day—the Marxisms that make history and humanity the by-product of bodies seeking space and wealth. The economic reductionism of much of modern industrial life has showed its most gruesome face in the hollowness of affluence. Succeed in securing the largest and most commodious space for guaranteeing and controlling the material factors of human living and find the boredom, the emptiness, the shallowness of life without dimension. Celebrity culture and lifestyle is marked by its awareness that fame and wealth are not all they are cracked up to be.

Nor can we legitimate the hedonistic psychologisms of our day. We are not simply pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding bags of skin-bounded protoplasm with libidos. We are not merely the carriers of DNA, biologically driven and dominated hosts of genes that use and abuse us only to discard us on the slag heap of the evolutionary life force. We are not reducible to the energies of atoms in a peculiar arrangement for a fleeting moment of cosmic space and time. Dust we may be, but we are not dust alone.

3. What is the divine service in such a world where we are to live and live as humans? We find the definition and destiny in the living of this human, Jesus of Nazareth. He knows the God who made the world and us within it. He tells us living is seeking and knowing the God who speaks intelligibly to us by his words. Divine service in this world is to hear those words, to echo them in the structure and pattern of our living and loving. Divine service is to do all we do, nourished and made strong by the words of God.

Only then does social service, political service, scientific service and so on find their appropriate limits and legitimacy. So often the arrogancies of various world-bound agendas infect the Church such that it no longer lives by and for the bread that comes from God alone. Instead, it takes the “breads” of this world as its nourishment.

We act as though giving people all their bodies need is the divine service. We dismiss those whose center is in prayer and preaching. Spiritual exercises and teaching are the by-gone dinosaurs of Church history. The real agents and actors are found on factory floors, in corporate board rooms, or following science into some new frontier. The passé and deluded are those who continue to talk of manna from heaven (pie in the sky?), of devils and resurrection, of miracles past and present, of a distinguishable voice from heaven that is not simply the reflection of the loudest voices here below. Jesus refuses the temptation of reductionism.

[2] Materialism and Idealism

Beginning points and emphasis are what make or break matters. The person who begins with sex, hoping to be struck by the lightening of true love is often disappointed. The person who considers sex the whole of a relationship places a massive stone on the back of that camel so large it cannot be carried. The shift of only a quarter of an inch in the placement of facial features marks the difference between beauty and plainness. Were we to lose the word “alone” in Jesus’ response, we would turn his theology from a wholistic and balanced view to one that is one-sidedly “spiritualistic” and ascetic.

The Lord does not deny that people need to be fed, that social justice needs energy and life, that economic development and participation are important. Social reform and community fairness are close to his heart. He, more than any other, feels the pains of the hungry, sees the agonies of political torture, hears the cries of those who want a better future for their children yet live in permanent squalor. Say not that Jesus lays the foundation by these words for despising embodiment, or for generating the false guiltiness attaching to sex, the ignorant or calculating

rape of the earth's resources and polluting of its streams and air. Jesus never denigrates the physical.

There is a false slander and defaming of the physical within the vows of the traditional Church. Poverty recognized the powers of money and possessions to possess and dominate our lives. The physical bread can become so central and filled with lusty desires that it crowds out the spiritual bread. Yet a double standard of spirituality can easily develop out of this commitment, a prideful poverty—even a false poverty where Church Princes live in mansions (but are poor because they do not technically “own” the assets).

Chastity confronts the distortion and preoccupation humans have with sexual pleasures. Yet the glorification of virginity and the reduction of sex to reproduction has brought its own covey of furies. The vows of chastity by those not gifted to be single, but called to the priesthood, has led to devastating sexual abuse.

Obedience challenges the arrogant pride that makes my own safety, security and significance as more important than others. We suppose we know best for ourselves and need to build wide moats about our rights and self-will. Yet that vow also has led to passivity, to domination and ambition, to squelching creativity and uniqueness, to the abuse of power.

Jesus knows we are in mortal combat with the forces and principalities of money, sex and power. Controlling physical facilities symbolized by bread are part and parcel of a regulating zeitgeist that infects our condition and splits the harmony of our communities. Bread by itself is more than enough to bring about the wars and troubles we find littering every nook and cranny of every decade of history. The Romans themselves were passionately committed to ensuring that the grains of the colonies were shipped on time and in large enough quantities to secure their bread supply. What counted for revolt was any gesture that threatened the supplies of tax, tribute and grain.

The solution Jesus offers is not the word of God without bread. His is not a spiritualism to substitute for a materialism. One extreme is not solved by another. Large ears are not solved by no ears. Hyper-sexuality is not solved by no-sexuality. Hunger is not solved by gluttony; being overweight is not solved by anorexia; death is no solution to misspent living. What Jesus seeks is not the withdrawal of life from the physical realities and glories of human living. His reply to this devilish urging is not a descent into an equally devilish pattern. The issue is primacy, centrality, balance, place and priority. God's word is primary in our world.

The whole of the physical is bound together and ordered by the providential and creational word of God. We live by physical bread because of God's good pleasure. Even the devil lives by the word of God even while setting himself against those very words. Nothing in existence is by chance. The conditions of our existence are given by the word of God as is the reality of our own unique existence. Whether we embrace that reality or not does not change its actuality.

Yet if we define our existence first and foremost by its material boundaries and necessities, then we will live devilish lives. Say not that Jesus is indifferent to suffering because he refused to become a baker instead of a savior, a crusader for equity instead of a redeemer from sin. Baker's bread gets its nourishment from the word of God. The equity of justice gets its blessing from the righteousness of God. Whenever we are nourished physically, wherever true justice is dispensed and institutionalized, we are to see the words of God active and alive, even if hidden and opposed. First the words of God and then all the other things will be added and balanced, so they provide the conditions for the living of authentically human life.

❖ Discipleship: The Physical

Western thought has been ambivalent for a couple of millennia. Since Plato and the Greeks introduced metaphysical dualism into our cultural blood stream, we have had a long dialogue between materialists and idealists.

At the practical level, we have struggled with the “spiritual” vs. the “material.” Withdrawal from “the world” expressed a profound devaluing the seen, the tangible, the physical. This had its manifestations in Asia and South Asia as well. Somehow the physical body and the world that limits it come to be the entangling enemy. Spirituality comes to be anti-physical at its heart. Release from the body is freedom from a prison house.

It is true that one major source of the evil that afflicts us comes intimately from within: “the lust of the flesh” (I John 3:16). But it hardly is the center or circumference of the problem:

“To suggest that the sin of man so corrupted his creation that God cannot fix it but can only junk it in favor of some other world is to say that ultimately the kingdom of evil is more powerful than the kingdom of God. It makes sin more powerful than redemption, and Satan the victor over God. Reducing the gospel to a strictly spiritual dimension of human existence concedes everything outside of that dimension to the enemy.”¹⁶⁷

Jesus never denigrated the physical. He did not stay in the wilderness as though the secret to holiness and closeness to God was the rigorous disciplining of the physical. His refusal to turn the stones into bread was not a rejection of the physical. It was a rejection of living life apart from the priorities of God. This is a hard balance to keep in a world whose dominant sentiment is increasingly secularism and lifestyle is materialism.

Ultimately, redemption happened by his physical bodily life being taken. In the eucharist or communion, we take physical bread and wine into our bodies as a sign of that very this-worldly, physical redemption. We are saved through the Word of God, but not without our bodies. Our “true self” is not some spiritual essence we need to identify with that one day will discard this physicality as a butterfly discards the cocoon.

(b) The Second Test: Misusing the Word of God (4:5-7)

The second temptation builds on the first. Jesus proved that his loyalty is rooted in God and God’s words. Great weakness and intense temptation will not dislodge Jesus’ loyalty. An appeal to meeting legitimate needs cannot defocus his vision of a life lived in all its pieces within the specific calling and will of God. Jesus keeps holy things holy.

The first temptation smelled like bread. The second has the incense of liturgy. This second assault upon his identity builds on this strong commitment to holy things. Not able to reach Jesus through the carnal gate, he seeks to reach him through the gate of spirituality. Jesus had asserted his commitment to the word of God. Now the Devil uses that as the point of the spear he thrusts into the consciousness of Jesus.

The holy God has promised in his holy Word to protect his holy Messiah—how much more in the holy city within the holy precincts of the temple? The clear meaning of the Scripture surely encourages us to trust God without limit. The angels themselves have commission to protect the

¹⁶⁷ Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005), p. 21.

saints. Already we know the angels have been engaged in protecting Jesus as an infant and child. ‘So, trust away—to the uttermost, here and now. Since we are to live by the words of God, live by these!’

The Devil’s subtly is not, as it was in the garden, “Hath God said...?” There is no questioning the word of God—only the insistence that it be taken at face value and pushed to a logical extreme. Jesus had already shown his foundational commitment to the word of God. To be sure, the Devil gives a partial quoting of the words from Psalm 91:11-12:

“For he will command his angels concerning you (to guard you in all your ways); they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”¹⁶⁸

Yet it seems the omission is not significant, though the larger context of the Psalm is. These Scriptures are about protection from dangers that come at the faithful, not about testing God to see whether he will do what Scripture promises. These words are not permission to put ourselves in danger as a sort of “fleece” to see God’s faithfulness. We cannot force God’s hand and call it obedience. Faith is not pushing God to see how far we can go in getting our wishes fulfilled.

The Devil is asking for bold faith, a literal leap of “faith.” In essence he is saying, ‘You want to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God? Then listen to this word and live by it.’ Yet on this line of reasoning draws a conclusion that is difficult to imagine: “According to the Devil’s theory there should be no martyrs.”¹⁶⁹ The Devil reads the Psalm as an invitation to arrogance rather than as a promise to those who seek the refuge of God. This is not an invitation to run into danger to test whether God will deliver.

Jesus does not model a modern habit in his response. He does not challenge this text as wrong-headed, misleading or misquoted. He does not create a canon within the canon to throw out parts of the Scripture that are humanly corrupted and inadequate. Nor does he contradict this text by quoting an opposite teaching, showing us how we must pick and choose the elements of Scripture we will embrace and those we will discard.

Rather, he shows that it is not legitimate to use one part of Scripture to encourage something the rest of Scripture discourages. He is not quoting one Scripture against another but showing the Devil’s use of Scripture is based on a false method.¹⁷⁰

It is not appropriate suddenly to make God the follower of us and our wanderings. Bold faith is required of us at times—but so is cautious faith. Satan suggests we can never trust God too much. Testing God, however, is never a form of trusting God. The words of God are not a magical talisman that provide automatic protection. It is ironic that the very verses meant to protect people from Satan and the demons are quoted by Satan.¹⁷¹

We follow him. If we truly feed on the Word of God, we will begin to discover that even Scripture builds into us discernment and wisdom. It is not simply and solely “let go and let God” as though we are more faithful the more passive and inactive we are. It is active response to God.

¹⁶⁸ Luke 4:10 preserves “to guard you” so both citations omit “in all your ways.”

¹⁶⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁰ Contra Boring, *Matthew*, p. 164: “The action is not obviously wrong or demonic (angels had protected Jesus in 2:1–23, and angels do come to serve him in 4:11), nor is the devil’s quotation of Scripture for his purpose a case of obviously perverse exegesis.”

¹⁷¹ Witherington, Ben, III. (2017). *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (p. 219).

But neither is it the action of a false prophet, wonder worker or deluded visionary, thinking their identity and status means the miraculous signs are always guaranteed. The problem with this suggestion to “trust God” is that it is out of harmony with the character of God. The only “sign” Jesus will give is that of Jonah (Matt. 12:38-39; 161)

There is a hierarchy of themes and truth—or better, there is a center and core around which all Scripture is oriented. The purpose and intent of Scripture is not to be sacrificed to a fanaticism that pressures Scripture into a cul-de-sac and recenters it on an unbalanced theme or truth. The individual texts and promises of Scripture need to be kept within the broad sweep and sense of the Bible as a whole. They do not stand alone, even though they do stand and nourish us in their particularity as well as their common witness.

Jesus’ practice is not the first “biblical criticism.” It is the exercise of good hermeneutics, the display of the reality that no Scripture stands by itself nor can be given a “private” interpretation. Scripture is to be interpreted within the context of other Scripture. That is its first and most significant context.

So too spirituality is not a contest to display hidden, unknown meanings, shown only to an elite or privileged few. Nor is it a contest of who can do the most spectacular demonstrations of supernatural things. Jesus does not model the spectacular as a means for identifying the working of God. We get too fixated on the “big deal” or on mega-sized displays. Jesus refuses the spectacular as he will through much of his ministry. He will do the magnificent, the unusual, the powerful and awesome. Yet its context will continually be within the mini-sized community of twelve, in small villages and out in wilderness areas. He will not begin an assault upon the ordinary as though the small and common is an insult to the work of God.

If the temptation of the bread was an appeal to act autonomously in providing for legitimate needs, this is an appeal to act dependently. “Faith” is turned into proving God’s promises within human history: ‘prove that God keeps his promises.’

Jesus’ refusal is not a deistic repudiation that God does not act this way in space and time, as though the God who created the world suddenly is handcuffed by it. God does work spectacularly and supernaturally, transcending the ordinary workings of natural “laws” and commanding nature to act in ways unusual and unexpected. God does reveal himself in history and has done so in the past. Yet it is not we who can command God. He commands us. Dependence and autonomy are both appropriate, but only in obedience and submission to God.

❖ Discipleship: Interpreting Scripture

Every time we open the Bible, we face a test of listening to the voice of God or overlaying it with worldviews and ideas that echo our own preferences and culture. We can read into Scripture what advantages us, affirms our agendas, advances our aspirations. Instead of hearing God’s voice, we can project our own voices onto the words of Scripture, finding in them our own self-affirmation.

This does not matter where we as readers are socially or politically situated: the wealthy can buttress privilege; the poor can find comfort; the angry grounds for revolt; the racist justification for discrimination; even the modern anti-Semite can astonishingly build a case on Jesus, the Jew. Jesus can be made into a hundred different “saviors” depending upon what we and the dominant culture we participate in has privileged and socialized us to value.

If God cannot be pressured to prove his love and the validity of his word by miraculous

protection, nor can one Scripture be pressured into a so-called valid interpretation that contradicts another passage or encourages thinking that is discouraged in the rest of the Bible. When we survey the current scene, we cannot help but be impressed with the question: have modern Christians yielded on this point?

The evangelical world often identifies success with size and spectacular sorts of ministry—it has its own “celebrity” culture. While the mega-churches may not themselves perpetrate the myth that bigger is better, that splashier is more authentic, there is a tendency for the broader popular culture to imprint those feelings upon the church. The curse of the “big deal” gently leads our magazines and ministries into entertainment and razz-ma-tazz. Image and Madison avenue displace the centrality of obedience and balance.

The opposite is not necessarily more spiritual either. The innovation of the grandparents becomes the settled tradition of the grandchildren. The subjectivity of the past is suddenly the objectivity of the present. Many smaller denominations remain that way not because of resisting the devil, but because they have not learned to change the means used in worship and service to retain the message. Many need to be told their techniques do not work, their programs are boring and uninspiring, their methods are defunct and deadening, their language obscure and their churches sealed-off from real human needs and dynamics.

Nonetheless, there is a great deal of ‘temple-leaping’ because of fame-lust. The traditional means have been sacrificed in a stampede for new means and cultural acceptability. There is no either/or here. Cautious faith is not better than bold faith. Both are needed in a mixture that responds to God’s purposes to reach all the kingdoms of this world. Madison avenue comes to govern evangelism and church growth. A sort of spiritual voodoo for discovering the will and way of God seeps in. No longer is the pain and patience of long and slow reading of the Bible the path. God’s voice speaks as clearly and directly as the devil’s voice did to Jesus. “God told me” becomes the mantra of spiritual superficiality, the justification for all sorts of excesses.

When it comes to the long process of sanctification, we find psychological tools, terminology and goals supplanting rather than supplementing the old healing of the soul. We find people so overwhelmed by their personal and familial crises and wounds that they are unable to attend to the spiritual disciplines. This is in no way to denigrate the epidemic of fallout from the sins of the present-day—or the powerful truth and light that psychology offers. What must be said is that the healing offered in psychological therapy is not the equivalent of sanctification.

Emotional healing, relational maturity, and functional integration are all important to the wholeness of the abundant life God desires for us all. Yet none of them, nor all of them together, exhausts the limits and benefits of spiritual maturity and integration. We put God to the test even here when we suppose psychological help can guarantee the winnowing power of the Spirit, bringing to judgment and purification the complex mixture of chaff and good grain we are.

Then there is the public arena. We had forty years of conservative Protestant withdrawal from public accountability and responsibility in the United States. Now we have had forty more years of public involvement. The pendulum swung from the irresponsible negation of the public relevance of the faith to the irresponsible affirmation by means of power politics. The white evangelical world in the USA has become captive to the conservative politics of wealth and power.

The shallowness of the life of the mind has issued in a fanaticism and obscurantism, a mean-spiritedness and viciousness that discredits the faith. The reinvigorated fundamentalists wearing the evangelical badge have projected an ignorant intolerance without discernment or civility that

has been used by the media to tar all conservative Christians. Morality and faith have been sacrificed for a pot full of political porridge. An arrogant narcissism has been justified so long as it professed right wing politics. The bankruptcy of a white, “evangelical” sub-culture has come to be motivated more by politics than by obedience to the Word and ways of God.

We need the example of Christ himself. He never abandoned the wholeness of the life of those he sought to redeem. His redemption reaches to the totality of life. Yet he did not and would not advance his cause by spectacular demonstrations. Most of his energy was spent out of sight and out of bounds of the Temple. When he came, his actions were strategic, aimed at reclaiming the Temple for prayer and worship. He spent his time preaching and teaching in the Temple, not creating spiritual fireworks. If we live by the words of God, then the central thing to do is to learn and be nourished by them so we can indeed live.

(c) The Third Test—Mistaking God’s Kingdom with Human Politics (4:8-10)

The third temptation goes to the heart of Jesus’ vocation: the redeeming of the nations. His purpose for coming, the meaning of his vocation as the messianic Son of God, was to make disciples of all nations and act as the savior of the world. The issues that plague us and continue to haunt the optimism of those who proclaim the goodness of human nature lurks here: all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. This has been the plague of the Church after Constantine as well.

The notion of Christ controlling the kingdoms of this world and their splendor as a way of redeeming the world is negated here. The issue is one of worship and reverence. What captures the imagination and mobilizes the energies is the visible splendors of this world and the palpable powers of the political entities of the globe. Jesus is offered the sword and wealth, the peoples and cultures, the heritages and civilizations of the world. In one swell swoop he could reach one major goal of redemption—or so it seemed.

In the first two temptations the appeal is a matter of Jesus doing something that centers upon himself—meeting his legitimate physical hunger or advancing his career as the Messiah (tests of self-fulfillment and super-spirituality). Now his love for the world, his service of others becomes the focus. If he will not act on his own behalf and demonstrate his true identity as the son of God, he is now taken up even higher than the pinnacle of the Temple to a very high mountain. There a vision of the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor appears before his consciousness. There he can see with full imagination all he seeks to save, all he seeks to offer to God. In one short period of time, the vast breadth and possibilities of God’s program are displayed. All that is needed is a simple violation of the first commandment.

In essence the devil promises to give to Jesus what God had already promised to the son of God: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps 2:8; cf. Ps 72:8; Rev 11:15). This is the whole issue of his life and death in one act. “Only after the passion, and then only from the Father in heaven, can Jesus accept all authority.”¹⁷²

This is responded to by a command: “Go away, Satan!” In that imperative we discover who is in charge. With that dismissal, Jesus refuses to break the first Commandment. The devil has shown his real hand. There is no “since you are the son of God...” or a quotation of Scripture. Only a pure transactional offer: authority for an act of worship.

¹⁷² Davies, *Matthew*, Vol. 1 (pp. 369-370).

Jesus rejects a sort of humanistic “lovism”. Loving the neighbor, doing for others, seeking the best for them cannot ever mean achieving them by doing things that stand outside the boundaries of the word of God. The Zealots might have been thought to be the most realistic about the oppressive situation Israel found itself in. If they were seeking to relieve poverty and oppression one might applaud the motivation and recognize its need in the present world of income inequality. But the means they chose, the praxis of violence, was wildly unrealistic. Their violent revolution came to a head and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and 90,000 Jews enslaved by Vespasian and the destruction of the Temple. Their success in stimulating a revolt against Rome changed the future of Judaism forever—and that of Christianity. The passion for righteousness cannot pit the love of God against the love of humanity.

In response to the temptations we see Jesus living according to the first table of the Law: worshipping only God, caring for the name of God, making space and time for God. The Sermon on the Mount will play out the second table of the Law, showing us how life that is lived, nourished by the bread of God’s Word. It is a life of ethical uprightness. Jesus treats God as God because only such a way of living will fully treat humans as humans. Humans are the imagers of God and must receive the dignity that matches that reality.

The true realist in this early century was Jesus of Nazareth. He saw that God is the great reality—at the center of our material existence, ordering our spirituality, and standing as the secret behind the kingdoms of this world and their splendor. We cannot have the humanism of Jesus without his spirituality. His faith meant rocks were, well, just rocks and remained rocks, and the stairs he took in the temple were, just stairs. Yet they pointed to the path he was taking, onto the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The suggestion in the text is that Jesus need bow the knee only once—not a lifelong sell out, just a moment—and all these things he loves and seeks to redeem would fall into his control. Yet Jesus claims every moment, every service, every commitment as conditioned by and subordinate to the reality of the living God. There is no room for this slight movement—even for the largest end possible to any means. One moment and then all the suffering, all the evil, all the oppression and distortion, all the groaning and pain, all the abuse and tragedy is done—and all the glories and achievements and wealth of culture and civilizations would flow into the gates of God’s kingdom! What a treasure for such a small price. But Jesus is too much a realist to allow such an illusion. God’s ends are not accomplished by the devil’s means, not even when God’s best and brightest take those means into their hands.

Jesus had refused both food and angels. At the end of this time his affirmation of worshipping only God led to the devil’s departure—and the arrival of food and angels. What he refused from the devil, God gives back to him. What the devil promised was an illusion, an attractive tissue of lies. What God gave him was the reality of an eternal kingdom.

Some wonder whether Satan’s offer was a promise he could deliver. Are the kingdoms of this world, the political power structures under his control, something he can yield? Or is this also one of the great lies of the deceiver, similar to the suggestion made originally in the garden of Eden? Is the Kingdom of Heaven an alternative earthly power structure that is incompatible with and is meant to displace the kingdoms of earth? Is this an implicit or even explicit comment on the nature of power and earthly politics? Is this one of the doors into concluding civil authority is an expression of the rule of Satan on earth and followers of Christ can have nothing to do with it? Epiphanius the Latin sees this as an empty promise:

Matthew 4:1-11 Testing in the Wilderness

“O the fallacies of Satan! Although he has nothing, he claims that all things are his. If only the Lord would adore him, he would give everything to him. The ‘giving’ of Satan is therefore, according to his custom, always to lie.”¹⁷³

Some take this as the baseline comment on politics and earthly kingdoms as completely plunged into evil. The challenge is all the other things said in the Bible about earthly powers (Romans 13 being a case in point). There are two dominant threads that run through Scripture dealing with political power. We see them signaled by the inauguration of kingship in Israel (1 Samuel 8) where there is a clear ambivalence. Kingship was promised to Abraham’s seed; yet the kingship of the sort Israel requested came with a dark shadow side (1 Sam. 8:6-18).

In the New Testament that same ambivalence is signaled by the state portrayed as the servant of God (Romans 13) or the Beast (Revelation 13). Political authorities are open to serving God or mammon, God or the evil one. There is no control over the kingdoms of the world that falls beyond the permissive will of God. Satan is loose but on a short chain. The political realm is a contested arena. Behind the visible, everyday world of politics and governance, stands invisible spirits: principalities and powers, elemental principles energized by evil. But equally their power is contested and limited by the powers of heaven (Dan. 10:1-14).

Note: Mountains and the Narrative of Matthew

One of the echoes between Jesus and Moses are all the significant references to mountains. We can note six important references in Matthew:

- the mountain of temptation (4:8)
- the mountain of teaching (5:1)
- the mountain of feeding (15:21–39)
- the mountain of transfiguration (17:1–9)
- the Mount of Olives and the Olivet discourse (21:1; 24–25)
- the mountain of commissioning (28:16–20).

This first reference is to a high mountain from which Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. It is a different sequence than Luke where the third temptation is located in the Temple (Lk. 4:9). Luke also refers to the “mountain” (ὄρος) whereas Luke simply says, “he lead him up” (ἀναγαγὼν) without specifying where (Lk. 4:5). The two Gospels agree on the number and nature of the tests, but not their order. Luke’s theology underlines Jesus as the descendant of Adam and seems to order the temptations to follow the order of Eve’s temptations in the Garden. Jesus replicates that event only does not yield.

Many commentators note that Matthew is more specific using “then” to link the sequence of temptations whereas Luke uses “and.” In addition the two “son of God” temptations are put together as the first and second in Matthew. Matthew’s order also seems more climactic in that it is the offer of the final condition of the kingdom of heaven (all kingdoms under the King of heaven) for the most dramatic and simple gesture: ‘worship me’. Jesus is portrayed as the true Israel, resisting the temptations Israel failed in the wilderness. He is the true “son of Abraham.”

The conclusion many draw is that Matthew’s order is the original sequence whereas Luke has reordered them. This is another case where we are left to our own devices in seeking an explanation. The best we can say is to repeat Davies and Allison: “Although these points admittedly fall short of proof, they nevertheless persuade because no better argument has yet been offered as to why Matthew might have

¹⁷³ Williams, *Matthew* (p. 61).

engineered the change in sequence...”¹⁷⁴

We should note the parallels between this first Mountain and the last in 28:16-20. In the last temptation Satan offers the kingdoms of the world in exchange for an act of worship. In the great commission, Jesus is worshipped. He informs his disciples that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

❖ Discipleship: Jesus' Testing and Our Own Temptations

There is one significant difference between Jesus' temptations and our own: we can and must refrain from seeking out temptation and tests of faith. Jesus' mission and identity meant he had to suffer obedience on the offensive while we do so on the defensive. It is to this testing/temptation that the Spirit leads him. Yet in other ways there are significant parallels.

(1) Our own words are inadequate to deal with the challenges and crises that come to us because the evil one is active and subtle. The potency of our words of dismissal to the Accuser and Slanderer of our soul is not rooted in us. It is not eloquence, rhetorical force, precision and accuracy of response that count. It is not even the reciting of the exactly correct scriptures and saying of the name of Jesus with intensity (as the sons of Sceva discovered in Acts 19:13-16). The words breathed out by the Spirit of God are creative and powerful, where our own words fall to the ground in futility, often not producing the effect we wished. Even Jesus (who says to the Jews, “I say to you....”) says to the evil one, “It stands written....” Eve herself said back to the serpent, “God has said...” Yet she still succumbed.

(2) There is no exceptionalism in this event. Jesus does not place himself in a unique category to whom the scriptures did not apply. If there was one who had basis for supposing that he might ask for a special dispensation or an uncommon singular exemption, it was Jesus. Yet he quoted the Scripture as it applies to us all, not simply to himself. Whatever happened with his own self-consciousness at the baptism, it did not lead him to the conclusion that the son of God could live other than the children of Adam and Eve. The Scripture given to them in their condition of sin was taken and embraced by one who was without sin. Nor are his temptations unique. We face the same tests in our life as he did. Not that we face the Evil One directly as Jesus did. But there are spiritual forces of evil that whisper in our ears every day.

(3) So sensitive are many of us to our context that, when our setting changes, we are startled to discover how weak we are where we supposed ourselves strong. What we thought was an inner quality of character turns out to be the outward support of custom, relationship and lack of opportunity. Place us away from our comfortable surroundings and suddenly we discover all sorts of longings and passions welling up. Something within is held in check and hidden until a new environment elicits it.

Adam and Eve faced the whispers of temptation in Eden, fully supported by their environment, filled as it was with other food and the fellowship of God. Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness, away from family and friends. There was no wilderness inside Jesus that responded to his new surroundings. So rooted and anchored was he that even the most powerful, most subtle of all tempters with the best advantages on his side could not find a weakness by which he could lodge his will within the will of Jesus.

(4) Where can we go on earth and there find the least suffering from temptation? Jesus is

¹⁷⁴ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 1*, p. 364.

tempted both in the wilderness, in solitude and solitariness. We do not escape the devil by placing ourselves away from the blandishments of civilization and bright lights. We carry the elements of temptation within. The devil does not know the boundaries of mountain retreats or desert caves. Jesus was also tempted in the Holy City. There is nothing distinctive about cities or even holy places that can exclude the evil one. Nor is the city the pit and source of evil while sacred nature, unchanged and pristine, is the place where God is known. Nor is the convent or cave the special context where the Evil One does not come. Nor is this the last time Satan comes after Jesus to deflect him from his identity (character) and mission (calling). But just like Jesus, wherever we find ourselves, in whatever stage of life, we can have the same victory over temptation.

(5) God can turn stones into the children of Abraham—and into bread. These are possibilities for God. He took clods of soil and turned it into Adam and a rib and made Eve. The problem is not the capabilities of God. One might wish in this day and age that God would do it all over again. We could use more children of Abraham and bread for the hungry of the world. Yet God's wisdom and purpose is channeled through sinful human beings. If we wish for more children of Abraham, then by faith we must transmit the faith. If we want the hungry to have more bread, then we must give it to them. God is still creating children of Abraham and bread for the hungry. His angels still spread tables in the wilderness and minister. We can join them.

(6) Is there anything about high places that suggests where temptation may become the more intense? Satan tempts Jesus originally as and where he found him: in the desert, alone, hungry. But he did not continue there. He took him to the heights of the temple and to a very high mountain to show him the kingdoms of the world. Nonetheless, we must say that here too the devil can cast none of us down. He can only tempt us to cast ourselves down. When we fall, we cannot say 'the devil made me do it.' We must say, 'I took and ate...'

(7) From this time on in the story, Jesus is known to the demons. Were they watching this contest? Is there a rumor mill in the spirit world where the account of the defeat of their prince is passed on? In any case, Jesus will now begin to proclaim the kingdom of God as near. Demons will show their weakness before that one. They will acknowledge and tremble before him. One word from him and they are finished.

(8) Temptation comes "immediately" following the baptism and the voice from heaven. No sooner than Jesus had been confirmed and affirmed in his true identity than he was subjected, by the Spirit, to the great test. It is often the case that immediately after peak experiences of life, we are tempted. Elijah faced and defeated the priest of Baal, only to fall into despair (1 Kings 18-19).

(9) Temptation often takes aim at our gifts, our strengths. Fortified by the voice of heaven, but weakened by fasting, Jesus' identity and reliance on God is what is put to the test in all three cases. The soft (or loud) voice tells us that we deserve recognition, reward for our gifts. Too often we lean on our own strengths, claiming them and counting on them. If we are gifted with gab, eloquent in words and celebrated for our ability to turn a phrase, we can be tempted to use our command of words to justify the unjustifiable. If we are charming, we can use charm to manipulate others in order to slither out of the consequences of bad behavior. If we have powers to heal the sick and raise the dead, we can claim those powers as evidence of God's approval and

presence while living profligate lives. Where we are strongest, we may be weakest.

(10) The question of God comes before the questions of human life. It is significant that the common element in Jesus' response to the Devil is God: the word of God, not putting God to the test, and serving only God. All three primarily engaged the first table of the Ten Commandments. The Sermon on the Mount will switch the focus to the second table, not neglecting the first table but lining out more on how we are to love our neighbor. We don't have one without the other. We should never forget that the best service of our neighbor comes from the love and service of God.

(4) The Great Light Shining in Darkness: first preaching (4:12-17)

The devil may have left Jesus for a time, but he has not left human history. He will be back. Already active in the political powers that ruled over Galilee, John the Baptist is arrested and begins his last days in prison. What John has been doing, Jesus will now amplify much more dramatically, moving to fill the gap left by John's removal. John is decreasing and Jesus is increasing. The blazing star must vanish as the sun rises.

All the glorious kingdoms, offered by Satan to Jesus, sit in darkness. Satan cannot transfer them into God's hands as places and peoples who live in ways of righteousness and life. The coming of Jesus does not make any of these dominions different. Difference comes when humans choose to change their life-principles, habits and decisions. Nor is it true that Satan controls all these Kingdoms and can transfer them.

John preached repentance because the kingdom of God is at hand. People need to be readied for the one whose baptism is like the blowing wind that separates the chaff from the grain and the fire that burns the chaff. The humble king of that coming kingdom lived within an earthly dominion. It would eventually capture and kill him. His forerunner, John, had been too specific in saying what Herod Antipas needed to do to get ready for God's Kingdom. His words were heard as having revolutionary implications. Antipas showed the darkness in which he lived, for all his splendor and culture, by seizing John. Like his father, he was corrupted by power.

The story of Matthew is predicated on a view of the world that the nations are not already light, already seeking the sort of God whose dominion will be expressed and extended in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The quotation from Isaiah is that the real exile ends with whatever it is that Jesus is and does. He is light. Light is not already present among the nations. None of their civilizations has the accent of the divine, not even the nation of Israel. The full meaning of Isaiah's words transcends the simple historical limits of the prophet and the geographical boundaries of the nation of Israel.

It is not that there is nothing worthy in the splendor of the kingdoms. There are marvelous and ingenious devices and ideas that enrich and delight the humanity God created and placed within us. Even apart from God, even in resistance to God, we witness to the magnificence of God's design and destiny. Our angry clashing can serve as a channel for the glorifying of God in his creation.

We err gravely when we suppose darkness means worthless. When we turn toward the light, we bring with us the same things that were darkness and they are transferred (and transformed) with us. We remain beings who must exercise the power misused by Herod Antipas against John. We still must live in human kingdoms and seek to turn them toward the light.

Nor should we suppose darkness is uniform. There are degrees of darkness. Part of the

meaning of this passage is that Galilee lives at a distance from the center of God's working with Israel. Jerusalem has been the place where the Temple, the worship and service of God, the Davidic dynasty and its justice are anchored. There, more than elsewhere, is the opportunity for perceiving and receiving the light of God. The religious and cultic advantages of Galilee pale beside those of Judea and Jerusalem.

Yet the Great Light, of which the light in Jerusalem is a pale replica, first shines in Galilee. There, where the darkness is the shadow of death, the life of life comes. The light they see is a man who preaches the Kingdom of God. His words are the same as John the Baptist, but the prophecy enacted differs. John is the voice of one in the wilderness, making ready the way of the Lord. Jesus is the light already shining upon those who are in darkness. They were first to be taken in Israel by the mighty Empire that swept down from the north. The Assyrians invaded from the Northeast to take Zebulun and Naphtali. Those first subjected to hiding in the dark recesses of caves in fear of death and deportation are the first to be given the liberating light.

Though the message is the same as John the Baptist, its context has shifted. John pointed forward to an event and a coming One. Jesus is the event. The coming Kingdom proclaimed by John has arrived. Its light already dawns and begins to shine. Yet this messianic figure is not the dominator and terminator of evil. The light shines by means of an invitation, not a coercion. Words of demand and decision are issued, not soldiers marching and killing. Preaching is the activity, not mobilizing armies. The words are the means. Repentance is the door. The Kingdom of God is the reality.

The issue is: who's in control? Whose words win the day? What definition of reality, what world view is to be taken as comprehensive and dominant? Is it the Roman imperial definition of things, enforced by rapacious cruelty? Is it that of the officials of the Temple-State of Judea or the client kings of Rome? Is it the resisting Essenes, the struggling peasant, the scholasticism of the scribes or Pharisees, the conservative pragmatic outlook of the landed aristocracy? Whose world is this? Who has the right to dictate its shape? Where do we find the answers that mean the flourishing of all life?

The movement from the Jordan back to Galilee is triggered by the imprisonment of John the Baptist. There the movement is from Nazareth to Capernaum. In general, this change from Judea takes Jesus further from the religious elite in Jerusalem who will be the primary opponents of his words and way. It does not put him further away from King Herod Antipas (ruler of Galilee and Perea) who had seized John the Baptist and imprisoned him. At the same time, this relocation puts him in the Galilee of the Gentiles. Capernaum was the home of Peter and Andrew.¹⁷⁵

There are many other events passed over by Matthew. John's account tells us a variety of events that took place in Judea before he returns to Galilee (John 1:19-4:42). There was an overlap with the ministry of John that simply goes unmentioned. The same is true of Luke's

¹⁷⁵ See Freyne, Sean. (2000/2002) *Galilee and Gospel*. Leiden: E.J. Brill; and (2004) *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean, a New Reading of the Jesus-Story*. London: T & T Clark. For more on the social world of the day: Goodman, Martin. (1987). *The Ruling Elite of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66-70*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and (2012) *The Roman World: 44 BC-AD 180*, Second Edition. New York: Routledge; Fiensy, David A. (1991) *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen; Fiensy, David A. and J. R. Strange, eds. (2014-15) *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods: Life, Culture, and Society* (2 Volumes). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

account of his inaugural preaching in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30) where he receives a violent response from his hometown which may have sealed his decision to make Capernaum his home base. By the time he speaks in the Nazareth synagogue, he already has a reputation as a prophet and healer but his fellow villagers who have known him from a child to adulthood cannot fathom it.

Capernaum (“village of Nahum”) was a much larger and more centrally located city in Galilee on the lake shore. Estimates put it at 10-12 thousand inhabitants. It positioned him for the extensive ministry to the 204 towns and villages of that densely populated region.¹⁷⁶ It housed a tax office (Matthew’s location) and a military garrison. Given its size and Matthew’s occupation, it should not be a surprise that Matthew is able to deploy fairly good Greek. It is the place where he calls the first of his inner circle of disciples.

Jesus seems to follow his later instructions to his disciples (Matt. 10): don’t spend much time where you are unwelcome. There are no inner disciples from Nazareth, we have several that come from Capernaum. Nazareth seems to have refused him and he refused Nazareth in return.

(5) The First Disciples (4:18-22)

For Jesus to have impact, more must happen than the expression of an articulate message. People must be persuaded that there is something in these words for them: something so compelling that they begin to listen to this voice, adopt this world view amid so many others. The pressures of poverty, the power of occupiers, the principles of tradition, the prodding of kinship, the practicalities of occupation—there are so many pushes and pulls that can deflect from listening and responding to this one.

Previously, it appears Jesus was content to remain in the shadow of John. Only his arrest brings Jesus into the public ministry for which he will be known. He will no longer be one of John’s faction. He will be gathering his own followers even while preaching the same message of John.

These two stories show that Jesus does not leave followership to chance. He confronts two sets of brothers. He calls them to leave what they are doing and take up the life of living and following him. To Simon and Andrew he gives a promise: “I will make you fish for people.” Out of what they now are (fishers on the sea of Galilee) Jesus promises to make them fishers who catch people in the great sea of the nations. The end of the Matthew will have Jesus commanding his apostles to make disciples from all peoples of the earth. Already this is the program, in anticipation.

They listen and respond, immediately. We are not told what prior contacts they had with Jesus. All we are told in Matthew is that the attractiveness of Jesus was such that when he asked them to abandon what they were doing (casting nets, repairing and readying nets), they left. James and John leave their nets and a boat and a father as well. Jesus asks for more than John the Baptist ever did. John baptized and called for repentance. Jesus now begins to forge a longer term, more broadly-based movement, including a close-knit set of inner disciples.

The commercialization of fishing in this day seems to have involved one of two systems. On the one side were royal concerns or elite landholders who were granted contracts to provide fish for the luxury consumption of the royal or wealthy. Fishermen were organized under these auspices to deliver given amounts of fish at a given time. This system did not enrich the actual

¹⁷⁶ Josephus mentions 204 prosperous villages and 15 fortified towns in Galilee: Josephus, Flavius and S. Mason (2003). *Flavius Josephus: Life of Josephus*. Boston; Leiden: Brill (p. 112).

fishermen. More often the estate managers and royal coffers benefited as the compensation mechanisms were manipulated.

The second system was one involving the taxation system of Rome. Fishermen leased their rights from toll collectors who took a percentage of whatever was caught. These “partners” were the buffer between the producer and the elite. Acting in this way they were able to enrich themselves while controlling a source of wealth that was not allowed to become autonomous. The remaining catch could then be sold at market or through other commercial middlemen.

In this new scheme, Jesus acts as a patron. He is setting up a new endeavor whose “product” is human beings rather than fish. His partners will be those he is calling to catch human beings. The ones they “catch” will not belong to these disciple-makers, but to their patron.

Whether the pattern of leaving all immediately is meant to be a more general pattern by Matthew is difficult to say. Not all who encounter and come to follow Jesus are portrayed in this fashion. Nor are all the instructions focused simply on a crisis point that immediately yields a leaving all and following. Sometimes it is a matter of asking, seeking and knocking before the gate to the Kingdom opens.

Yet the parables of the kingdom indicate that there is nothing so valuable, nor so critical that it cannot be sold or sacrificed to obtain the kingdom of God. Response to the word of the kingdom and the children of the kingdom will be determinative of one’s eternal destiny. But for some, that brings on a struggle that, over some time, will bring the selling all to obtain the great treasure of the Kingdom. If this initial calling and response is exemplary, what it underscores is taking action to become followers of the one who proclaims the kingdom of God.

At this time nothing more is said of what following Jesus will mean. That will come only as the gospel lines out its various elements. The next chapters give the first details of what Jesus understood his penetrating word to mean: “Repent, because the Kingdom of God stands near.” The Sermon on the Mount spells out in greater detail the sort of things he gave to his disciples as they were learning from him and being made into fishers of people.

(6) The First Teaching and Healing (4:23-25)

These words set up the next two large sections: teaching and healing. Matthew 5-7 provides the epitome and essence of the teaching of Jesus. Matthew 8-9 shows Jesus healing the sick and commanding nature. Together they will provide the lines of evidence that enable readers/hearers to determine the status and honor claims of this man. They are the demonstration of the meaning of his identity and calling.¹⁷⁷

What courage it takes to stand in more populated areas before strangers and spread the message John the Baptist sounded only in the wilderness. Jesus is beginning to spread the word of the kingdom. First it sounds in the basin of the Jordan Valley. Then in Galilee. Later it will be spoken in Judea and Jerusalem. By the end of Acts, it has reached the center of the Roman Empire. John’s call to repentance, to readiness for the coming Kingdom of God still makes its

¹⁷⁷ Note the repetition of nearly identical phrases in 4:23 (“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people”) and 9:35 (“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.”) bracketing these five chapters together.

way into remote places and resistant palaces. Still, it needs to be communicated. Still people wait for an intelligible pattern of values and meaning that will make sense of them and their world. The two words, repent and believe, are the foundations of authentic and lasting significance.

Jesus works not only in the established places of instruction (the synagogue) but the open arenas of life, where people are found in everyday occupations. Preaching is a heralding and persuading people of something new and wonderful. It declares God's coming and with him the arrival of a new world order. Teaching involves instruction and interaction, the probing and applying of what is preached within the everyday and extraordinary days yet to come. The Sermon on the Mount is the most extended example of such preaching/teaching.

To this point we have not seen Jesus as healer. This introduces the origins of his activity as healer. He deals with every disease and malady in the people. We have no indication that John the Baptist worked miracles. He alerted people to the stunning reality that God's kingdom was suddenly to be present in a new way. We do not see the "dramatic" kingdom effects in his ministry. His effects are people showing their openness and readiness for its operation in their midst by repentance and baptism.

With Jesus' healing work, a new era begins. What is foreshadowed in the miracles of Moses and Elijah/Elisha now shows itself in full display. God cares for his people, for all aspects of their lives. One day all the debilities and deficits that rushed into the universe with sin will be banished. Already in small form, those maladies are confronted and removed. If people are to be active participants in the preaching and teaching of Jesus, if they are to ready themselves and their homes for the coming kingdom, then they need not to be preoccupied and burdened with illnesses.

The effects of this preaching, teaching and healing are immediate: great crowds come, bringing their sick and pain afflicted. Great crowds, pressing, demanding, questioning, watching. We can only imagine the excitement and hope that welled up. So active was the gossip network that his fame spread into the whole of Syria, the Roman administrative province that included territory to the north as well as Judea. Yet even within "Galilee" Josephus mentions 204 towns and villages. It is a region rich and productive in agriculture. Estimates suggest 200-300,000 people in Galilee. There were more than enough places for Jesus to visit, were he to succeed in touching every hamlet and settlement of his home arena.

Jesus reaches out to the large, active population of this area. For his cohorts and colleagues, he picks fellow Jews from the region. He takes them with him. That way they not only hear about but see modelled what the coming of the kingdom looks like for this time. The compact word we have so far heard in this story will now be elaborated into a fully displayed account of what is honorable and right within the life of one who wishes to follow Jesus Christ. When people are called to change the direction of their lives, the tendency is to go in another well-worn rut of the day. Jesus is about to call them into a wholly new world. It is a world of action and attitude very different from any they might have imagined would come with the arrival of God's redemptive action in fulfillment of prophecy.

❖ Discipleship: The Good News of the Kingdom

The phrase, 'the gospel of the kingdom,' is found only in Matthew's Gospel (4:23, 9:35, 24:14, 26:13). This first occurrence marks the beginning of a larger discourse and narrative

Matthew 4:32-25 First teaching and healing

section. The end in 9:35 seems to frame Matthew 5-9 between the two as pointing to the content of the “good news.” Jesus’ words (the Sermon on the Mount) and works (healing and miracles) are the signs and reality of the nearness of the kingdom. Discipleship is about entering the kingdom and living by its demands.¹⁷⁸ He proclaims the news about the kingdom – and the news “about him” spreads throughout the region. The “great light” shines brightly, even beyond the boundaries of Galilee.

(1) The gospel is about a kingdom. That is “political” language even while it is not directly about an earthly kingdom. It means the good news is applicable to the realities of the “polis” – that community within which people live and move and have their being. It is not solely a private, personal, inner matter relevant only to the “spirit.” It encompasses all of life. Any gospel that narrows it down, turns into a “Badspell,” bad news.

It is a kingdom, so it demands allegiance. We are not automatically enrolled as citizens. As with the Evil one’s third temptation in Matthew, we can worship and love other ‘kingdoms.’ The imperative to “repent” is part of the good news. We no longer need to be subject to the powers of this age or the passions of our nature. We can change allegiances and change our lives. The nature of that kingdom will be spelled out most fully in Matthew 13’s parables.

(2) As “good news” it is good in several senses:

- It defeats ignorance. Jesus proclaims the good news to those who sit in the darkness of confusion and lack of knowledge. Jesus came to tell us the truth about God, ourselves and the world we live in. We too must proclaim the good news.
- It defeats misunderstandings. Correct knowledge does not always come with an understanding of its implications and demands. We can misconstrue and misuse even the best and clearest knowledge. Jesus tells us the meaning of what he proclaims and draws us toward maturity and wisdom. We too must be able and ready to explain why the kingdom is good news, how it relates to everyday life as well as displaying that very wisdom in how we live it out.
- It defeats human suffering. Jesus turns his words into deeds and his deeds into healing. Truth and knowledge must turn into love and action, touching the people and world that surround us. Listening and hearing the words of the kingdom must turn into action. Having correct “doctrine” is not sufficient. As Jesus says: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” (Matt. 7:24)

(3) As deeds of miracles and healing, Jesus gives signs of the fullness of the kingdom that has already arrived in hidden form in his appearance.¹⁷⁹ If the Sermon on the Mount explores the meaning of the kingdom in word, the narrative following it explores it in deed. Nine miracles

¹⁷⁸ Ladd, *Theology*: “Discipleship to Jesus involved far more than following in his retinue; it meant nothing less than complete personal commitment to him and his message. The reason for this is the presence of the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ person and message. In him, people were confronted by God himself.” (p. 106)

¹⁷⁹ Twelftree, Graham H. (1999). *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (See pp. 336–337 for a summary of the function of miracles in Matthew). Also, Wenham, David and Craig Blomberg, eds. (1986/2003). *Gospel Perspectives, Vol. 6: The Miracles of Jesus*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock; Keener, Craig S. (2011). *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 Vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

are paraded before our eyes (a triad of threes). The kingdom, present in humble and word form, is nonetheless a powerful word, able to make tangible, real effects in the material world. The miracles are integrally part of the coming of the kingdom. They also support and promote the identity of Jesus as the messianic agent of that kingdom who has come to save his people from their sins. They are small signs of the hope for the coming kingdom and spurs to Christians to hunger and thirst for the coming of the kingdom in its fullness.¹⁸⁰ In the meantime:

“As signs of kingdom power, however, the miracles foreshadow the hope that lies beyond the cross. While Jesus’s unjust execution unveils the world’s injustice, his ministry to the broken summons his followers to address the same concerns on which Jesus acted.”¹⁸¹

(4) Jesus and politics: Is the Kingdom of heaven an alternative to the violent empire of Rome? A fair answer would be yes and no. The Kingdom of heaven in its fullness will be a realm without oppression, violence or war. In that sense it offers a very different vision for the possibilities of human community.

On the other hand, Jesus was not announcing a resistance or revolutionary movement against the Roman empire or the Herodians, but the renewal and restoration of Israel’s covenant with God. His message and actions were about the fulfillment of the promises given to Israel. He tapped into the economic distress and political subjection experienced by struggling Galileans and others. But his movement was not a revolt of the poor.

The Kingdom of heaven was not a political program to be carried out by the sort of means of violence that Zealotry resorted to in the great revolt of A.D. 68. The deliverance of Israel from its oppressors would come by the God who would reestablish justice and sovereignty for Israel. His message has social and political ramifications, but it is not itself a mandate for violent revolution.

“It is also sufficiently clear from several, though not all, of the episodes reviewed above, that Jesus ignored or refused or rejected the dominant current understanding of the royal Messiah as a royal and military power like Herod the Great.”¹⁸²

There are a number of current portraits of Jesus as the Zealot or a peasant revolutionary.¹⁸³ Much work has been done in the last 30 years on the social and economic situation of Galilee to create a portrait of the context within which Jesus of Nazareth lived and ministered.¹⁸⁴ The quest

¹⁸⁰ This is not the place to enter into the larger debate about the continuation of this facet of Jesus’ ministry in contemporary miracles and exorcisms. It is important to note that diseases are mentioned separately from demon possession. They are not identified with each other but overlap in some instances.

¹⁸¹ Keener, Craig S., op. cit., *Miracles*, (p. 767).

¹⁸² Dunn, James D. G. (2003). *Christianity in the Making: Jesus Remembered* (Vol. 1). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. (p. 653).

¹⁸³ Aslan, Reza (2013) *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: Random House; Horsley, Richard A. (2003) *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

¹⁸⁴ Culpepper, Alan, “The Galilee Quest: The Historical Jesus and the Historical Galilee” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 45 no 2 Sum 2018, p 213-227. See also: Horsley, Richard A. (1996) *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis*. Valley Forge:

for the historical Jesus has been supplemented by the quest for the historical Galilee.

(5) Matthew and the Kingdom: More than the other Gospels, Matthew highlights the Kingdom of heaven as the reality that forms the content of what Jesus preached and taught.

“If it is the basic rule of interpretation...that a text must be read in the light of its context, i.e., in this case against the background of the rest of St. Matthew’s Gospel, then in this instance it is clear that the decisive character of its contents is to be sought in its special connexion with the theme of God’s kingdom as it has come in the person of Jesus Christ in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.”¹⁸⁵

(6) The Kingdom and the Church: The Kingdom of heaven encompasses more than the Church. The Kingdom is incorruptible and eternal while the Church militant is corruptible and temporal. As the Church remains a servant of the King is it blessed.

“But if the church gets in the way of the peace, justice, deliverance, healing, and restored community that are the marks of God’s reign, God will work in other ways. The history of the covenant people Israel offers regular reminders that God is at work beyond that people and can work around that people—the same is true of the church.”¹⁸⁶

Trinity Press International; Horsley, Richard A. (2014). *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine*. University of South Carolina Press; Fiensy, David A., and Ralph K. Hawkins. (2013) *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Fiensy, David A., and James Riley Strange. (2014) *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods: Life, Culture, and Society*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press; Freyne, Sean. (2002) *Galilee and Gospel*. Leiden: E.J. Brill; Freyne, Sean. (2004) *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean, a New Reading of the Jesus-Story*. London: T & T Clark; Hanson, K. C., and Douglas E. Oakman. (1998) *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press; Crossan, John Dominic, and Jonathan L. Reed. (2001) *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco; Reed, Jonathan L. (2000) *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.

¹⁸⁵ Barth, *CD Vol. 2.2* (p. 687).

¹⁸⁶ Gushee, *Kingdom* (pp. 18-19)

B. Discourse 1: Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)



“The church of my own childhood, as well as that of my present and my future, comprises deeply flawed human beings struggling toward an unattainable ideal. We admit that we will never reach our ideal in this life, a distinctive the church claims that most other human institutions try to deny. Along with Chesterton, I’ve had to take my place among those who acknowledge that we are what is wrong with the world. What is my snobbishness toward my childhood church, for instance, but an inverted form of the harsh judgment it showed me? Whenever faith seems an entitlement, or a measuring rod, we cast our lots with the Pharisees and grace softly slips away.”¹⁸⁷

“...the first question is, Who is it, according to Jesus, that has the good life? ... The Beatitudes of Jesus drive home his answer to this question. ... Along with the Ten Commandments, the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and very few other passages from the Bible, they are acknowledged by almost everyone to be among the highest expressions of religious insight and moral inspiration. We can savor them, affirm them, meditate upon them, and engrave them on plaques to hang on our walls. But a major question remains: How are we to live in response to them?”¹⁸⁸

“After nineteen hundred years the Sermon on the Mount still haunts men. They may praise it, as Mahatma Gandhi did; or like Nietzsche, they may curse it. They cannot ignore it. Its words are winged words, quick and powerful to rebuke, to challenge, to inspire.”¹⁸⁹

“The Sermon on the Mount, if I may use such a comparison, is like a great musical composition, a symphony if you like. Now the whole is greater than a collection of the parts, and we may never lose sight of this wholeness. I do not hesitate to say that, unless we have understood and grasped the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, we cannot understand properly any one of its particular injunctions.”¹⁹⁰

“The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do. To my mind no two words sum up its intention better or indicate more clearly its challenge to the modern world, than the expression ‘Christian counter-culture’.”¹⁹¹

“The hard judgments which the Sermon on the Mount hurls upon us all, relentlessly unmasking the deepest secrets and urges of our hearts, are spoken by a Saviour who in

¹⁸⁷Yancey, Philip D. (2001) *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*. (New York: Doubleday) pp. 58-59.

¹⁸⁸Willard, Dallas *Conspiracy*, p. 98

¹⁸⁹Hunter, A.M. (1965) *A Pattern for Life: An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Westminster), p. 9.

¹⁹⁰Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon*, p. 16.

¹⁹¹Stott, *Sermon*, pp. 14-15. We should note that in a 2002 report by George Barna, 61% of American Christians thought the “Sermon on the Mount” was preached by Billy Graham (and 71% thought “God helps those who help themselves” was a verse in the Bible).

the very midst of judgment calls out to us “Blessed are you,” a Saviour who does not only fling out the cry “Woe to you,” but invites us to the Father’s house.”¹⁹²

(1) Introduction: Varieties of Understanding the Sermon

The title for this first major section of Jesus’ teaching (sermon on the mount) comes from Augustine of Hippo.¹⁹³ Yet it is not a sermon. Rather it displays the marks of a rabbi (teacher) instructing his disciples. Like a rabbi, Jesus sat down after his disciples (and crowd) gathered around him. It has obvious parallels with Moses, bringing to Israel the Ten Commandments he received on the mountain. Matthew has often been read as portraying Jesus as the new Moses.

If Matthew has been the Gospel with the most commentaries written on it since Apostolic times, the Sermon on the Mount is the section of Matthew that has garnered the most attention—and an extremely wide range of interpretations. To do it justice requires listening to that spectrum of opinion as well as seeing how it fits into Matthew as a whole. Too often people pull out famous tidbits out of the Sermon as stand-alone, obvious sayings (such as “judge not”) which are then used in arbitrary ways to judge contemporaries or church goers, even contrary to what Jesus was saying. The meaning of the words of the Sermon must be determined by reading the whole Sermon as well as setting it in its context of Matthew, the Gospels, the New and Old Testaments.

Context is crucial for understanding the meaning of any utterance. For the Sermon on the Mount (and Matthew as a whole), second Temple Judaism as found in Palestine and the world of ideas found in the Jewish movement of the first century B.C., especially wisdom literature and prophecy is decisive. But so too is Hellenistic popular philosophy, especially the Greco-Roman virtue tradition.¹⁹⁴ Together they provide the larger context for clarifying the context of the Sermon’s meanings. Jesus focuses on “being a certain kind of person, on learning practical wisdom and a way of being in the world that will result in one’s flourishing.”¹⁹⁵ In modern terms, the Sermon focuses on what we would call virtue ethics within an eschatological framework.

This major teaching section comes after Matthew has established the identity of Jesus as the promised messianic figure of Old Testament prophetic foresight. Four of the five texts cited in the infancy narratives link Jesus to geographical sites in Israel. This last fulfillment passage before the Sermon comes from Isaiah 9 and links Jesus to the promise of a child who would be the wonderful counselor, almighty God, everlasting Father and prince of peace, ushering in an era of permanent peace. Having established Jesus’ Jewish credentials, Matthew now shows how Jesus both affirms and fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

(a) Outline of the Sermon

The Sermon on the Mount (a name given to this section by Augustine) appears to display a classical rhetorical structure, centered on the major theme of “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη).

¹⁹²Thielicke, Helmut. *Sermon*, Kindle ed. Loc 142.

¹⁹³Augustine, *Works, Vol. I/15 & I/16*: “*De sermone Domini in monte*.” This was Augustine’s first writing of a commentary on New Testament materials. His emphasis is on morality rather than spirituality or theology. He opens thusly: “If anyone were to ponder with piety and seriousness the sermon from which our Lord Jesus Christ gave on the mount, I believe that he would discover there, as far as norms for high moral living are concerned, the perfect way to lead the Christian life.” (p. 23).

¹⁹⁴Pennington, *Sermon*, has provided a detailed case for these two traditions as crucial. (pp. 19-40).

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 40.

Johan Thom has helpfully lined out the structure of the Sermon as:¹⁹⁶

- I. **Exordium** (Introduction: the topic)—Defining the righteous disciple: 5:3-16
 - A. Beatitudes (5:3-12)
 - B. Metaphors of salt and light (5:13-16)
- II. **Propositio** (Summary statement of theme)—The exceeding righteousness: 5:17-20
 - A. True fulfilment of the law (17-18)
 - B. The exceeding righteousness (19-20)
- III. **Probatio** (Argument)—Understanding and practicing the righteous life: 5:21-7:12
 - A. δικαιοσύνη and the interpretation of the law (5:21-48)
 - 1. Murder (21-26)
 - 2. Adultery (27-30)
 - 3. Divorce (31-32)
 - 4. Taking an oath (33-37)
 - 5. Retaliation (38-42)
 - 6. Love and hate (43-48)
 - B. δικαιοσύνη and piety (6:1-18)
 - 1. Principle (1)
 - 2. Alms (2-4)
 - 3. Prayer (5-15)
 - 4. Fasting (16-18)
 - C. δικαιοσύνη and priorities (6:19-34)
 - 1. Correct focus: God vs. possessions (19-24)
 - a. Treasure in heaven (19-21)
 - b. Lamp of the body (22-23)
 - c. Two lords (24)
 - 2. Anxiety vs. trust and obedience (25-34)
 - a. Principle (25)
 - b. Food (26-27)
 - c. Clothes (28-30)
 - d. Conclusion: correct priorities (31-34)
 - D. Judgment and discrimination, actions and consequences (7:1-11)
 - 1. Judgment (1-5)
 - 2. Discrimination (6)
 - 3. Seeking and finding (7:7-11)
 - E. Golden Rule: moral imagination (7:12)
- IV. **Peroratio** (Conclusion)—Warnings regarding words and actions: 7:13-27
 - A. Difficulty of the righteous life (13-14)
 - B. False prophets (15-20)
 - C. Claims and obedience (saying and doing) (21-23)
 - D. Parable regarding hearing and doing (24-27)
 - 1. Hearing and doing (24-25)
 - 2. Hearing and not doing (26-27)

Using classic rhetoric categories, Thom's outline highlights the unifying theme: righteousness (δικαιοσύνη). But it is accompanied by a number of other supporting and important thematic elements without which "righteousness" cannot be understood: the kingdom of heaven, the father in heaven, blessed (makarios, μακάριος), "perfect" or wholeness (teleios, τέλειος) and the "exceeding righteousness" which is to mark the true disciple. Another major theme focuses on the heart as the locus of righteousness in its response to the arrival of the Kingdom of God in

¹⁹⁶Johan C. Thom, *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009) 315-316 with some slight modifications.

Jesus, the motivational center that generates the words and deeds that mark a disciple's life.

In approaching the Sermon to discern its structure and the interrelations between the various parts and statements, we need to keep two things in mind:

(1) Matthew's summary of Jesus' teaching follows a pattern found in Hillel's principles of interpretation. In the main body (5:21-7:12) we have the general and the particular, the particular and the general. The notion is that the two must be understood in the light of each other. What the general means is indicated by particulars—and conversely the particulars are expressions of the general, not independent items unrelated to the general.

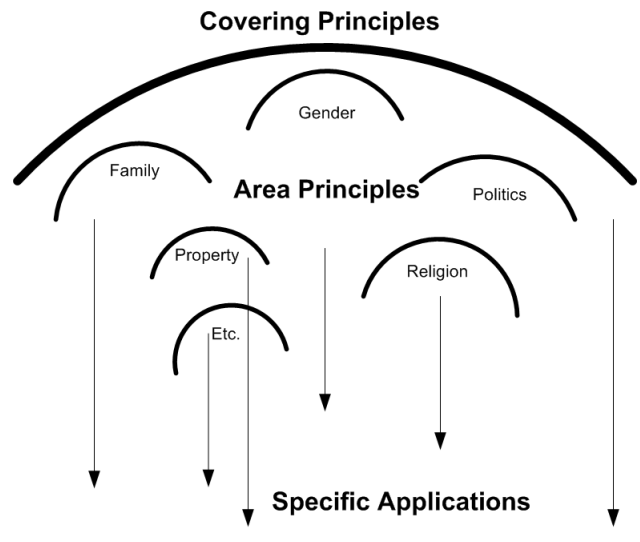
There are five “summary” statements that provide the more general guiding principle for which the examples are illustrations of that principle in action (e.g., the Golden Rule). Ethical “rules” come at very different levels:

Some are “covering principles” that are virtually universal, covering all cases of life and relationships (‘Seek first the Kingdom’; ‘Be perfect’; ‘Do unto others’). Some are “area principles” that sort of middle level considerations (‘Everyone who is angry’; ‘Everyone who looks at a woman’). They are guides for a given arena of life and relationship (such as truth telling in court). Then there are very specific “rules” that apply to a particular action or relationship (‘leave your offering before the altar’; ‘when you fast, anoint your head’) in given situations.

In the Sermon we find all three levels of statements, conforming to Hillel's notion of the general and the particular and the particular and the general.

(2) Some paragraphs or verses serve to end one section and introduce another. They act as a “chain-link transition.”¹⁹⁷ For example, 5:11-12 links the beatitudes with the salt and light sayings with its switch to “you” and “your”; 6:19-21 points both backwards and forwards with referencing treasures (rewards) in heaven and on earth.

The following chart provides a graphic organizational map. Each of the major sections is summarized with the questions that it seems to be answering, followed by a summary statement of the answer.



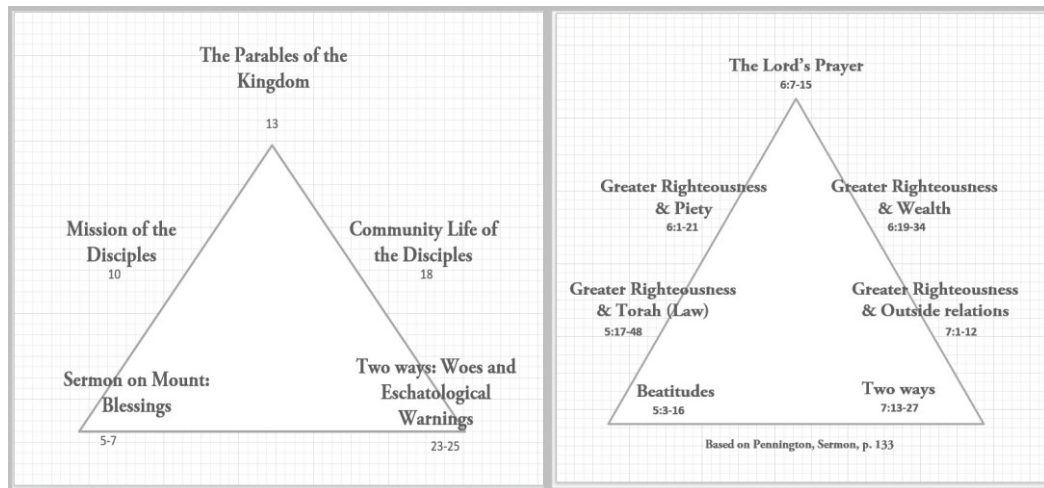
¹⁹⁷Longenecker, Bruce W. (2005) *Rhetoric at the Boundaries: The Art and Theology of New Testament Chain-Link Transitions*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Sermon on the Mount: The Disciple's Life at the Center of the Kingdom		
I. Exordium (Introduction-Topic)— 5:3-16. Discipleship		
A. Beatitudes (5:3-12)	Which life is the good life? Who is well off?	One blessed by God with the rule of the Kingdom of God
B. Salt and light (5:13-16)	What is that life like? How related to the larger world?	Retards corruption, does good, brings glory to God
II. Propositio (Theme) – 5:17-20. Righteousness		
A. True fulfilment of the law (17-18)	Where do we find specific guidance for living well?	The law and prophets give us the will of God for living
B. The exceeding righteousness (19-20)	What is the measure to determine that what we are doing is the will of God?	The Pharisees and the scribes are not exemplars; only a greater righteousness will do.
III. Probatio (Development of Theme) – 5:21-7:12. Examples of true righteousness		
A. Righteousness and the interpretation of the law (5:21-48) [Toward humans]	In what way does greater righteousness differ from Pharisaic righteousness?	It is rooted in character, in the heart, which is to control outward speech and action.
Summary. (5:48).	The model for righteousness is God: Be like him, love like him	
Summary. (6:1).	Warning – Beware of doing your righteousness to be seen by people	
B. Righteousness and piety (6:1-18) [Toward God]	What does greater righteousness mean in our relationship to God?	Whatever is done must be motivated by God's glory and his kingdom agenda.
Summary. (6:19).	Warning – Do not store up treasure on earth, but in heaven	
C. Righteousness and priorities (6:19-34) [Toward possessions]	What does greater righteousness mean for our daily physical needs?	Treasure the goods of the Kingdom first of all and trust God to provide daily needs.
Summary (6:33-34).	Seek first the Kingdom and its righteousness and so have no anxiety about tomorrow	
D. Righteousness –judgment and discrimination; actions and consequences (7:1-11) [Toward humans]	How do we interact with and wisely manage our relationships to others around us?	Don't be judgmental; first correct yourself then you will discern others clearly. Then ask for what you need.
Summary. (7:12)	The final sum of the Law and Prophets: The Golden Rule	
IV. Peroratio (Conclusion)— 7:13-27. Warnings regarding decisions, words and actions		
A. Two gates and paths (7:13-14)	How do we enter the path of greater righteousness?	Through a narrow gate (Jesus) that leads to life.
B. Two prophets and trees (7:15-20)	How do we know/follow a true spiritual leader or prophet from a false one?	By their "fruits": an inner righteousness with outer good works (integrity)
C. Two claims of following the Lord (7:21-23)	What about spiritually gifted miracle workers?	Great deeds or profession no substitute for obedience
D. Two houses, two foundations (7:24-27)	What must we do in light of this teaching?	Build our life on its solid foundations: trust and obey.

In considering this section of Matthew, we will review a number of ways the Sermon has been understood as well as misunderstood. If this is the epitome of what Jesus teaches, then we need

to pay close attention as well as rearrange the furniture of our lives to correspond to the way he teaches us to live.

The major teaching sections of Matthew can be portrayed on a graph. This highlights the correspondence between the Sermon on the Mount's blessings and the fifth discourse that gives woes. It also ends up in a manner similar to the Sermon: warnings that there are only two ways of relating to the Kingdom of heaven. It portrays the centrality of the Parables of Matt. 13 where the nature and meaning of the kingdom of heaven is explained in detail.



Then the Sermon on the mount has been seen as having a similar structure: starting with blessings and ending with warnings. The central body of the Sermon is about the righteousness that must surpass (or be greater than) that of the Pharisees and Scribes. It deals with the law, with religious practices (piety), possessions (wealth) and with relating to fellow humans. In this scheme the Lord's prayer is central (expressing our commitment to seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness first of all and our poverty of spirit).¹⁹⁸

There are "overlapping" paragraphs in this scheme for the Sermon. It is not as neat as one might like, but we do have paragraphs that connect both to what comes before and what comes after them, bridging the topics that came before with those that come after. Still, this scheme is helpful to think about the way the different parts of the Sermon fit together. In the larger picture, we need to acknowledge elements of the Sermon that have echoes, examples, additional instruction, balancing elements in the rest of Matthew, as well as the whole Bible or we will wrench it out of its larger contexts.

(b) Alternative Interpretations of the Sermon

How shameful to followers of Christ when many say: "You are no different than anyone else."

¹⁹⁸ Barth, *CD Vol. II.2*: "It is not for nothing, therefore, that the Sermon on the Mount has its heart and centre in the passage in 6:9f. where Jesus teaches His disciples to pray. It may well be said that the whole relationship of Jesus to His own, with which the saving presence of the kingdom of God stands or falls for them, works itself out exhaustively in the fact that He prays for them, and that this means at once that He prays with them and bids them pray with Himself." (p. 696).

Jesus begins this teaching section in Matthew for the very reason that the Jews had become little different than anyone else. To be sure the day was full of movements and pockets of countercultural activity and thought. The Pharisees, the Essenes, the zealous for the law, the revolutionaries and apocalypticists, prophetic wanna-bees, the strange and tragic—all were present. Jesus confronts all of them on a mountainside with a demand that the righteousness needed in his day and beyond must exceed that of those thought most “righteous” in their day.

The Old Testament was his manifesto, read in its details and its grand sweep. Jesus heard the outcry of heaven for a holy people, a people set apart for God. It is about the situation of an embattled ethnic group, ground between great imperial powers and ruled by a groveling local elite. Jesus gives a summarization of the thrust of the Old Testament as it comes to focus on those who seek the blessing and favor of God. It is a theology of who God is and who we are to be in the light of God.

Through the centuries there have been numerous attempts to make sense of the various pieces of this short set of words. Questions over the relationship of Jesus to the law, of the Christian way to the Old Testament, of how these precepts are to be applied and lived in everyday life, of the applicability of these precepts to Jew, Christian or even unbeliever: these and other have led to a variety of answers as to what this teaching is about and what its intended force might have been.

There is no part of the New Testament that has had more commentary and debate than this first sustained teaching of Jesus. A saying attributed to Mark Twain expresses the sentiment many feel: “The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.” As is the case with all interpretation of Scripture, the danger is that, rather than engaging and living these words, we evade them by our interpretation.

To be sure, the Sermon’s words create issues that many have noted: legalism (works) and grace, their practicality, the relationship of the laws of Moses to these of Jesus, the meaning of “righteousness” in these words as opposed to Paul’s view, the applicability of the Sermon to social issues – so many points where commentators and Christians have struggled.

(1) Augustine saw it as “the perfect measure of the Christian life” for all Christians. These were instructions to and for all Christians, not simply counsels for the advanced disciple. They are both greater precepts of righteousness and the fulfillment of Old Testament law.¹⁹⁹ With most Christian writers in the Patristic period, Augustine did not see the Sermon as problematic but simply guideposts and encouragement to live well:

“If anyone were to ponder with piety and seriousness the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ gave on the mount, I believe that he would discover there, as far as norms for high moral living are concerned, the perfect way to lead the Christian life.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Augustine, *Sermon* “The fact that the Lord did not merely say, *Anyone who hears my words*, but said instead, *Anyone who hears these words of mine*, is proof enough, then, in my judgment, that the words he spoke on the mount serve as such a perfect template of instruction for those people who wish to model their lives on them that they can rightly be compared to the man who built his house on rock.” (p. 23). Greenman on Augustine, *Sermon* (pp. 43-57).

²⁰⁰ Augustine, *Sermon*. (p. 23).

(2) **Aquinas distinguished precepts** (commandments that imply obligation and are necessary for gaining eternal bliss) **from counsels** (optional instructions that are aids in gaining the end of eternal life). St. Thomas provides the foundations for the distinction between the ordinary religious life and the extraordinary, between the minimal and the meritorious. All must keep the precepts. Only some will go on to the heroic measures of the counsels. Nonetheless, his own writings he followed Augustine as well. Later Roman Catholic developments made a much harder distinction between precepts and counsels than Thomas seems to have done.

(3) **Luther** rejected all language hooking law observance to the attainment of eternal life. The law had been set in a position that made it the creator of a works-righteousness in Medieval Christianity. This sermon is for those who already stand in the experience of grace—as **an expression of what a grace-filled life looks like**.²⁰¹ It is a teaching for all Christians, not just some religious elite who choose this hard way in order to attain greater perfection. The reward language in the sermon is meant as a consolation for those whose life is filled with suffering because of their following Christ. In his polemic against the radical reformation, Luther insisted that they confused the secular and the spiritual. What one's position or office required may be contrary to the ethic of this teaching, but in one's heart one will mourn the necessity of force and coercion. In one's role as a Christian, one turns the cheek. When acting as a designated and authorized agent of the civic order, one might well shoot the criminal or execute the murderer. Within one's heart the commands of this sermon are to be carried out continually, even when practically one's role may require the opposite.

(4) **The radical reformers (the Anabaptists) wanted a rigorous application of Jesus' words** in almost a wooden or literalistic fashion. They appealed to a complex hermeneutic in which Jesus' words overturn and provide greater and more precise instruction than the Old Testament. Such things as swearing oaths, participating in military or legal roles, use of personal or civic force and even the possession of personal goods were banned (though not by all Anabaptist groups). These may have been permitted in the Old but not in the New. Withdrawal from public life and a strict separation of church and state were logical consequences for many of them.

(5) **Calvin takes Jesus as acting as the one who expresses and clarifies what the Old Testament law and revelation meant and means.** Jesus frees it from the false impressions and interpretations current in his day, showing how God's intention in the law has been subverted. There is no valid distinction between precepts and counsels. Nor can the Anabaptist distinctions hold true. Every Scripture must be understood within the context of the whole of the Bible. The wooden application of the commands of this sermon violates the clear use in other parts (oath-taking is not forbidden in a blanket fashion—only the misuse of God's name with oaths as is shown by the

²⁰¹ “Therefore, according to Matthew, Christ pauses here, satisfied to have taught only that good works must be done from the heart. Here He lingers on this subject, nor does He say anything further about faith and how grace is necessary. For He does that in another place. Here He is content to have taught what must be done and how it must be done. But here He does not teach on what basis and by what power it may be done.” *Works*, Vol. 67 (p. 32). Also, Vol. 21 (pp. 3-5). “For perfection and imperfection do not consist in works, and do not establish any distinct external order among Christians. They exist rather in the heart, in faith and love, so that those who believe and love the most are the perfect ones, whether they be outwardly male or female, prince or peasant, monk or layperson.” “On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed.” In H. J. Hillerbrand, K. I. Stjerna and T. J. Wengert, Eds. (2017) *The Annotated Luther: Christian Life in the World* (Vol 5.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (p. 92).

actual practices of Jesus and the early Church who use oaths).

(6) **Contemporary radicals** such as Tolstoy and “Christian” Marxists have done one better than the Anabaptists. These words are not the prescription for a Christian counter-culture. Rather these are **revolutionary words for the remaking of all social life**. Some Anabaptists (such as the Amish and Hutterites) have tended to develop parallel, separated communities, encapsulated within larger civic orders (apolitical in effect). Christian Marxists have taken the new order as marching orders for revolutionary praxis. To realize the Kingdom of God by a here-and-now reconstruction (even revolution) of the current social order and relationships is what this sermon prescribes. These are practical laws that, if practiced, would establish perfectly new and surprising conditions of social, economic and political life.

(7) The **early dispensationalists took these words as the manifesto for the millennial kingdom of the Jews**. These words are not for Christians at all, but for Jews in a future, this-worldly kingdom. They simply are inapplicable to contemporary Christians.

(8) **Albert Schweitzer took these as an interim ethic**. Jesus, expecting the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, gives his disciples a radical ethic to live by in the meantime. These standards were preparation for that Kingdom as well as providing the basis on which moral renovation could occur in the repentance that prepared for its coming. Because it was meant for a short time, it contains many concerns and issues that are quite irrelevant for a world that continues century upon century. Jesus offered nothing in the way of a social ethic for a continuing, millennia-long human history. Jesus was mistaken in his expectation of the Kingdom of God coming in its fulness after a short interim. In effect these are no longer applicable as Jesus taught them.

(9) **Wilhelm Herrmann** used the liberal kernel-husk surgery on Jesus’ message. Contained within the husk of an outmoded world view, these words nonetheless display the kernel of **the love-ethic that is timeless**. We must not take them as demands that are irrelevant or as requiring a blind, literalistic obedience. Rather they lead us to a proper inner orientation, an attitude that frees us to serve rather than binding us to legal prescriptions. We are to have the mind of Christ, not the mindset of another age or the morality of legalism.

(10) **Modern criticism** sets up another dynamic. This isn’t the “sermon” of Jesus at all. It is Matthew’s collection of diverse aphorisms and teachings, rearranged so Jesus appears as the new “Moses,” giving the new “law” from the mountain. It is the “church’s” understanding of what Jesus required for salvation, even in contradistinction to what Jesus offered. This is not a snapshot of an event, but an abstract painting, expressing more of Matthew and the changes that happened due to oral transmission over decades. We know little of what the real, historical Jesus said. These words are what others (many others?) say he said without concern for original setting or intention. What Jesus said is mixed in with what others wished he had said and put in his mouth as saying. So, the issues of Jesus’ relation to the law or the Old Testament or the applicability of Jesus’ teaching to us is caught in a matted fictional thicket. It is impossible to discern with precision what he said. The result is we take from these words whatever seems to support an ethic or

wisdom we get from other sources.²⁰²

These are a few the critical perspectives and lines of reasoning that swirl about this text. How we take the force and substance of the sermon will depend upon a variety of issues and their answers—

- Is Jesus interpreting and clarifying the law or does he offer new instructions?
- Does the sermon intend to make people aware of their need for grace or does it presuppose that people are already standing in grace and thus sets forth the standards for true discipleship? Are these requirements for entrance into the Kingdom or duties of those already in?
- Is this meant for disciples only or for all the world? Parts seem to point to Jesus speaking to the crowd in general, while other parts are clearly addressed just at disciples.
- Is there hyperbole in the Sermon? How is its significance and applicability to be spelled out? Is this a literal code of ethics or a set of principles offering focused instances illustrative of the sort of thing the spirit of the law asks of us without trying to be exhaustive?
- What is the proper balance between eschatology and everydayness in these words? If they are given in the light of the expectation of the end, how do they help us live in the interim until the end? Should we pray to be spared the final test or various tests along the way before the final woes of history?

When we seek to see what others have answered, we are confronted with a blizzard of writings, arguments and penetrating insights or at least suggestions. We are left with the task Bonhoeffer suggested.²⁰³ It is not so much that we need to get the intellectual threads all straight before we seek to obey. It is only in obeying what we already understand to be the force and truth of these words that we begin to sort out the various interpretations and suggestions. This is meant to be lived, not just thought. Seeking to put them into practice is one way to discover some of the interpretations put on these words are virtually unlivable.

(c) Impossible Ideals or Practical Ethical Imperatives?

Reactions to this teaching on the mount hover between hopeless despair and foolish optimism. Those who say, 'I live my life according to the Sermon on the Mount,' are incredibly naïve or ignorant. They are naïve, if they are well versed in the words of the Sermon, supposing themselves to meet the intent and implications of these words. They do not take the reality of

²⁰² This is not the place to evaluate the various theories of the composition of the Sermon on the Mount – or rationales for taking these as words derived from the teaching of Jesus. The introduction to this work provides the basis for considering the work to be based on eye-witness testimony and to be historically reliable. Comparison with Luke's account of the same or similar Sermon does yield important insight (Luke 6:17-49).

²⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*: "From the human point of view there are countless possibilities of understanding and interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey. Do not interpret or apply, but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus' word is really heard. But again, doing something is not to be understood as an ideal possibility; instead, we are simply to begin acting." (p. 181)

their own sin seriously and romanticize these words. Or they have no real idea of the thrust and intent of these words. The specifics penetrate into our everyday lives, invading our inner sanctum and shining a bright light on all the mixed and confused motives that govern our relationships.

On the other hand, those who suppose Jesus is hopelessly naive in giving these words also err. To put these standards completely out of reach of any human being is to suppose Jesus had little awareness of the recalcitrant resistance of sin within humanity. Jesus' intention was neither to show how everyone can easily live nor to mock us in our inability by articulating impossible ideals. These are not, as Tolstoy's character Nekhludoff puts it: "beautiful abstract thoughts, presenting for the most part exaggerated and impossible demands."²⁰⁴ These are the life-giving word of Christ, tracing the shape of the character, inner life and outer actions of those who open themselves to the blessing of God.

There is a circularity that affects living as well as the logic of these words. Without the interior purity and singleness of heart, it is impossible to do the sorts of startling actions portrayed here. Yet the interior life is murky until one begins to do these sorts of things and discovers all the devilish things lurking within, showing how impossible it is for such as we are to do them in our own resources. The teaching starts with the blessings of God on those who are poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for righteousness. But without that blessing we do not know our poverty nor experience that hunger. So how can we be poor or hungry before the blessing, if awareness of such poverty and thirst comes with the blessing? It seems the only way to get in is already to be in.

This is one of the clues that this is given first and foremost to disciples, to those who are already in. Matthew places the call of the pairs of brothers just prior to this—as well as the notice of the tremendous fame and attractiveness of Jesus to large crowds. Jesus goes up the mount with his disciples when he sees the crowds. He sits down and teaches them.

If he is to address the needs and longings of the crowds, he cannot do it alone, nor can it be done with the well intentioned, highly committed and ill-equipped disciples. Until and unless his disciples know the sort of lifestyle and inner integrity demanded of them, it is foolish to suppose they will be much help to him. The confusion built into them by the variety of currents of thought as well as the way people live and struggle around them will block any effectiveness.

What Jesus offers is an insider-outsider message. These disciples have been called to be the close followers of Jesus as the pioneer of a new though ancient way. In some dimensions and aspects, it is an old, old way, layered over with a luxuriant growth of reinterpretations and evasions. Jesus will root what he says in the imperatives of the Hebrew scriptures. Yet he will make very clear that his own understanding of it is at startling variance with dominant interpretations of his day. He is not placing himself as the follower of the normal lines of reasoning. When he is done with this teaching, the people will be amazed because of the authority with which he teaches.

In other ways, this is the new way, novel in clarifying the radical implications of God's expectations and demands upon human existence. He gives all of us the outsider's status. We are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, period. Take that and smoke it in your pipe! The standard of measurement is not the bloke next door or the saintly volunteer up the street. It is God. We are not simply asked to be like the greats among human beings—all of us to be heroic in stature like the "heroes" or "saints" of history. We are to be like God.

²⁰⁴ Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 3.28.

We discover our poverty of spirit, our diminished appetite for righteousness, our inner impurity, our raging arrogance and clamoring ego as we listen to these simple words. We sit down with the one who called us to be disciples, thinking we would be affirmed. We listen. To our horror we discover the infinite vacuum that resides inside each of us. We are called to be disciples, yet that is precisely what we find we are not. Nonetheless Jesus tells us we exist with choice: the narrow or broad way, building on sand or on a rock. Choose and live.

One of the longer debates about the Sermon is whether it is simply another legalism. Do the Sermon's demands come as "entrance requirements" with the relationship between God and his people dependent on their fulfilling these requirements? Is there an assumption that humans are capable of meeting the admission qualifications? Or is it that God has already come in love to invite and pre-qualify humans for entrance into the Kingdom? Is there behind this an assumption that humans can only act properly only if enabled by a prior act of God's grace? What is the relation between the indicative of God's grace and the imperative of God's demand, here in the Sermon and in all of Matthew? The note of demand is very clear. Is there also a note of grace? Charles Talbert gives a succinct answer:

"Matthew clearly sees a person's entering into Jesus's community as due to divine initiative. The disciples are called (4:18–22) before Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 28:19–20 specifies that the nations are to be made disciples and baptized before they are taught to observe all that Jesus commanded. That the kingdom has been inaugurated in Jesus's ministry (12:28) means that repentance (4:17) is a response to a prior act of God. Matthew is clearly not legalism. A divine indicative enables one's entry into the community of Jesus's disciples."²⁰⁵

(d) Inner or Outer?

One central theme that runs through Matthew is whether these so-called disciples are authentic or false. Even at the end of this teaching the question remains—do we do more than say "Lord, Lord"? Do we do the words of Jesus? The authority of Jesus words may not have their intended effect. The surprise at the Great Judgment (Matthew 25) and the parable of clean and unclean fish in the net (13:47–50) indicate that physical presence among other disciples and verbal profession, even exhibiting disciple-like works, are not definitive proof.

On the one hand the criteria embedded in this sermon are such we can barely live lightly or easily with our own inner contradictions, much less judge our fellow disciples properly. Discernment is not banished by our inner contradictions, but it is chastened. We cannot help but live in ways that require boundaries as well as a center to Christian living. However, this is not

²⁰⁵ Talbert, *Matthew*, p. 10. Talbert also sees a variety of narrative techniques that point at the divine initiative in the life of the Kingdom (an 'omnipotence-behind-the-scenes'): "At least four techniques in Matthew fit such a method of narration: (1) I am with you/in your midst; (2) invoking the divine name; (3) it has been revealed to you/you have been given to know; and (4) being with Jesus. ... The four techniques discussed above function in the Gospel of Matthew to provide an indicative of divine enablement that underlies the imperative in an ongoing way. ... At every point in a disciple's life and at every stage of salvation history, therefore, Matthew speaks of the divine indicative, divine enablement for the whole of a disciple's existence from its beginning to the messianic banquet. Granted, all of this is unobtrusive, almost invisible to the eye that is focused on the surface of the plot of the Gospel." Pp. 14–15, 24, 26–27.

about boundaries so much as it is about the center of it all, with its ramifying transformations that move into all of life.

Most essentially this is about character. It is essential to know who we are and what we are before God. Only then can we know who we are and how we are to conduct ourselves before our fellow humans. Jesus staples the inner and outer together in such a way that we can never again suppose an either/or. The inner life is the center. Our character is to be changed from within. This is an inside-out movement. Yet our conduct betrays what is within. We live the way we do because we imagine, feel and think the way we do.²⁰⁶

The beatitudes begin with character but end with conduct.²⁰⁷ The eight blessings are not unrelated isolates nor alternatives. We cannot suppose the outer will suffice—or that if our inner life is well ordered we need not consider externals. The Lord made us body and soul. God approaches us through the externals of bread and wine, through the demands that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Jesus was incarnate, not simply spiritually present in our midst.

Our bodies are the means whereby our character is formed and expressed. Much of this sermon focuses on the imagination and intentions that infuse our outward action—what our tongue says, where our eye looks, what our hand does. On the one hand, we will be told not to be hypocritical as many of the legalists of Jesus' day were—presenting our piety as a gesture of public righteousness and holiness. On the other hand, we will be also told not to engage in the futile formalisms of the pagans. We are to do acts of piety, rooted in an inner being that rests on the faithful love of God as our heavenly Father. In all we do—from the inner motivations that dominate us to the outer actions that express our way of being as embodied creatures—we are to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

The problem is not either inner or outer. It is both together.²⁰⁸ The outer life witnesses to the reality that something is dramatically wrong inside us. Our bodily members are dominated by habit patterns that cause them to respond in ways that show we are alien to the life of God. Jesus does not simply invite us to reform our character. He portrays a life-way that is far beyond anything we might have imagined. The “reforms” needed to match this pattern create the necessity of a whole-life transformation. It is not acquiring a better presentation of self or kinder ways of treating others. Nor is it simply finding serenity within the midst of a troubled world. It

²⁰⁶ Talbert, *Sermon*: “The primary thesis of this study is that the Sermon on the Mount functions primarily as a catalyst for the formation of character. The secondary thesis is that the Sermon can also contribute to decision making when it is taken together with the whole of the Gospel of Matthew, the whole of the New Testament, and the Old Testament.” (p. 29) Pennington, *Sermon*: “...I am suggesting that the best overall approach to the purpose of reading the Sermon is aretegenic and *pros ôphelimon* [for benefit]. By ‘aretegenic’ I mean ‘for the purpose of forming character or virtue (*aretē*).’” (p. 15)

²⁰⁷ The difference is between what is so deeply a part of our inner self that it is habitual, done easily and wisely out of a proper motivation, across a wide range of situations (character is about what is typical, consistent) and what shows up in our words and actions in a given event (conduct). Jesus means to tie these two together so that our conduct (say truth-telling) is not a happenstance that occurs occasionally, under those easy conditions that encourage truth-telling, but is consistent across all relationships and situations, even when personally costly.

²⁰⁸ Luther ties the two together. *Works, Vol. 21*: “...we have been treating almost all the elements of a Christian's way of life and the spiritual fruits under these two headings: first, that in his own person he is poor, troubled, miserable, needy, and hungry; second, that in relation to others he is a useful, kind, merciful, and peaceable man, who does nothing but good works.” (p. 45).

is a whole-souled, body-encompassing change.

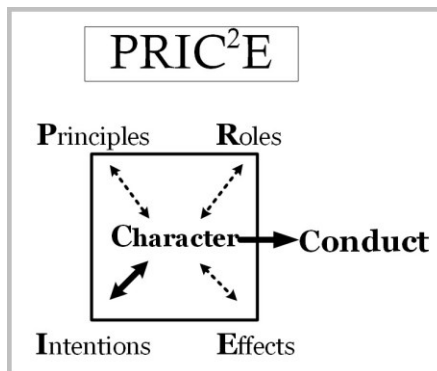
We tend to seek our own comfort, our own glory, our own advancement, our own rights, our own vindication, our own justice and fulfillment. We seek many things rather than the kingdom of God. It is that seeking that tells us we are not aligned with the core values of Jesus. So, we need, along with these disciples, to be taught. We do not know yet what the meaning of the good news of the kingdom entails. We are asked to repent and believe. But what is it we need repent of? What must we believe (and disbelieve)?

We come to Jesus because we are distorted and twisted beings. Our bodies are paralyzed when it comes to authentic righteousness. Our emotions are ungovernable or dead. Our imaginations populate the present and future with illusions, fears and untrue hopes, and rationalities that lead us consistently to falsehoods and half-truths. We come to Jesus to listen, to listen long and well, to listen for something old and new, to listen to be changed. We come to Jesus to be taught. Teach us, O Lord.

(e) An Ethic of Character

If there has been a single text that has been at the core of the ethics of Jesus, these three chapters of Matthew are it. Making sense of the Sermon on the Mount is foundational to making sense of the ethics of the New Testament, especially in its insistence on his centrality.

Western ethics, flowing out of the Greco-Roman traditions as well as the Old and New Testaments have thrown up several key, well recognized ways of articulating the ethical. We can summarize them in terms of a model that indicates the stress in the Sermon on conduct that flows out of a well-formed character whose inner intentions, conformity to the law and prophets, and duties entailed in the role of disciple are a single, integrated whole. Practical wisdom and maturity are essential in living out the calling to be salt and light. We can summarize the basic elements in this chart (the Pric²e model):



a) Deontological: ethics is embodied in rules, principles, duties, requirements, norms, guidelines, commands. This stresses conformity to standards or teaching that stands outside the individual and demands obedience. It sets boundaries which, when transgressed, produces a violation of ethical correctness. It is a code of conduct, a statement of what is right. Action is proper and good when it conforms to the rule or principle. The moral value of an act depends on its rule-conformity: conduct that conforms to a proper external standard. “Give to the one who

asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” (Matt. 5:42)²⁰⁹

b) Intentionalism: ethics has to do with the motive, inner sensibility, spirit, the emotive roots that energize activity. This stresses the inner attitude, intention or motive that sets conduct into motion. An action can conform to a command or correct requirement yet be done from the wrong motivation (as when one gives generously to charity but does so out of a desire to be well known as a generous benefactor). The moral value of an act on this account depends on the intention of the actor. In this account an action is right or good only when it stems from a motivation or emotive drive that is good. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6:33)²¹⁰ “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ in front of others, to be seen by them.” (Matt. 6:1)

c) Consequentialism: ethics is about the outcomes, consequences, effects, results of action or systems. This stresses that what makes an action or attitude “correct” is its consequences. If good outcomes result from an action or system, then that action or system is good. The best known modern form is utilitarianism with some variations. The moral value of an action, rule, or policy, what makes it right, is what it leads to. If it produces good effects (more good than bad), it is a good action or rule. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Matt. 7:1-2)²¹¹ This is also known as teleological since it enjoins the pursuit of a good end, an outcome that is good.

d) Perfectionism: ethics is about the character, temperament, disposition, settled habits of the person. This approach stresses the formation of a long-lasting character that is able consistently to discern what is right in different situations (practical wisdom) and has the habitual ability to do what is right, easily and with pleasure. Through training, the “raw material” of human nature has been reshaped into a settled and well-developed set of responses that embody the virtues that perfect human nature, a second nature. This is most often known as virtue-ethics. Character is about the power to act whereas rules and effects are guiding norms that inform a decision to act in a given way. All of the beatitudes seem to underscore character traits: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (Matt. 5:8)²¹² Its goal is embodying the character of God,

²⁰⁹ In modern times, this form of ethics has been one of four major schools of ethics, flowing largely out of Immanuel Kant’s work. Acts are right or wrong intrinsically, regardless of their consequences or intentions. Two “categorical imperatives” form the foundation of his ethic: (1) Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law. (2) Act so that you always use humanity in your own person, as well as in the person of every other, never as a means, but at the same time as an end. This second formulation comes closer to the Golden Rule of Jesus.

²¹⁰ In this imperative, as is the case with many elements in the Sermon, the inner “seeking” is also connected with a consequence or effect. But the stress is on the inner motivating intention: *why* is an actor engaging in that specific conduct?

²¹¹ In modern times this has been a major school of ethics, used largely in public policy. It flows out of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Most frequently it is called “utilitarianism” and focuses on the “greatest good or happiness for the greatest number.”

²¹² This has been a major school of ethics in recent years. It is a revival of the older Aristotelian focus on the development of excellences or strengths in the person, on answering the question: what sort of life is the good life, the life that expresses and brings to full expression those qualities that are distinctive and

Christlikeness.

e) Obligationism: ethics is always about a person within community who always has a specific social status or position. The roles a person inherits or acquires in a community with its rights and duties (such as husband or wife, father or mother, magistrate or policeman, doctor or patient, teacher or student, priest or parishioner) carry intrinsic responsibilities. Different social roles carry with them different ethical obligations. This may be viewed as a sub-set of the other ways of determining the ethical – only tied to a specific role which not all persons occupy. An example in this case is the married man: “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matt. 5:32)

This underlines the reality that we are always particular people, embedded in a given social world, and playing different roles. Even when it comes to the virtues, excellences and strengths of character are partly rooted in the specific identity I carry in social practices and roles. The skills and strengths needed depend in part on my social roles. The same is true of my obligations and duties.

In the Pric²e chart, the main line of stress is on intentions expressing character leading to proper conduct. One of the clarifications of the Sermon is the distinction between the sort of “righteousness” taught by Jesus and that taught and embodied by the practices of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. We can ask: do any of these fit the sorts of ethical discourse we find in the Sermon? Or for that matter in the larger canon of Scripture?

Scott McKnight sees a few of these and lines them out as a three-fold cord: ethics from above (the Torah – deontological); ethics from beyond (the eschatological prophets – consequentialist); and ethics from below (Wisdom – virtue or perfectionist).²¹³ All three of these are clearly present in Jesus’ teaching. Yet it also seems equally valid to say the emphasis is on character (wisdom, virtue), combining themes found in both the Greco-Roman tradition in the Hellenistic world being addressed as well as the Second Temple Jewish wisdom traditions.²¹⁴

We need not draw a strong line between the various approaches to ethical decision making and acting, but inquire into what sorts of warrants and rationales are presented to us in the discourse of the Sermon itself—and how the focus on character formation leads on to decision

central to human life being human. What sort of life is a well-lived life? This stresses that doing the right thing occasionally is not the goal. Rather the goal is a matured ethical agent who habitually, consistently and easily does the right thing in all situations motivated by right intentions.

²¹³ McKnight, *Sermon* “I want to propose, then, that Jesus’ ethic is a combination of an Ethics from Above, Beyond, and Below—the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom Literature. But there’s more because those three elements for his ethics are tied to his messianic vocation, his conviction that an ethic can only be lived out in community (the kingdom manifestation in the church) and through the power of the Spirit now at work. The above, beyond, and below are each reshaped because it is Jesus’ ethic, because this ethic is for his followers, and because the Spirit has been unleashed.” (p. 13)

²¹⁴ Pennington, *Sermon*, pp. 25-40. “The virtue-ethics approach (McKnight’s ethics from below) focuses on being a certain kind of person, on learning practical wisdom and a way of being in the world that will result in one’s flourishing. This approach makes sense of why this inner-person focus is such a consistent theme throughout Scripture and why it is also found in refracted form in so much of philosophy and culture. Ethics/morality is fundamentally and ultimately about us becoming a certain kind of person.” (p. 40); Gushee, *Kingdom* (p. 21).

making in everyday life.²¹⁵ The striking thing about the biblical ethic is that, with a focus on character and wisdom, all four of the other considerations for determining what is good and right for human conduct are brought in as important considerations.

In all of this we need to remember that biblical ethics aims at lived experience in the real world. While overstated, a comment attributed to Paul Tillich has the right emphasis: “Ethics is not a subject, it’s a life put to the test in a thousand daily moments.”

(f) Arrangement of the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:2-12 is made up of nine beatitude statements. Together they create a portrait of characteristics that mark the disciple and constitute key elements of the good and flourishing life. The first four are oriented toward God. The last five (or four if the ninth is an expansion of the eighth) deal with key relationships with fellow humans. Of those the first three are matters where the disciple is active; the last two are matters where the disciple endures actions that are anything but pleasant. The first eight are in the third person (‘they,’ ‘theirs’); the last in the second (‘you’).

Scholars have offered a variety of accounts to outline the relationships between the nine beatitudes:

1a. Seven: Augustine (matching the 7 gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2-3 and describing the ascent of the soul from the good works of the active life [1-5] to the contemplative life [6-7] with the 8th summing up and returning to the beginning beatitude)²¹⁶, St. Thomas follows Augustine but elaborates it even further. Moderns who count them this way: Wellhausen, Strecker, Klostermann (who eliminate 5:4 [mourn] as not in the “original” Sermon).

1b. Eight: Gregory of Nyssa (8 stages of the ascent of the soul) with the 8th the climax as the restitution to heaven of those who had fallen into slavery. Also: Calvin, most modern scholars (such as F.F. Bruce, Quarles, Carson, Stott, Mounce, Witherington, Blomberg, France, Boice, Hendriksen take it as 2 x 4 beatitudes plus 1). Most take 5:3-10 as the core beatitudes with 5:11 an expansion and 5:12 a direct call to rejoicing. Most agree since vs. 3 and 10 seem to be an “inclusio.”²¹⁷ But not as an ascent of the soul. The ninth beatitude sets the theme that immediately follows – how blessed people are to be in a world that rejects and persecutes them (salt and light). They are not to withdraw into huddled conventicles that are self-protective and separated from the world. They are to rejoice at their common fate with the prophets of old (and Jesus), and be salt and light in the world of corruption and darkness that surrounds them. The persecution and reviling should not intimidate or discourage them.

1c. Nine: Scott McKnight takes them to be three on humility (poor in spirit, mournful, meek); three on pursuing justice (hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, pure in heart); and

²¹⁵ Talbert, *Sermon*. Talbert follows this pattern, arguing that the main thrust of the Beatitudes is on character formation. “It aims in the first instance to function as a catalyst to shape character of its auditors in the direction of covenant faithfulness.” (p. 31) To move from character formation instruction to decision-making requires taking into account the whole of Matthew, the New Testament and the Old Testament.

²¹⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* (pp. 26-29).

²¹⁷ Some also note the first four beatitude qualities or virtues are all “p” (π) words: πτωχοὶ (poor); πενθοῦντες (the mourning); πραῖς (the meek or gentle); πεινῶντες (the hungry) as a reason for grouping them together.

three on those who create peace (peacemakers, the persecuted and the insulted).²¹⁸ Others agreeing: Martin Luther, F. Dale Bruner, Osborne, Stassen, Hagner, Davies. This view comes from counting the nine times the word “makarios” (blessed) occurs and noting how many times in the Gospel Matthew groups things in threes. One can speak of 9 beatitudes and still arrange it as the “eight” group does.

Another possibility is to see vs. 6 as a pivot – the hunger for righteousness expressed in the first 3 beatitudes as the “hunger” of humility before God and in the following 3 as the “hunger” for right relationships with fellow humans. Verse 10 then is the outcome: right living toward God and fellow humans will elicit opposition and persecution, as it did for the prophets and Jesus. Yet this is the very state of flourishing because of what the coming kingdom of heaven will bring.

Verses 11-16 switch from “those” to “you” and addresses the listeners directly. The connection is that these verses spell out the responses to be given to persecution and insult: rejoicing and then courageous continued solidarity and engagement with the larger, hostile world, not ceasing to do good, not losing any of the qualities or virtues commended in the Beatitudes. Losing saltiness or hiding one’s light can be a response to pressures to change the way we live and the character we are forming.

The following chart follows the arrangement of 8 plus 1 arrangement, taking the ninth as an expansion of the eighth and bridging to the following verses on salt and light.

5:3	The poor in spirit	Theirs IS the Kingdom of heaven	Relating to God
4	Those who mourn	They <u>shall</u> be comforted	
5	The meek	They <u>shall</u> inherit the earth	
6	Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness	They <u>shall</u> be satisfied	
7	The merciful	They <u>shall</u> receive mercy	Relating to fellow humans
8	The pure in heart	They <u>shall</u> see God	
9	The peacemakers	They <u>shall</u> be called children of God	
10	Those persecuted for righteousness’ sake	Theirs IS the Kingdom of heaven	
11-12	You who are reviled, persecuted, defamed	Your heavenly reward is great	Expansion: rejoice during persecution
13	You are the salt of the earth	Negatively: retard evil to preserve good (invisible)	
14-16	You are the light of the world	Positively: do good (visible)	

²¹⁸ McKnight, *Sermon*, p. 38.

(2) Matthew 5:1-16: The Shape of the Good, Flourishing Life (Exordium)

The first two verses are introductory, giving the setting and audience. No bushel basket will hide this light. It will shine from this mount like the city of God into the darkest valleys. Its trigger was Jesus seeing the crowds pressing in upon him – the great host of miserable, confused, lonely, guilt-ridden, incurables and careworn. From all parts of the region they came to be near this new prophet whose words were like the dawning of a new day and whose hands brought healing. Along with them were the few who had been called already to be disciples.

Jesus “saw” the crowd, really saw them. He understood their predicaments and their pains, their passions and their purposes. He confronted them not as their judge but as their teacher. Once he sat down and the disciples came to him, he began to teach them. What they expected to come from his mouth we do not know. What we do know is that what he said has echoed down human history to teach even us moderns.

(a) Blessed, prosperous, happy or flourishing?

In reading a book we are taught to pay attention to repeated phrases or words. They are a clue as to the thrust of the material. The words that stand out in the beatitudes are “Blessed”²¹⁹ and “are.” Their meanings are not immediately obvious.²²⁰

One way we draw ourselves into the orbit of these words is to say God is in the “happiness” business. “Blessed” is a word moderns use, but they normally mean they have been free of great or grave tragedy and have had a materially comfortable life. “Happiness” rings more of our bells. Yet God is not in the business of securing our lives against the pains and struggles that accompany a vulnerable life during a history that frequently seems out of control. Happiness penetrates beneath our circumstances to the inner atmosphere of our spirits. Yet the opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappiness” but “cursed.”

Consequently, there is something not quite right with “happiness” as a translation. It suggests an inner joy or some emotional high that feels good much of the time. We have made the pursuit of happiness one of the great goals of American life (“I only want you to be happy”). People are told to follow their bliss, to do what feels good. Pleasure and enjoyment are often confused with happiness. Or success. The successful (in terms of commanding wealth and position) are considered the happy. Yet often the loneliest moment is having achieved the pinnacle and discovering that it does not deliver the ultimate we were seeking.

The problem with happiness is that its focus is on a subjective state. Jesus’ words are not so much about feelings as about the objective reality of being placed in the center of God’s approval and favor. People seek very different sorts of approval and recognition, very different centers of pleasure and enjoyment. Jesus is not saying these other sorts of approval or goods in life that give pleasure are illegitimate or unnecessary. We were made as creatures powerfully motivated by pleasure and enjoyment. That is one way the glory of God gets at us. We are constantly surprised

²¹⁹ It should be noted that “blessed” (μακάριος) is used, and not “prosperous” (ὀλβιος) or “happy” (εὐδαίμων). Because of the dominance of eudaimonistic ethics in the Greek world and the pursuit of “happiness” in the modern world, the meaning of “blessed” needs careful attention.

²²⁰ The clearest continuity of the term “blessed” is in Wisdom literature with a clear echo to Isaiah 61:1-11 in terms of the qualities selected to celebrate. Gushee, *Kingdom* (p. 23) follows Guelich in setting wisdom (as ideals that followed make one wise) against prophetic teaching (which emphasizes God’s action that delivers). But this is a both/and matter, not an either/or.

by the joys God built into the world and allows us to uncover and develop. As Dallas Willard puts it:

“No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for mourning, for being persecuted, and so on, or that the conditions listed are recommended ways to well-being before God or man. Nor are the Beatitudes indications of who will be on top ‘after the revolution.’ They are explanations and illustrations drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus.”²²¹

These words focus away from circumstances and specific pleasures, away from achievements, endowments and human recognition. They focus on what God bestows upon us, putting us into the position where all the other joys, the small and large pleasures round us out rather than grind us down. The malaise of our affluent, material-saturated, pleasure-oriented culture is boredom and depression. Pleasures increased to the heights do not fulfill us. They numb us and push us further into addictive patterns that destroy.

When we examine what “blessed” is connected to it is to people whose circumstances and inner sense of the world and self are hardly recommended in contemporary therapy. Not that these people are morose neurotics whose religion serves as an opiate to the painful pessimism that infects them. These are people we would not expect to put on the list for the Nobel prize for “happiness.” Their circumstances and activities are out of kilter with the values we have placed at the center of ideal living. Yet they are blessed. They have every reason to experience an inner joy and serenity that may well seem unrealistic (at least unusual) to those around them.

These are privileged, benefitted, favored people—those removed from the curse placed upon a sinful creation. The guarantor of their benefits is God himself. Their benefits are both now and in the future. That is why this is not simply the opium of the people or pie in the sky. It is a present tense experience (“are”). What they are offered is the on-going present rule of God within a rebellious and chaotic world. They are blessed now and will be so in the long haul. Participating in God’s governance in their lives will not bring the ideal comforts and success as portrayed by contemporary culture. But it will mean a bouquet of God’s favors: comfort, inheritance of the earth, righteousness and justice, mercy and the vision as God’s children to see God. There will be rewards for such in the heavens.

This opening set of pronouncements poses the question sharply: what is it we set our sights on? One set of contrasts is between those who suppose all of reality is this-worldly. Any spiritual talk about God is a waste of time as opposed to those who seek God as their highest good.

Another contrast is between those wishing to mix these two worlds in disastrous fashion. Some seek God in ways that build their reputation for righteousness and piety. Others compartmentalize religion to get certain personal and private values without having to mix them into corporate or civic life. Jesus will have none of it. His claim is every bit of our lives or none. We must have the blessing of God in all of life—or else be without God under his curse.

(b) Who is well off? – honoring God and enabling human life to flourish

The beatitudes express what is honorable and favored in the sight of God. It is a transvaluation of values, a window onto a new world, a schematic for transformational living, a challenge for all ordinary living and judging. It is difficult to grasp the thrust and meaning of these compact words.

²²¹ Willard, *Conspiracy*, p.106.

On the surface they seem direct, straight-forward, crystalline in the light they throw on life. The first time one reads them, they seem to turn everything upside down. The second time one reads them, it is apparent they are putting all things in the proper order.

In a world of sin and suffering, there can be no dismissing the painful conflict and confrontations that come from our neediness and the neediness of others. Additionally, we live in the context of powerful forces that want to keep the world upside down.

These words are dually focused: they are a heavenly affirmation of how life can hallow and reverence the Creator; they equally inform us of the shape of the life that enables humans to flourish as individuals and communities.

The present tense of “theirs is the kingdom of God” acts as an inclusion, marking the beginning and ending of these beatitudes. This phrase indicates that all the blessings promised are kingdom blessings, all the qualities of character are kingdom norms. Though the blessings are future in their fullness, they are certain. In limited ways they already are part of a present tense experience of the kingdom.

This is not specifically a code of ethics or morality. It does not say, ‘live like this and you will become a Christian.’ Nor is it a matter of setting forth a set of guidelines for revolutionizing the larger social worlds in which we live, even though it portrays ideal social relationships. Nor can we say these are principles for inner serenity.

Having said that, we cannot back away from one conclusion. People living with the blessing of God upon them will revolutionize their small and large worlds as they manifest life springing out of these characteristics. They will have an inner serenity and will be trustworthy, ethical individuals. So too will they exhibit the sorts of living qualities that ought to mark a Christian.

The rub comes with how these matters relate to being or becoming a Christian. It is not, do this and live. Rather it is live and then you will do these sorts of things. Because you are Christ-followers live like this. Christ is within you, so his life will be active in you:

(a) **Poor in Spirit.** “As Ambrose says, this beatitude is not only the first in order, but also the one that in some way generates all other virtues.”²²² These are the completely destitute, utterly helpless and inadequate in their own resources. They have nothing, bring nothing to the kingdom but come only as beggars.

(b) **The broken-hearted mourners**—those sorrowful and contrite because of how much is wrong in their lives and world around them. They suffer the pain of their own sin and the world of trouble sin produces. God gives them the courage to confront and challenge the strongholds of sin. He will comfort them.

(c) **The meek**—those who relinquish the will to power and claim nothing. They are so disciplined in all their affairs that a God-controlled gentleness marks them. They are not weak but are those who live without arrogance, impatience, or the need to dominate. They have their lust for self-advancement under control and consistently desire to see the other’s interests advanced.

(d) **Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.** These starving souls are parched, crazed for justice and justification, dominated by a burning desire for the rights of God in his world. God’s banquet table with all the delicacies and delights of God’s righteousness will be set before them. They will be satisfied.

²²² Cited in Betz, *Sermon* (p. 111).

(e) **The merciful**—those with kind hearts who are full of outgoing love. They are compassionate, helpful, forgiving, ready to do what is best for the other person, renouncing rights and demands when met with repentance for wrong doing. They also will discover mercy coming their way when they do not deserve it.

(f) **The pure in heart**—those without the inner stain or uncleanness of sin, whose inner world of motives, thoughts, emotions and desires is unmixed, unconfused, undivided, single and whole. They will see the invisible and incomparable reality of God surrounding them always.

(g) **Peacemakers**—those who break down barriers, bestowing reconciliation and wholeness, ending the conflicts and tension that mar human relationships. God looks on them and will say, “These are my children—see how they resemble me!”

(h) **Those persecuted or insulted** because they are Christ-followers in their commitment to righteousness and justice. Though stung by false accusation, wounded by rejection and exclusion, hated and harried because they are Christ-followers, their joy is full. The difference Christ has made in their life cannot be ignored by God’s enemies and will not be ignored by God himself. They are to rejoice and be glad because God guarantees them a great reward. Already, the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

The problem becomes what this sort of character is like. The very compactness of these beatitudes hides their range of applicability. On the one hand these are general patterns—while the rest of the sermon and the epistles give us more specifics. Certainly, that much is true. We cannot suppose Jesus misunderstood what he meant by his own words and later acted or said things contradicting them. We would have an Ebionitic Jesus, a fallible, confused human, who was pushed about by his own lack of clarity, the tides of the mistaken passions of his culture and the falsehoods of the tradition into which he was socialized. He was in the world but not of it.

Whatever we make of the beatitudes in their force and focus, our best arguments for our understanding of them will place them first in the larger context of this very sermon. Then we must read them in terms of all of Matthew and the whole of the Old and New Testaments. What Jesus suggests in these words may go beyond what the Old Testament offers to us, but it does not go against it. What Jesus teaches on this occasion is modeled and repeated in the rest of his teachings, actions and in the Epistles as well.

To understand Jesus’ “ban” on oath taking means we must consider oath taking in the Old Testament, Jesus’ own oath like words (“Very truly I tell you...”), Paul’s oath taking “God is my witness...” and so on. We cannot suppose this statement of Jesus is a prescriptive law whose precise wording sets forth the letter to be followed regardless of context or intent. Or suppose that we have a confused mishmash of instructions and contradictions.

Every effort at peacemaking is not legitimate. We engage in peacemaking allied with our hunger and thirst for righteousness. Conflicts are to be ended, but not at any price. The “peace” of a tightly regulated oppression and exploitation is not what peacemaking aims at producing when it “settles” the conflict produced by powerful urges for human dignity and well-being.

Jesus repeatedly gets at our inner spirit as expressed in and through our outer actions and relationships. This is about character as much as it is about norms, guidelines and practices. It is about what all Christ-followers are to be and do, and not just a heroic few. It is about all the things all Christians are to manifest. It may be true that some are better at peacemaking than others; that some receive more persecution and rejoice more readily than others. Yet we all are to have characters and live according to an ethos that fosters these qualities and actions.

The ground of the possibility for all of this is the blessing of God. That blessing comes

packaged in several ways. We find it in grace: the unmerited favor of God, gifting our lives with more happiness and goodness than we deserve. We find it in mercy: the forgiving kindness of God, staying with us and helping us even when we have violated the terms of our relationship. We find it in love: the self-giving outflow of God's yearning and caring for us in all aspects of existence. We find it in patience: God's suffering long with us, sticking it out with us again and again, as though mercy had no limits. We find it in joy: the hearty merriment of God, laughing with us in our folly and our growth, giving us gladness even in difficult times.

The "blessed are..." is followed by a reason clause (for or because "theirs is" or "they will be") (Greek: ὅτι). Is this transactional? I merit the reward by having or exhibiting the quality mentioned? Or is there some intrinsic connection between being poor in spirit and possessing the kingdom, or being merciful and receiving mercy? Or is this simply the explanation for why, paradoxically, people who live life with these characteristics marking their character and conduct are in a "blessed" condition? The answers to these difficult questions only come when we experience the in-coming of the kingdom into our lives.

The blessing of God is the person of God with us. Matthew tells us the story of who Jesus is: Immanuel, the new Joshua who will save his people from their sins. That is the blessing in view here. God's overflowing favor and joy is richly rooted into the experience and character of Christ-followers. It is granted to those who are poor in spirit, who mourn and hunger for righteousness, who are peacemakers, the meek and merciful. God stands alongside those who stand alongside Jesus, rewarding them now and evermore with his presence.

One of the ways to understand that this inner transformation reaches out to outward expressions of action is to note that the "woes" of Matthew 23 parallel a number of the beatitudes. In seeing that we realize more keenly that these marks of character, rooted in our inmost being, have their opposites that lead to God's disfavor.²²³

Woes	Blessings
"You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven" (23:13)	"poor in spirit/those persecuted ... theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3, 10)
"you make the convert ... a child of hell" (23:15)	"peacemakers ... will be called children of God" (5:9)
"blind guides ... blind fools ... blind ..." (23:16–19)	"the pure in heart ... will see God" (5:8)
"you have neglected ... mercy" (23:23)	"the merciful ... will receive mercy" (5:7)
"you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate ..." (23:25)	"those who hunger and thirst after righteousness ... will be filled" (5:6)
"you are like whitewashed tombs ... full of the bones of dead men" (23:27)	"those who mourn ... will be comforted" (5:4)
"you will build the tombs ... and decorate the graves ..." (23:29)	
"that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth" (23:35)	"the meek ... will inherit the earth" (5:5)

²²³Lundbom, *Sermon*, (pp. 13–14).

(c) The Poor in Spirit: Matthew 5:3

If we admit that this emphasis places Luke's rendering (Lk. 6) in perspective, then we have to say that this cannot be interpreted simply as saying something like blessed in spirit are the poor. It is not being poor materially that automatically creates a person open to God. The poor person is no nearer to the kingdom than the rich, just for being poor. Yet we must also say that Luke puts Matthew in perspective. The rich are clearly farther from the kingdom because of the numbing effect of wealth. There is a reliance upon money and possessions that must be overcome by the rich, an obstacle not also afflicting the poor. Jesus commented on the difficulty (the impossibility) of the rich being saved. There is no similar comment on the poor.

In Luke we must note that the phrase is more precise: "Blessed are you poor..." Luke's focus is on the disciples who made the break with their way of life, with the security of their family and work. They left all to become learners in a wandering lifestyle that depended upon alms and hospitality. They did not have assets or money. They became literally poor materially because they could see the poverty of their spirits in their confrontation with Jesus Christ and left all to follow him. We must be careful in the generalization of these texts.

Matthew's expression of the meaning of Christ's words turns our eyes to the operative focus: the beginning point of being blessed is God's outgoing compassion toward those who are without resources. God responds to those who wait empty-handed for God's initiative, for God's deliverance and vindication amid abuse and rejection. God's help is for the helpless. God's Spirit is for the dis-spirited. God's favor is for those disfavored. God's grace is for the ungracious who do not deserve it, his righteousness for the unrighteous.

"The whole promise of the Sermon (already fulfilled), and its whole threat, are concentrated on this one issue, on this straight gate, this narrow way of the poor in spirit. 'Few there be that find it,' while the wide gate and the broad way are used by many."²²⁴

This is not a matter of "personality." To be poor in spirit is not to be less of a self. It is to be more aware of who and what we are when we come into the reality and riches of God. It is to see ourselves as we are, whatever may be our virtues and achievements. This is not a request that we somehow, in some theoretical manner, figure out how to run ourselves down or emphasize the negatives that are there. This is an acknowledgement that God's blessing begins where we see ourselves, our whole being, as poverty stricken in the very things we need to experience and live in a world where God is the preeminent ruler.

Like the quality of humility, this is knowing ourselves and God's ways so well that we are not tempted to exaggerate. We do not attempt to create a false self, to act as though we were less than we are, to be diffident, weak or unassertive. We do not become "poor" by taking on voluntary poverty (with the monastics) or by repudiating our own name and retiring into closeted existence—doing nothing and being nothing in terms of the ordinary affairs of this world. This is not the effacement of personality, the quenching of identity, the ending of involvement, the breaking of relationships. Being poor in spirit is recognizing the insufficiency of all we are but still must deliver the goods of the kingdom of God, no matter the size of my this-worldly assets.

It is to become God-centered, to be rich toward God. It is to see with absolute clarity that we are filled with ideas, patterns, capabilities, habits and understandings that in their complete total leave us poverty-stricken before God. It is to understand that the complete expenditure of what

²²⁴ Barth, K. *CD Vol. II.2* (p. 693).

we have—our time, energy, talents and skills—is not enough to reengineer our world into Eden or ourselves back into close companions of God. No matter the sacrifice, no matter the asceticism, no matter the iron-willed effort, we do not have the resources individually or corporately to build a tower to heaven or to create heaven on earth.

If God does not act and bestow his Spirit upon our spirits, if God does not forgive and transform us, if God does not create new communities, if God does not remove the debt we have incurred, if God does not bless us, we are finished. Our world is condemned to the history it has created. Our sin and folly have undone us so thoroughly that we often do not realize how desperate and helpless is our situation and we within it. **God's blessing begins here and nowhere else: the poor in spirit.** If we would know God's blessing, we must begin with the deep, existentially vivid awareness that we do not have it.

The poor in spirit are those so needy they have no alternative but God. They are unable to save themselves and at the same time recognize they have no claim upon God's salvation. The Laodicean Church lost this awareness. They identified with their city's strengths and it infected their own ethos: "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." (Rev. 3:17) This is not simply a matter of perspective. It is a matter of reality.

The problem (as C.S. Lewis put it) is that, when we invite God into our lives, we tend to think that he will come in and replace the plumbing and putty a loose window pane or two. What he does is a total reconstruction job, tearing things down and laying a new foundation. We think all we need is a little reform. We are subjected to a complete transformation.²²⁵

We come to God thinking we have a few bad alternatives and a few promising ones, ones that are just a bit out of our reach. We want taller shoulders on which to stand to reach them. What occurs is that all our alternatives are shown the door. God throws out the "good" with the ones that are bad. This is not about living a better, more moral life. This is not a word for the bad who skipped church and got into more mischief than others. This is a word for us all. Particularly those who are fully convinced of their own right living, who think God is in their debt because of all they have done for their neighbors and him.

Something must happen deep within us if we seek the favor and face of God. It is not a matter of keeping rules or changing ourselves into somebody else. Nor is it a matter of being poor-spirited, being wimps, letting life happen to us while we are passive. This is not asking for a bit more modesty (not pushing ourselves or our accomplishments forward). The problem attacked here is not conceit, as though the problem with the Pharisee is trumpeting his own horn too loudly. After all, he was in many ways a model citizen. What he said was true. So, it might seem that more modesty was demanded when he came to pray in the Temple. Yet that is not the center of the problem.

The issue is a sort of spiritual pride. The opposite of pride is poverty of spirit, is humility, not modesty (whose opposite is conceit). And humility is a clear-sighted knowledge of what is definitively true: we are unworthy, unable, unqualified when it comes to the blessings of the kingdom of God period. What confuses us frequently is that we do what the Pharisee at prayer did: we compare the best of ourselves with the worst of others. We are like two people in debt to the tune of a hundred million dollars. The one has \$2.5 million worth of assets. The other is down to the last \$2,500. The one is a thousand times more solvent than the other. The reality for both

²²⁵ Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperOne. (p. 205)

is that they are going to default on the loan and someone is going to lose a lot.

The problem we all face in confessing our sins is that we think in so doing we are engaging in modesty (and confusing it with being poor in spirit or humility). We are ready to admit that we've made some mistakes somewhere among all the good decisions that have brought us to our comfortable place in life. If we are down and out, often we will say (and many times be justified), there were forces beyond our control that did us in. Society has made us into the wrecks that hulk about the haunts of the homeless, the addicted, the unemployed, the dissolute and disarrayed. We confess our sins only from a position of strength.

Poverty of spirit does not have room for its many imitators. It is not pleasant or genteel. It is not moderate or easy. To experience poverty of spirit is to be humbled to the last inch of our dignity. It is to admit that we are not the author of the goodness that can be brought into the kingdom of heaven. It is to sense in our whole being and history that we are alien to God, that some minor spiritual cosmetic will not do, a little spiritual plastic surgery will not beautify us enough for God's kingdom.

None of this is to say that we should prefer the dastardly and degraded to the courageous and capable, the immoral to the moral or the cruel to the kind. Humanly speaking, it is preferable to live in a community of the loyal and honest. Humanly speaking there are real distinctions between monstrous sinners and the average run-of-the-mill sinners. This is not about that. This blessing goes beyond civic righteousness and good human relationships to the heart of our own existence and that of human history. Whether relatively good or bad, we are marked by the curse of sin and its outcome of death. The remedy for that is God's blessing. We need to remember: in the parable of the prodigal son, there were two sinners – the dissolute, ungrateful, selfish prodigal and the self-righteous, well-behaved elder brother.

Poverty of spirit also does not refer to the passivity that says we are nothing, can do nothing and have nothing God wants from us. The slave who was given a capital sum and buried it in the ground, being afraid of his master, was not poor in spirit. Being lazy, indifferent or incompetent with the resources and gifts we have been given is not what poverty of spirit entails. The one talent slave looked about and saw the master had given more to others. He knew the accounting principles were strict and unbending. So, he buried his trust in the ground and did not even try. He felt like nothing and did nothing.

Poverty of spirit is vitally active because it knows, without the gifts from God, there is only the stark prospect of death. This is not the poverty that can stay alive by working, but the destitution that can only beg for the next meal. It is the cry of the heart, "Give us today's bread," without the barns bursting with grain from a bumper crop. The poor in spirit do not have a self-pity party, running themselves down and cringing at the thought that they must get out of bed and live another day.

The difference is already present in the story of the spies who evaluated the land of Canaan. Ten returned to say that the land was full of giants—that "to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num 13:33). Only Caleb and Joshua remembered the promises and greatness of God. The ten who brought the unfavorable report were not poor in spirit. They were fearful in spirit, spiritless and faithless in perspective. Caleb and Joshua tore their clothing in a dramatic gesture of mourning in the face of the lack of courage. Their poverty of spirit meant they could be filled with the Spirit of God and gain a view of life that resonated with kingdom possibilities. They understood the capabilities of God, no matter the

impossibilities of the situation. Their urging to go forward was not a sign of a lack of poverty of spirit, but its very reality.

Our own cultural lenses mean we are prone to suppose the docility of females is what poverty of spirit is about. Humility, meekness, self-effacement, self-denigration, followership—all these blended together in a passionless, colorless personality is what we suppose this strange quality must mean. Since women are traditionally cornered into more passive, less assertive patterns and positions, we suppose them “naturally” poor in spirit. Men are considered prideful, macho creatures who cannot show weakness or vulnerability.

We must remind ourselves that this traditional cultural division of labor no longer holds (and was a stereotype of the past). Further, we must also say that this poverty of spirit is not prescribing a personality type or commending a typical gender role. Nor is it a patriarchal reinforcement of a slave-mentality (Nietzsche to the contrary). This is not the avenue into the world of door mats and spinelessness.

All these qualities of Christ-followers have Christ himself as their essence. He is the poor of spirit par excellence. Whatever we understand to be the circle of actions and attitudes compatible with or expressive of poverty of spirit, it must be able to fit the profile of the action and attitudes of Jesus himself. To exhibit the qualities listed in these beatitudes is to show within our own personalities and cultures, the qualities of Christ-likeness. He was no patsy, Uriah Heep with cloying obsequiousness, or unctuous self-denigration.

To be sure we must move to poverty of spirit from a very different starting point. Jesus emptied himself of his heavenly powers and glory, becoming a human being and lowering himself to the helpless cruelty of the cross in complete, unqualified obedience to the Father (Phil. 2). We begin as prideful, slothful and self-deceived sinners, full of ourselves and our minor abilities and achievements. We must empty ourselves of the illusions of grandeur, not the reality. We must empty ourselves of false claims of piety, not of the actual communion with God. We must surrender our enslavement to our own autonomy, not our autonomy for the place of a slave.

John’s Gospel tells us most clearly of Jesus’ own utter dependence upon God as the incarnate Son. Yet what a powerful, active, alive, penetrating personality. Poverty of spirit did not reduce him to a faceless, nameless cipher, a groveling nobody. It was the platform upon which God’s mighty Spirit was active, able to show the authority of the kingdom of heaven in confrontation with falsehood, injustice and unrighteousness, demonic activity and illnesses. His poverty of spirit meant the fullness of God’s Spirit. Poverty of spirit is the soil of humility and “meekness” but not the stimulus for insincerity, sycophancy, or resignation in the face of injustice and opposition.

(d) Those who Mourn: Matthew 5:4

This has the ring of “happy are the sad.” It sounds absurd from the start. We wonder how it is that any statement that begins this way can be taken seriously. If we can make sense of these words, then we are either interpretive tricksters, finding evasions rather than translations of what he must have meant, or we are confronted with a strange new world that overturns most of the assumptions we accept as true. We know that following Jesus should feel more like “my chains fell off” than “I have screwed up.” Yet we start with awareness of the chains that bind us, some of which are ones we have put on ourselves.

The immediate and most obvious connection is that mourning is related to poverty of spirit. Once we realize how absolutely empty we are of the very resources needed for confronting and

changing the horrors of our self and our world, we cannot help but sense overwhelming grief. We have lived so long with the illusory hopes of prometheanism that we cannot imagine what a world is like where humans do not already or potentially have all the answers, to be all they want to be.

We have been told repeatedly we are gods and goddesses, wondrous miracles in nature, creative geniuses latent with the very things our battered world needs. Released from the strictures of bad parents and incompetent schooling, from sexism, racism, classism we will rise like Hercules to do the heroic. Freedom from poverty and ignorance will produce a light so bright that it will banish the stupidity and folly of the millennia that have gone before. Technology, science, commerce and education will join hands with a benevolent and wise government to bring about a truly humane world. With AI (artificial intelligence) the brave new world will dawn, and the peace, progress and prosperity August Comte promised will emerge.

This view says what we must mourn is not something within but something outside of us. Down deep inside we are reservoirs of godlike goodness and creativity. But our environment has victimized us. We must mourn the evil and distortions that infest the structures of our world. It is there because of surviving superstitions or because of the venality of the wealthy who exploit the poor. What cannot be fixed by new socio-economic orders will be fixed by genetic counseling and engineering. Give us only another hundred or two hundred years.

So, the litany goes. What Jesus declares is that the evil outside is no less real within. What we experience and see coming from outside us is also rooted deeply within the best and brightest of us. We mourn because of the pain we feel when we must give up the illusions we once had about ourselves and our world. We weep over the devastation and distortion even our best intended actions have had on those we dearly love. We are deeply saddened by our inability to heal ourselves, much less those we have scarred.

It is important also to do the task of clearing the rubbish that has accumulated around this beatitude. Jesus is not saying blessed are the depressed, the morose and gloomy. This is not a statement about personality types or imbalances of brain chemistry that afflict the bi-polar. Those who mourn generally are not all comforted. So, this must have a more specific reference. The context is helps us to place limits on what otherwise might seem a limitless endorsement of seriousness.

In part this is the anguish of those who know the scorn of rejection and ridicule (those persecuted for righteousness and for Jesus' sake). These are people who know what they have lost in this world when they have forsaken all to enter the kingdom through the gateway of poverty of spirit. They are bereaved because of the conflict caused by becoming a Christ-follower. They are distressed by the spite and venom from neighbor and kin. They are upset at all the unnecessary pain and suffering that grows out of the foolish and venal exercise of free will. Why is it that people are slandered and vilified for wanting the world to be set right?

In part this is the sadness of those who attempt to bring reconciliation during the conflicts of this world. Peacemaking exposes one to the misunderstanding of both sides, to the charges of not taking the wickedness of the other side seriously, to the anger and bitterness of fellow human beings. The path to peace is long, thankless and littered with the bodies of "innocents." The powerful who can stop conflict are frequently the very ones who profit by it. To see what conflict brings and know that peace is possible brings great sadness.

Mourning is the emotional counterpart of poverty of spirit. It is an interior grief that strikes us when we see the riches of the kingdom of God. It is the voice crying before the Lord high and lifted up, "Woe is me, I am lost..." (Isa 6:5). It is Paul's lament: "Wretched man that I am! Who

will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24). It is Peter breaking down and weeping after he discovered how fragile and weak was his own loyalty to his Lord (Mk 14:72).

It is not enough to perceive that I am without resources to qualify me for citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Knowing my emptiness and great debt before God is not enough. Confession is not the same as contrition. Ezra heard the dire straits of the people of Israel—all their departures from the commands of God:

“At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God and said,

‘O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens....Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this.’

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly.” (Ezra 9:5-6,15, 10:1)

There is godly grief. It is not the only emotion of the kingdom of God. But its absence is a sure sign that people have not and do not understand yet the poverty of their own spirit or the richness of the kingdom. There is no awareness of the great loss that happens to life every moment we live without the fullness of the kingdom as our environment and reality. When John and Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God’s kingdom, they were not asking for jubilation or celebration. They joined that fact with the steely demand for repentance.

Those who heard the gathering thunder of the hooves of heaven knew that Israel was not ready: “My eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not kept” (Psa. 119:136). Those godly ones who identify with the people of God are not arrogant, self-righteous religious rigorists. They are those who recognize themselves in the mirror of the chaos of trouble loosed by the sins of God’s people. They understand the opening to the judgment of God such sin provides. They understand the fiery baptism of such judgment, should it fall.

Then we must also acknowledge the tears of Jesus. He had no inner wilderness, no internal raging hurricane, no destructive demons within his personality over which to mourn. He needed neither confession nor contrition. Yet he wept—over Lazarus, over Jerusalem, over the cross. There are no tears for lack of home or comfort. There are none for the everyday frustrations and difficulties. He does not mourn in self-pity or lie on his bed like Ahab because he coveted something he could not have (1 Kings 21:4).

Jesus mourned over the hardness of heart of his compatriots. What sort of people is Israel, two thousand years into its history with God, and what face does it show? It is the face of oppression, of misusing the worship of God to make money, of laying rigid legalism onto the backs of people, of hating gentiles and Samaritans, of making friends with the powers that be to facilitate economic and political advantages.

What is blessed by God is a divine discontent—for us and for the world. Without it we will never know the divine comfort. At the end of it all we see God wiping away the tears from the faces of those who enter the new Jerusalem. God’s comfort is for godly sorrows. The baptism of John already portrays this sequence: first repentance, then the Spirit. Jesus came in

solidarity with sinful humanity, confessing its sins and symbolizing its need for God's cleansing. God sent his Comforter upon Jesus to demonstrate his response to the broken and contrite heart. The poverty of spirit that mourns is strengthened, quietened, renewed by the incoming of God's presence. It is not a mourning that ends since we and our world continue to sin and be afflicted by all the woes of ordinary life.

There is also the sequence we find in Isaiah: first the lament and accusation of Israel in its sin by God. Then the exile and mourning. Only then come the words, "Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people." (40:1).

(e) The Meek: Matthew 5:5

How important it is for gentleness to come between mourning and the hunger for righteousness. There is a manic harshness and meanness these days. People who rally behind the flag of "righteousness" are anything but gentle. They demonize those whom they see as violators of justice—be they the corporate capitalists of multinational corporations, the military juntas and paramilitary bands who rape and kill, the abortion clinic doctors, the police who kill the unarmed with impunity, the drug lords and arms merchants. Even those who are gentle with gays and lesbians are painted as betrayers of God, goodness and the kingdom.

Because we are not meek, the slander and vicious invectives, the bitter anger and public folly is multiplied. Former ministers shoot abortion doctors and their escorts; practicing televangelists assassinate the characters of those with whom they disagree about public policy; abortion opponents bomb clinics and justify it by Jesuitical reasoning. Amid all the confusion, gentleness is assassinated.

Meekness commends a quality that can enter relationships with difficult and exasperating people and sustain itself without anger, impatience or arrogance. It is not disputatious or rough. It does not easily burst into angry defensiveness and is not brusque or harsh. It refers to a quiet, positive friendliness that does not depend upon the response of the other to determine its tone or direction.

The meek are not whiners who thrive in a culture of complaint. Neither are these the weak and fawning, pushed about by one and all because there is no backbone or strength to their identity. The meek are those whose sense of self has been tempered by poverty of spirit and mourning. They are surprised that things go so well for them and that others treat them as well as they do. There is not a molecule of self-inflation or self-defensiveness in them.

This beatitude takes us a step further. It is one thing for us to conclude in the quiet of our aloneness that we are miserable sinners, co-creators of a world of suffering and tragedy. It is another for other people to say that of us. Unpleasant as our own inner voice may be, the vocal sound of others agreeing is very difficult to take. The meek are those who have lost illusions about themselves and thus are not surprised to hear the low opinions others may have of them. Unpleasantness does not unbalance them so that they respond in kind. When cursed, they are able to bless—not because they are so superior, but because they are meek. Thus, their gentleness and honesty does not deliver a patronizing arrogance, but a gracious acceptance of the other, despite the difficulty.

These are not "losers." These are those who know they are winners with God and so do not have to be winners anywhere else. So rooted are they in the reality of God's care and compassion, they can be compassionate and gentle with others, even others who are in the wrong. They do not live by the letter of the law nor insist on their full rights. What they display is power and

strength under control. They do not need to prove to themselves or to others who they are. They may live in a world that is passionate about honor and sensitive to every slight of face, but they are gentle within that world.

Tempted as we are to think this beatitude unreasonable foolishness, we need to rethink our own civilization. Even in nature it is not the strong and powerful that are surviving. Those who are surviving are not the eagle, the tiger or the rhino. As powerful as they may be, it is the lamb and the cow, the sparrow and the finch that are inheriting the earth. We may suppose the Napoleons, Stalins, Hitlers, and Maos of our age are the real inheritors of the earth. Yet when we look back over the sweep of history, we find them swept away. Their “thousand year” kingdoms humbled and erased. Our culture of celebrity has seduced us into thinking we are nothing unless we are celebrated, famous, powerful, wealthy—one of the “beautiful” people.

Those who know not the comfort of God will never understand this beatitude. It is only for those whose treasure is God, who can thus not be seduced by the earth and become possessed by it. They do not need to display their strength or glory, their honor and power. They have discovered that God’s favor is far beyond the love of men or women, far beyond the size of estates or the boundaries of conquest.

Especially with **meekness**, we need to set some boundaries so as not to over generalize and apply it in ways that negate its true force. Otherwise, we suppose this refers to those so weak they never assert themselves, never disagree with others, never confront or show any spunk.

Meekness is not niceness. Being nice can be a screen behind which boils an angry cauldron of disgust and resentment. This is not a blessing upon those who go along to get along, who never create any unpleasantness for any reason. Meekness is the spirit in which the search for justice, the making of peace, the enduring of persecution, the dispensing of mercy takes place. It is not the Casper Milquetoasts of the world who undertake or experience those things. Those things require inner strength and endurance.

Christ is meek and lowly, yet we find him everything but nice to the rigid, legalistic Pharisees of the day. There in his hand is the knotted rope, swinging away at the animals and overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. It is Jesus, the meek and mild, showing the gentleness of one who is jealous for the honor of God. Jesus was so approachable children climbed into his arms. Yet he was so impressive that people said no one spoke with such authority. Even when the armed band came to arrest him, they fell back when he simply answered them, saying “I am he [whom you seek].” Meekness is far more than niceness.

The meek are not the indolent or passive. They are not holed up somewhere behind doors and screens. They do not haul in all their sails in order to have minimal exposure to the winds that blow through history. They do not hunker down in their tiny barks and try to hurtle through the rapids of life with the minimum of exposure. Meekness is not a minimizing of one’s involvement or participation in the affairs of life.

Moses is described in the Old Testament as the meekest on the face of the earth. He may not have started that way. His rage for justice that led to the murder of the Egyptian is what is in mind in such a description. Yet there had to be some meekness in a man whose origins were Pharaoh’s court, whose education was the highest available of the day, who could then tend sheep on the backside of Sinai for forty years. Was it meekness speaking when this same Moses, who had killed man, said he couldn’t even speak before Pharaoh? Nonetheless we see Moses leading the many tens of thousands, acting as general in war, walking up the fearsome mountain to face the living God, pronouncing judgment on the sins of Israel. That is meek and mild Moses.

Meekness is not peace at any price. Gentleness is not the same thing as giving in to the will of others. It does not rage and battle, tooth and nail, to get its own way. But it is not the compromising, have it your own way, 'I-don't-care' stoical indifference. It is not indifferent to the matters of righteousness or the truth. It can suffer long because it is convinced that what God favors will triumph in the end. Meekness cares deeply about crucial and important things but seeks to advance them gently. After all, principles, causes and institutions have great strength and resiliency. People are fragile and need to be handled gently.

Paul may be one we might not think of as meek. Yet when we read his letters to the Corinthians carefully, we can see his meekness shining forth. For all the struggles in that congregation, for all the challenges and calumny poured out on him, for all the disappointment and wounding, Paul still is thankful to God for them. He reasons and bares his soul to them, pushing and pulling, seeking to bring them step by step to a better and more godly way. His letters are strong, but his personal presence is gentle.

In all of this Jesus is the secret. By the Holy Spirit his character is installed into our personalities. We are conformed to the image of one so God-intoxicated that we need not be puzzled at how his great strength was expressed in gentleness. God is one who bears with us long, whose mercy and kindness are astounding in their depth and breadth. Jesus, like God, is gentle with us in pursuit of the redemption of creation.

R. Earl Allen's treatment of this has much to commend it.²²⁶ The meek he says are those who are tamed, like wild animals whose wildness is brought under internal control and responsive to external cues. When we think of Moses and Paul (and Peter), this taming process stands starkly before us. But they are also the teachable, open to the wisdom and insight of others, aware of their limited knowledge. Then they are the tempered, strengthened like steel, forged out of the fires of temptation, a tool in the hands of the Master.

Another dimension is suggested by Martin Luther. While I as a follower of Christ am to show gentleness and meekness in my relationships with others, when I hold positions of responsibility (such as judge, police, or military), I may well be required to act in ways that require coercion and even violence. The state bears the sword, and not in vain. To be sure, insofar as I find myself in such positions, I am not to misuse the authority and power vested in it. Yet Luther has a point when he says:

"Therefore if we have an office or a governmental position, we must be sharp and strict, we must get angry and punish; for here we must do what God puts into our hand and commands us to do for His sake. In other relations, in what is unofficial, let everyone learn for himself to be meek toward everyone else, that is, not to deal with his neighbor unreasonably, hatefully, or vengefully..."²²⁷

(f) Those who hunger and thirst for Righteousness: Matthew 5:6

When Jesus was hungry, he was tempted to turn stones into bread. His refusal built on the word of God. Today we have hundreds of thousands who are hungry for justice. They are tempted to turn bread into stones and let the rivers of blood flow. These words give us in small

²²⁶ *Divine Dividends: An Inspirational Reading of the Sermon on the Mount* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1974)

²²⁷ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21 (p. 23).

compass the answer to the thirst for righteousness. It is the in-filling, in-flowing work of God with his people. It is a politics of justice different from what we normally experience. It is the politics of those who are poor in spirit, who mourn and who are meek.

This is not to say that the meek never organize, never strike, never engage in nonviolent direct action in order to confront the realities of inequities and injustice. Nor are we to suppose Matthew is a manifesto rejecting social or political revolution. The spiritualizing of these texts so that they have no political or economic implications is a falsifying of their grounding in the Old Testament.

The first two beatitudes are not meant to describe people with praiseworthy spiritual attitudes. They are not the sorts of things one naturally prays for or engages in disciplines to develop and deepen. The kingdom of God is offered to people who are despised and weak because they are marginal to this world. Socio-economically and spiritually their hands are held out to God alone for help. The great reversals of fate clearly predicted ('the first shall be last...') lurk behind these words as well (Matthew 19:2).

The poor, the afflicted, the famished are just that. Such were the disciples who sat before Jesus. They already were among the marginal of the Roman Empire—provincials whose necks had the feet of the legionaries of Rome resting on them. But they were not numbed, paralyzed or anesthetized by their disastrous situation. They continued to look to God, to believe his promises, to hunger and thirst after the rightful ordering of life only God could bring. It was not the kingdom of Caesar, Herod, or the high priestly Hasmoneans they sought.

The meek display something that can be sought and developed. We are not naturally tranquil or tame in the face of terrible difficulty and unfair distribution of the goods of life. Whether we are a Moses striking down an Egyptian oppressor, a Peter striking out to protect the messiah, or a Saul zealously seeking Christian heretics, we need the powerful presence of God's kingdom and comfort if we are to live effectively upon this earth. We need to learn to be meek in a world of aggressive oppressors, poverty and pain without giving up hope or the active life that contradicts a world that contradicts God.

Hunger for righteousness is like meekness. This is something which we do not have naturally and can pray for perpetually. These are people who desire righteousness so desperately they cannot live without it. These are already righteous.²²⁸ Their longing for justice grows out of a deficit. They look inside and around at their world and they see the lack of the victory of God. They feel the vacuum created where there is no vindication of the right and the righteous. They are stung by the contempt poured upon right conduct. This hunger and thirst grow from an awareness that the world mirrors their own inner response patterns. External evil resonates with internal evil, lurking within and benefitting from the evil without.

Jesus portrays the necessity for a healthy spiritual appetite. Poverty of spirit can be a constricted, narrow, pinched sort of thing, rendering a person faceless—grave, ordered and

²²⁸ Luther expresses discomfort. He sees the Sermon as not first preaching faith and grace but simply outlining the external fruits and good works that faith produces. "'Righteousness' in this passage must not be taken in the sense of that principal Christian righteousness by which a person becomes pious and acceptable to God. I have said before that these eight items are nothing but instruction about the fruits and good works of a Christian. Before these must come faith, as the tree and chief part or summary of a man's righteousness and blessedness, without any work or merit of his; out of which faith these items all must grow and follow. Therefore take this in the sense of the outward righteousness before the world, which we maintain in our relations with each other." *Works, Vol. 21* (p. 26).

passionless. Mourning can become a root of bitterness, completely resistant to authentic joy, as if pain and comfort were water and oil. Meekness can wear the cloth of eccentricity, feeding the habit of niceness until, one day, anger springs out to kill in the name of a tiny fault.

There is nothing more important than a hearty appetite that feeds a strongly vital life. It is not enough to see our poverty, mourn over our past sins and the sins that surround us, and learn the habit of gentleness. We must also hunger for the riches of God in creation, long for present and future righteousness and a world without sin, and desire authentic meekness that is aligned with the strength of God rather than with our fears and weakness.

Why is it that goodness, right living, virtue, doing the right thing seems so pale, colorless and unchallenging? Why is evil so endlessly fascinating while righteousness seems stifling, constricting, life-draining? Our contemporary pop culture considers a full-blooded human being as one who measures out life by the bucketful, buckets full of boozing, arguing, adultery, drugs and sundry other sorts of moral lapses.

When we are challenged to “live a little” we know we are being told that our lives don’t have enough sins or colorful enough sins in them. Do-gooders are displayed as being one-dimensional, pathetic little creatures who never had enough guts to break through to a life worth remembering. If we are not Hemingwayesque or gargantuan in our vices, we are not worth noting. Hollywood neuters and distorts most of the characters it portrays as “religious” or simply ordinary. The mold into which we are pressed by our culture is to hunger and thirst after happiness, powerful and manifold experiences, after wealth and success. To really come “alive” is to throw off restraint.

Part of the problem seems to be that so many who undertake religious goodness trivialize it. They become keepers of petty principles, defenders of eccentric religious fiefdoms, the guardians of some great grandparent’s convictions. Challenging the evils of racism, confronting climate change or feeding the millions of the hungry is major league. In comparison, brawling over whether to ordain women, the merits of rock music, men’s hair length, obscene language and whether to observe Halloween is trivial, even when they involve serious issues.

The larger world also has sized morality down so that showing your “humanity” means failing to do right. True humanity is identified with our flaws. Being holy is only for “saints,” and there are precious few of them (most of whom you wouldn’t want as a friend). Being holy seems to mean being less human, not more.

Clergy are portrayed in several ways in the major media: (1) the harmless, feckless naïve simpleton who doesn’t know the score of life and is always found fiddling with the flowers before an altar; (2) the corrupt televangelist who is only after your money; (3) the twisted, self-righteous, hell-fire preaching prig of a priest; or (4) the all-too-human clergy who drinks too much and is engaging in illicit sex. The implicit message is: Church leaders are hypocrites.

Genius likewise is associated with eccentricity, even madness. Drug-taking and alcoholic binges are essential nurturers and comforters of the superior. Distorted moral character is considered the flip side of being possessed by the muses of great intelligence and grand vision. Extraordinary gifts are supposed to excuse mundane faults and exquisite cruelties. “Be yourself” seems to mean give into an identity and conduct that violates moral and ethical boundaries. Often it is a reaction to misdirected middle-class moralisms.

Even in the Church we are children of our culture and our subculture. Too many of us have had the externals handed down: don’t do this or that, sit this way and sing these tunes but never listen to that music. What is easy to retain and pass on are all the prejudices and compromises imposed within the Church by the so-called weak (Rom. 14). Too many retaining walls have

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness

been erected that the only territory left unguarded can fit on the head of a pin. We have inherited negative and defensive legalisms and moralisms. The liberty of the children of God is exchanged for the liabilities of a religious subculture and its prejudices. We become a peculiar people at odd angles with the larger culture, unintelligent in our engagement with its currents and challenges. We know all about our rules and boundaries and little about the righteousness of God.

We also reflect our larger culture's rejection of absolutes. Having seen too many things welded into the swords of inter-religious moral warfare, the larger culture has concluded the problem is with the notion of absolute per se, not the specific things made absolute and used to begin crusades. We are skittish at appearing rigid and brick headed by advocating the objectivity of moral absolutes. We have been sold such a bill of goods we can no longer carry goodness and its hard edges in our wagons. Our culture has sized morality down, identified it mostly with feeling good and a radically individualized doing what "comes naturally."

Heaven knows, it is not simply the larger culture, wrong once again. We in the church have frequently gotten cultural relativities confused with divine certainties. The contextual applications of a generation ago become the principles of the Scripture of today. We pour more passion into things that are unclear and hardly mentioned in the Bible and neglect the weightier things of God.

A healthy and hearty appetite for the righteousness of God is what is frequently lacking. We have tried to feed people a diet of our own notions of right and wrong and they have starved in the pews and stumbled on the public commons. People have come to the church for clichés and common place values (such as middle-class aspirations, the educational credo, honesty—most of the time, "decency" and good etiquette). We have given it to them. But the hunger and thirst for righteousness is not something we have cultivated or advocated. So, we blithely wink at the cultural rot that celebrates all sorts of misconduct and excuse injustice when it dresses up in suits and uniforms. We create islands of personal piety that have little connection to the destructive forces of our contemporary world.

Mark Twain is reputed to say: "Having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners." This captures a truth: righteousness is frequently off-putting. There is a "goodness" that is not good and a "righteousness" that is not right. But that is not why Jesus spent time with those who did not pretend to be righteous. Nor is it the case that the so-called good people have much goodness. Too many we identify as good people are deodorized, clean-cut, "all American" prigs who have never been on the wrong side of the tracks. We are not turned-off by righteousness but by the atmosphere of self-righteousness or the pale imitation of righteousness. Some are turned-off because genuine righteousness holds up a mirror to them and they do not like what they see.

The righteousness we hunger for is not the defensive negatives of the well-born or the conventionally religious. To be sure, many of their prejudices go in the right direction. It would be a better world without drunkenness, without abortions, without drug addiction, without dissolute life-styles. But it would also be a better world without hypocrisy, face-saving and self-righteous judgmentalism. We live in a strange world of contradictions where we are torpedoed either by irreverence and moral dissolution or by hyper-reverence and immoral righteousness. We ricochet between no absolutes or any and every absolute but the true absolute.

Hunger and thirst don't sound like good things. We have crusades to feed the hungry and provide clean water. Yet here they are. Unlike the Buddhists, Christians view desires as intrinsic to the human condition which is good as created. The only persons without desires are the dead.

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness

Part of the essence of being a human is living on the edge of constantly renewed, powerful longings. Strong desires are a sign of health and vitality. There is something wrong with us when we no longer desire.

We are in deepest difficulty when we have no desire for righteousness. That hunger comes as we face our poverty of spirit, mourn over sins and suffering (past and present) and begin to learn to live a submissive and gentle life with others. Clear-sightedness about ourselves and the world we live in is the best stimulant of hunger for righteousness. Then we know what magnificent differences would flood our earth and history if things were righted and wrongs were no more.

This hunger, Jesus guarantees, will be satisfied. This is another of the promises of Scripture that assures us of the wild hope: God will be triumphant in his creation. No matter what appearances are now; no matter how unredeemed even the redeemed appear. God will come, robed in righteousness, resplendent in equity and justice, shimmering with authentic goodness. Then none will be poor. Tears will be wiped from the faces of all. Those gentle, submissive welcomers of God's kingdom will inherit the earth. All things will be added for those who seek the kingdom of God above all else.²²⁹

In the meantime, we struggle with many other hungers and thirsts. For many of those desires, satisfying them inflames the desire and deepens the thirst. This is not in itself bad. After all, thirsts are not something that ought to be terminated by a single swig of some liquid. Vitality is marked by continuing, on-going hearty appetite. It is neither extinguished by some consumable nor so captivated that one hunger overwhelms all others. Our difficulty is that we become addicted to such powerful substances that they encircle and enslave us in ways the satisfaction of a single hunger or thirst ought not to do.

Food is meant to nourish our body (and hopefully give us pleasure in its texture and taste). The taking of food with others cements our delight in relationship as well. Yet gluttony damages our bodies. A fixation with only the best and the best prepared food can make us into insufferable snobs. Food is meant to serve the health and vitality of life, not become the end of life. When we begin to feed hungers that rage because they are unfilled in appropriate ways, we become emotionally and chemically dependent. We no longer keep in proportion the variety of elements that make up a life lived productively and usefully.

This is a hunger and thirst that will be filled—finally satisfied in such fullness that we will no longer hope or pray for its arrival. Immersed in it, we will be released to live out its possibilities and our own powers. No longer hindered by evil, no longer captured by inner compulsions, we will stand amazed at what a world “righted” looks like. At present, we can only have partial quenching—and thirst again and again.

So many of the things we want drain the life out of us when we get them. We pursue creation rather than the creator. We lust after second-grade consumables while shying away from what is of preeminent value. The temporal displaces the eternal, the glittering the valuable. We seek everything but genuinely want nothing. Having secured what we set our sights on, we then discard it after a few days of possession.

We are filled with haunting hungers that populate us like a legion of evil spirits. We are

²²⁹ John Chrysostom: “For it is righteousness that produces true wealth. Thus so long as you act righteously, you do not fear poverty or tremble at hunger. Rather those who extort are those who lose all, while one who is in love with righteousness possesses all other goods in safety.” Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 85).

pushed and pulled by every passing fancy, every fad and passionate tide of culture. We are ever modern and never at rest. Even the Sabbath is a thing to be consumed. The frenzy of our day turns everything (including time) into money. It then turns us into ciphers whose value and self-worth are measured by that mania.

Jesus tells us that there is a hidden hunger. It is the hunger for righteousness. Buried under our recklessness, under our dissatisfaction, our complaints and injuries, our longings and lusts are a hunger far more powerful than the will to power or our sex hunger. It is a redemptive hunger, longing for a return to the Father's favor after centuries of living in the pig-sties of prodigality. It is a hunger for mercy in a cut-throat, unforgiving world. It is a thirst for peace in the midst of conflicts and anger unending.

What Jesus puts his finger on is the reversal of the garden of Eden's effect. Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. Rather than satisfying and vitalizing life, it ruined it. Rather than becoming like God and knowing good from evil, they were plunged into a history where evil is parasitic upon good. Jesus offers the food that will fill our hunger for righteousness. Living in a confused and confusing world where we long for right because we cannot discern it clearly nor desire it purely, we need another sort of fruit to eat. Yet we keep returning to the false notion that we can succeed as the final arbiters of right and wrong. We make conscience inviolable (even though it may be hardened, seared, ignorant or undeveloped).

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness come to confess that Eve and Adam's meal did not and does not satisfy. The rebellion at the foot of the tree in the garden is undone by the obedience performed upon the tree of Golgotha. The light that pierces our confusion and arrogance is the righteousness of God.

The whole Sermon on the Mount orbits about God's kingdom and its demands. The righteousness of the best and brightest of Jesus' day is not enough. Jesus tells his disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees. Their highest model for rigorous, disciplined, committed right living and devotion to the Torah was the Pharisee. Many of them (like Paul) may well have succeeded in holding to their profession. Not all were greedy. Not all were rapacious.

Nonetheless, these pillars of the synagogue and community became the implacable enemies of Jesus. Some, to be sure, converted (as did some of the elite Sanhedrin in Jerusalem). The major core of Judean leadership may have sensed the threat Jesus was to their hegemony. But there were exceptions. That Jesus singles out the defects of the Pharisees is not an indictment of any and every Pharisee. What he puts his finger on in the remaining words of the Sermon is the strong tendency of the Pharisee to focus on external. They strengthen the boundaries of purity rules and despise those who do not or cannot keep them. Theirs was a righteousness that had an attractiveness about it (witness the final embracing of them by later Judaism). But it was not a match for the sort of righteousness Jesus wants us to hunger after.

When we thirst afresh, we are not to reach for the fruit on the tree of Pharisaism. Having rejected the pig's husks, we should not seek the bark off the mighty tree of Pharisaic righteousness. Jesus does not give us an answer as to how and when God will satisfy this hunger. All of the beatitudes ought to raise as many a question as they provide an answer. What is poverty of spirit—and how will I know I am poor, and not simply acting poor? What does it mean to mourn and be comforted? When do I trivialize sin and its effects by crocodile tears and regret with no repentance? How can I be submissive to the hand of God, living gently with myself and my fellow humans—and not hide aggressiveness behind the screen of niceness? How do I avoid

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the struggle with what is not right by retreating behind a smoke screen of meekness?

We need to be right. Yet we are not. If God does not give us his righteousness, we are lost. If we are not motivated by a deep hunger and thirst that gets us out of our complacency and sluggishness and into great eagerness, unceasing diligence, we will not be filled.

If poverty of spirit is our brokenness in the light of our sin and mourning expresses our bereavement over a world wounded and death-destined, meekness is our awareness of the holiness of God and the beginning of a new hunger. Meekness is the awareness of the positive, that there is something more than a world condemned to all forms of poverty and pouring out its eyes in grief. There is the character and reality of divine initiative. God will remedy the human mess. So, we can display that uncanny mixture of patience, stability, humility, gentleness that allows room for God and for others to take stage center.

Meekness allows me the freedom not to defend myself while giving me the courage to be an advocate and witness to God and to the kingdom righteousness that comes with God's redemptive action. That was Moses and David and Jesus. They too hungered for righteousness. Jesus' keen sense of the fallibilities of the Pharisees was not because he 'out-Phariseed' the Pharisee. It was because his solidarity with God's kingdom made him sensitive to the ways righteousness was absent, even where it is shouted, loudly.

Many of his contemporaries felt the real sin and evil of the day was due to the Romans. Their pagan idolatry and repressive military combined with the economic oppression must have made them seem demonic. There was a theodicy that pinned this difficult and compromised condition on the sinfulness of Israel. Yet it would have been hard for observant Jews not to see the larger sin. They could easily suppose the pagan idolater who lived profligately and cruelly to be the sinner, the paragon of unrighteousness. In this picture they were the suffering servant of Yahweh, waiting patiently for liberation, as did Israel under Pharaoh's boot.

Jesus saw beyond all of this. He did not bring a theodicy to explain the punishing presence of the Romans. Nor did he trivialize sin by finding ritual requirements and the etiquette of Sabbath or purity rules as the sin against the Holy Spirit. Jesus put his finger on the tragic perversion of an imitative righteousness. It had all the form and none of the life, all the Bible verses and none of the God of the Bible. His sharpest words were for the most committed and most pious of his day. Their righteousness in the name of Yahweh was the major obstacle to developing an authentic hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Nor does Jesus turn us more intensely inward, focusing on an endlessly depressing exercise of self-examination. Having a healthy appetite does not take long to discover. It gnaws and paws away at our consciousness. When we see what will satisfy, we are ready. Our inner mobilization translates into outer action. The righteous life is the key Jesus is describing as blessed by God, rooted in an inner longing and desire for authentic righteousness. No wax-figure with enough layers of cosmetics will fool us for the living thing.

It is not a matter of some ecstatic experience, a fiery epiphany or hurricane of emotion unleashed. Religious rapture is not the Siamese twin of righteousness. On the other hand, it is not righteousness when we groan and moan and have to drag ourselves kicking and screaming to do the will of God. Jesus begins with the interior because the revolution he brings moves from the inside to the outside. Yet we can so worry over the inner that we never act as whole persons. Some of us struggle with a life-time of interior gloom. We seem to have had something that turned all the lights dim because of our genes and our upbringing. We suppose if all is not light and bright within, we cannot be in the center of God's love and will.

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What we find in this sermon is the combination (and balance) of the inner and outer. The inner is the starting point because without it the outer never can be right. Yet our worry over all the tiny twitches of the inner life must remain overshadowed by the mercy, grace and love of God. The promise of God is that we will be filled. Hence all the longing springing out of our poverty of spirit and mourning for sin has as its horizon the guarantee of God, not the groveling self.

The balance is the dual necessity to crucify the fallen self and to cherish the created self in Christ. Those who turn us into living corpses, a spirituality of self-contempt and self-hatred, whose spiritual athletics merge with masochism feed the carnal nature just as really as those who indulge it with sugars and silks. Righteousness is not measured by human heroics or sober-faced seriousness. It is measured by the life and character of God. We are to find God's initiative and action enough.

Righteousness is an interesting term. Its meaning (like justice) is often taken for granted. We never seek to say what it means because then we discover how fuzzy we are on its shape and implications. It is so much easier to assume that we know one when we see one, even if we cannot quite say in words what one looks like. If it quacks like a duck, walks like a duck, then it is a duck! We have so many aphorisms that get us off the hook of doing the difficult work of saying what this is.

Martin Lloyd-Jones underlines one aspect (but one only).²³⁰ Righteousness encompasses what is doctrinally called justification and sanctification. Part of righteousness is the personal reality of being made right with God, followed by being transformed gradually into right living, thinking and feeling. One fundamental component of the shalom-ordered world of the coming kingdom is every individual made right by God. There will no longer be sinning sinners but right-living, right-relating transformed sinners.

This side of righteousness is a transformation from the inside out. It begins with what we want, with our desires. When God is finished with us, we will no longer want to sin at all. In the meantime, our appetite for righteousness is itself in the process of development. The very fact that we spend so much time and energy on vanity fair shows how little our appetite is for righteousness. We devote ourselves to what we treasure. Our hunger is often only a dull ache on the edge of our central passions.

Part of that hungering is realizing that Jesus is not simply a commonplace moralist, recommending that we all be more decent and kind people (though that would be a great benefit for all society). The startling part of this teaching is yet to come. We are not only not to bed our neighbor's wife. We are not even to have lusty longings for her or envy over him who is her spouse. We are not only not to bad mouth our difficult neighbor. We are not even to hate him or her. By the time Jesus gets done with saying what are his standards for life, we are stunned. This "moralist" thinks he can command our emotions as well as our behavior.

This righteousness is not simply the integrity that even pagans practice: keeping contracts, doing well by doing right, showing consideration for others and not being difficult. It is something much more difficult, much more basic. It is the integrity of seeing the wholeness of life, of not being able to dissociate the white lie from the damnable lie, of not pretending we are well intentioned while evil comes from "society." It is seeing ourselves in the very center of the mess our world is in.

²³⁰ *Sermon*, pp. 65-67.

The problem with Lloyd-Jones' view of Jesus' words is that it does not fill up the meaning of righteousness within the kingdom of God. It is at least individual and personal righteousness. But it is also civic and social righteousness. Any of us who have lived in Christian organizations find communities that are a little better than those whose principles and patterns are governed by other spirits than Christ. We may all be saints, but there seem to be limits to the saintliness of the saints.

We are still limited by our unfinished sanctification, our unvarnished worldliness, and our unlimited ignorance. We know the power of the Spirit and the poverty of our structures. We look about and see that the saints are as capable as the "sinners" in doing wrong-headed, people-harming, community-destroying things. These sorts of injustice are done by well-intentioned, prayerful, biblically literate people. This hunger for righteousness encompasses a corporate vision as well. Healthy, hearty families as well as vital and life-giving churches. Para-church organizations that are as capable as they are compassionate. Neighborhoods and schools where opportunities for wisdom and goodness are as abundant as opportunities for sports and drugs. Nations and international arrangements that provide for more than self-interest and ethnic superiority.

The circle of things Jesus focuses on begins and ends with the person. All social orders are built up of individuals. Transformation must begin with them. Yet it cannot end with them. Holiness is not an abstract thing apart from individuals. It is rooted in our delight in and reverencing of the character and person of God. Holiness is more than pious feelings and rightly ordered loves. It is being the peculiar people whose motives transcend the personal and social passions and patterns of the world. They are the poverty-stricken, grieving meek who hunger for righteousness and therefore cannot be individualistic, self-righteous "saints."

One of the striking issues in these beatitudes is their enormous reach. We can and need to make the case that none of these qualities in its fullness and purity is simply natural. The meek are not people blessed with a meekness gene, while the rest of us must struggle to act contrary to or beyond our heritage. Those who mourn are not the melancholy souls whose dour spirits are depressed most of the time. This is not a matter of personality tendency as such. In some ways one might say all of these are contrary to our nature as it now exists.

Yet Jesus did not speak these words just to the disciples: to the true believer alone. There are degrees in these matters: how poor must we be in order to be poor in spirit? How much must be right before our longing for righteousness is satisfied? How many actions of mercy make us merciful? To be sure there is explicit reference at the beginning and ending to the kingdom of heaven. These are eternal qualities, character traits that will survive the great change that's coming. These are first and foremost statements given to Christ-followers. Those who are persecuted for his sake are blessed. It is not any and all suffering, any and all virtue, any and all poverty that is the basket in which God's fullness comes.

Nonetheless, we can acknowledge that we see hints and harbingers of all these qualities even in those who refuse Jesus as the Christ. The imaging of God by his living icons does not stop simply because they want it stopped or refuse to acknowledge where their powers are sourced. Any god-fearing person who responds out of their dim knowledge and acknowledgement of their sin and need will know a touch of the living God's mercy and blessing.

We need not be surprised or disappointed when we find people more right-thinking and right-living than some of our fellow Christians.

Theological universalism is wrong-headed in thinking all people adequately cooperate with grace and are saved or will do so one day. Or that God must fit our picture of love and not permit any to be successful rebels to the end. The Christ who calls all to follow him in faith and obedience is also the Christ through whom and by whom all things are created and hang together. Even when people do not affirm Christ, he affirms them in their creational goodness. Yet at the judgment, it will not be those who have simply said with their lips, “Lord, Lord,” but those who have lived righteously, caring for the poor, comforting the mourning, living gently with sinners, peacemaking and offering mercy who will be welcomed into the kingdom.

God is not limited by the Church or Christians. God is not bound to the means of grace, but we are. So, we must not say more than Jesus does. Those who are blessed by God are also those who feast upon righteousness. They are active in pursuing what that might mean in their world and their lives. It is not piety or impiety that counts, but the vital power of God’s blessing upon an unrighteous people and world. That blessing is pronounced as coming through faith in the word of Jesus Christ. It is not those who live by the abstract principles of right and wrong or those who are sincere in their religious and ethical life. The foundation to build on are the words of Jesus Christ (the unique foundation). The task of the church is not to teach people moral platitudes but to make disciples who conform their living to the patterns of Jesus’ words.

What Matthew teaches us is that there is a world full of people who do not hunger and thirst for righteousness. While many other things might be said of them (including the righteousness that does peep through despite no longing for it), the central thing is that their heart of hearts is dominated by other hungers. The great commission at the end of Matthew is an acknowledgement that what Jesus teaches is not the unveiling of the deep structure of a universal human nature. People must be baptized in the triune name and taught to observe what Christ commands. It does not come naturally or automatically, implanted by liturgy or recitation of sacred formula. Righteousness is both a gift and a demand, both an event and a process. But its center is Jesus Christ.

This is a pivotal word among the beatitudes. It looks back to the inner heart-responses of need—and forward to the outer words and actions of authentic disciples. It is right that we acknowledge our true state before God. It is right that we insert ourselves into human affairs so that we are merciful, pure, and peace-making. Righteousness is not one or the other. It is the whole-personed transformation that happens as we are filled with the goodness of God’s blessing.

(g) The Merciful: Matthew 5:7

Mercy is seen in the meek. Because the meek admit they are wrong-doers, they have compassion on others who also are caught in doing wrong. Their gentleness with those who wrong them is known by the name of mercy. Yet mercy extends to those scarred and ship-wrecked by sin. Mercy is help and comfort given to the suffering and troubled. It is the ability to stay with the pain and struggles of others, standing with them in their failure, showing mercy on others because we know ourselves to be subject to the same sins.

Mercy is what is promised to those full of mercy. Forgiveness is one sort of mercy. It too is linked with the promise of God’s forgiveness. The unmerciful servant was the one who could not and did not forgive the minor debts of a fellow servant. The nature of the blessing of God’s forgiveness is such that we cannot experience it without it developing in us a tender heart toward

others. If we are unable to forgive, we do not know the forgiveness of God.

In the forgiveness we extend to those who have painfully wronged us, we enter emotionally into the act of God's forgiveness. The death to self that forgiveness requires is an acceptance of the pain of the sin without vengeance exacted. In knowing that pain, we begin to understand the pain of God in forgiving us for even worse disloyalty and betrayal. Forgiveness does not exhaust mercy. But it is the deepest and most painful sort of mercy. It is easy, out of our abundance, to bring relief to strangers who suffer the effects of sin. It is almost impossible, out of our paucity, to bring relief to the monster who has brought us undeserved suffering.

With mercy, we move from matters in the beatitudes that orient us primarily inward to things that orient us outward. The actions of the kingdom come into focus. These foreshadow what the demands of the greater righteousness of the Sermon will outline. Love demands that we care for the enemy, not just family or friend. Love demands that we exceed the law of reciprocity and give to others what they do not deserve and may not be able to return. Love demands more than an inner response but outward behavior. If our hearts are right, then our hands and feet will move in the ways of righteousness.

Those who are full of God will be full of mercy. The pious are not the dispassionate, the rigid and controlled, the always-correct and never-wrong. Those marked and mastered by the piety of Christ are the compassionate. To have the compassion of God is not to live in denial or to trivialize either the guilt of sin or its consequences. The mercy of God is a very tough thing. It is not mercy (or forgiveness) that dismisses the pain or the guilty party as having done nothing wrong or only a little thing. Compassion means one stays with the fullness of the reality yet stays with it in an active seeking of how to alleviate the suffering, how to bring a new beginning, where to find space for forgiveness in a messy and difficult situation.

Here's the dilemma: first we long and strive for righteousness. Then we give to wrong-doers something strict righteousness does not command.²³¹ Strict righteousness or justice means death. Mercy means the commutation of justice's death sentence. How can mercy and righteousness co-exist? How can we insist on people receiving their due and then give to wrong-doers good they do not merit? Does not mercy violate the spirit and letter of justice? Does not mercy efface justice, by-passing the moral structure of the universe by helping people avoid the just consequences of what they have become and what they have done?

Part of the answer is that mercy is what we all have in life from God. We've placed ourselves under the death sentence by our sin. Yet God in mercy provides room for us to continue to live, to continue to have chances to live differently, to repent and discover our poverty of spirit. Righteousness is the bottom line. Mercy is an interim measure. It aims at providing the time and incentive for us to claim God's in-filling so that we conform increasingly to the profile of life we see in Jesus Christ. Mercy given and mercy received are what restore in us an appetite for righteousness. If it does not, then we will face the just master once again.

²³¹ Luther sees this beatitude as protecting us from becoming "abominable" saints who, in self-righteousness, despise and condemn others harshly. "If a man deals with his neighbor in an effort to help and correct him in his station and way of life, he should still take care to be merciful and to forgive. In this way people will see that your aim really is righteousness and not the gratification of your own malice and anger; for you are righteous enough to deal in a friendly and gentle manner with the man who is willing to forsake his unrighteousness and improve himself, and you tolerate and endure his fault or weakness until he comes around." *Works, Vol. 21* (p. 30).

“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (Jas. 2:12-13 TNIV)

There are two things mercy responds to: the misery that sin brings to life and the full penalty of justice incurred. It moves to relieve the misery so that people are able to recover more opportunity for fullness of life. It agrees to reduce the penalty of justice so that a person can live a different sort of life. In either case, what it is extended is a kindness, not an obligation.

The promise of mercy for the merciful is not a sort of note indicating that what goes around, comes around. This is not a statement that life (or God) works so that what we give to a person they will someday give back to us. Androcles and the Lion is just such a story. The thorn removed from the lion’s paw, saving his life, is repaid in the arena when the lion protects Androcles from the ravages of the other hungry animals. That is the story of optimistic utilitarianism: do good to others and in time your turn will come and good will be done to you.

This promise is not an incentive. It is not the carrot held out before the reluctant donkey of a Christian. It is the guarantee that the God of all mercy will be the partner and companion of those who are merciful. These words are far more than the pious phrases of a spiritually exalted soul, impractical and unrealistic. We must remember the context and times in which these were spoken.

At this time the Roman boot marks the roads and markets of Palestine. Their ruthless and unmerciful behavior are well known. There are few families who do not have someone in their kin crucified or sold into slavery or dead in a time of war with the Romans. To be sure there are good, God-fearing Romans. We read about Centurions who build synagogues and who treat Jew and slave well.

But the heartbeat of the average Palestinian is for freedom from the Roman yoke. The last thing they wish for are words advocating mercy—or love of enemy. They want leadership, strong decisive action, vengeance, an eye for an eye. They long for fulfillment of the promises of victory and vindication. Mercy is what the Romans needed to learn. Justice is what the Palestinians want delivered to the Romans.

To have mercy praised on the heels of the hunger for justice seems to spoil this line of teaching. It opens the door not only to be poor in spirit before God, but also before the arrogant in spirit and the hated Roman. What is being asked is that the person be merciful even in the context of a merciless exploiter. If mercy is no more than reflecting back mercy to those who are merciful, then it is not a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees.

If our hunger and thirst has been satisfied, then we who are poor in spirit will have something within: mercy, purity and peace. Jesus gives a range of qualities that characterize those who experience the blessings of the presence of the kingdom in their lives. They can afford to be merciful because it will not remove from them the great treasure that can never be taken from them. Their concern is not with the etiquette of ritual purity but with the purity that is rooted in the heart. Their singleness of motivation and vision will not be troubled by the fragmentation of the self that leads to mixed messages and actions. They will be able to act as peacemakers because they do not divide the world simply into aggressors and victims or sinners and saints.

Nonetheless, we sense here a troubling prospect. Isn’t mercy wasted on the merciless? Isn’t this a counsel of weakness in the face of overwhelming strength? Isn’t this giving people the best advice they can have in a context of defenselessness? Doesn’t this allow the wicked to continue

being wicked? Isn't mercy the permission for the powerful to exploit the weak?

We must be careful. Normally mercy is something shown by those with resources to those without, by those with some power to those who can benefit from that power. This is the mercy of not executing the gladiator who lies defenseless on the ground at the end of the champion's sword. It is the mercy of the good Samaritan, helping the naked and unconscious man or the king to his hopelessly indebted servant. Mercy (except forgiveness) is not something frequently shown by the weak toward the powerful except where misfortune has humbled the powerful. In that context, mercy may be extended by the weak to the strong.

Mercy is the compassion of righteousness. It is the heart that hurts in the face of the grave losses experienced by fellow human beings. Mercy is pity that understands the dilemma and helplessness of others in difficult, even if deserved, dead ends. Mercy builds a bridge over troubled waters and offers a way out.

How do we show mercy?

First, we do it by moving toward those whose circumstances are so difficult they are unable to care for themselves in the ways we ordinarily do. Mercy means having such compassion as to understand the difficulty another human being is in. It reacts to the tragedy that inhabits life but does so wisely and prudently. This is not the repeated refueling of the resources of the alcoholic or the compulsive gambler who are now homeless because of their addiction. This is not facilitating vice. It is relieving misery.

So, we refurbish houses for the poor and homeless. We provide job opportunities and training for the unemployed. We feed the hungry and give clothes to the cold. But all of this is done within the confines and out of the motives provided for by the righteousness of the kingdom of God.

We do not humiliate the helpless or flaunt someone's weakness to their shame. Mercy joins with meekness in sensitivity. We protect the name of those we serve, not making something of the failures that led a person to misery. Mercy joins with righteousness in giving and aiding in ways that restore possibilities for people to exercise freedom responsibly. We remember, with Calvin, that the poor are God's test of the rich to see if they will exercise the grace and mercy of God. The poor are God's means of grace to protect the rich against avarice and the powerful against pride.

Second, we show mercy by taking on the sins and relieving others of the guilt they incur in relationship to us. Jesus asked that God forgive those who crucified him. Stephen prayed that the Lord will not hold sin against those who unjustly stoned him to death. If love is the ocean from which the gentle rains of mercy come, mercy is nourishing moisture that enables the tree of forgiveness to bear much fruit. Forgiveness is an expression of mercy. Mercy is an awareness that the sin of others separates them from God. Willingness to take the burden of that sin (though Jesus alone has finished the work of forgiveness) is an act that expresses our imaging of God. We long to share the sufferings of Christ. Among those sufferings are ones that come when we die to our desire for vengeance against those who harm us in sinful ways.

This is not to start down the path of the Roman Catholic idea of merit. But Protestants have frequently not sensed something important in that idea. How is it that we can ask God not to apply guilt to those who so blatantly sin against us? From whence this mediating dismissal of sin? Is it not part of the act of forgiveness? We not only release the other from the guilt they have

toward us, we ask God to release them as well. Forgiveness is more than a simple transaction between an abuser and victim. Part of the process of forgiveness is coming to the place of not only saying, "I am free from my emotional drive to harm the other: I forgive." It is also coming to the place of desiring that they do not suffer God's just retribution either.

This is to say that mercy aligns us with the character of God. God is longsuffering and abundant in mercies. Part of our being priests before God is serving those who are yet to acknowledge their guilt, yet to end their harshness and wickedness. Jesus told his apostles that they could release people from their sins or retain their sins. Protestants hardly know what to do with such Scripture. We should at least be able to say that mercy is the clemency we ask from God for those who have sinned against us.

Third, we show mercy by confronting others who stray from the ways of God. Our brothers and sisters in faith need mercy as really as do our enemies. We are told to admonish one another, to encourage and reprove, to correct with gentleness those who are in opposition. Mercy is a form of tough love as well as tender love. It is the merciful thing to intervene in ways that will snatch a person out of the fire."

This means we must have a relationship and know the person we seek to aid. We prod people without being self-righteous prigs. This is not prying into business that is none of ours. If we are Christ's, then we belong to one another. What that means and how it plays out in being able to help takes discernment, wisdom and practice. At present we hardly see this sort of activity. We watch our fellow Christians flounder and fall yet we stand by mute. When we attempt a clumsy intervention, we are curtly told to mind our own business. Mercy has yet to find its wings and soar in most of our Christian circles.

(h) The Pure in Heart: Matthew 5:8

Purity is first of all something that is unmixed, without foreign matter contaminating its homogeneity. Pure gold is without other metals. Pure honey has not been spoiled by other substances. Purity in heart refers first of all to an undivided, unfragmented interior. There is no shadow, no hidden second face, no secret agenda. It is a heart whose motives are unified and without guile.

The pure in heart are those who live in the light and by the light. They need not lie or trick. The clarity and unity of their self is such that they can live with integrity. There is no hypocrisy or phoniness to them. Their progression in the characteristics that mark those who belong to the kingdom brings them a healing of the self. They find they are able to live with a oneness in their inner life and an openness with others. There is a basic honesty with God and others because there is a basic honesty with themselves.

This purity of heart thus is not something that is simply interior, simply individualistic, simply hidden. Where it exists, it manifests itself in daily living and in the manifold network of relationships. One cannot be pure in heart and impure in word and deed. The heart, hand and tongue are bound together. Some have tried to think more systematically about purity and its various forms in order to spell out what is in view here. John MacArthur claims there are five kinds of purity:²³²

Primitive purity. This is the kind of purity that exists only in God. It is as essential in

²³² *Kingdom Living Here and Now* (1980). Chicago: Moody Press (pp. 131-132).

God as light is to the sun, as wet is to water.

Created purity. This is the creation of a pure being before the Fall. God created angels in purity, and He created [humans] in purity. They both fell.

Ultimate purity. This is the category of glorification. Ultimately all the saints of God will be completely pure. We are going to have all our sins washed away, not just positionally but practically. First John 3:2 tell us: “We shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.”

Positional purity. This is the purity we have now by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. When you believe in Jesus Christ, God imputes to you positional purity. When God looks at a Christian He says, believe it or not, “You are right, absolutely pure, in Christ.” Romans 3 says the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us. Romans 5 says we have been justified because of what Christ has done. Galatians 2:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 say the same thing.

Practical purity. This is the hard part. Only God knows primitive purity. Only God can bestow created purity. Someday God will give every saint ultimate purity. Right now, every saint has positional purity. But we have a lot of trouble trying to live out what we are in position, don’t we? That’s why the apostle Paul cried out in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

There are problems with this analysis. It is a helpful schema, suggesting ways of thinking about purity that we might otherwise miss. Yet it tends to slide back into a notion that this beatitude is focused on either an unreality (i.e., that God pretends we are pure when we are not (positional purity) or on our own efforts (the living out of our positional purity). Nor does it give us much insight into “heart” purity, which is the focus.

When we discover how impure we are in reality, how powerful is the presence of sin, how frequent is the necessity for us to return to the stance and state of mourning because of our own sin, we conclude that God lives in denial and that God asks from us an impossibility. Either way, God comes off as a cosmic idiot.

Part of the problem is that this analysis does not start at the root of the matter. This is not a matter of purity in the sense we normally think of it in our highly immoral and impure culture. Nor is it a purity that is simply positional and must now in daily life be produced by will power. It is something different than either of those.

First, we must be sure we are not simply remaking this beatitude according to our fears. We hear this as “blessed are the prudes” or “blessed are the sinless.” We often hear “purity” as sexual chastity and faithfulness. In this view purity means people have their sexual behavior and relationships in order and, if they are spiritual giants, have no feelings or urges of lust anymore.

One of the reasons we narrow this beatitude down is because we know ourselves to be disordered and out of control sexually. We have a terrible struggle with our own sexual identity and feelings. We have a terrible time living in a culture that is sex-obsessed and sex-saturated. On every hand we are bombarded with invitations and models that tell us genital sexuality of all sorts and with all sorts of partners is the highest and holiest of rights. It is the pinnacle of love and the greatest fulfillment in human living. When we discover how ordinary and difficult sexual relationships are, we crash inwardly.

We church people have been pummeled by these cultural illusions. What we say seems so

hollow and unreal to our young people. Hollywood's distortions, the talk-shows' extremes and the psychological assurances overwhelm virtually all of our attempts to build a platform for sexual sanity and sanctity. Consequently, our tendency is to grasp at every mention of purity and trot it out as sexual purity. We know we need more of it and are convinced that our culture and young people are risking and losing their lives in the pursuit of Hollywood's lie. We become obsessed, shouting a counter message into the sexual hurricane.

What this beatitude takes aim at is much deeper and broader than sexual purity. Sexual purity is included, but much more besides. The heart is the core of our being. The Sermon will continue by returning again and again to our interior world. If we suppose ourselves to be pure in heart, we will be strongly challenged when we consider our evil thoughts of sexual immorality, hatred and covetousness and our evil words of slander and false testimony. Why do we do such things? The root lies in what we are and aren't in our heart.

We must say that purity of heart refers to a practical reality that comes by the power of the kingdom. When Christ rules over all within, there is the undivided, unashamed, uncontaminated inner life. The light has so shown within that the person has the "single" eye. Mark Twain wrote: "Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody."²³³ This is not true of the poor in spirit who become the pure in heart.

To be sure there is a dark pool within us all, a reservoir of uncleanness and insanity. We can drink from it and be poisoned. We can swim in it and be polluted. The child who is born is such a gift of joy and delight that we suppose it innocent, and innocent it is of what we adults have made of ourselves and the infinite possibilities that surround us. But even that child has the dark pool already within. We are not the pure of heart who have lost the innocence of childhood. We are the polluted of heart who have come to experience the dynamic cleansing offered only by God. That is what it means to be blessed by God.

That cleansing of God breaks down our insecurity, our anxiety over the vulnerability we have because of our impurities and sins. We don't want people to see into the depths of our being any more than we want to look there very often. When we do, what we discover is discouraging and disheartening. In response we often substitute some external set of ritualized behaviors as adequate for achieving purity. We turn this into a contest.

We create ladders of purity and sanctity. The universal tendency is to look downward at those we think must be lower on the ladder than we are. If we are not the compulsive self-haters who are always trotting out Mother Theresa, Francis of Assisi and other great saints, we are the obsessive self-congratulatory who trot out Hitler, Stalin and the local child molester. We see ourselves as higher on the ladder and so figure we should not be bothered much by "human nature" after all.

God marks all of us who focus on the externals and constantly compare ourselves against others as the self-righteous. The self-righteous are the least likely ever to realize their need for purity of heart. They will never see God because they are preoccupied with fellow humans in these illusory judgments. Purity of heart is what delivers us from self-pity or self-pride. It does not have room for woe-is-me or look-at-the-divine-in-me religions. In the end it has room only for the sight of God, full of holiness and compassion.

Being pure in heart means a remarkable degree of integrity and unity of self. Of such a one we say he or she is unimpaired, unmarred—whole and complete. Through and through this one

²³³ *Following the Equator*, Chapter 66.

is consistent and undivided. All elements of the inner life are aligned and work together. Integrity is the commitment to the best and the consistency in living out those commitments even in the face of adversity.

One might wonder: can there be a unified “purity of heart” committed to the worst, dedicated to the kingdom of darkness? In this life we must answer, no. We are made in the image of God. Only when the civil war within is ended by the crowning of the true king in our heart, only then is there genuine unity in the self. All other principles of wholeness and consistency are at war with the essential nature of who we are. Purity of heart may be a practical matter, an empirical reality. But it is not the appearance of inner harmony of self that is in view. It is the reality of inner harmony, of singleness of motive and action.

People do achieve remarkable degrees of integrity and unity of self by wrapping their lives around a variety of centers besides God. People can develop astonishingly subtle and complex systems of truth that exclude the truth of God—and then bend heaven and hell to live in consistency with their system. Yet in these cases the ultimate fate of both is hinted at by the denial built into them. They love the proximate and deny the ultimate. They create a caricature of reality and then call it reality. They exist only within the margins of yapping guard dogs, vigilant to keep the fuller truth at bay.

So, purity of heart is more than simple sincerity, as much as sincerity is an integral ingredient. It is the genuine unity of the self that is created when the blessing of God floods into a fallen and poverty-stricken self. It is the result of the mournful and meek person who passionately seeks the righteousness of God in every corner of reality. God’s satisfaction of that hunger is first of all a filling full of mercy and then of purity.

Part of the passionate quest for righteousness is engaging in the disciplines of righteousness. It engages the word of God in serious manner in order to discern what within is only a dream-fantasy planted there by the larger world. It means over time we substitute the words of God for our own words about God, the practices of righteousness for our habits of unrighteousness, mercy instead of our harshness, meekness instead of our bullying. We begin to see ourselves, our neighbor, our world and God in very different ways because we have embraced the word of faith and understanding.

For faith leads you up and opens up the heart and will of God for you. There you see sheer, superabundant grace and love. That is exactly what it means ‘to see God,’ not with physical eyes, with which no one can see Him in this life, but with faith, which sees His fatherly, friendly heart, where there is no anger or displeasure.²³⁴

Mercy and purity are essential accompaniments of each other. Without mercy, purity can become a rigid, self-righteous, unctuous sanctimoniousness. When purity is seen primarily as an outward matter, a matter of negatives or the absence of certain sorts of behavior, then it is lost to a religious atheism. It is the religious talent buried in the ground.

The compassion of mercy is the only frame that can make the picture of purity look appropriate in human life. The merciless pure are those who pursue an adulterous woman, seeking her execution even before Jesus. The merciless pure are those whose moral calculus is so askew they strain at a gnat and swallow camels, celebrating minuscule virtues while neglecting

²³⁴ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21 (p. 37).

the weightier things of God's law. Without mercy purity of heart sucks the lifeblood and warmth out of a person.

Yet the compassionate mercy of the beatitudes is not without the purity of heart that sees God. Mercy is not a stand-alone moral virtue. There were strange contradictions in the moral and political crusades for civic righteousness of the 1960s and 1970s. How many of their passionate leaders and followers lived lives of moral contradiction. How is it that personal lives could be such moral wrecks at the same time they were pouring out energy and intellect to rectify the moral wreckage of public life? The compassion for the victimized, the marginalized, the distressed and discarded was at high tide. At the same time, their personal lives were ravaged by drugs, broken vows, sexual promiscuity, and uncompassionate relationships with friends and family.

Jesus joins compassion to purity. True mercy sees not only the misery of the other, created and flourishing because of sin. It sees its own contribution to such misery in large and small ways. Its longing for righteousness is a longing to be healed of its own propensity to sin. To be merciful is not to excuse sin even in one's self. It is to long for inner healing, the healing that unifies the self and leaves it pure before God and human beings. Such a healing does not remove compassionate mercy. It provides the very sort of person who can live that compassion out without pretense, without burning out or without becoming self-righteousness. There is no terror like the terribly righteous whose purity is the condemnation of all rather than the compassion for all.

What does the promise that is connected to purity of heart mean? What does it mean to see God? Is this more than the notion that God receives into his courts at Temple those who have "clean hands and a pure heart" (Psa. 24:3-4)? Is this stating for all to hear what it takes for one to come into the presence of God? Or is this something deeper and more profound in its implications?

If we accept the reality that the kingdom of God is both present already and yet not here in its fullness, then we must admit that the full circle of the meaning given here involves the eschaton. There is a day in which God's reality and presence will be unfolded for all to see. To see that world is to be admitted to the presence of God (to be "in heaven"). The promise here is that the final beatific vision is for the pure in heart. Those blessed by God are to be congratulated and celebrated because they will have the honor of seeing God. Their future is the most desirable possible.

Nonetheless, this beatitude is for the here and now as well. God is to be seen now, not just later. The benefits of the Old Covenant, intermittent as they were and selective in their distribution, are now secured for all who participate in the New Covenant. The Spirit who came and gifted some is now fallen upon all who believe.

There are those (like Paul and John) who are caught up into the hidden realm of the heavens where God dwells, there to see things that are difficult to communicate. Stephen saw Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of the most high God as he was dying. These seem to be as unusual in their occurrence as they were in the Old Testament. The visions and theophanies of God are still rare (it is only in the final state that we will live in the constancy of the glory of God's visible presence). What we must ask is whether there are other ways in which we "see" God now.

We know that what we see is often dependent upon what exists behind our eyes, not just what is in front of them. There is an infinite manifold of sensory experiences that flood our physical eyes (and our inner in-sight). What Jesus has in mind may well be the physical

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experience of the resurrected body—actually and literally seeing the glory of God in the fullness of the coming Kingdom. Some have even defined hell by this reality. Hell is to have seen God and never to be able to see him again. This glorious sight is so wondrous, so majestic and profound that there is nothing to which it can be compared. It is the priceless pearl, the treasure worth all one is and has to possess. But this beatitude has more to do with insight than with physical sight.

We come blind, deaf and dumb to our world. We cannot see most of the worlds within which we live, worlds that are immediately present, but to which we do not pay attention.

The botanist can enter the garden forest glen in which we stand and see dozens of plants and life forms flourishing around us. We have just asked the ranger, “What is there to see here,” as though it were a boring, uninteresting, “ordinary” forest. We scan the same night sky as the astronomer. We look at the same painting or sculpture as the artist. We hear the same noises as the musician. Yet we do not recognize the symphony of sounds in their progression and intricacy.

Think of the ornithologist, the entomologist, the auto mechanic or the nurse. We live in the same world. How much we do not see. There is a spiritual kingdom all about us, enclosing and embracing us, altogether within reach of our spiritual perceptions, yet we say we do not see or hear it—and hence we cannot speak of it to one another. “The whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6). Jesus is with us to work a miracle—to open eyes that are blind; to open ears that are stopped; to loosen the tongue to declare the glories of the majesty of God in his world.

What we see is partly a function of what is in our hearts. Without the sensitization of purity of heart, we are told, there is no ability to see God. With it, we will see God on every page of Scripture, in every movement of nature, in the mysterious pains of suffering and the glorious explosions of pleasure. The earth is full of the glory of God and we are blind, deaf and dumb to it. We have filled our visions with so many other things that we see not God’s presence and activity for us and toward us.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God!

What then blocks our vision of God? Why do we not see God? One important answer is that we are not looking for God. We are looking for many other things. Controlled by sexual drives, we scan our world for sexual objects. Dominated by the lust for power, we see everyone else and every situation as a minefield, where we may be minimized and our power limited. Struggling with the need for recognition, we see every encounter as holding the possibility of rejection or the slighting of our importance.

What we see is a function not only of the objectivities of the world around us but the subjectivities that color and control our inner life. If we are not pure of heart, then our viewing and valuing can well be tinted, if not polluted, by things other than the realities of God’s kingdom. We can look at our world and the people who share it in a variety of ways.

Michael H. Crosby looks at it in this way:²³⁵

The eye is the body’s lamp. It reflects the inner commitment of the hearts. Out of it shines either light or darkness. If the eye is pure (simple), so is the heart. If one is absorbed in the experience of God’s reign and will, the whole personality will be endowed with light’s perfection. The eye is what gathers information and shapes it for our consideration and response. We can look at our world in a variety of ways, some of them only taking in the surface. These external “looks” see many other things than God.

²³⁵ In his *Spirituality of the Beatitudes* (2005), Rev. Ed. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. (pp. 144-149).

(1) The “curious look” is compulsive, a looking rooted in inner anxiety and fear. It is distracted, preoccupied, worried about power, possessions, prestige. Never able to settle down. Always scanning for signs of potential loss to oneself. So, it needs to “know,” needs to be vigilant in gathering as much information about what others are doing and thinking. It pries and probes so that potential danger can always be avoided.

(2) The “look of pleasure” is on the search for what will give quick, rapid, intense pleasure (a quick relief from inner pain—the Alka-Seltzer philosophy of life). It is seeking mood changers. It is rooted in addictive habits of drugs, food, cigarettes, sex, possessions.

(3) The “ideal look” is controlled by our striving to be better or the best, dominated by the tyranny of the “shoulds” (I should be more beautiful, more intelligent, better disciplined, more graceful socially). We are so unable to accept our true selves that we judge ourselves and beat up on ourselves and judge others. We have the critical eye, always seeing what is wrong with ourselves and others. And we have the envious eye—seeing what is outstanding in others and resenting that we do not have it. What we see is dominated by comparisons.

(4) The “look of resentment and unforgiveness”—the angry look that accuses others, blames others, disparages others. This is the victim mentality, the super “skunk” who is always sure when things go wrong that someone else screwed up. Other people are problems, difficulties, hindrances, enemies. They are not viewed as fellow strugglers, candidates for compassion and caring. They are the reason my life is so painful and difficult.

We might add a number of other “looking” patterns:

The “fashionable look”—so controlled by advertisers and trend setters we are occupied with catching the “look” in clothes, hair styles, hip phrases. We are obsessed with being cool, being “bad,” Every nuance of change, every new style is noticed, and we allow ourselves to be controlled and manipulated by what’s “hot.” Those who do not fit the newest and the trendiest are seen as nerds and losers.

The “covetous look” sees what there is to possess and is possessed with the longing for more, bigger, better, faster, flashier. What is valued is rare things. We see ourselves in our possessions, especially those that others do not or cannot easily obtain. We see the world as something to be owned and disposed of.

The “lustful look” reaches out and considers others as potential sexual partners. It sizes up the erotic potential and sees the person as the sum of their socially defined sexual qualities.

In all these ways, what predominates in our inner life conditions what we attend to in the world around us. Only the pure in heart see God. Because they are not divided in their heart, their eye is not blurred. They can see things as they are and for what they are. They can see that God is actively involved in every day, every movement of nature, every event that comes their way. They can see that God is richly blessing them.

Purity in heart is perhaps the most difficult matter we encounter in these beatitudes. The absolute singleness of the interior is something we do not find in ourselves or others.

It is one thing to be poor and downtrodden and thus without resources. Yet my sense of being poor in spirit is mixed with a secret pride and inner congratulation on being better than my roommate or the jocks, the egg heads or the party animals. Self-esteem gets mixed up with self-pride. It becomes a barrier to dependence upon God. The sins of passivity and self-hatred become the ground of so-called poverty of spirit. We avoid the sin of pride by committing the sin

of sloth. One part of us knows how desperate our need is. The other part is recalcitrant to any such notion. No matter how straight we get our ideas, our emotions do not follow.

It is all well and good that I cry over my stupidities and weaknesses. My mourning is often half-hearted because I do not sense much that is drastically wrong—or it is mixed with a hundred excuses and blaming of others for the shortcomings of myself. Can it be that a nice person like myself stands on the same moral ground as the cruel slave-master, the drug kingpin, the insensitive bully, the monster who molests children? Or do we make the “truly evil” into the “actually sick” so that none of our species need be accountably horrid? Our moral calculus for ourselves and our social worlds seems bent on allowing for sin—up to a point. So, I wind up divided, carved into partial grief and partial defensiveness, into regrets and no apologies.

My sense of lowliness, humility, or gentle openness to being controlled and guided by God is tainted by “practicality” and the “real world.” I clothe myself with the “gentleness” of strength and self-control, not of weakness and lack of resources. I will allow anything but being humbled, especially not in the presence of others. Show no weakness is my motto. Nice guys finish last. It’s a dog-eat-dog world. So, I take this beatitude and praise it in women, in children, in servants, in followers but not in myself. Leadership involves something different from meekness. Meekness is good in church, but not at work or in the family.

My hunger after righteousness is only an occasional twinge—not a starving soul’s passion for righteousness. We hunger for a little righteousness, not for all of righteousness. We want to be seen as doing the right thing, but we don’t always want to do it. When I think of the time and energy I expend, so little of it is in the pursuit of the justice and righteousness of God. I hallow many things, but God’s person only slightly more than the many forces and factors that dominate my world.

Our kind mercy is mixed with noblesse oblige, with the handing out of benefits by the superior to the inferior and we puff with pride. I am inwardly conflicted as to how justice and mercy fit together. I want mercy for myself and justice for those who have caused me deep pain. I am also in trouble when I attempt to be merciful, not sure at all whether and for whom it will soften and change for the better instead of inciting to more bad behavior.

Our peacemaking is active so long as we don’t have to risk, so long as we are guaranteed recognition, so long as we are seen as breaking down barriers that need leveling rather than meddling in others’ affairs. One blast from one side of a conflict and we are out of there. Sometimes we want peace so badly we are willing to sacrifice justice, truth and mercy. Inwardly, my own anger gets hooked and produces an ambivalent, clumsy response. I want people to listen to my pain and find it difficult to listen to the pain of others.

Our pursuit of the Christ-way hesitates or even halts whenever we sense criticism, opposition, or hostility. We will go with Christ so long as the road does not lead to persecution or death. How can it be that I might finally be pure of heart, gentle in approach, just in passion and merciful toward others—and yet find people reviling and hating me? If I follow the Christ-way, should I not be admired, appreciated, blessed with the affirmation of believers and unbelievers alike? How can being and doing right lead to persecution? I am inwardly afraid because of this tag end of the beatitudes. I want peaceful co-existence more than righteousness, benign tolerance more than Christ-identification. I am ambivalent about God’s blessings, if that means human cursing and persecution.

My discipleship is mixed and confused. I am a walking civil war. My personality fractures in a welter of conflicting intentions, without a clear and simple goal, without a north star which

governs my decisions. Purity of heart points at simplicity and integrity. Simplicity means that there is one dominant, unmixed, unfragmented whole. The personality in all its wrinkles and folds is centered and clear. Purity means the absence of the sorts of pushes and pulls that indicate we are at war with ourselves, that parts of us are committed to diverse and conflicting goals or principles.

Simplicity is not a matter of shallowness—not knowing the plurality of goods and the conflicting lifestyles offered in the marketplace of life. Nor is it a matter that our ability to commit is dysfunctional—so that we are not committed to anything and can sail through life without any wind of change or challenge affecting us. Simplicity is the clarity and singleness that enables us to stay attached to that to which we have committed.

Integrity is an alignment between right action and right intention, a transparency that means the impression given corresponds to the authentic commitments one is making. Integrity also refers to the commitment to do what is best even under conditions of adversity. It is likewise a union between inner intention and outer words. A person of integrity is one whose inner life is not compromised in ways that make it difficult to keep commitments when it becomes costly to do so. Integrity is part of what purity of heart means.

Those who are insincere are not pure in heart. Their pretense and masking of actual intentions or commitments is an expression of a divided heart. They say things that hide their feelings in order to deceive others. So, they cannot be relied upon to do what they have promised to do. They claim to be committed to something when they aren't. They lack the inner attachments they claim they possess.

Hypocrites are also not pure in heart. They may not be insincere, yet they act in deeply contradictory ways. Their avowed principles and purposes are undermined by the actual pattern of behavior they display. Their self-presentation and status claims are at war with what they wind up doing. Hypocrites often are deeply committed people, yet they are also fundamentally self-contradictory.

The Pharisees were highly committed, extensively principled, carefully trained people. They thought deeply about the law and its claims and sought to spell out its implications in detail. It was that very zeal for the law that brought many of them into the Christian movement—when they discovered their zeal was without true knowledge. They attempted to do the same thing we see so commonly about us today: combine a love of God with a love of money and status.

In this way, they were not only hypocritical but were self-deceived. Purity of heart involves not only an inner singleness, but a simplicity that is centered in light, not darkness. It is possible for there to be what appears to be an integrated personality and lifestyle. The concentration and committed nature of the people engaged in following the pattern may be impressive. Yet the implicit nature of the principles to which they are committed should correct the behavior they undertake—and it does not. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisee's hypocrisy was that they lived within a field of rationalizations that fundamentally compromised the principles they professed.

A person of integrity embraces a demanding way of life and does not allow prudential considerations or adversity to outweigh their commitments. Integrity demands that such a person be open to growth, flexible where commitments conflict, sensitive to relevant information about the truth of their beliefs, and consistent in what they believe. The person of integrity exercises discernment and wisdom, knowing that principles and rules cannot map what is right and good for all relationships and situations.

We can speak of different types of integrity: intellectual, moral, religious, artistic, professional.

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As is the case with a person's roles, some central sort of integrity acts as governor over all the rest. Jesus' claim is that our purity of heart is to be governed by our vision of God. When the commitments of various sorts of integrity conflict (as Eric Liddell's commitment to a sabbatarian rest on Sunday conflicted with his athletic goals to win the Olympics), then the higher order commitment supersedes the lower. Liddell may have been "weak" in his view of Sunday, his knowledge not yet adequate to the freedom we have in Christ, yet he was pure in heart in choosing to forgo running on Sunday. He was a person of integrity.²³⁶

How then do we end the inner civil war and come to the place where our heart is undivided and thus our eye is single? What does this most interior and most ethical piece within the beatitudes drive us to do? Are we condemned by our very nature not to find peace within? This standard is not simply an abstraction. Jesus goes on in the Sermon to indicate how the interior life is critically important to the sort of righteousness that structures the kingdom of God.

Part of the answer comes later with the Lord's prayer. Jesus teaches us how we must come to God—as those blessed with these characteristics. This is not a matter of "will power," as though we might will ourselves into such a condition. God lays the foundation in Jesus Christ, and we build on it. The words Jesus gave are the preeminent words we must allow to master our thinking and outlook. Only hearing and doing them will build on the foundation of rock.

1. We must end our exceptionalism. We are not the exception before God. Only Jesus is. The rest of us are all goats who need a change of nature and identity, if we are to be sheep (Matt. 25). We start with coming to God who is to be addressed preeminently as "Our" Father. We are before God only with others of our species. We are not peculiarly loved, distinctively hallowed, uniquely bestowed with qualities that others do not share. Nor are we the sinless and the pure—unlike the other scum or dirtbags.

2. We must acknowledge that the source and meaning of our being resides outside of us ("in heaven"). Our origins are from God and our destiny is to return to him. This identity as a child of God is to dominate without erasing all other possible identities. Our purity and impurity, our correctness and incorrectness, our righteousness and unrighteousness are first before God. We come with all our fellow humans. But we stand before a loving and holy God.

3. The single most significant thing we can do is reverence the person of God. When we begin to hallow God's name, we discover how much is distorted and damnable—in our lives and the world in which we live. God is ignored, maligned, blamed, re-imagined, rejected, recruited, subverted, bullied and trivialized. We pervert God by subordinating him in so many of our sinful projects. God is a stick to beat children into submission and justify the violence of home and war. God is a tool in ideological warfare for reforming social arrangements and legitimating whatever lifestyle or biological necessity people claim for themselves. We are to hallow God above all else and have no other gods besides the living God and Father of Jesus Christ.

4. We long for the will of God to be done on earth as pervasively, persistently and perfectly as it is in the heavenly places. There are many lordless powers that demand our allegiance. There are many wills (including our own) that seek to dominate and determine the nature of life and the distribution of its goods. We pray for God's will to be done, and thus turn from our own will and that of a thousand other clamoring claimants.

²³⁶ Hamilton, Duncan (2016). *For the Glory: Eric Liddell's Journey from Olympic Champion to Modern Martyr*. New York: Penguin Random House.

5. We acknowledge our ultimate poverty. Whatever we possess, however secure our job and large our pension, however significant our financial opportunities and excellent our inheritance, we are dependent upon God for the simplest of daily sustenance (“give us this day”). The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. The mystery of our life is that it is bound up with the provision and promise that God will care for us—not that we will be without difficulty. To orient our attitude toward God’s provisioning presence is to see ourselves as bringing nothing with us that is guaranteed. There is no warranty except that God listens. When we pray for sustenance, we say “our” once again. We will not eat alone and exist as though our surplus belongs to us by rights of private law or effort. What God supplies is supplied to us, even if it is temporarily given to me.

6. Forgiveness is at the heart of living. We need it. We mourn for the pain and suffering we cause to even those we love and treasure most. We grieve because we fight. Reconciliation is something we need with God and with one another. We do not hallow God adequately or do his will sufficiently. We do not share our possessions with the poor and needy as we ought. We are not merciful—not as merciful as God is or as we want others to be with us. Who will make peace for us—and will we help make peace with others?

7. In the end we see ourselves as weak, not so pure in heart that temptation from without cannot seize us and succeed. We need deliverance from the Evil One. Only God can do that. We begin and end with God.

Another part of the answer comes in the remaining Sermon on the Mount. To recognize purity of heart we must be aware of inner contradictions, those things that shed light into areas still plunged in darkness within. Without the instances of what the righteousness of God entails, we mistake a little decency for a lot of purity. This is not a sermon for the lightheaded or the shallow. We cannot pin the conventions of society on our lapel and march forth as paragons of the Christ-followers.

Nor is this a manifesto that can be taken in tow by a particular church party—whether fundamentalist, evangelical, Pentecostal, liberal, Orthodox or Catholic. It undermines all our pretensions. We cannot take up the swords of ecclesiastical warfare and support our claim to be the only authentic followers of Christ, the pillars of the truth and the stalwarts against heresy—whether heterodoxy or hetero-praxis. Christ undermines us all with the matter of purity of heart. How can we stand by his side and spit on his disciples?

To be sure we look even here to Christ himself as the exemplar of this quality. So pure in heart was he that he could say (in John) “I and my Father are one.” There is the ultimate in singleness, simplicity and integrity. There was no darkness at all in Jesus because of his singleness of eye. His vision was filled with the reality of God. His life manifested that unity of self and alignment with the kingdom of God. No circumstance, no encounter pushed him off the center of his mission or into impure and unholy responses.

This is why we cannot look upon his extraordinary outbursts of virulent condemnation as petulant frustration venting itself unfairly. Purity of heart is not the pious walking about with hands quietly folded in prayer or contemplation. It is not passivity of heart and withdrawal from life. This is not some otherworldly ideal that can only be approximated if we remove ourselves to a monastery to avoid temptation. Jesus waded into the hurly-burly of a complex and morally messy world.

Nor did he shy from scorching language when he detected the hypocrisy of sin dressed up as religious purity and orthodoxy. Those few encounters with the Pharisees that ended in the same sort of fiery denunciation we heard from John the Baptist were not examples of Jesus having a bad day—a little off his piety. They were themselves the expression of purity of heart. To see God is also to see anti-God. It is startling that the boundaries that separate the two are not where conventional religion draws the lines.

We develop purity of heart by living closely with the story of Jesus—the story of the Bible and its many characters. It is the grace of God at work within us, ironing out all the folds and wrinkles we have put into our selves by our years of bad habits. Yet it is a grace that works with us and mobilizes our time and energy in the very activities that produce those effects. So, we find ourselves engaged by the spiritual disciplines, allowing ourselves to be probed by the workings of the Spirit in Bible study, prayer, solitude, simplicity in living, meditation, submission, fasting, celebration, confession and so forth. Purity of heart is a divine fiat. It is also a daily task.

The problem we have is that we confuse our own inadequate and mixed motives with the purity of heart demanded and promised. So, we rage on abortion picket lines, not out of mercy or purity of heart. Our actions become the trajectory of years of habit formation and character flaws that steal life from others and create tragic enclaves of pettiness. To be pure in heart is to accept the costly contradiction of being committed fully to the righteousness of God and to peacemaking, of being committed fully to the justice of God and to mercy, of being committed fully to accepting the blessing of God and the curses of humankind.

The tensions of holding these various vocations and outcomes together requires the undivided heart that knows the blessing of God's power and presence within. It is only then that the diverse contrariety of character we see in Jesus remains attractive and convincing. Here is someone children felt safe with and Pharisees did not, one who lived in complete purity of heart and life and yet was merciful and understanding with a woman caught in adultery. He was meek and humble, yet armed captors fell down in fear before him when he presented himself, unarmed, for arrest. We must live a life that has such polarities and do so from a heart that is whole.

(i) Peacemakers: Matthew 5:9

This quality is joined with the promise that such will be called children of God. In a word: god-like. To be the child of someone is to share in their features, to be marked by the inheritance of their make-up. Those who are children of God are recognizably so because their character and action resemble that of God. This is not to say that we become children of God by so behaving. First comes what we are—then its manifestation in the features that show what we are. The expression is rooted in our being.

Peace is rooted in the reality God wills for human existence. Peace was present in the Garden of Eden. Peace is present in the final condition in the New Jerusalem. The angels declared peace when Jesus was born. He is the Prince of peace. He bestows peace upon his disciples in the midst of their fears in the upper room.

The theme of peace is present not only where we find the actual word. The rest people are offered in the Sabbath is a form of peace. The drivenness that we find rooted in our spirits because of the futility and difficulties that attend a fallen world expresses an absence of peace. There is a calm that characterizes inner peace. It is a sense of security, a restful trust that all the important elements of life are in competent hands.

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Peace is also present as a theme when we see people who seek to confront violence and hatred. The mutual suspicion and hostility between Jew and Gentile, even in the Church, expresses the absence of peace. Christ's atonement makes one new whole out of the former Jew and Gentile in the community of faith. Peace is the ending of struggle against the interests and intrigues of the other—even against the differences of the other.

Male and female, educated and illiterate, Greek and barbarian—there are many armed camps. When they are not fighting, they often coexist in a state of ready alert. “Peace” is the time when they rearm for the next great war. Yet Christ's politics transcends all these politics. What he offers and how he changes inner drives and attitudes is fundamental to bridging the gulfs that have grown up.

Only the merciful can be at peace. There is too much objective guilt in the world to find room for peace if strict justice reigns. Where there is no forgiveness, no forgetfulness, no mercy, there will be no peace. One generation will hand on its unsettled business to others. The sins of the parents will repeat themselves for millennia as we see them in many contemporary conflicts.

There are many things that are not peace—though some of them are better than open conflict. We may look to them as interim measures, lesser evils, cracks in contentions through which the light of true peace may shine into darkness. Peace is not:

1. Armed truce: A ceasefire is an advance over a hot war. Often it is time to tend the wounded, restore strength for exhausted troops, resupply the food and firepower, all in prospect of continuing the struggle. There is no mutual submission, no surrender, no ceasing of the goals of domination and power.

2. The quietness of the cemetery: Here all arguing and shouting is done. There are no court cases or acts of vengeance. There is only the stillness of rigor mortis. We say people who have died are “now at peace.” But that is only partially true. Death is a grim reaper, not a peace-maker. It marks the cessation not only of struggles that mean ill to others but struggles for righteousness and peace-making itself.

3. The lack of conflict between master and slave: Disparities of power and the threat of violence by the powerful can create the appearance of harmony. There may be no strikes, no demonstrations, no overt violence, no revolt or revolution. The absence of battle may only indicate the overwhelming domination of one party over another, the existence of a state of affairs where struggle seem completely futile. This is not peace.

4. Church-playing when we are hostile toward our sister or brother: Many congregations are smiles and handshakes, at least among each clique. Yet there are unforgiven wounds. There are those no longer attending because they have been frozen or forced out. Still, we come, smiling, playing “Church.”

5. Pacifism: Peace is not an ideology. It is a state of affairs, a reality of a community of righteousness. Pacifism can be a step and foundation in the building of such a community. Still, it can festoon the company of the rigidly righteous, who exclude and shun those who disagree with the eldership's power. Power can be exercised in a domineering and merciless fashion without sword, jail or Magistrate. There is much to repent of by the larger community's (and Church's) pressures and persecution of the “peace churches.” There is much within those communities that have not fostered peace within their own ranks or even peace for the larger civic communities. But they stand for “peace” in terms of intra-group conflict.

6. Not caring enough to confront one who has sinned against me: Peace is more than the avoidance of unpleasantness. We don't like making "scenes", so we do not make peace. We try to ignore the pain and the sin, dismiss it without dealing with it. Not knowing how to confront the sinner, we try to marginalize the victim, silence the anger and hide the pain. It is often easier to dismiss the complainant than to challenge the offender (who may be powerful, popular and vindictive). This too is not peace. That we've avoided a fight does not mean we've made peace. We may simply have allowed the sin to root even more deeply than before.

7. Not appeasement or conciliation: When contention breaks out and scenes happen, our response is to get things quickly quiet, to cool off rather than to get to the irreconcilables in the situation. If it looks like it will cost us too much, what we want to do is to placate the powerful, to let them have a part of what they want. We tell the victimized and the weak that things could be worse, to take half-a-loaf or they will lose it all (when it was their whole loaf in the first place). Rewarding bullies because we don't want the pain of taking them on is not peace making. It is teaching the powerful another way they can get their way.

Peace-making is more than peace-wanting or peace-loving or peace-living. It is making peace. It is bringing harmonious community, bringing the best to the sides that find themselves at odds over matters they care about. Here we have people who have lived long enough with the help God gives to the helpless that they can be helpful even to those who think they need no help.

It is Jesus who defines the shape of peace-making. He does not do so by commending the power of arms and the genius of generals. His disciples are not fighting for earth and blood. They do not carry the sword to secure large fortunes and assets, or to sustain a visage of invincible righteousness.

Jesus does not display the concern never to have conflict. His life was conflictual. He struggled with the Pharisees and the demonic. He did not trust the powerful. He violated conventions in ways that he knew would raise hackles and create controversy.

Nonetheless, he was a peace-maker. His peace-making involved a great deal of time given to the Pharisees—the very ones whose blood-pressure rises to murderous heights. Christ's life was very conflictual, but not bloody or violent. He urged the love of enemy in an era of political oppression and exploitation. He modelled the pursuit of righteousness and holiness in the midst of society, not withdrawal from it into islands of peace.

Some question whether this verse or even Jesus himself is relevant to the realities of politics. We must claim clearly: Jesus is not irrelevant to the questions of the legitimate shape of justice-seeking or peace-seeking on our part. Moving from injustice and death-dealing patterns often passes through the valley of the shadow of death. But we cannot give our actions and attitudes over to the lords of contemporary conflict management.

The assets we mobilize are not tanks, mortars and well-trained divisions of soldiers. The actions we take, however, are not aimed at avoiding conflict or confrontation. There is a managing of conflict, not so that there is a win-win outcome or a maintenance of some beneficial status quo. Peace-making is in the service of the goals of the kingdom, the overwhelmingly important righteousness and justice of God.

What means are legitimate in peace-making can only be answered in a Christologically-centered manner. The measure is not success or effectiveness, but faithfulness to the lordship of Christ. Our ethic is an ethic of obedience. Our model is Jesus Christ. Our assets are the Sword of the Spirit and the armor of God's righteousness. None of this exempts us from asking very

difficult questions.

The most immediate question is whether the soldier can be a Christ-follower. Does the model and word of Christ exclude the seriously committed Christian from serving in the police, the military or the judiciary? How can the force exercised in our civic “orders” be reconciled with the peace of Christ? If we hunger for righteousness, are merciful, gentle and pure in heart, can we use forceful coercion as a means, ever?

What about the example of the early Christians who left the armies of the Caesars in droves? Was not the Church pacifist from early on? Can we have a non-pacifist Church that is faithful to Christ? Was not the Church thoroughly corrupted by the Constantinian reform? Has not the Church been wrong to lionize so many who were violent? Did not Constantine himself use his power to kill family and enemy instead of to engage in peace-making? Can peace-making be done at the end of a gun? Is violence and force a contradiction of peace wherever it is used? Does it ever beget the peace of God?

The reformed answer has been that the peace of God and the wars of humans are sometimes aligned. The problem comes in saying when and how far they overlap. In the abstract it is not difficult to say that the use of force to end forceful criminality seems justifiable. In a fallen world, if there are to be human kings and queens (with their armies) who represent and serve as God’s intermediary, dispensing justice and displaying the authority of righteousness, then force and violence can be means of God’s grace.

In practice, the humans who serve that mediating function are sinful instruments, capable of being corrupted by power and self-defensive when they have been abusive. Samuel understood the by-products of an increasingly complex Israel where centralized power had become attractive. The aristocratic elite that grew up around the kings and queens of Israel guaranteed their wealth in the midst of the poverty of Israel by the armies and warriors they equipped. The grave disorders of agrarian aristocratic states overcame the institutions of mercy built into Israel’s Torah.

Yet David, bloody David, would become the symbol of the Messiah. The defects of his own behavior and rule were not sufficient to set aside the imagery of God’s kingship and kingdom. There was enough of an overlap that God elected such a man to stand as a sign of God’s desire to bring justice and peace to all the earth.

Further, God is portrayed as a Warrior in the Old Testament. Only those who are pre-committed to pacifism or infected with idealistic liberalism will find that immediately offensive. Those whose doctrine of revelation reduces all communication in the Bible to the reflective response of humans might see this as the symbolic sediment of an aggressive Israelite imperialism. Yet these are inadequate to the phenomena as we encounter it. Only those whose comfort is secure have the luxury of supposing the force and violence of God is inessential in a world of injustice.

What is striking is that God as Warrior does not take this or that particular side of human politics. God sides with the weak, the little ones, the widow, the enslaved. God’s liberation of Israel is definitional of his character and politics in this world. It does leave God vulnerable to being subverted into the petty god of nationalism or socialism. This theme does not provide high walls to those who wish to subordinate the major themes of Scripture to the powerful sinews of realpolitik.

So serious have been these subversions of Scripture that not a few have used progressive revelation as a moat to set Christians firmly on the shore of pacifism. These earlier actions of God

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with Israel were adaptations to inadequate understandings and less than ideal political necessities. They were the left hand of God when the right could not move. Christ now makes clear what is the prime will of God and what was the concessive will in the Old Testament. So, we cast aside the imprecatory Psalms, the justifications of Israel's warfare, and the images of God as a warrior as legitimating any human warriors. Now we live within and under the full Lordship of the Prince of Peace. Anything less is a sinful return to a temporary measure. Such is a pacifist viewpoint.

Those of us who cannot relate the Hebrew scriptures and the New Covenant in this way have to offer something better or join our pacifist brothers and sisters. The Christ of the New Testament is the same Christ already present and active in the Old. Progressive revelation there is. But not quite in the pacifist way.

1. The story of Israel is more than the story of failure and hardness of heart. There is capital punishment in the Torah. There is self-defense and warfare against the enemies of Israel. There are commands of God to root out the Philistines lock, stock and barrel. Disobedience to that command left Israel vulnerable in the land and brought corruption that ate at the very spirituality and sociality of the way of life the Torah instituted. The specific wording of key texts makes it extraordinarily difficult to walk this path and not cross a dangerous line either way. God commanded warfare. The language is no different than God commanding love of neighbor. For the pacifist the danger is creating a double standard that is arbitrary. For the nonpacifist the danger is taking commands to Israel and applying them to contemporary conflicts, as though there were some functional equivalents between our nations and Israel.

2. The establishment of the Davidic dynasty, of kings and queens in Israel, was not simply concessive. It was also part of the promise to Abram and part of the Deuteronomic speeches. Human kingship might be a fragile and corrupt instrument—but so is prophecy, priesthood, and ministry (even the ministry of Apostles). Violence is a terrible thing—but so too is nonviolence that allows violence to run amuck. Politics in the fallen world may be an emergency order as the Lutherans put it. But it is an order, not simply a disorder. Power is exercised perfectly only by the perfectly righteous God. Power is not in itself evil or unnecessary to human life.

3. Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus demand soldiers cease and desist their profession. The Pauline vice lists never include soldiering as evil (while thieves and murderers and adulterers are told to end their behavior). The problems that are underscored are the misuse of the power of their position. They are to be soldiers, but not greedy. They are to be soldiers, but not use force to extort and exploit. They are to be soldiers and wield the sword for the benefit of righteousness and as a terror to evil doers. Jesus does not confront the centurion, caught in the act of soldiering, to tell him to go and sin no more. There is not a single shred of evidence that the Old or New Testaments presupposed acting as warriors, soldiers or police was inherently evil. On the contrary, it assumes their legitimacy and provides ethical guidance for human civil government.

4. We Christians are told to pay taxes even to the evil Empire of Nero. We are told to honor kings and respect Magistrates. We are told to acknowledge the legitimacy of human authority as having its final roots in the authority of God. At the same time there is a sustained critique of actual human governments. This matter is one of grays, one of lesser and greater goods and evils. The state can be a servant of God (Rom. 13). It can also be a beast (Rev. 13). What we find in human civil government (and church government) is the mixture of goods and evils. At any given time, the mixture can become tilted so decisively in one direction or another that an overall

evaluation might label it as though it were one or the other.

5. Peace-making begins at the interpersonal level. If we do not do the small business of pursuing peace with everyone with whom we have dealings, we will not do it in the larger business in group conflicts or nation-states. For many situations the logical and important peace-makers are the heads of state or their ministers. To them and other agencies such as the United Nations these words must have their effect. They too are blessed if what they do is make peace, a difficult thing to do when there are so many pressures to make profit, make racial dominance, make national glory, make military superiority.

None of this is to say that there is some sort of Christian government, some form (democratic capitalism, constitutional monarchy, libertarian anarchy, industrial socialism) that is Christian when others are not. There is no single Christian politics. There are Christian principles and people. There is the discernment of the Spirit for the times and issues that shape the future. There is the possibility of being the children of God and living in alignment with the kingdom of God. These are possibilities that need to be actualized in contemporary history. Jesus opens the door for Christians to do that out of meekness, purity of heart and a hunger for righteousness.

When we turn to the personal and individual, there is much that can be said without settling all the complexities of politics in a fallen world. If the beatitudes are rooted in character and describe the nature of the person who experiences the blessings of God, then we must include this beatitude along with the others as addressing the personality and attitudes of the child of God.

It involves: a person who is peaceable, not touchy, ready to explode, defensive or insistent on minute observance of rights—not cruising for a fight or quarrelsome. This delegitimizes leaders who are warmongers, who seek revenge or fight at a moment's notice. There is an absence of party-spirit. Such a person is one not prone to externalize interior conflicts, projecting fears onto others and settling old business with others by reenacting traumas from the past.

Positively, such a person actively seeks change in the status quo, not allowing “sleeping dogs to lie,” goes out of the way to settle disputes and builds the foundations of right living and relating. This is not a person who simply is easy to get along with because she or he has no strong commitments and few principles. These are people who have learned to be active for the righteousness and rights of God in the universe.

What leads us down the path toward becoming peace-makers in this sense? There are several preconditions and habits:

1. The tongue must be mastered. We must know when not to speak—and when we speak what to say that is life-giving and peace-making (truth with love and grace). It is the tongue that sets great fires of conflict going (James 3:3-6). On the other hand, the tongue can often say the very words that extinguish them. We must not say different things to different people or shade the truth for the sake of peace. The peace-making of Jesus is wed to truth-telling that is gracious, non-defensive and non-coercive.

2. We must relieve the sufferings of others, identifying with those who are aggrieved and assaulted—seeking their good and the civic justice that provides legitimacy to the power exercised in the name of order. We make peace when we till the soil, not just tend the plant of peace. The fruits of peace come because of deeply rooted conditions and traditions. The habits of peace must be learned and practiced.

3. Confession of faults to one another must be happening. There is so much invulnerability

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behind conflicts. Why is it getting in the Christian community requires admitting we are wrong, but once in we act as though we could never pronounce the “w” word over our actions and thoughts again? We must be able to say that we have done wrong and need to be forgiven and accept that forgiveness from others.

4. Forgiveness is essential. We are not likely to find our world suddenly without wounds or sinners or monsters. If we do not know how to forgive and do not practice true forgiveness, peace will not come—either to us (inwardly) or between us and those who wound us. The goal of forgiveness is restored trust and relationship. In a word, forgiveness finds the fullness of its fruit in reconciliation. This is equally the fruit of peace-making.

What we need are people who do not lose their head or their heart when all around them are. What is it that creates people who are not driven but called, not distracted but comfortable, not destructive but constructive? Where does the inner singleness come from? Where can we find leaders who are not preoccupied with their status and honor, their agenda and challenges? Leaders who listen without losing their own principles, who empathize without sacrificing justice, who lead without creating new conditions for conflict?

The answer is already given. They are leaders whose lives have been transformed by the touch of the blessing of God. They are leaders who are learning their poverty of spirit, who mourn over their sin and the sin of the world, who are gentle with themselves and others, who increasingly long for God’s justice, who are merciful and pure in heart. They are peace-makers for they live in and by the kingdom of God.

❖ Discipleship and Conflict

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness sometimes means conflict is unavoidable, even coercive violence. When one sees a woman in an alley being assaulted by a criminal, “peacemaking” involves more than persuasion, or worse, ignoring it by claiming to have no responsibility. A major part of “peacemaking” means creating a moral ecology within which peaceable relationships between people and groups is possible and fostered. But when the moral order is shattered by the actions of a group or person, then peacemaking’s first step is restoring the moral order by restraining or even killing the evildoer(s).

There are times and situations within which the normal processes of peacemaking are impossible. Then conflict and oppositional relationships are essential. The judge in a criminal case is not charged with peacemaking so much as insuring that justice is done in the face of the actions of the evildoer. The policeman who witnesses a grave threat to the innocent by a gun-bearing, murderously motivated agent cannot stand aside on the grounds that he or she is a peacemaker. The state bears the sword in the service of restoring the moral order within which peacemaking and keeping are even possible.

What is clear is the goal of the disciple is peace and reconciliation between alienated and hostile parties. We are not to seek conflict or be responsible for initiating it under ordinary circumstances. Our active, persistent striving should be for peace among all parties in any sort of conflict. When conflict breaks out and there is a clear aggressor who is guilty of breaking the peace, we cannot remain neutral.

The means are not always clear. Peace does not mean appeasement, giving into the will of the bully, the imperialist, the blackmailer, the assassin. It does mean lessening tensions, seeking

solutions, bridging yawning differences, and ensuring good communications. But Christians have differed on some of the means. Some see this beatitude to be a personal virtue, something exercised in interpersonal relations only but not always viable in international relations. While the state's stance is heavily biased toward seeking peace in the arena of nation-states, there are times when military violence and war are justifiable.

Others see this as applying to anything in which the disciple participates so that consistently following Jesus means never participating in war (or coercive violence of any sort). Pacifism comes in several flavors but all of them advocate abstention from taking an active military role that involves killing an enemy.

(j) The Persecuted Matthew 5:10-12

It is hard to get through our thick skulls that the various blessings tied to the qualities of living listed above are not rewards. They are marks of persons who participate in the kingdom of God. They do not exhibit those qualities in order to gain the blessings promised. Because they belong to Christ, because they listen to his words and take them seriously, because they embrace the good news of God's kingdom and repent, they are blessed. That blessing brings them the experiences of comfort, inheriting the earth, being filled with righteousness, mercy, the sight of God, being acknowledged as like God. But it also brings opposition.

What is described here is persecution, not punishment. In punishment we are given (when rightly done) what we deserve for wrongdoing. The boys who beat a fellow teen to death with a baseball bat are punished by the sentence of years in prison. That is not persecution. The Christian who is fined for cheating on his taxes is not persecuted. The Christian woman who is fired from her job because she has been sloppy in her work is not being persecuted. John Chrysostom puts it this way:

“But to keep you from supposing that being slandered of itself makes people blessed, he has added two qualifications: first, that it happens for Christ's sake, and second, that what is said be false. Do not expect to be blessed if you are being reviled for something evil, and what is being said is true.”²³⁷

This is not any and every opposition. The Christian right may feel persecuted when it is opposed for its political agenda. There may well be items in their platform that accord with the justice and righteousness of God. Such opposition is hardly persecution for righteousness' sake. It is a matter of policy disagreements in large measure, for there are Christians in the political middle and left who pursue righteousness as eagerly and intelligently.

This has another side to it, of course. Bonhoeffer, standing in opposition to the Nazis, was persecuted for his “political” loyalties. The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church drew the clear theological boundaries for Christian living in that German fascist context. The Nazis tortured and killed Christians who refused to compromise their commitment to righteous mercy and singleness of sight. When they sided with God and took up the advocacy of the hunted Jew, when they repudiated racial superiority and warmongering, they were persecuted for Jesus' sake.

It is difficult to say when a political climate and order crosses over to a place where opposition is a form of standing with Jesus. What we witness today is moral disintegration of major proportions in the United States. Perhaps it is only more visible because it has become less hidden and shifted from the conventionally more acceptable sins to those less acceptable to

²³⁷ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*. (p. 90).

middle class sensibilities. Yet when the stand against many of these matters is used to divide the Christian community along political party lines, then it is questionable whether the opposition is persecution for Jesus' sake.

The rest of the New Testament accords with this distinction. We are not to suffer as murderers, thieves or meddlers. We are not to behave in ways that violate the clear norms of ethical and civil morality. In quiet lives that are lawful, we are to commend ourselves to the highest and best ideals of our society. Persecution will come when we find ourselves fired from jobs because we are lawful through and through. It is happening in countries today that ban religion or religions other than the majority Islam. It is happening in India and China, in Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, in Peru and Chile. It is happening even in the USA.

This sermon is about righteousness because it is about God and the kingdom of God. The dilemma for the Christ-follower is right here. The genuine righteousness of God is something they hunger and thirst for. Yet they are in danger of being persecuted for it when they are filled with it. Part of righteousness is the willingness to be and do right even when adversity is intense. That is the meaning of integrity.

What sorts of things bring persecution? Why might righteousness lead to the intense opposition that maligns, slanders and even kills?

The commands of the Sermon on the Mount suggest some reasons. Those who hold to Scripture as the very words of God, who see its teachings as from God, may be considered ignorant fanatics. Those who will not hate, who seek reconciliation and do good to the enemy will be called traitors and cowards. Those who struggle for sexual purity will be labelled prudes and puritans. Those who embrace fidelity in marriage will be taunted as out of date, as unrealistic and foolish.

Truth tellers who will not varnish reality or lie for convenience will be seen as out of touch with what is necessary to make life run well. Their integrity will cost them because they will not change their promises when circumstances change. Their nonviolent response to persecution and injustice will be seen as weak. Because they will not take part in scapegoating or the violence against the outsider, they will be called traitors to the group or nation. Their righteousness will be considered self-righteousness by others; their witness to Jesus Christ will often be skewered as intolerant and offensive in a pluralistic world.

The intensity of group conformity norms is heightened when there are insiders that do not follow them. We live in a world of conflicting authorities, powers that claim allegiance and demand obedience. It is not always clear where and when those imperatives conflict with our unconditional allegiance to Jesus Christ. Persecution comes partly because people rightly sense the Christ-follower as one who cannot and will not give unconditioned loyalty to any human group.

If groups or persons create either/or: 'Either give up Christ or we will throw you out of the family'; 'Either swear this oath of loyalty or you will be fired'; 'Either come with us to vandalize the property of these Jews'—then the Christian faces persecution. Jesus did not create a people who seek trouble and wish persecution. This is not a movement of masochists (or sadists). Yet their shift in loyalty and principle often brings them into direct conflict with other group imperatives. Husband may be separated from wife; parents from children; friend from friend; employer and employee. Jesus came as the Prince of peace, but what often results is a sword.

What this last beatitude does for us is to banish our romanticism. We long for paradise. We hope the entrance of the kingdom of God into human history will bring the new world where

right is triumphant and rewarded invariably. We hear the repeated word, “Blessed,” and read into it all our wishes and longings. We have been misled by notions that happiness is the good luck of no misfortunes, no tragedies, no pain, no struggle. Yet in a sinful world, as sinful people, we cannot expect so much.

This is not the final state of affairs. It is the interim period when Christ is here in weakness. The good soil lies side-by-side with the bad. The wheat grows together with the tares. The net gathers in both edible and inedible fish. There is no final separation of the righteous and the unrighteous until the very end. In the meantime, not only is God sowing his children, the Evil one sows his as well. We cannot expect righteousness to be welcome or even recognized in our history. Nonetheless, we march with different orders to a different drummer than the ordinary in our society.

As the poor in spirit, we renounce the security of possessions. As those who mourn, Pollyanna attitudes or “positive thinking.” As the meek, the implacable pursuit of our own “rights.” As those who seek righteousness, our own righteousness. We renounce vengeance or unconcern when we are merciful. We break with duplicity, hypocrisy, insincerity, guile and a host of other manifestations of the divided self when we take on purity of heart. As peacemakers, we renounce party-spirit, indifference and withdrawal. As those who stay loyal in the face of intense persecution, we renounce our own safety or recognition as the heroines or heroes of this age.

In any of these renunciations there is potential for clear and ready opposition. People do not understand and will activate hatred toward those who live in ways that are different. They are threatened by difference, however much they may mouth tolerance and pluralism. If we do not agree with them, they will put us down.

(1) Righteousness: We bring opposition and trouble upon ourselves for many reasons. We are fanatically overzealous and make nuisances of ourselves. We are foolish and unwise in our principles and behavior. We are obstinate and overbearing in our manner. We are self-righteous and harsh in our judgments. We are self-seeking and insensitive to the needs and dignity of others. There is but one reason for real trouble that is blessed: our loyalty to and practice of right ways of thinking and living.

(2) Resentment: When persecution comes, our initial response is to ask why me? We may bring such a question to God, so deeply rooted is our feeling that all things good and wonderful will come if we are well behaved and well connected. Why me? Those of us who are self-doubters will rummage around, supposing there must be something wrong I did to have this happen to me. Those of us who are other-blamers will suspect that wicked and venal people are up to no good again. So, we resent God. We resent the people who are causing us pain. Yet this emotional response can carry us out of the ways of righteousness.

(3) Rejection: We can decide the pressures are so great, the cost so high, the dangers so fearful that we break down and give up the faith. The good seed that has sprung up in our lives may wither when the heat of the sun of persecution dries up the limited roots. We can compromise and reshape our lives to the patterns the pressures seek to conform us to.

(3) Retaliation: Or we might break out in hostility—and give back in like kind. We have learned the law of reciprocity so well that we assume one person’s injustice to us is grounds enough for us to return the “favor.” So, we curse them and plot against them. We seek revenge and retaliate in every way we can imagine. It may be character assassination. It may involve the damaging of property or the striking out against person.

Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are the persecuted

(4) Rejoicing: This is the response that is supposed to come with persecution. It is strange to command what is an emotionally-rooted response. It indicates that emotions are deeply connected with the way in which we view things. We may suppose that “we can’t help ourselves.” But even that is an outlook that gives us permission to feel and think a given way. We are not what we think we are. What we think—we are. This command is not that we should live in denial, stoically denying that we feel any pain. Rejoicing is rejoicing in the midst of pain and loss. It is that very “unnatural” response that creates the impressive witness that won many of the first and second centuries. Christians persisting in their “error” in the face of radical adversity exercised an attractive fascination. Here were people who believed they had something worth dying for!

(5) Reward: What brought that unnatural response to persecution for righteousness was the prospect of reward in the life to come. There is a pie-in-the-sky element within Christian faith. It is connected to very this-worldly attitudes and behavior. We should not put down the promises of the coming kingdom of God as an ultimate motivator. Throughout the New Testament we see Christian leaders strongly oriented to the promises of resurrection to the new age. It brought them reason to purify themselves, to labor industriously even when the present results seemed meager or even non-existent.

(6) Recognition: Jesus tells his disciples to recognize the pattern they are a part of. It is that of the true prophets, who before them were also mistreated and maligned. If we recognize that, then we won’t misunderstand those who live lives troubled and harassed as they seek to serve Christ. Their experience identifies them with the prophets of old and with Jesus himself. Some of the opposition and trouble is brought upon us by our own folly and insensitivity to the culture and etiquette of the surrounding world. Yet we have to say some is a matter of the inherent contradiction between the principles governing the Christ-followers and those that drive the people among whom they live.

It is never easy to be ridiculed or reviled. We cannot suppose that people will “understand” what it is we are about. Nonetheless, there is little excuse for the brutal insensitivity of much public discourse by Christian leaders. Their analysis is shallow, their information untested, their reasoning flawed. Some bear false witness in the most abominable fashion. Having reentered the world of civic concourse, they demonize those who disagree with them—and then are “persecuted for righteousness sake.” Or are they?

These last two beatitudes are framed in two ways: (1) there is an “inclusio” (a bracketing rhetorical device that groups the first eight blessings together); (2) the shift in tense and person in these indicates something different about these last two beatitudes.

Where verse 10 “ends” the formal list of beatitudes, verses 11-12 expand on that ending and summarize the expected reception of people who are marked by these kingdom values or virtues. Persecution is not a sign of disfavor with God when it is because the disciples are identified with Jesus. This last beatitude is suddenly focused on a person, not virtues (such as righteousness) or the kingdom of heaven in general. Prior to this, the beatitudes relate to various positive character traits and conduct. Now they are connected to the person who promises and bestows these blessings.

The reflex at the end of this set of values might well be what Jesus gives with the right hand he takes away with the left. Blessings ending up in insults, reviling, falsehoods, persecution? That hardly seems like what should be the consequences of a life shaped by God's kingdom values. Yet it is. So beyond rejoicing in the "privilege" of suffering alongside the prophets, what else is essential in response to this ending? Matthew 5:13-16 give the first and crucial answer to that question.

(k) Salt and Light: Matthew 5:13-16

The connection between these two pictures of the disciples and the beatitudes is the link back to vs. 11-12: the relationship of the disciple to the world. This brief section underlines first what disciples are and then what they are to do. In sum, they are to make the place where they are better. The Beatitudes outline the character of the disciple. This section gives their calling.

Disciples are salt and light. They are not told they should be or ought to become salt. These "ares" belong to the whole series of assertions (indicatives) that begin the sermon. Jesus gives these indicatives as further statements of fact. Before the commands (imperatives) come the assertions, the indicatives. If they are disciples, they already are salt and light.

Where the beatitudes focused on the blessing of God resting on those with certain qualities, these "you are" focus on the fact that such people are useful.²³⁸ Their blessing is for a reason. They are to function as salt and light. They are to influence the societies in which they find themselves. First the blessing of God; then the blessing of all nations through the blessed ones.

Saltiness and being light are what invite persecution. People do not always want the good still present and preserved. They do not want to see themselves and the world as they really are. Disciples persevere as salt and light by preserving their authentic commitments to beatitude living even in the face of grave adversity. If they lose their saltiness, they become worthless in terms of the purposes God has for them. But what is the analogy with saltiness?

"In addition to its use as a seasoning for food (Job 6:6; Col. 4:6), salt was added to sacrifices (Lev. 2:13; Ezra 6:9; Ezek. 43:24), connected with purity (Exod. 30:35; 2 Kings 2:19–22), a sign of barren wasteland (Judg. 9:45; Job 39:6; Ps. 107:34; Jer. 17:6; Zeph. 2:9), a sign of loyalty (Num. 18:19; Ezra 4:14; 2 Chron. 13:5), and used in fertilizer (Luke 14:34–35) and in cleaning newborn infants (Ezek. 16:4)."²³⁹

The point may not be to narrow it down to one of its beneficial effects, but to point out that disciples, as they are in close contact with their fellow humans, are to have a beneficial effect on

²³⁸ They are to live in solidarity with the world, not conformity with its worldview or ways. The community of disciples does not exist for itself, but for God and for the world – as salt and light.

²³⁹Turner. *Matthew* (p. 154). "Most of these uses are positive. There are those who take "salt" to be a sign of judgment. Christians are God's "watchmen" on the ramparts of human history, shouting out the warning of coming judgment. But this seems to be at odds with the context and the second metaphor of Christians being the light of the world. The positive effects seem to be in view (as they are in the letters to the Churches in Revelation 2-3). The Church community is consistently portrayed as beneficial in human affairs."

life together.²⁴⁰ Persecution and insult (5:11-12) are not to cause them to stop living in the pattern given by the beatitudes. On the other hand, it may be that Jesus is referring to the most common use of salt in his day: as a preservative for food. Either way, they are to live with courage and joy (even beaten and jailed—Acts 16)

Salt is put on that which is dead. In the ancient world its primary function was for preservation, to keep dead things from rotting. It was also used as flavoring, to give savor to bland food. Salt plates were used in the ovens that burned with dung—a necessary component to enable the dung to burn. Whatever might be the imagery, the point has to do with the essential character of salt to the living of human life. Without salt there were many aspects of life that would not continue in a normal plane.

“Why must you be salt? Jesus says in effect: ‘You are accountable not only for your own life but also for that of the entire world. I am sending you not to one or two cities, nor to ten or twenty, nor even to one nation, as I sent the prophets. Rather, I am sending you to the entire earth, across the seas, to the whole world, to a world fallen into an evil state.’ For by saying, ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ Jesus signifies that all human nature itself has “lost its taste,” having become rotten through sin. For this reason, you see, he requires from his disciples those character traits that are most necessary and useful for the benefit of all.”²⁴¹

If the prime point has to do with salt being used to preserve food, then Jesus is saying that the world has a constant tendency to corruption. It is consigned under the sentence of death. Without salt, it would stink even more than it does. Salt has the function here of retarding corruption. Yet salt works only in close contact with the substance it is to preserve. The gospel’s goal is more than a purification of a holy huddle, a spicing up of true believers. It is meant for the earth. If we are to be salt, we must get out of the salt shaker and into the world.

Salt’s action is hidden, unobservable. It cannot easily be seen when added to food. Its reality and purity are not tested by what it looks like, but by what happens when it is used. It has no value apart from its flavoring and purifying effects. If it loses its purity as salt because of contamination with other minerals, it becomes positively dangerous to food and health. This is a warning. Jesus does not say become salt. We already are if we are his disciples. But we must be sure not to lose our saltiness. This is a warning to lax disciples, to those who might assume once “in,” never out.

We can lose it by refusing to continue our commitment and distinctiveness when we are placed amid people. Then we may conform to the principles and patterns that dichotomize living. It is all right to be all the things God blesses in private. But bring them to the marketplace and

²⁴⁰ One benefit they are to give is to share the knowledge of God. Luther tends to narrow “saltiness” down to this function: “The real salt is the true exposition of Scripture, which denounces the whole world and lets nothing stand but the simple faith in Christ. ... This is why I have always admonished, as Christ is doing here, that the salt should remain salt and not lose its taste, that is, that we properly teach the chief article of faith” *Works, Vol. 21* (p. 59-60). Luther takes the salt to be ‘law’ and light ‘gospel’ and applies 5:13-16 to teachers in the Church. But the imagery is that all *disciples* are salt, not just the message they bear or the true preaching of the word of God by preachers only.

²⁴¹ John Chrysostom in Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*. (p. 92).

one is likely to be taken for a ride if not run over. Or we may operate by the principles of Christ but hide our identity as Christians.

We can lose it by refusing to enter the worlds of suffering and sin that surround us. It is not difficult for salt to retain its saltiness in supreme isolation or at least to seem to retain it. The monastery's walls and total control of decisions, time and relationships are meant to minimize the possibility of worldly entanglement. Even their saltiness may be lost, as the history of the Church shows us. The petty corruptions of the spirit can even lead to major breakdowns of the flesh in the monastery or convent.

There are pressures surrounding us and within us that suggest we not take Christian faith seriously. We long at times to be only "ordinary" people. It seems so unnormal to sustain the war we are engaged in with the unrighteousness of the kingdom of darkness. It is natural to retaliate and resent when we are vilified and tormented for our identification with Christ. It is natural to believe the very last to find space on the earth and inherit it are the gentle. It is natural to wear out and wear down, to compromise and "mellow" as we age.

We are in the constant borderlands of what truly matters and what only seems to matter. There are no permanent maps, no infallible tests, no definitive answers. The boundary shifts as we grow and mature. We are salt—and Jesus asks that we act in alignment with our true nature and identity as those blessed by God.

Then he tells the disciples: You have not only the negative role of retarding corruption and preserving the good amid death. You are to be light; to shine unhindered for everyone's benefit.

How can we lose "saltiness"? In the context, it would be to lose the shape of life that conforms to the imperatives of the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness. It is to be one who hears the words of Jesus but does not do them (such as the one who builds his house on the sand – 7:24-27).

Light makes visible whatever is in darkness. It is absurd to light a candle and then hide it under a bowl or bushel basket. It is the quality of light that it illuminates. It does not desire that it be looked at. It enables other things to be seen—as they are. A single lamp in a single room illuminates only a short distance, but it shows whatever is there—as it is.

Light also shows us the way in the dark. A city shining on a hill gives a clear point of reference for the weary traveler. From great distances people can find the way home.

We are to be light to the ends of the earth—and light in the private, small rooms where we live with a few other people. Neither our public corporate life as Christians nor our private, small group contexts are to be without light. We are not to be light in public but darkness in private, or vice versa.

The world, for all its wondrous culture, art, philosophy and science is plunged in darkness. Our world does not like seeing things as they are. We have been told since the Enlightenment that we and our world are fundamentally good, that whatever is evil in us was pushed in there by a corrupt society, misguided parenting or rotten schooling. To be sure, these sorts of things heighten and aggravate the evil in us. We don't like admitting that all of us, even the best and kindest, are dominated by the power of sin and separated from God; that each of us is capable of great evil and contributes to it even by our so-called petty inconsistencies and mistakes.

An interesting word: "petty." We say petty cash, meaning small. Stealing petty cash is petty larceny. One study argued that Napoleon died from being fed a steady diet of petty arsenic over several months. We are all tempted to engage in petty Christianity. Our Christian colleges can

do no greater harm than to give their students and faculty petty Christianity while living under the titanic imperative of taking the totality of God's good news of his blessing to the Whole of God's World.

Beware, said Jesus in another place, lest the light in you be darkness. Ideas have consequences. Embracing this notion of natural goodness has had dramatic social and personal consequences in the twentieth century. We are suffering from the fallout of a mistaken view of human nature wedded to all our institutional premises. We identify ourselves with light and our social structures with darkness. We are quick to claim credit for successes; quick to blame others for failures or defects. If it is good, we did it. If it is bad, they did it.

What Jesus does say here is that light can shine amid darkness. Christians are the light of the world. They can so live and speak that they provide the illumination that is needed amid our history. No matter how dark the darkness, it cannot snuff light out. Light by its inherent nature shines and pushes the darkness back. Only when light stops shining is it possible for darkness to triumph.

In both this saying and the one preceding it, Matthew's text puts "you" in the emphatic position: "You, yourselves..." This is to emphasize that the Christ-followers who manifest and live by the qualities blessed by God are the very light the world needs in the midst of its darkness. Contrary to Lloyd-Jones this is not equivalent to saying "you and you alone" are the light of the world. The stress is not on exclusivity.²⁴² Its force is more "you especially." They are to be it intentionally. But there are other "lights" that are not intentional.

Besides the great light that comes in the person of Jesus Christ, there are many smaller lights. These first and foremost are his disciples who follow in his footsteps, who proclaim his good news, who take seriously all he has commanded and conform their life decisions and patterns to his words and will. What is astounding is that these rather plain, lower-class folk from small villages and towns are themselves the light of the world. The temptation is to take things as they appear within the scales of worldly criteria. These are not the great paragons of wisdom and knowledge. They are not advisers to the great and the yet-to-be-great. Yet these unassuming ordinary folks will show the way to a different life, a different world for centuries to come.

Insofar as salt and light have to do with influence and the attitude-behavior-knowledge that produces that effect, then we can say that Christians are not the only salt and light. There are Gentiles who do the things of the law, even though they do not know the oracles of the revelation of God. There are god-fearers who, in their sin and ignorance, search for the true and living God. None of this denies the essential reality that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ.

The problem comes with assertions without room for the created goodness of humans to manifest itself apart from saving faith in Christ. Some of the wisest and most astute people are outside the boundaries of explicit faith. They may fail ultimately in the knowledge of God and be finally foolish in refusing faith. Yet they may be people of integrity, honesty—skilled lawyers, doctors, teachers, administrators, craftsmen, artists and writers. That disciples of Christ are light of the world does not mean no one and nothing else is.

One shocking side to this sermon is its assertion that the Pharisees in all their intense law-observance are not the light Israel needs. Nor are the Essenes, the Temple administrators—or the hotheaded revolutionaries of the day. If there is light, it will come from a piety and a practice different from any in common use in Jesus' day. It will come out of listening to and heeding

²⁴² *Sermon*, pp. 140-41, 147.

Jesus' very words. The way to God, the way out of the messes of sin, the way to a righteousness that is aligned with God and not simply with some religious faction—all come from a very different source and dynamic.

What Jesus suggests is that we penetrate beneath appearances. The very people who lay claim to the truth, to the righteousness and spirituality that connects us savingly and properly with the true and living God may be far from God. Nor are we to suppose that those who manifest and advocate civic righteousness apart from Christ are saved. This whole matter is both simpler and more complex than that. Those who advocate a theological and soteriological universalism open the gates impossibly wide. Those who shut everything down but the Christians who are like themselves close the gates impossibly tight.

What universalism acknowledges is that God gives light through many means. That is the meaning of general revelation. For our creaturely life there are many lesser lights, whether medicine, astronomy, psychology or the fine arts. Our lives are eased and adorned by a thousand points of light in the advancing knowledge of technology and the arts. Yet none of this finally banishes the darkness within and about us. We have the strange experience of an increasing breadth of knowledge and education accompanied by increasing depths of sin and crime. Human families become more fragile and nations more chauvinistic.

What exclusivism acknowledges is that God's salvation is by and through a particular historical person and event. Special revelation is how the truth to which general revelation points finds its fullest meaning and brings people to a saving relationship with God. For all the genuine light and help we receive apart from the context of faith in Christ, we do not receive the transforming salvation that comes only with the great Light of the World, Jesus himself.

The balance lies in holding together God's common and special grace or alternatively God's general and special revelation. We affirm the reality and value of all knowledge and goodness regardless of its source together with a keen awareness of the uniqueness and necessity of the knowledge and goodness available only through explicit discipleship in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We have had enough of the ignorant assertiveness of Christian zeal that cannot see God's hand behind all truth and goodness. We have also had enough of the ignorant assertiveness of Christian tolerance that cannot see God's salvation uniquely available in Jesus Christ. The one creates a pinched defensiveness. The other creates a defensive 'platitudinarianism.' Our choices are hardly cultic narrowness or humanistic obscurantism. We need not be forced into an either/or that truncates the doctrine of creation or the doctrine of redemption. The goodness of creation does not overcome its corruption by sin—nor can sin extinguish the light of creation. The reality of redemption is not latent within creation but is actual in Christ's acts of re-creation. Our choice is Christ as Creator and Redeemer.

Jesus did not say we are the honey of the earth. We are not present to add a bit of sweetness and light, a little sugar to make the trouble ease a bit. Salt is biting and stinging in open wounds. It brings the flavors out and strengthens them. We are not those who paint over hell, leaving only heaven for the future. We are not those who pretend we have overcome the world and can go about with an innocuous smile on our faces.

Jesus set us as sheep amid wolves, as the impossible absurdities of sinners talking about righteousness, as the incredible nobodies who claim to have encountered the greatest of all realities. We are salt and light, even the smallest bunch of us. Every one of us who is salt can have influence. It is astounding how one person living and standing and speaking against the

stream can upset the highest powers of the age.

These two sayings together teach us a few clear things, as John Stott points out:

1. The Christian is different than the non-Christian, the Church is different than the World. This difference is not something we are to minimize or ignore. The drive toward conformity is often furious within us. The last thing we want to be is different. We do not want to stand out or to be thought different because we know that difference is often experienced seen as deficiency. Our self-doubts and self-condemnation drive us toward sameness. Yet if we are in Christ, we are different.

That difference is not what we glory in as though all continuity with our past is severed. We are still sinners saved by grace. We are still male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated. What is different is that we have a new master and new motive. Christ does not make us obnoxious or eccentric, difficult or insensitive. But he does ground us in a way of life that stands forth because of its nonconformity to the conventional wisdom and prevailing standards of the groups to which we belong. If we are not different, we are not Christian. Yet there are differences that have nothing to do with righteousness or Jesus' cause.

2. We must accept the responsibility that goes with that difference. What we are must now be translated into what we become. We are to align ourselves with the character God declares is now essential to our very being and history. We must express what we are. It is possible (as our whole past shows us) to live in self-contraction, to negate what we have been designed to be and do. God has not given us something to do without first giving us something. By his blessing we are empowered and positioned to live upon the earth in a startling new way.

This means the committed pursuit and passionate chase after godliness. We are not naturally pure in heart or hungry for righteousness, gentle and mourning or merciful and rejoicing when rejected. The responsibility is for us to shape our responses through prayer and fasting, through the practice of doing what is right and discerning what is wrong, through the disciplines of heart and head. This is not automatic. Our responsibility does not end with our first steps of discipleship. It encompasses obeying all things Christ commands.

3. We must see our responsibility as two-fold. As salt we are to do all we can to arrest the growing corruption and degeneration about us. As light we have the positive task of speaking and living the truth, of spreading goodness and beauty wherever we might be. Evangelism and politics, edification and social action, worship and service are joined in these tasks. We are not to exalt the one over the other, as though we are finished when we expend ourselves in salty fashion or when we shine brightly for a few moments. As Chrysostom indicates:

“The person characterized by humility, gentleness, mercy and righteousness does not build a fence around good deeds. Rather, that one ensures that these good fountains overflow for the benefit of others.

One who is pure in heart and a peacemaker, even when persecuted for the sake of truth, orders his way of life for the common good.”²⁴³

There seems to be a tension later in the Sermon when we are told not to do our giving, praying or fasting in ways that people can see (Matt. 6) with this passage which insists you let your light shine and your good works be visible. The difference is the context.

In this first passage it takes courage to continue to do the grace-induced good works in the face of insult, ridicule and even persecution. Jesus is warning against the sin of cowardice. In Matthew 6 the focus is on doing good works in order to impress others, to enhance one's reputation as religiously devout, to gain admiration and praise from fellow humans. There Jesus is warning against the sin of vanity, the ravenous hunger for the praise of fellow humans. Doing good works in public is meant to bring praise to God; keeping our piety secret aims at giving glory to God as well.

The common element is seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33) – both as expressions of seeing God's glory enhanced, not our own. The tension between the two stances (shine and hide) are resolved in that both are in the same service and spring from the same motivation.

These metaphors tackle our wild imaginations and draw us into the highways and byways of follows. Jesus outlines what “saltiness” entails in specific instances. Whatever his further words mean, they draw the profile of the good works we are to be doing just as the beatitudes drew the profile of our character. In whatever manner we see ourselves as salt and light, we must struggle with the demands of the greater righteousness Jesus demands. We cannot pretend all is done when our own individuality is salted and well lighted. There are dozens of cities on hills that need better lights than they now have.

Jesus' disciples are called to be extraordinary husbands and wives, remarkable neighbors and employees, powerful friends and citizens. Their deeds and their words, in the power of faith and the Spirit, will be like salt, like light in the darkness.²⁴⁴

(3) Matthew 5:17-20 The Exceeding Righteousness (Propositio)

The theme of this sermon is again repeated: this instruction is about that righteousness which is the essential accompaniment and definitive order of the Kingdom of God. The power, glory and peace of the Kingdom cannot be separated from its righteousness. Neither can the blessings of God, the opposition of the worldlings, the influence of the Christian or the particularity of God's revelation in the Old Testament. All the ethical and moral counsel given in this sermon is tied up with the narrative of human destiny. Until heaven and earth pass away in the great finale of history, the normative validity and importance of the law as definitively interpreted by Jesus Christ will not be annulled.

Note the common phrase in 5:17 (“Do not even begin to think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets”) and 7:12 (“So in everything you do, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”). These two phrases form an inclusio: a rhetorical device inclosing all the material in the Sermon on the Mount between them.

²⁴³ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 93).

²⁴⁴ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 262).

This signals that we are entering in the “body” of the Sermon – its main development. While 5:17-20 states the theme (the *propositio*) of righteousness, the “body” of the Sermon (the *probatio*) develops it in detail.

The phrase marking the *inclusio* signals where Jesus finds his notions of what righteousness means and requires: the Law (Torah – revealed instruction) and the Prophets (both predictive statements and ethical indictments – here understood as all the rest of the Old Testament after the Pentateuch as Torah interpreted, lived and told). Jesus turns the disciples’ eyes to the Hebrew Scriptures as a reliable guide for clarifying ideas about righteousness. Jesus’ “Bible” was what we call the Old Testament. This is his primary source of ethics: Scripture. Something about which he agreed with the Pharisees and scribes. For Jesus there was no real discontinuity between the Old and what will come to be the New Testament. Still with that continuity comes a new deepening and development.

One reason Jesus focuses on this continuity is that people might be wondering whether Jesus was bringing some “new teaching.” He has been proclaiming the kingdom of heaven for a time, as we are told in Matt.4:23. In the process, as part of the good news of the Kingdom he has been talking in specific ways that interpret the Law and the Prophets that differed from common interpretations given by religious leaders of his day. For example, among other things, if we look sideways at the other gospels, we find he is challenging understandings of the law of the Sabbath (Mk. 2:23-3:6) and claiming that what Isaiah wrote was being fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4:14-30). His healings raised deep questions about his authority and identity. The first question answered in this paragraph is what is Jesus’ relation to God’s prior revelation in the Torah and Prophets? Jesus disagreed with his contemporaries on the interpretation of Scripture, the way Scripture informs our ethics and forms our moral convictions.

His words and actions baffled people—and attracted them. Some must have been thinking: (a) his method of interpretation is wrong, idiosyncratic, novel, not governed by good principles of interpretation; (b) his words and action undermine the Torah; (3) his claims are false – he is a false prophet. In the Gospel we see these charges brought against him – and some streams of early Christian really did believe he abolished the Law and Prophets (e.g., the Ebionites and the Gnostics and the writer Marcion). In this section we have some clear principles of interpretation.

1. Christ and the law:

Whatever we find in the Hebrew scriptures must be considered in the light and life of Jesus Christ. The Torah and prophets are not independent of him because they are given the fullness of their meaning by him. Whatever role and function they are to play, what limits and liberties they circumscribe, what mysteries and destinies they spell out—all of these circle around the words and works of Jesus Christ.

It may seem that Jesus comes to supersede the old, to correct what is wrong and separate the kernels of revelation from the husks of inadequate human perception, to reject what was wrongly done and commanded by Moses.²⁴⁵ Jesus denies that flatly. Whatever one might attribute to him, we are not to think he is here to destroy, abolish, repeal or supersede the Old Testament’s

²⁴⁵ E.g., Kenton L. Sparks argues that Matthew presents Jesus as a new and better Moses who supersedes Mosaic commandments: “Gospel as Conquest: Moses Typology in Matthew 28:16-20” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 68, 2006: “Just as Jesus used his ἐξουσία (‘authority’) in his first mountain sermon to supersede the commands of Moses, so did he, as the new Moses who possessed πᾶσα ἐξουσία (‘all authority’), supersede the command to kill ‘all the nations.’”

precepts and outlook. His is not the mission of tearing down the old in order to build a new foundation. His is the mission of showing what sort of structure is to be built on the foundation already in place and how some of his contemporaries have misread Moses.

Now He says: 'I have come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it.' That is: 'I do not intend to bring another law or a new law, but to take the very Scriptures which you have and to emphasize them, dealing with them in such a way as to teach you how to behave.' What the Gospel or the preaching of Christ brings is not a new doctrine to undo (or) change the Law, but, as St. Paul says (Rom. 1:2), the very same thing that was 'promised beforehand through the prophets in the Scripture.'²⁴⁶

There is continuity in what he says. His challenge to what people have heard is not to question the full authority and definitive validity of the old, though part of what they have heard is not in fact the words of the Old Testament.²⁴⁷ He tests the way those words have been understood and applied. He has come to show the true force and entailments of even the laws that are thought "easiest" to keep. He is correcting misinterpretations and misapplications, not sorting the errors of the Old in order to bring in the New.²⁴⁸ None of law or prophets are repealed or discarded. That happens only when the new heavens and new earth come into being.

The foundation is the permanent validity of the law and prophets. If a disciple hears Jesus as doing away with them, they are mishearing. In Jesus we have the "fulfilling" of the law and ethics of the Old Testament as well as its prophecies. He is its interpreter and embodiment. The real teacher of Torah and Prophet is Jesus. Its fullest and deepest "subject matter" is to be found in the Messiah, Jesus.²⁴⁹

He indicates faith's final authority is to be found in the written words, not in their interpretations. Is this a "syllabic" view of the authority of Torah and Prophets?

"The Greek ἰῶτα (iota) refers to the Hebrew letter yôd [י], the smallest letter of the alphabet; and κεφαία refers to the small stroke that is used to distinguish

²⁴⁶ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21 (p. 69).

²⁴⁷ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*, "Jesus is teaching his first-century disciples to attend to his interpretation of God's will, and not to the competing first-century interpretations they have heard." (p. 279).

²⁴⁸ Cf. Gundry, *Matthew*: "As we shall see, Jesus contradicts neither the law nor current rabbinic interpretations of it. Rather, he carries out its tendencies to their divinely intended ends." (p. 83); "Under the erroneous presumption that Matthew sets Jesus' true interpretation of the OT opposite Jewish misinterpretation, search is usually made in the extracanonical literature of late Judaism for the command to hate your enemy (see esp. IQS 1:4, 9–10). But Matthew has not been attacking Jewish misinterpretation of the law, nor does he attack it now." (p. 96–97)

²⁴⁹ Barth, *CD Vol. 1.2*: "If Christ has risen from the dead, then the understanding of the Old Testament as a witness to Christ is not a later interpretation, but an understanding of its original and only legitimate sense. Moses and the prophets do not belong only because the New Testament undoubtedly says so, but—when the New Testament has undoubtedly said so on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus—they belong, not as the representatives of an earlier religion prior to the Evangelists and apostles, but as the prophetic heralds of Jesus Christ side by side with them. Therefore the Church cannot be released from its task of expounding and applying the Old Testament witness too, and of respecting its authority as the Word of God." (pp. 489–90).

letters (e.g., ך from כ) or an ornamental stroke added to a letter.”²⁵⁰

If not even the smallest letter or tiniest stroke is abolished, nothing is.

There are proper understandings or interpretations of Scripture just as there are views that evade, undermine, annul, abolish parts of God’s word and will for human life. Those who put parts of the law and prophets aside or evade them, even the least parts, by their teaching and observant practices, will be called least in the Kingdom. The law and prophets have to be rightly interpreted and taught. The radically new thing that was present in Jesus’ teaching was that he himself was there, showing how it pointed to him and the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus did not insist that the righteousness of his disciples be greater than that of Moses, as if what we find in Moses is inadequate. What was inadequate were the interpretations and uses to which Moses was put by some of Jesus’ contemporaries.²⁵¹

Not all elements of the law and prophets are equally important or basic. But even the least significant part has a rationale and reason and something to teach us, even if it is not literally relevant to our current world or culture. For example, justice and mercy are the goal of the laws, their animating purpose and rationale. Justice is more basic, more important than a specific law dealing with, say, fair weights and measures in the marketplace (a particular expression or application of justice). Note how, in the woes, Jesus singles this out: “Woe to you...you give a tenth of your spices...but you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.” (Matt. 23:23-24)

The reason the words of the law and prophets as well as their interpretation (teaching) and observance (keeping) are so important is because these give us the path that leads to the kingdom of heaven. Without a righteousness that far surpasses that of the teachers of the law (scribes) or the strict “law keeping” Pharisees, no one will enter the kingdom of heaven. If the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is understood to cancel the law and the prophets, even in the smallest part of their message, then it has not yet been heard.

Whatever ethical demands are given to us in the Sermon, as Jesus interprets the Law and Prophets, the goal is to enable the disciple to participate in the eschatological kingdom of heaven (the entirely future new world of a new heavens and new earth that arrives with the coming of Jesus at the second coming). Now we are to live by its hope, its dynamic, its way of life (righteously) and to seek and pray for its coming. If the result of embracing this message of Jesus does not lead to a higher righteousness, then it has not yet been heard.

In what ways does Jesus’ life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension “fulfill” the law or the prophets?²⁵² Perhaps we can say:

²⁵⁰Osborne, Grant R. (2010). *Matthew* (Vol. 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p. 182.

²⁵¹ Mattison, *Sermon*: “...the old law and the new law share the same *telos* of covenantal friendship with God and others in God. Both prescribe activity by which believers participate in that goal. The new law fulfills the old law by prescribing activity in more perfect conformity to that goal.” (p. 89).

²⁵² What do the two verbs “annul” (καταλύω) and “fulfill” (πληρώω) mean? “‘Fulfil’ must be taken in a manner that allows it to be an appropriate counterpart to ‘annul’...” Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 218). “To ‘fulfill’ God’s law was to ‘confirm’ it by obedience and demonstrating that one’s teaching accorded with it; to ‘annul’ it was to cast off its yoke, treating God’s law as void.” Keener, *Matthew* (p. 177). Does Jesus’ teaching change the law? If we say “no,” then the sense of “fulfill” is “to emphasize its true meaning or express it fully.” If we say “yes” then it would mean “to add or complement” or “to make perfect, to

(a) What was spoken in the Hebrew Scriptures is now actual in Jesus Christ. God's covenant promises and duties and the prophets' foretellings are now fully actualized in his appearance. Jesus brings the law and prophets to their intended goal without the slightest detail going unfulfilled.

(b) The "Law" in its myriad forms was never kept fully and faithfully by Israel or any human being. But Jesus is the unique, singular faithful and fully obedient human who does so perfectly. The law and prophets are fully obeyed by Jesus.

(c) In his own interpretation (teachings) and observance of the Law, Jesus shows us the full significance of the Law and Prophets for daily living. His teaching and living show their true meaning and importance.²⁵³

2. The Christian and the law:

The second main question this paragraph answers is: What is the relationship of Jesus' disciples to what had previously been revealed in the Torah and Prophets? In whatever way we put together our hermeneutics and line out the relationship between the new and old covenants, we must show how not even the least parts of law and prophets are dishonored, dismissed or "loosened" (λύσῃ). If we act as contemporary versions of Marcion and pit the old against the new, then we will discover ourselves to be least in the kingdom of God. Those who both teach and conform their lives to the intent of the precepts will be among the great ones of the Kingdom. Those who even simply lessens their force and downplays them in various ways are the ones in trouble. How much more those who dismiss them altogether.

Christ's finished work on the cross does not finish our responsibility to obey the commands of God. Discipleship is constituted by the righteousness without which no one can enter the Kingdom of God. The character qualities of the beatitudes are not static essences but descriptions of dynamic ways of being in the world. As disciples we will enact and enflesh those qualities in every group and culture on the face of the earth. We are salt and light of the world. As long as the earth continues, we are to continue in the discipleship of obedience. We are also to teach that law and those prophets. There is no cultural development, no technological

supplement its imperfections." If we relate it to Jesus' actions, then we can say that he fulfills the law and prophets by perfect obedience or by his life, death and resurrection brings the law and prophets to their goal. Cf. Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (pp. 215-217) for a history of interpretation. Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 1*: "Fulfilment can only confirm the Torah's truth, not cast doubt upon it. And while Jesus' new demands may surpass the demands of the OT, the two are not contradictory..." (p. 487)

²⁵³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: "In Matthew's view, the teaching of Jesus by definition amounts to the true meaning of the Torah and is hence paradoxically an affirmation of Jesus' loyalty to the OT. ... it is best to understand πληρῶσαι here as 'fulfill' in the sense of 'bring to its intended meaning'—that is, to present a definitive interpretation of the law, something now possible because of the presence of the Messiah and his kingdom." (p. 106); Betz, *Sermon*: "Particular laws are intended not simply to be complied with but to be 'fulfilled' by serving as instruments for meeting the demands of justice." (p. 179). Gundry, *Matthew*: "In all of them Matthew has shown that Jesus carried out the tendencies of the OT law to their true ends: OT prohibitions of murder and adultery escalate to prohibitions of anger and lust; OT limitations on divorce and oaths escalate to demands for marital compassion and simple truthfulness; and the guard against revenge and commands to love neighbors and hate enemies in the OT escalate to the requirements of meekness and love even for enemies." (p. 100).

innovation, no historical individual that negates our observance of all things Christ has commanded.

But our relationship to the law and prophets is mediated by Jesus Christ. When we ask for the hermeneutical key for making sense of the Hebrew Scripture, we listen to him. We also listen to those who listened to him—in the gospels and in the epistles. There we discover more than the unimaginative new legalism of rigid conservatism, the new Christian Pharisaism. There we find the Spirit of Christ honoring Christ and creating space for obedience to the truth in multiple cultural contexts. There we find the firm continuity of world view, of doctrinal agreements, of moral commitments, of religious authority.

Whatever Jesus gives in this Sermon is to be framed by an awareness that Jesus is not discarding the old. He is showing the inner logic and essential force of the old.²⁵⁴ He is distinguishing the authentic righteousness of the Kingdom from that paraded and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees of his day. He goes beyond the old, but never against it. He shows more than we may have suspected as present in the old, but he does not hollow the old out. There is discontinuity with what has been made of the old by the Judaism of his day. But Jesus does not create new cloth out of which to weave new garments. Every thread of the old is folded into the new garment of righteousness we are to wear in the Kingdom of God.

F. Dale Bruner treats this as the necessary introduction to the six antitheses.²⁵⁵ Here we have the grounding of the disciple in the Word of God. First, Jesus insists that we respect and love the Hebrew scriptures. Lest we think the following teaching loosens the hold of God on us through the law and prophets, Jesus makes clear that he is not an early version of those who see the Hebrew Scriptures as displaying a god different from his own heavenly Father.²⁵⁶ What we have in the Old Testament was given by his heavenly Father, not some other angry, deficient lesser god.

Before Jesus gives an exposition of those scriptures, he first tells us the attitude and orientation on which it is based. We are to appreciate and treasure “what was said to the people of old.” Only in that context can we hear his “but I say to you...” properly. It can be called an “antithesis” but not one to denigrate or discard the Old.

Verse 17 tells us about Jesus’ own relationship to the law and prophets. He is not here to abrogate or render them of no force. His coming does not issue in an era of the “Spirit” with no need to pour over the Hebrew Scriptures and discover the shape of life they advocate. Jesus is

²⁵⁴ Contra Augustine, followed by many others, who sees the Old as lower than the New: “If we look for the meaning of *mount* it could justifiably be understood as signifying the greater precepts of righteousness, because those of less importance had been given to the Jews. Yet it was the one God who gave the lesser precepts, though his holy prophets and servants, to a people for who it was still opportune to be bound by fear, in accordance with a most just ordering of times. And through the Son he gave the greater ones to a people for whom it was now fitting to be set free by charity.” *Works*, (2014) Vol. I/15 and I/16 (p. 23).

²⁵⁵ *Christbook*, “The four verses of this passage (5:17–20) are the preface, exordium, or introduction to the Six Commands (or Antitheses) that follow. These four verses are not usually considered a command themselves. But vv. 17, 19, and 20 are, in fact, three sides of one great Command: to take Scripture very seriously.” (p. 196)

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* “In the history of the church from Marcion to Bultmann it has been seriously asked whether Jesus and the religion inspired by him ought not to be freed from the OT and its myriad difficulties.” (p. 197)

not anti-law, anti-Scripture, or anti-Jewish. Rather, we discover Jesus is a person saturated with the knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. It was his Bible. He does not intend his disciples to be “unbooked” by being unhooked from these texts. It was Jesus’ Bible. It is ours as well.

Jesus sees his own vocation as tied integrally to the fulfillment of those scriptures. He saw himself as living in conformity with the proper understandings of their imperatives and requirements. He was not an unobservant Jew or indifferent Gentile. His messianic status found its shape and direction in the teachings and narratives of the Hebrew Scripture. Whatever we may feel today about the uses or abuses of Scripture, we should have little doubts about Jesus’ own perceptions. These texts are the Word of God and remain so, even with his coming. Authentic discipleship means opening ourselves to that Word and allowing it to shape our life.

Verse 18 focuses on the durability of scripture. Its validity remains until heaven and earth pass away (his own words will never pass away).²⁵⁷ We need only open our eyes and see ourselves living on earth under the heavens to know that the law and prophets retain their importance and imperative nature. Having said that, it is also clear that when things are accomplished in the messiah as set forth in the Old Testament, their meaning and function changes. Not everything, not every way or word in the Hebrew scripture retains the very same force and function after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We have clear examples in the New Testament that the Jewish Christians retained the seriousness of their commitments to the covenant and laws of Israel. Yet the Gentiles, now equals in the people of God, are related to that old covenant in a different manner, but not permitted to ignore the Old Testament. Hebrews talks of Christ as a supersession of the Temple system with its sacrificial patterns. Paul does not allow Gentiles to be circumcised where that is taken to be normative and salvific. Yet Jewish Christians continued observing the law of Moses as given to Israelites—until a Gentile Christian majority unfortunately and for the wrong reasons banned a “Jewish” Christianity.

Jesus teaches us a respect for God’s Word, a Word in force until there is a new heavens and earth. What that respect means is spelled out in the examples and focal instances given in the rest of Matthew. It is not a literalism. Nor is it a libertarianism. Jesus exercises a freedom over the law by his messianic vocation that retains the respect we must have for it and Jesus’ words.

Verse 19 centers on the disciples who teach and live in accordance with Jesus’ respect for the Hebrew Scripture. If we belittle even the seemingly least important parts by our behavior or

²⁵⁷ This is given particular emphasis by the “oathing-like” words: “*Truly* I say to you” (ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν). In discourse analysis this is an “attention-getter” that breaks the flow of discourse as if to say “listen up!” France, *Matthew*: “Jesus’ introductory use of *amēn* to confirm his own words is unique. The formula is used in the gospels to emphasize pronouncements which are meant to be noted, particularly those which the hearers may be expected to find surprising or uncomfortable.” (p. 185); Alternatively: “The foregoing discussion of the formula ‘(Amen) I say to you’ reveals that there is no major difference between the expression ‘I say to you’ and ‘Amen, I say to you’ in the canonical and apocryphal sayings of Jesus. These phrases and their variants always indicate the greater status and authority of the speaker in relation to his audience. There can be no doubt that the expression is a historically authentic expression of Jesus. His use of the formula was one way of expressing his authority within the framework of a teacher-student relationship. Although ‘Amen, I say to you’ is a legitimation formula, it is not a functional equivalent of the OT messenger formula, nor can it be said that it reflects a unique authority claimed by Jesus.” Aune, David E. (1991). *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. (pp. 165).

words, we will be called “little” in the Kingdom of heaven.²⁵⁸ If we are tempted to dismiss Scripture or to relativize its legitimate force away, if we cast the mantle of anti-legalist over our license, then we show ourselves as those who are not true disciples. At the same time, we need to guard against the modern Pharisaism, the hyper-orthodox that can, in their zeal for “the least parts of the law” render us unorthodox.

The gate is narrow and the way difficult that leads to eternal life. Neither the fundamentalist nor the liberal has much room for the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. He offends liberals with his unqualified commitment to every part of the Hebrew Scripture. He offends fundamentalists by his interpretation of what doing and teaching the law means.

3. Religious elite and the law:

There are more shadows here than we might realize at first. How is it that our righteousness can far exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? These were intensely devout people. They poured over the oracles of God, memorizing them and delighting in them. They sought to exercise an intelligent faith, one rooted in and secured by every word that came from the mouth of God. They were not like the Evil one, seeking to twist and trivialize the law and the prophets. They were zealous (as Paul indicates) for the righteousness of God.

Yet there was a grandiose ignorance. Somehow all their intense effort and elaborate knowledge did not lead to light and saltiness. There was a righteousness, but it was not aligned with the righteousness of the Kingdom of God. One clue to an appropriate answer is in these very words. Was there a problem in the distinction between the least of the laws and the greatest? Did they balance law against law and annul some of the “lesser” by appeal to the “greater”? By contrast does Jesus hold all the laws together in a holistic manner, teaching us that much of the casuistry of the legal experts is only a sophisticated way of violating the law?

Perhaps there is a clue in the connection of the righteousness grounded in the law and prophets to the Kingdom of God. The problem in Israel repeatedly is not that they did not have a code of ethics or a religiously oriented culture. The problem was leaving Yahweh out of the deliberations and decisions made in the institutions and everyday life lived in the nation. Or alternatively leaving out their fellow Israelite and stranger in their zealous piety. Whatever righteousness means, it is more than a detailed code of conduct, inscripturated and elaborated in the Torah and the Prophets. Righteousness does not pass into our control. If it does not lead to the love of God and love of neighbor, it is not righteousness.

If the devastating result of the fall in Eden was the loss of the knowledge of good because of the knowledge of evil, the oracles of God does not provide an adequate substitute. Having reached out once to become like God in deciding the right and wrong for ourselves, by ourselves, we cannot do the same thing by means of the revelation of God’s will in Scripture. The scriptures do not render us autonomous, not needing the actual living presence of God because we have what we suppose to be a complete religious and ethical code of law. The law is only one level of the governance of God. It is a tutor that presses us forward until we realize we need far more than

²⁵⁸ What “being called little” means is disputed. Chrysostom (and Augustine) sees it as meaning cast out into hell (Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 98). So Luther, *Works Vol. 21* (p. 71); Bruner, *Christbook*: “Against the majority here, I think that because Jesus speaks more often in contrasts than in gradations, this verse probably means belittlers won’t get in at all...” (p. 202). Most see this as meaning such will have a lower rank in the kingdom of heaven. Those who minimize the law will be minimized in the kingdom. As we treat the word of God, so we will be treated by God. Gibbs, *Matthew, Vol. I* (p. 265).

what we are and have in ourselves or can gain from the best and brightest of our ecclesiastical scholarship.

One side of the scribal and pharisaic righteousness was its capacity to become a humanly controlled, humanly contrived, culturally-captive buttress against God's living presence. Rather than blowing the limits off human security and opening existence to the rulership of God, it created a security and protection against God's larger reality and relevance to life. There was a great deal of atheistic piety and of anti-god spirituality. What also occurred was the neglect of the central identity of Israel as a priest to the nations. The gentiles were turned into kindling wood for the fires of hell. A religious superiority complex afflicted the law-observers that undercut the intention of God to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham.

The further paragraphs of the Sermon on the Mount indicate the dialectic between the letter and the spirit of the law could also be corrupted. Jesus sets the standard at perfection. He also insists that however the laws are understood, deeds and desires must be held tightly together. The law of love is returned to its proper place as the animating center for all elements of what the law and prophets demand. The righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisee and scribe is not a more rigorous observance of a more rigorous law in all its minutiae. It is the drawing of the law into the community of faith in Jesus as the messianic savior promised in the Old Testament. It is entrance into the obedient discipleship that observes and teaches all things he commands.

The life of Jesus also shows us that law-observance does not mean the appearance of law observance. Jesus' own actions violate what seem to be *prima facie* clear accounts of what unambiguous statements of the law seem to demand. Jesus seems to teach the continuing importance and validity of all the Scripture and then to give permission to violate it. We shall have to see how this is possible. It was a perception of his critics and of Saul (Paul) later on that law-violation was occurring both in fact and in teaching. Yet both insist very strongly that the law of Christ is the new avenue for authentic Kingdom living.

At the root of the difference between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day is the way in which they "intensify" the Law. The Pharisees joined others in producing more and more external things to do or not do in order to build a fence around the Law so it would never be violated. Jesus "intensifies" the law by rooting its keeping in the inner motive or attitude that underlies and generates the external actions.²⁵⁹ Jesus sees the "spirit" of the law as more important than the "letter" of the law, the goal of the law as more important than specific laws or external practices designed as means to that goal, the inner attitude of the disciple as crucial to the action.

We see that contrast when the Pharisees complain about the disciples. Twice Jesus quotes Hos 6:6 to Pharisees who are questioning his or his disciples' carefulness with respect to righteous behavior (Matt. 9:13, 12:7). Learn the meaning of "I desire mercy (chesed חֶסֶד) and not sacrifice" is the response of Jesus to the concern that he is failing to practice righteousness. In essence, "sacrifice" is the external observance of righteousness in obeying the Law. But "mercy" is a major goal of the law as well as an animating spirit within which the law must be kept, without

²⁵⁹ "Jesus is not engaged there primarily in extending, annulling, or intensifying OT law but in showing the direction in which it points, on the basis of his own authority (to which, again, the OT points). This may work out in any particular case to have the same practical effect as 'intensifying' the law or 'annulling' some element; but the reasons for that conclusion are quite different." Carson, *Matthew* (p. 177).

which no strictness of keeping the rituals or commands of the law has validity. One of the ways Jesus' view of righteousness far exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes is that it abounds in steadfast love, a mercy that conditions all external conduct and relationships. It unites heart and practice.

Another way to understand some of the difference is by seeing what Jesus identifies as the different sorts of "hypocrisy" the Pharisaic approach tends to generate:

(a) Inner motives actually contradict the outer conduct (6:1-18). Action meant to glorify God is done in the service of self-glorification, in order to gain the praise of other people rather than to glorify God.

(b) Inner outlook/emotions are the opposite of apparent outward righteousness (5:21-22, 27-30). No murders to confess, but inner brooding anger; no affairs or womanizing, but lust in the heart. Later Jesus will label this as cups clean on the outside but inside full of greed (23:25).

(c) Acting morally in some situations but not others (5:33-37, 43-48). My word is my bond, but only when I swear an oath with a precise formula (or when you have a legal document with my signature). I love only those who love me in return, or I love my neighbor but not my enemy.

(d) Inconsistency between relating to God and relating to fellow humans (5:23-24; 6:14-15; 7:1-5). Bringing a gift to God in order to seek reconciliation with God when not seeking reconciliation with fellow humans from whom you are alienated; asking God for forgiveness, but not forgiving those who have wronged you; expecting you will not be judged by God while you judge others.

4. Having and entering the kingdom:

How is it that the persecuted, poor in spirit already have the Kingdom of heaven while here the language is of entering the Kingdom? The one speaks of the present tense experience—the other of a future, hoped for experience. The one seems related simply to the blessing of God—a gift. The other seems to indicate the struggle to learn, grow and become righteous in the sense of observing all the commands of God, from the easiest to the most difficult. How do we put these differing emphases together?

There is a range of language used to describe us and the Kingdom of God. There are those who are regarded as the least and others as greatest in that Kingdom. We can be near or far from the Kingdom (even while the Kingdom surrounds and upholds us). We can inherit it but must enter it, and even take it violently. The Kingdom can belong to us—and people with child-like qualities constitute the Kingdom.

The authentic experience we have as disciples has both elements. On the one side, we are keenly aware of our sinful past and its continuing power to shape what we think and how we live. We carry a guilt that annuls any contemporary efforts to wipe the record clean and claim blamelessness. If God does not act mercifully toward us in the poverty and recalcitrance of our condition, we are hopeless. It is the blessings of God we need, not the bounty of our accomplishments. The free gifting of God's bounty constantly amazes us.

On the other side, such gifting does not render us null and void, a passive lump of human matter with no capabilities for work and accomplishment. As light, people are to see our good works and give God glory. As followers of Christ, we follow one who does not shatter the law or

the prophets, giving us an existence of pure freedom. We are not made into existentialists without external guidance as to the meaning and texture of our lives. We are ushered into a new order, a new creation with its own structure and powers. The elements that constitute the Hebrew scriptures are not discarded or denigrated. They are renewed and repositioned by God enacting their promises in Jesus as the messianic savior. We are still to teach and observe them—but to do so in relationship to the sort of righteousness expounded and enacted by Jesus Christ. Just what that means is spelled out in greater detail in the remainder of this gospel and in the rest of the New Testament.

To enter the Kingdom of God in the sense that is given here is to be given access at the end of history to the place and presence of God. The eschatological Kingdom in its fullness is in view. This is the same hope as that expressed about attaining the resurrection of the dead. It is the hope that, when God restores all things and ushers in an existence that is perfected in its wholeness and holiness, we will be included, not excluded. It is the hope of being sheep not goats (Matthew 25), or wheat not tares, or fish that are kept, not thrown back (Matthew 13). There is coming a great division, a decisive and final sorting by the judgment of God. That is when “entering” the Kingdom of God happens in the fullest meaning of “enter.”

Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake and who are poor in spirit already have the Kingdom in another sense. Already they are under the rule of God and experience God’s blessings. But it is in a world full of contest and challenge, a world of violence and threat, of trouble and tragedy. Jesus teaches such to pray that the kingdom will come—as if it were not already here. From one point of view, it has arrived. The pearl of great price is already present and we need sell and give all we have to obtain it. From another viewpoint, it is not yet fully operative and manifest. It is present (as Matthew 13 shows) in weakness and hiddenness. It is here in humble word form and can be resisted, rejected and ridiculed—and we along with it.

Neither here nor in the beatitudes are we given the prerequisite deeds necessary for salvation. We do not merit the Kingdom of God. It is the Kingdom that rescues us in the midst of the mess we have made of life. It is the Kingdom that provides us with the resources we need to become righteous, to do the good works that glorify our heavenly Father. The Kingdom meets us only when we receive the remarkable words of Jesus and allow them to become salt and light within us.

5. Avoiding legalism and antinomianism:

One puzzle amid all this teaching is how it is to be taken. The dual danger is legalism and antinomianism. The balance is precarious because our inner character is fragile and underdeveloped. We are not perfect as our heaven Father is perfect. So, we are pushed and pulled by our social groups. We use them as our primary reference group and assume that corporate wisdom will make up for our personal deficiencies. They also pressure us to validate their norms, persecuting us when we deviate from them.

5.1). Some consider the Sermon as a code of ethics, providing the foundations for a comprehensive set of rules and laws that can regulate all of life. Literalists like Tolstoy insist that a “plain” understanding of the words leads us into the patterns of the Kingdom of God for society. The radical nature of this view pulls at our heart. To suppose that the whole of life might be as simple as these words is an alluring siren call. When we examine the life of Tolstoy as a “saint” we discover his documented harsh failure to live the life of love. The hard edges of judgmentalism and legalism, the painful neglect of family and friends, the excessive eccentricity

polluted this very attempt. His life displayed the folly that comes with reading Jesus' words as the legalists of Jesus' day read the Old Testament.

5.2). Some go a step further and see this as setting forth principles or guidelines for use in a variety of contexts that will require creativity in implementation. Martin Lloyd-Jones²⁶⁰ suggests five principles as governing the message given by Jesus to his disciples:

(a) The spirit of the law is what matters primarily, not the letter only. The law gives body to the spirit, but the purpose of the law is to serve that spirit. Both the act and the motive or desire behind the act are basic.

(b) Conformity to the law thus is not simply found in the shape of the action. Thoughts, desires, purposes, motives are equally important. What leads to action is as important as the action itself.

(c) The law is a positive thing, not just negative. It is given not simply to guard us from doing bad things, but to orient us so we become lovers of righteousness. It is not simply what I do not do that makes me holy. Holiness is not simply separation from the wrong, but separation to the right. I am prohibited in order to be freed to do something positive.

(d) The purpose of the law is not to keep us in a state of perpetual obedience, but to promote the development of our spiritual character.

(e) The ethical instructions are never to be regarded as an end in themselves. They are avenues by which we come to know God. The result is the knowledge of God, not some quantitative score on rule conformity. The question is not 'have I avoided murdering or hating today', but 'has God been supreme in my life'—and thus I have not done so and so but positively have lived in love toward everyone I've been with.

The purpose of the disciplines is not discipline, as though there were something valuable in the acts themselves. We fast and pray, we study and take ourselves into solitude, we confess and forgive because these things deepen our poverty of spirit, engage us in ways that require gentle meekness, stimulate our hunger for righteousness, lead us along paths of mercy and so on. What we must ask of ourselves at the end of the week is not have we lived by the Sermon on the Mount. But am I more identified with righteousness and the cause of Christ? Do I rejoice more readily when opposed and slandered for his sake? Did I act as salt and light? Do I have greater faith and hope that the blessings of the Kingdom of God surround me every minute of my life?

5.3). Another approach goes another step beyond the literalist and the principalist. Many see these as focal instances. These antitheses are not an exhaustive panel of ethical matters. They are focused examples, illustrative of the sort of thing demanded of us as we live with God's word in this world. Every moral challenge and every law of God requires creative wisdom and a broader reading of Scripture. It is not casuistic legislation for every possible scenario.

This is clear from the fact that a number of the examples and statements need qualification. For example, in forbidding anger against one's "brother" surely includes anger of the same sort against non-Christians and even enemies. Nor are the times Jesus and the Apostles express anger seen as violations. In forbidding looking with "lust" at a woman does not mean to ban sexual desire for one's wife. When struck on the nose instead of the cheek, the maxim not to strike back still applies. Yet these sorts of "exceptions" are not mentioned.

²⁶⁰ *Sermon*, pp. 191-192.

What is needed is the development in us of the sort of character and maturity necessary to see that rules and principles carry us only part of the distance we need to go. These focused illustrations stimulate in us the sort of thinking necessary for moral discernment in a range of relationships. It also means to indicate that God claims us absolutely and completely in all levels of our being and action.

“For it is true enough that what we have here are only examples. But it is also true that these examples are intended to make clear that the grace of Jesus Christ, the grace of the kingdom which has dawned, claims the whole man absolutely. It is also true that the only One who really fulfils the Law as understood in this way is Jesus Himself.”²⁶¹

Jesus is not giving us less than specific rules and general principles. But he is giving us more. We need something deeper than a cultural ethos or set of rules. We need those items as part of our tool kit for righteousness. We cannot live without rules and principles. But we need more than rules and principles. We need character, the development of an inner maturity that can create new rules and see exceptions to principles. We need inner strengths or virtues that enable us to actually do the right things the rules and principles teach us.

What about this contrasting, “You have heard it said” vs. “but I say to you...”? What does this tell us about the nature of the communication both before and after these so-called antitheses?

Unlike his introduction of the direct quotation of Hebrew Scripture in the temptation (“it stands written...”), the stress in the Sermon on the Mount is on what people of old have heard. Jesus is not critical of what stands written in the scriptures. For the most part, people were illiterate and would only have heard what some teacher or scribe might have said is written—and even translated it into whatever contemporary language they spoke and understood. There was always the veil of someone’s reading and interpretation.

Jesus picks several instances from the second half of the Ten Commandments. He focuses on some prohibitions and positive commands as well as some permissions. In examining the specifics, we discover that not all of them are direct quotations from the scripture (“love your neighbor” was supplemented with “hate your enemy”). Even those that are unadorned quotes are cited because they had common interpretative frameworks placed about them by the teachers of the day. The scribes and Pharisees took great pains to sort them out and make sure that their implications were clear to all who heard them teach.

On the one hand, there were clear instances where they “tidied up” the law, contemporizing and recontextualizing it by restricting the scope of the commandments. Neighbor was emphasized rather than love. Neighbor was restricted to one who was part of the Jewish faith and ethnic circle. What Jesus does is to return the law to its intended meaning by expanding the applicability of the moral demands of the commands, making them more difficult to observe and less manageable. We are not to wish to murder one’s enemy with impunity. We are not to desire the death of one’s spouse, even though before the “law” one was guiltless because the knife was never plunged into the chest.

The scribes and Pharisees also expanded some of the permissions. Not only was divorce permissible, but it was also permissible (by some teachings) for virtually any reason of displeasure on the part of the man. The intention behind the divorce permission in mosaic law was

²⁶¹ Barth, *CD Vol. 2.2* (p. 696).

neglected.

Divorce was allowed under conditions that violated the spirit of that permission. Jesus returned the law to its intention. He tightened up the permissions, restricting them by the purpose for which they were given.

The other way permissions were subverted was by turning them into inflexible commandments. You were not only permitted to do this (though not required) but on such a reading you were required to do it. As permission there was choice and the ability to exercise mercy and kindness. As command it was a hard-edged singular choice.

The *lex talionis* permission was meant to inject justice and balance into the process of retribution. Only an eye could be exacted for an eye taken. The point was to moderate savage vengeance or the demand that a small debt be rectified with an enormous repayment. It was not meant to ban mercy or mandate exact reciprocity as the measure of justice. It did not convey a “right” to the other person’s eye in retaliation.

Jesus was insisting that the force and purpose of Hebrew Scripture be observed in its implications and intentions without artificial limitations or permissions. Our tendency is to reshape God’s will to meet our capacities and desires that are shaped by the condition of sin. Our tendency is to limit our exposure to censure and expand our degrees of freedom for action. The net result is fewer things that are wrong and more things that are right. The focus also shifts to externals that can be seen, measured and sanctioned while ignoring the inner motives and purposes behind them.

Jesus’ teaching shows that he is not setting himself against one of the ideas he shared with the Pharisees and scribes: The Word of God in the scriptures is authoritative. What he undercuts is the interpretative principles and conclusions by which they focused its thrust onto externalities and changed its permissions without limit or without exception. With them he did not believe the Torah or Prophets were given in order later to be abolished. They retain their validity and authority so long as heaven and earth remain.

When we look at the broader picture beyond the Sermon, we see that Jesus broke through the social and ritual intensification of the law of his day. He relaxed elements of the (misinterpreted) “law” in favor of a universalistic love ethic. He also heightened the moral and motivational elements of the law, insisting that authentic discipleship is not measurable by external ritual purity laws or ascetic pietistic practices of disciplines such as fasting. His disciples’ righteousness would not display more public piety, more frequent fasting, more scrupulous purity rituals, stricter social restrictions, greater attention to the tiniest religious tithing prescriptions.

The greater righteousness would be a “depth” righteousness. Such righteousness is motivated and lived from the inside out. It treats stranger and gentile as neighbors to love. It refuses a developed casuistry to subvert the intent of the law. It keeps the weightier things of the law in balance with the lighter things. To live and to teach these commandments as interpreted by Jesus himself constitutes such righteousness.

(4) Matthew 5:21-7:12 Living the Righteous life (Probatio)

This begins a longer section, running to 7:12, giving specific examples of righteousness “in action.” In accord with Rabbi Hillel’s fifth principle of Bible interpretation, after the “general” we need to see the “particulars.”²⁶² With a dialogue between the general and the particular we

²⁶² Rosensweig, Bernard. “The Hermeneutical Principles and Their Application” in *Tradition*, Vol. 13 no 1, 1972, (pp. 49-76).

understand both. These six “focal instances” start to fill in what Jesus means by “surpassing righteousness.” He “intensifies” the Law and the Prophets in ways that are surprising, challenging, seemingly “impossible” for everyday life. Yet careful examination reveals patterns for living that express a surpassing righteousness that finds its roots in an ethics of the heart.

The Sermon consistently affirms the validity of the negative boundaries given by the law (don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t divorce, don’t break your word, don’t violate proportionality in seeking compensation). In the case of the sixth “antithesis” we are shown the key to “greater righteousness.” In all the cases, what had happened was a persistent whittling down of the intent of the law. Yet the law’s intent was to guide life into a positive love that benefits the whole ensemble of relationships.

Yet there was a tendency to think: if I don’t actually murder you, I am guiltless (even if I treat you with contempt and denigrate you with degrading words). If I issue a certificate of divorce for any reason, I am in the right, just by issuing the certificate. If I exact precisely the same recompense for harm received (an eye for an eye, no more, no less—that is ‘justice’), I am in the right. If I love my friends and fellow citizens and hate my enemies and the enemies of my people, I am in the right. I have kept the law.²⁶³

The basic form of these focal instances is a statement of an ethical norm (most often a Torah prescription), an explanation of its true intent and finally a further application to specific instances. What Jesus does is to affirm the law (if it is the law he quotes) but then to do three things:

(1) Provide a correction to the misinterpretation of the law or its misuse – or in the sixth case a denial of an implication drawn out of the love command. Nonetheless, the law is affirmed. What we have is exegesis more than antithesis.²⁶⁴ One might even argue that Jesus is out-doing the Pharisee’s task of building a fence around the law. Jacob Neusner seems to argue this for the first three “antitheses”:

“Not only must I not kill; I must not even approach the threshold of anger that in the end leads to murder. Not only must I not commit adultery; I must not even approach the road that leads to adultery. Not only must I not swear falsely by God’s name; I should not swear at all. These formulations represent an elaboration of three of the Ten Commandments. In the language of a text of Judaism attributed to authorities long before Jesus’ own time, ‘Make a fence around the Torah.’ That is to say, conduct yourself in such a way that

²⁶³ “In the teaching that follows in 5:21–48, then, Jesus focuses on some of God’s commandments in the Torah and declares their true meaning and intent, in contrast to the interpretations of those same commandments that his disciples had heard from other sources, such as the scribes and the Pharisees.” Gibbs, *Matthew*, Vol. I (p. 275)

²⁶⁴ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21: “Now He says: ‘I have come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it.’ That is: ‘I do not intend to bring another law or a new law, but to take the very Scriptures which you have and to emphasize them, dealing with them in such a way as to teach you how to behave.’” (p. 69). Davies, *Matthew 1-7*: “...through six concrete examples, (i) what sort of attitude and behaviour Jesus requires and (ii) how his demands surpass those of the Torah without contradicting the Torah.” (p. 508).

you will avoid even the things that cause you to sin, not only sin itself.”²⁶⁵

(2) To insist that the law’s intent is positive. Yes, no murdering; but positively we are to do the good that helps others flourish, to do the things that build them up. Don’t murder also means “cherish life.” The “do not” is always aimed at “do.” Whenever we confront a law that gives us a negative boundary, we need to ask: what is the positive good it seeks to guard?

Every ‘Thou shalt!’ and ‘Thou shalt not!’ is seriously meant as an intensified indicative which has the force of an intensified imperative. The man who is reached and affected and determined by these imperatives is the new man: Jesus in His own, Jesus in His disciples, Jesus in those who hear and do the Word of grace spoken by Him, Jesus in those who have recognised and assimilated the higher righteousness of the kingdom which He Himself is and proclaims; Jesus in them, but also Jesus in them, Jesus who gives them a share in the fulfilment of the Law as He has accomplished it, and from whom they have received this share as a gift.”²⁶⁶

(3) The law is meant to be a whole-hearted matter. It is not enough just not to murder or just to act positively to do good to others. The greater righteousness also involves your inner being, the way you feel and think is to be aligned with doing positive good for others. The not doing and the doing are to spring from a character that is aligned with the love of God and love of neighbor. In seeking to conform our action/conduct to the law we discover that our inner self is out of whack. We need an inner transformation of character so we can discern what it is that is the right thing to do, and then are increasingly able, easily, consistently, joyfully, to do the good, the right thing in the right way for others and in our walk with God.

(a). Matthew 5:21-48 Righteousness and the Law: Antitheses/Exegeses

This section has puzzled many due to a number of features. what is going on when Jesus says: “you have heard it said...but I say to you...” We need to point out a translation issue: the Greek word (δέ) that joins the two phrases is:

“δέ ...[is] used to connect one clause to another, either to express contrast or simple continuation. the most common translation is ‘but’. When a simple connective is desired, without contrast being clearly implied, ‘and’ will suffice....”²⁶⁷

In reading the various “you have heard it said...I say to you” it is not always clear that Jesus is putting up an antithesis (sometimes it is). In the very first one, he quotes the Old Testament without overturning it in his “intensification” or “correction” of its interpretation. So, here it could be “and I say to you” where we have ancient “sayings” that are nearly word for word from Hebrew Scripture.

²⁶⁵ Jacob Neusner (2002). *Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 24-25; “To interpret the law on the side of stringency is not to annul the Law but to change it in accordance with its own intention.” W. D. Davies (1989) *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*. Brown Judaic Studies 186; Providence, Rhode Island. (p. 102).

²⁶⁶ Barth, *CD Vol. II.2* (p. 694). (Emphasis in the German: *Kirkliche Dogmatik*, pp. 774-775)

²⁶⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, Bauer, and Gingrich, (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (p. 213).

It is not the Torah itself that Jesus rejects. Rather he is correcting the halakah, the oral tradition and interpretation, that came to surround the law.²⁶⁸ Jesus is a faithful expounder of the Law and Prophets in their ethical/moral demands, not a rejector or reformer of them. What is being rejected are ways of evading the spirit and intent of those norms, permissions and commands. Often what is rejected is either a relaxing of the demand of a command or turning a permission into a command.

But each “antithesis” must be taken on its own to see what it is. Each must also be seen in light of the general statements in the Sermon (so each can be viewed in the light of “loving our neighbor as ourselves”). Each seems to follow the basic pattern: a “command” from the past, an explanation of its correct intent, and some examples of what it practically entails.²⁶⁹

Another question deals with the connections between the various antitheses. Many see them as a hodge-podge that were thrown together without any integral connection other. Initially we must say it is not immediately clear whether there is a running connection between the various focused instances of what the greater righteousness looks like in specific situations. Only careful analysis will tell us.

These are not a full roster of ethical situations. Each one of the six is loaded with one or more examples that cut across our “natural” inclinations and climax with the final, most difficult demand that we love even our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In the final beatitude we were told that living the Jesus-way would entail persecution. Now we are told how to respond to our persecutors (and those who treat us badly with less draconian misconduct than persecution).

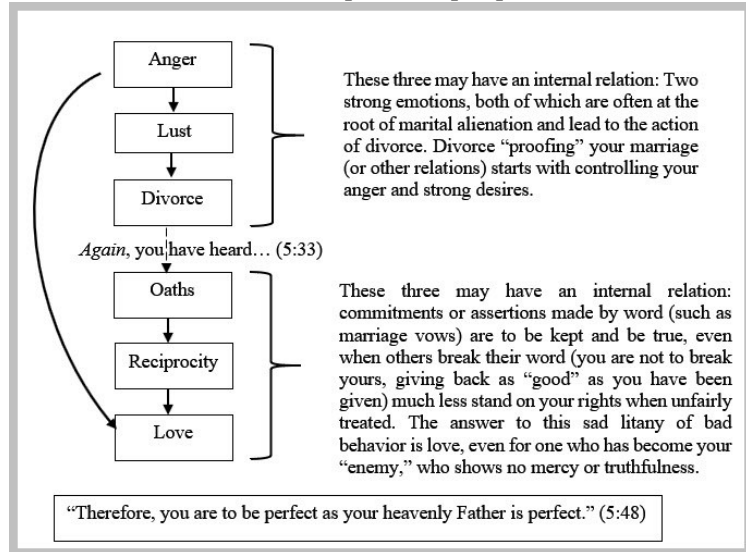
The bottom line is also drawn in the sixth antithesis: this is what God is like. The point of all of these six examples is that they are pointing us toward the nature of God – and what it means if we seek to have replicated a full measure of his righteousness in our very beings, from our deepest emotion laden thoughts to the words we use towards other and even in the most visible actions. In whatever way we understand their connection or lack of it, the unifying general statement covering them all as instances of the “greater righteousness” is that, in engaging life with others we are “to be perfect as our heavenly Father in heaven is perfect” (5:48)

I would suggest that there are some connections that are not immediately apparent but can be seen once we consider this whole section as a unity. Perhaps, as we have in the Proverbs, the last in a sequence is the major point toward which the earlier items participate as contributors to the outcome described. In this case we have six arranged in two groups of three each (signaled by the “Again, you have heard...” vs. 33 and by the switch from “everyone who” to direct commands). The climax is in the sixth as the major point that ties them all together. The chart suggests such an arrangement, with the command to love even enemies as the general principle that ties them all together.

²⁶⁸ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*: “Jesus refers to various scribal interpretations of the Torah in order to offer by way of contrast his own authoritative interpretation.” (p. 280). Luther calls these pinches “of salt directed against the teachings of the Pharisees” Luther, *Works Vol. 21* (p. 84).

²⁶⁹ See Pennington, *Sermon* (p. 182). Gushee, *Kingdom* takes the “triad” structure to be a statement of Torah or Jewish moral teaching (traditional righteousness), the sinful pattern, and then a transforming initiative. (pp. 102-104). For example: “traditional righteousness” (“You shall not kill”), a “sinful pattern” (“being angry”), and finally a “transforming initiative” (“Be reconciled”) (p. 95). See pp. 190-191 for 12 elements Gushee sees as essential in ethical decision making.

One theme that runs through all of these antitheses is damaged relationships with our fellow humans. Conduct counts. People count. There are no disposable people. But what is more important than outward conformity to standards or rules in our actions is the inner character that is the engine of all our conduct: what kind of people are we when we speak and act, even in righteous ways? What are the inner emotions and thoughts behind our conduct? Jesus reaches into our emotion-infused thinking, to the place where our decisions and impulses arise, where our words form before they are spoken, to the fountainhead of our action: character.



This reaches even to those places where we are “spontaneous”—where we experience responses beyond our conscious control. At times we seem simply “dragged along” by our immediate response: a word is said. Without thinking rage wells up at the insult or slight. A sexually erotic image catches our eye and we are aroused with interest even when we don’t want to be. Some things hit us like a great tsunami because we treasure (or fear) them most.

Character reaches to this bedrock of who we are. Jesus’ antitheses rip off the façade we cloak ourselves in by our desperate tendency to justify ourselves. Our conduct may look very good to an outside observer. We know the darkness that lurks within, a darkness we keep well hidden from others (and even from ourselves).

Jesus does not give us a different and better “road map” for life (norms, commandments) to follow. He says the one we have (the Law and Prophets) is excellent. Nor does he offer just more fuel for our engines to burn. He intends to completely rebuild the engine that takes us everywhere we go. He intends to show us how to stop having relational crashes that damage us and others on the road of life. But first the “engine” needs repair. Heart renovation. The real character in view is the character of God – and the intention is to conform our character to His.

[1] Matthew 5:21-26 Anger/Murder

An interpretation of Exod. 20:13, Deut.5:17²⁷⁰

Jesus’ astounding list of contrasts remind us of how far the world is from the Kingdom. Even the followers of Christ need be reminded of the most basic elements of community living. We

²⁷⁰ LXX Exod. 20:15, Deut. 5:18. The imperatival future is used, particularly in the quotation of OT quotes such as this. It is used to convey categorical injunctions. Wallace, *Grammar* (p. 569).

are so far from godliness that we have to be taught the elementary principles of the character of God in the most dramatic manner. Not even having the oracles of God in the Hebrew scriptures is enough to instruct us properly.

Jesus begins this array of teachings with words about murder (the fifth Commandment). From the beginning we are murderers. The sin of Cain is the dramatic indication of what life becomes when lived apart from God with the knowledge derived from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are not those who are naturally spiritual, whose life rises as a flower unfolding in the sun to the beatitudes. We do not hear these words as beacons for a long-lost ship—harbor at last. Rather we listen with confusion and perplexity.

At first, we read them and wonder what idealistic fool might suppose humans could live like this. Then we read them again and are horrified at what they ask from us. We become angry that God should make things so impossible, so impractical, so improper for ordinary life. Why must we be everything our natures are not? How dare God ask from us the most painful and most daunting responses in the midst of a world ready to pounce and persecute?

Does God not know we live amid wolves? So why does he ask that we become sheep? Are we being sent as innocents to the slaughter? And for what? These murderers that surround us have repeatedly shown willingness to kill and maim for the most trivial reasons. We know enough of our own responses to realize that murderous intentions and wishes rise up within us even when confronted with the minor faults of our most deeply loved spouses and children. How can we who are wolves become sheep?

Yet Jesus teaches with an authority that goes beyond what we might expect from such a person: “but/and **I myself** say to you.”²⁷¹ This is not the great high priest of Israel. He is not one of the most highly trained scribes, a rabbi whose years of study and interaction with students have honed the dialectical insight. He has not sat at the feet of the great Ones in the schools of Jerusalem. His teachings do not conform to the major groups or traditions of the day. Yet he sits on the Mount and contrasts what he claims about righteousness and what is typically heard in synagogue, temple and brotherhood meals.

The validation of his authority comes from deeds that indicate the power of God unleashed in his words. He speaks the word—and the deaf hear, the blind see, even the dead are brought back to life. His words have tangible effects in the material world.

When we ask by what right he claims us for a life that is absurd in our world, a life that contradicts the simplest and most tried principles of our world, we discover the power of his person, presence and words to create a new world. He is here not to give us better tools for survival in this world. He is here to make us a different kind of people and then to change the world with us as salt and light. We murderous ones will become life-givers. We who gravitate to conflict will become peace-makers. We who strike back for generations of ill will show mercy. We who puff up and show no weaknesses will become poor in spirit and gentle in action. We murderous ones will become forgiving and loving people.

But first we must learn how murderous we really are. Our tendency is to keep ourselves clear from the reputation of the “real” criminals. We who have not been actual serial killers and who are fascinated with the stories of death-row inmates are nonetheless brothers and sisters of these people. The mindset, emotional responses and attitudinal outlooks, the cultural encouragements

²⁷¹ ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν. The pronoun “I” (ἐγὼ) is unnecessary. It is emphatic.

and habit patterns we find in them are not qualitatively different from what we find in ourselves. We are all the children of Cain.

With Cain we worry: who will guarantee our security? Who will protect us from those other avenging murderers who live across the street and work in the next office to us? Where will we find security from all whose righteousness matches that of the Pharisees and scribes—whose religious spirituality does not prevent them from murderous plots and actions? Jesus already warned us that our good works are as likely to bring persecution as to stimulate people to glorify God in heaven. With Cain, we seek to guarantee our own security.

This section on the ethics of Jesus is not an intrusion of moralistic Matthew, setting forth the very law that Paul puts down in his writing. The gospel of Paul also leads to a moral character that is not legalistic—just as the commands of Jesus are an intrinsic part of the gospel of the Kingdom. If the danger to readers of Paul has been to justify antinomianism and libertarianism, the danger for readers of Matthew is to justify legalism and judgmentalism. Yet these are dichotomies that misread both Paul and Matthew.

The progression in these six antitheses seems to be from the decalogue to lesser matters—the fourth and fifth items are direct commandments in the Torah while the third and sixth are implications drawn from the law. Jesus illustrates the greater righteousness by picking items from several places in the normative framework used by his Jewish contemporaries.

Discussions of these matters have, for the most part, been too broad and general. There are a variety of sorts of law (civil, ceremonial, cultic, familial, economic, political and even within them subdivisions—dietary, worship, sacrificial, Sabbath etc.). The way Jesus both holds to and fulfills every bit of the Hebrew Scripture, while also transcending some of them is complex. Even in these antitheses we see various sorts of things happening.

More than this, we must also say that the term “antitheses” is a bit misleading. There is an “over-againstness” in Jesus’ words, “but I say to you.” We cannot avoid that. Jesus does set aside the letter of the law in some instances. However, this is not in order to do away with the law or to remove us from any serving of the law. The tension built into his “but I say to you” is not a genuine antithesis (or one would expect, “You have heard it said, don’t kill, but I say to you, kill!”). Instead, Jesus deepens the applicability of the law, showing that its fulfillment is far more than the literal acting out (or not acting out) of the norm.

In the case of the mandate against murder, Jesus shows how much more is involved than the last step of taking the life of another human being in a way not justified. It is not murder in such cases as capital punishment, or war or self-defense against an aggressor. Nor does he offer a strict and literal set of rules. He drives the issue back to the inner stance of the person in the heart. Righteousness is first a matter of the heart.²⁷² It is not the heart only—as though inner attitude was all that is involved. What one says and what one does is also a part of this.

One of the striking things is that Jesus says we are liable to the judgment when we humiliate or shame another because of our anger by calling them damnable idiots or despicable fools. Later

²⁷² Aquinas: “It is for all this that Christ taught us not only to beware of murder but also of anger. The good physician removes the external symptoms of a malady; and, furthermore, he even removes the very root of the illness, so that there will be no relapse. So also the Lord wishes us to avoid the beginnings of sins; and anger is thus to be avoided because it is the beginning of murder.” On the sixth command, *Explanation of the Ten Commandments*. Accessed June 13, 2019:

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/SOURCES/thos10co.HTM>

in Matthew Jesus himself will call the Pharisees fools (23:17). Jesus is not focusing on a specific form, but on a meaning-attitude-form combination that leads to ways of relating to each other that violate the greater righteousness.

We also know that the emotion of anger is legitimate. God is angry because of unrighteousness. Jesus displays indignation and laments the inability of Jerusalem and the people of Israel to respond appropriately to their covenant responsibilities. So, the issue is not simply the words, “raka” or “fool,” nor the attitude of anger behind them. It is more complex than most solutions that seek to explain this teaching. What is it Jesus teaches by these words?

The scope of this antithesis has to do with good relationships with fellow human beings. The boundary set by the commandment against murder is not a minimum standard, allowing all sorts of hatred and anger, all sorts of conflicts and fights so long as they stop short of murdering the other person.

Look at this beautiful Pharisaic holiness! It can purify itself and stay pious as long as it does not kill with its own hand, though its heart may be crammed full of anger, hate, and envy, of hidden and evil schemes of murder, and though its tongue may be loaded with curses and blasphemies.²⁷³

The positive behind this is that even the inner heart attitude that begins the journey toward murder is included. Cain’s killing of Abel did not begin with the hand lifted against his brother. It began with his burning anger. He blamed his difficulties with God on his brother and was jealous at the reception God gave to Abel.

The beginning and end of murder is rooted in contempt for a fellow human being. We may despise another so violently that we think the solution to our dilemma is the ending of his or her life. We are not to nurse anger or hatred any more than we are to plot and carry out murder. The disorder of the act of murder is first of all a disorder of the attitude of the heart.

The anger Jesus bans is anger that is nursed along, anger that is kept warm as one repeatedly stirs it up and feels it again and again.²⁷⁴ It is the carrying of anger that is in view (present participle). We will get angry because of the ordinary and extraordinary friction of living with one another. That is not what is in view here.

Some anger is a result of my own inflated sense of honor or righteousness. I get over it when I realize how small a harm is involved. Some small slights need to be dismissed, especially when it is unintentional. Some anger is justified because my boundaries have been violated or my person and dignity have been slurred. The proportionality of the anger should match the degree of harm or betrayal done. Getting angry is one thing. What we do with that anger is another.

Jesus locates the violation of this command in the belittling and demeaning of our brothers and sisters. The words we say wound and fester in another’s consciousness. While the word in season can heal and vitalize, the wrong words can whittle away at another’s health and heartiness. One sharp word out of season can dispirit and kill. Jesus confronts even such a deed with the fiery warning of judgment. We are liable not only because of actual capital crime but because of

²⁷³ Luther *Works*, Vol. 21 (p. 74).

²⁷⁴ ὀργιζόμενος. In addition: “Although the reading with εἰκῇ [‘without cause’] is widespread from the second century onwards, it is much more likely that the word was added by copyists in order to soften the rigor of the precept, than omitted as unnecessary.” Metzger, *Textual Commentary* (p. 11). The KJV contains it but most modern translations correctly omit it.

our active nursing of anger against others.

Note several things about Jesus' treatment of anger and its offspring:

1. There is a progression in situations: from anger to contemptuous words, to hypocrisy in a religious activity, and finally to finding oneself in a losing court case that might result in long term incarceration. All of this is rooted back in anger leading to broken or damaged relationships.

2. There is progression in the seriousness of the consequences: Anger can create liability for the local court; contemptuous words that denigrate a "brother"—liability before the high court, the Sanhedrin; extremely contemptuous words—guilt enough for the fiery hell (Gehenna).

3. Spirituality is affected. Not even Torah commanded religious obligations are more important than repairing broken human relationships (cf. Leviticus 6:1-7; Numbers 5:5-8 as examples of "remembering a brother has something against you" and the prescriptions to rectify it). Imagine this: you are in Jerusalem, having traveled 80 miles from Galilee and you need to return to restore and make restitution to a fellow Galilean. Much more difficult than doing it earlier.

4. The solution: In the final illustration of the court case, the defendant is presumed guilty – and it seems to be a case of debt owed. One major point is: consider it urgent to settle the brokenness of the relationship – before words are said that cannot be taken back, before it winds up before a judge. Then you are not just in an alienated relationship but incarcerated. You won't be released from this confinement until the debt is fully paid.

This last illustration seems to indicate that the "debts" created by the damage brooding anger does and the resulting alienation will be "paid" for one way or another. Best to "pay" it by making friends with your adversary rather than spouting off angry words or simply papering it over with continued devout religious actions (as though dealing with it with God excuses you from dealing with the person). Not dealing with this matter can ruin your life, even endanger your spiritual fate.

The alienation has escalated from anger, words of contempt, or grudge to being taken to court. What was interpersonal has now become legal. This appears to conform to cases of a debtor being hauled into court to compel payment. The "make friends" can also be translated as "be well disposed" (εὖνοεῖν) and would be a form of reconciling. It suggests the reason these are in court is as much emotional as financial – some anger is getting in the way of being "well disposed" towards one another and settling accounts more amicably. It is a matter of prudent wisdom to avoid the court proceeding since it may well leave one penniless and incarcerated.

What then can we do to keep this command? We first need to ask: how is this topic discussed in the rest of Matthew, the Gospels and the whole New Testament? Is there "righteous anger" that differs from this sort of anger so not all anger and the actions resulting wrong? If so, in what ways are the two sorts of anger different? (E.g., Psa. 29:22; Prov. 15:1; John 2:13-17; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 4:26; Col. 3:8; Tit. 1:7-8; James 1:19-20; Rev. 19:16). We may ask: if there is anger in God, how then do we image it appropriately. Understanding these things as the larger context there are a number of steps we can take immediately:

1. Face our anger. Not live in denial about what angers and what festers within us. We are to keep short accounts when it comes to expressing and extinguishing our anger. We are not

to nurse grudges.

2. Listen to our words—not just the literal phrases but the tone and function of our speaking. Words come out of our inner heart. They are a clue about what we harbor and the habits of the inner life by which we live. Words are an external map to the internal topography of our spirit.

3. Seek reconciliation with those who think we have done them wrong. If something is wrong, no matter what it is, we are to make it right. Do it now. Do it quickly. Not even the worship of God take priority.

4. Break the chain of hostility as soon as we can. Sometimes our attempts at right-making after our wrongdoing go awry. We get caught up in the judicial system. Jesus says we are to negotiate recompense for our wrongdoing as quickly as we can. The chain of grievance will pull us into jail or worse if we do not settle accounts fairly and rapidly.

This is not about the persecution and hostility others may show to us. If we are ground up in the judicial system (as Paul was in the latter part of Acts) because of our identification with Jesus' cause, that is a whole different matter. We are not asked to sacrifice our connection with Christ in order to avoid the lengthy process of legal redress. The matter in view is the entanglement that has encircled us because of our anger. It has led to our words and actions that have wounded and harmed another. Peacemaking is urgent and imperative. We keep this command by making amends for the wrongs we have inflicted on others.

So, Jesus turns this boundary into a staging ground for the fostering of life in others. Rather than demean and belittle, rather than run away from our bad behavior, rather than nurse our anger and fuel its passion, we are to nurse the well-being of others.

We do this by being merciful when we are harmed, gentle in spirit, meek and pure in heart. We do this by making amends for our wrongdoing and making peace with those who have anything against us. We do this by mourning the harm we have done that sucks out the life of others because our harmful words and deeds. Jesus demands more of us than avoiding murder. He asks that we positively nurture the life and vitality of others by living as salt and light according to the beatitude qualities blessed by God.

Jesus motivates us not only by the command to love and our hunger for the righteousness of God stamped in our own character. It is our righteousness that must exceed the Pharisees and scribes. Whatever its source, that righteousness must mark our attitudes and actions. This righteousness is not simply forensic or positional. It is tangible and real. Jesus also stimulates our behavior by fear, warning us of the severity of hell-fire awaiting the disobedient.²⁷⁵ Jesus warns us not because he is hoping to cast us into the pit, but so that we might avoid arriving there. It is a warning of a real danger that we need to heed.

This is the first way in which we are to be salt and light: to manifest an atmosphere where we take as many possible steps toward peace and love with others as possible. This involves the community of faith and people who nurse grudges against us because we have harmed them. It deals with our general life in civil community where we have an accuser who claims we are indebted to him or her. Wherever we find ourselves, we are to consider settling those sorts of accounts quickly because they are of paramount importance.

²⁷⁵ See: Moisés Silva, ed., (2014) “γέεννα G1147 (geenna), Gehenna, hell” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. (p. 548).

Murder is a horrendous act. Jesus tells us that murderous anger and insulting or demeaning words are also horrendous. We catch the first glimpse of what it will mean to exceed the righteousness of scribe and Pharisee. Every inner emotion or expressed word is brought under the bright light of God's will. Every deed, word, thought, look that diminishes, despise, or denies another's dignity or their rights is made part of the discipleship of righteousness.

In normal relationships and with ordinary people, we are to cherish life and nurture it. We cannot stand on a self-righteous pedestal or in a holier-than-thou circle or even on one side of a "we have the truth and you don't" line. To live and be righteous, to know and speak the truth, to be salt and light does not mean we become vacuous personalities, milquetoasts with no spine or spirit. Neither do we become the rigid zealot for whom all the world is going to hell (and should be told in those terms of their boneheaded idiocy and numb-skulled heresy). Christ is the truth. We witness to him in grace and truth. Because we love and serve him, we seek to live lives that do not violate the command against murder.

We are not to sneer at or abuse our brothers and sisters, however much we may well disagree with them or walk in a different direction with our understanding of the faith. Jesus does not give us permission to become nasty toward those who disagree with us. We are not to take on the mantle of infallibility in our judgments of others—nor to be hardnosed, unbending people because we have justified anger at those who have injured us.

One of the things that being pure in heart means is purging it of the anger that leads to murder. Purity of heart seeks peace with everyone, insofar as that is possible. Our reaction to others is to be that of gentleness, not gruffness springing out of an inner reservoir of irritability and anger. We are not right before God simply because we have stayed within the boundaries of legality. The righteousness of the Kingdom is hearty: reaching into our hearts and changing us in fundamental ways from within to the outside.

Relationship is what this is about. It is equally about self-control. Without self-mastery, the imperatives are impossible. Even with such regulation of the inner life, such commands seem absurd. How can I not wish the harm of others when they harm me? How can I not respond with anger—and give voice to that anger in everyday life?

These commands strike at me in the very center of my being. They show me how far I yet have to go in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. We live in great denial and unreality in our haze of self-congratulation and other-blaming. We cannot (for the most part) deny the mess that surrounds us (the news sensationalizers make sure of that). What is strange is that we can abstract ourselves from it and suppose that it is that way because of other people, other institutions, other nations and cultures. We are on the side of good and cannot understand why so many marriages and churches, so many courts and legislatures, so many charities and colleges are riddled with conflict and corruption.

How much energy and time we spend applying the social make-up offered by conventional rituals! We wish to confirm that we are well-behaved, good-meaning, socially-benevolent people. No matter how it might be with others, we act only out of the truest and kindest of motives! The mess ups are accidents on our side (however much we may believe them to be endemic, essential and intentional on the other side).

Jesus shows us how foolish such lines of thinking are. We are not merciful in the way God is or requires of us. The merciful are blessed because they have discovered the truth about themselves and follow a new way of treating others. It is a life-giving way that expands the room

for life not burdened with anger, hatred, shallow conflict, invectives and even murder. Jesus roots the mercy of God deep within us by this instruction.

[2]. Matthew 5:27-30 Lust: inappropriate unions, sexual hungers

An interpretation of Exodus 20:14, Deut. 5:18.

This first antithesis was about alienation and separation. This is about inappropriate union. Here too Jesus reaches into the heart. Now the issue is not the fire of anger but the longing of lust. Simply wishing we could be finished with others, imagining their hurt and even demise is wrong. But also wrong is wishing to be joined to them in one of the deepest and most significant ways we can with another human.

Anger and lust are both strong internal emotions – both seemingly at times “outside our control.” We talk about people “pushing our buttons,” and seem to mean, “I cannot help it if I am angry at that, or sexually aroused because of what I see. It just is the way we are built as humans.” There is more than an element of truth in this self-observation. We are built that way. But...

Jesus takes aim at deeply rooted motivating drives within us. In the case of “strong sexual desire” we have something that is indeed built into us. As followers of Christ, we have no problem with sex, after all, God invented it (and the Song of Solomon celebrates it). Erotic love is one of the most powerful and beautiful things. Yet, like, anger, it can and repeatedly does go very wrong.

Jesus is demonstrating that his superabundant righteousness is not easy. Live without the anger that wishes the death of others—and live without the lust that fantasizes about getting another person in bed for sex. Try moving through life that way and we discover how profoundly out of line either Jesus’ standards or our habitual response patterns are. In our current age, pornography has corrupted millions, including pastors, church leaders, leaders in Christian NGOs.

Unfortunately, within the Church are Bishops, Bible scholars, well-known preachers telling us Jesus was, actually, sad to say, wrong on this one (or doesn’t mean what we have taken him to mean in the past). Sexual impulses and drives are part of the good nature we have – and, so long as “love” surrounds the fantasy or even the sexual act, everything is rosy. The ethic for sex is: ‘Don’t hurt anyone. If there is mutual concern and all is consensual, anything goes.’²⁷⁶

Actual physical adultery is connected here with eye and heart-adultery. Jesus seems to interpret the seventh commandment (adultery) by the tenth (coveting). What the eye takes in fills the heart.²⁷⁷ What the heart longs for conditions the looking we do. The pure in heart see

²⁷⁶A recent example is the Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book, *Shameless: A Sexual Revolution* (Convergence Books, 2019): “I’m here to tell you: unless your sexual desires are for minors or animals, or your sexual choices are hurting you or those you love, those desires are not something you need to ‘struggle with.’ They are something to listen to, make decisions about, explore, perhaps have caution about. But struggle with? Fight against? Make enemies of? No.” Certainly, we need to make decisions about them. But her claim goes well beyond the ethic of the Bible: so long as sex is consensual with mutual care, without ‘harm’, there is no shame or guilt, in effect, under these conditions no sexual immorality, not even adultery.

²⁷⁷ Aristotle recognizes the importance of the eye-gate: “Goodwill seems therefore to be the beginning of friendship, just as the pleasure of the eye is the beginning of love. No one falls in love without

God. The lustful see and covet every half-attractive person as a potential sexual partner. To be sure the actual act of adultery differs from this in that such physical adultery takes two people. But when the event is lustful thinking, the other party is not guilty of any wrongdoing.

The popular recent response has been to denigrate the moral insight of Jesus. To expect people to live this way is sheer psychological absurdity. All our social experience tells us people don't act this way. Our own inner responses show that we are programmed and predisposed to go for pleasure, to seek attractive people, to long for closeness. How can we suppose anyone is sane who demands that we not only not have sex with anyone but our spouse but that we not even participate in the emotional and social moves that lead up to it?

Unfaithful lust is put in the center of this ban. The integrity of righteousness means sexual self-control, both in our behavior and inner emotional responses.²⁷⁸ This is a command that protects marriage and sexuality. In the first instance it protects women from the lustful leer of men. In a secondary way it bans all seductive gestures or poses, meant to lure another to bed in contravention of the strict rule: chastity outside marriage, faithfulness in it. The clear assumption of this saying is that marriage is between a man and a woman.

What is banned is the willful looking that springs from or is aimed at stirring up lust. Literally the phrase is "looking at a woman in order to lust."²⁷⁹ The looking has the purpose of fueling the inner stirrings of sexual longing, stirring it up and mobilizing oneself into action to secure another as a sexual partner. Such looking and its accompanying fantasies and hopes are what Jesus brings into focus. This ends the hunt in sexual relations, the thrill of the chase, the glow of being sought and wondering whether the conquest will happen. If adultery is to be prevented, the remedy starts in the heart. The whole train-wreck starts there, beginning at imagination and moving on to intent, planning and execution.

The problem is not marriage. Some have thought this was the root of all sexual evil. By insisting that people marry only one and stay faithful to only one, Jesus creates the crisis of prudery and puritanical rigidity. Without marriage people would discover the "naturalness" of sexuality, the freedom of lust, the liberation of sensuality, the delights of everybody. It is marriage and morality that create guilt. Guilt is the great distortion and destroyer. Ban marriage

first being charmed by beauty, but one may delight in another's beauty without necessarily being in love: one is in love only if one longs for the beloved when absent, and eagerly desires his presence." *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (1934, Revised edition) Loeb Classical Library, Vol. XIX. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (p. 539). Book IX.5.3.

²⁷⁸ Augustine, *Sermon*: "The lesser righteousness, therefore, consists in not committing adultery through the joining of bodies, but the greater righteousness of the kingdom of God is not to commit adultery in one's heart. Whoever refrains from committing adultery in his heart all the more easily safeguards himself from committing adultery in his body" (pp. 40-41)

²⁷⁹ The term is *πρός* with accusative. This can be taken in several ways (the purpose of looking, the result of looking, or simply coordination as in "looking and desiring"). The present participle of looking (*βλέπω*) should not be read as "continually looking." It is gnomic. Wallace, *Grammar* (pp. 615-16). "If one takes this construction here in 5:28 as strictly purpose, Jesus' meaning is severely narrowed: a man commits adultery only if he looks at a woman for the purpose—with the prior intent—of desiring her. However, Jesus' meaning seems broader than that, so I have translated the construction as 'so as to desire her' to allow not just for purpose, but also for result: with no prior intent to sin, a man may look upon a woman, but if he then desires her, he has already committed adultery." Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 286). Contra Carson, *Matthew*, p. 184, who takes it as "so as to get her to lust."

and heal grave social and personal neuroses. This is no more than a diagnosis of a symptom, not the root of the problem. Marriage institutions are troubled, but they are not the problem.

Some strains of Christendom and other religions denigrate marriage in favor of celibacy. Some even see the problem as embodiment and pit the spirit over against the body. A gnostic spirituality takes the enemy to be the body with all its physical desires and appetites. True holiness is a matter of learning complete indifference to one's own body and its adornment, accoutrements and attractiveness. What counts is the liberation of spirit from body. Yet this strikes at our identity as creatures, as humans, as imagers of God. The body is not evil as such.

Jesus forswears such "easy" answers. The issue only becomes apparent when we continue to live fully and gladly in our bodies, with hands and eyes and imagination. What Jesus demands is not that we avoid marriage or deny our sexuality, seek disembodiment or create separate gender worlds. What he asks is that we terminate lustful thoughts. We are to act decisively here as we did with anger. It is urgent and important that we learn to be with the other gender without adulterous intentions or actions. That is the expectation and challenge.

It might seem that the solution is to create a sort of enforced separation of the genders as happened in the Church. Allow only men at the front of churches. Women as priests, especially attractive women, would only create opportunities for this command to be violated. Separate men and women "priests" and clothe them in ways that minimize or hide the distinctives of their gendered embodiment. Create a community of holiness by isolation and insulation.

This too is a violation of the commands of Jesus. It is an "easy" solution, not the narrow gate or the difficult path. There is considerable wisdom behind the monastic and male-only solution. It recognizes the forcefulness of Jesus' hyperbolic statements regarding the offending eye and hand. It is always better to enter the Kingdom of God maimed than to go into hell hale and hearty. Sometimes one must settle for a distorted and crippled arrangement for the sake of the Kingdom of God rather than the wholeness and health of the fullness of God's will because sin runs rampant in that direction.

The whole restriction of priesthood to males is at best this very distorted, crippled solution—however much the Church and its hierarchy has rationalized it as the superior way. It is a travesty and troubled solution to the lustfulness of males. It blames the less guilty and restricts them for the sake of the over-sexed males. To be sure there is more than enough seductiveness and guileful temptation done by some women. Women have their wiles as surely as men have their wantonness. This is not an either/or matter. Yet the restrictions on women in Church leadership are a very poor and crippling arrangement when measured by the gifting of the Spirit and the fullness of God's will.

Nevertheless, such solutions are at times acceptable interim arrangements. When they become normal and normative, then we find ourselves back again with a righteousness that does not exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes. For a time, or even all time, I may need to sever a relationship with a third party because of my own (or his/her own) uncontrolled desires and actions. It is better to be limited relationally than to incite and do the wrong. It is better to have a structured restriction than freedom with sin. What is at stake is the eternal health of my whole being, not just a part of me that is inessential. My sexuality is a mirror of me.

What Jesus seeks is an integral community of males and females, males or females, within which the lustful look and gesture does not happen. This is the solution of Jesus. We are to live with that, not some half-solution that temporarily "solves" the temptations by removing the external stimuli to them. The problem lies first and foremost within. That is painfully and

powerfully clear due to so much male priest misconduct. It begins and ends with the heart.

But we say back, ‘Do you know, Jesus, how involuntary much of this seems to us. I hunger and thirst after righteousness, but my eye keeps getting caught—my hand seems to have a life of its own. I want to be pure yet even the best of intentions gets sabotaged. The attractive beauty of another, the kind understanding of a friend, the weakness of my loneliness, the anonymity of my situation—a dozen sort of things arrests my best intention. I find myself looking and lusting against my will.’²⁸⁰

We should not suppose Jesus was naive or ignorant of the inner male drive. There is variation here, but it is a variation on a theme. He would not have lived as a human male without such knowledge. Jesus doesn’t allow the normal range of excuses or rationalizations for lust any more than he does about murderous anger. His purpose isn’t a seminar in self-esteem. It is a seminar in reality therapy. Underneath our will lies original sin, a power that rises up, even against our conscious willing and desiring. We are neither as helpless nor as free and able as we think.²⁸¹ There is nothing Jesus asks of us he did not ask of himself, nothing that is impossible when we live in and by the blessing of God. God’s grace is even more real and powerful a force than our hormones and cultures.

None of this is to say Jesus is offering quick and easy solutions. When it comes to combatting the mess of evil, we find ourselves in, nothing is easy or quick. So, this is not a sort of: ‘Here’s the answer, so just do it.’ Once we start to ‘do it’ we discover how deep is our need for the grace and mercy of God, how unsalty and full of darkness we really are. We discover how much we need salty women and men around us. We discover that Jesus doesn’t remove the hormones, our cultural surroundings, or the people who hook us.

In dealing with our propensity toward eye and heart adultery, Jesus brings into the foreground the sin that resides within us. If we set out to think this whole subject matter through, we tend to focus on sins, the actions that we can see and censure in ourselves and others. These are the events that disrupt and destroy. These are the matters which, if ended, would relieve the suffering and folly we find in so much of human life.

Wisdom is needed. We are to act as if we had no eye, if it is the eye-gate that leads us astray. Or no hand if it is touch-gate that brings us into sinful fantasy or action. We should be wise enough to stop fueling the inner fire. We need not feed ourselves pornography or literature that inflames our desires. There is a level of habit that takes time to repattern. We have had all of life to become twisted. It takes time (and pain) to become straight. “Eye” and “hand” adultery are

²⁸⁰ Augustine was wiser on this account than many moderns, even if his theological deduction is questionable: “There is no doubt, then, that human nature is ashamed of this lust, and rightly so. For the disobedience of this lust, which has made the sexual members of the body completely subject to its urges and snatched them away from the will’s control, shows quite clearly what the retribution was for man’s first sin.” *Works, Vol. 1.7*(p. 128). *City of God*, Book XIV, 20.

²⁸¹ “For, there are three steps by which sin comes about: suggestion, pleasure, and consent. Suggestion occurs either through memory or through the bodily senses, as when we see, hear, smell, taste or touch something. But if there is pleasure in the enjoyment, illicit pleasure must be curbed. ... If, however, consent is given, sin takes place in the full sense of the word, known to God in our heart, even if the deed does not become apparent to others.” Augustine, *Works, Vol. 21* (p. 41).

both banned by Jesus.²⁸² Yet people differ here in what they need to do so each needs to be wise. There is no single antidote.

Jesus points out that such events of lust or adultery are built upon a granite hard foundation, an inner life that is wrongly structured and dynamically mis-motivated. These actions are present not simply because people don't think before they act (though that does happen—ignorance and folly are part of the atmosphere of sin). They happen also because, knowing the right, they still want to do the wrong. Their imagination and desires are at war with what they understand cognitively to be the better way.

To be sure, Jesus tells the woman caught in the act of adultery to go and sin no more. The act of sin must be ended. But that is not the end of the matter. Why she engaged in that action is worth exploring, as is why the man was involved in the affair and why these men brought her (and not him) in public for condemnation. The action level is important because it displays what is in our hearts. At one critically important level it is important that certain actions cease and desist, even if the motivational drivers do not.

This was a point Jesus made in about anger and murder. To get the enemies in a hot war to stop shooting and shelling each other is a giant step forward. But it does not deal with the longer term, more deeply rooted issue of fear, anger and hatred. AIDS has ushered in an era of somewhat more restraint sexually. There are probably fewer who are wildly profligate, fewer cases of the act of adultery. Recent statistics seem to indicate a moderating of the explosive plunge into fornication and adultery that came after the sixties. Simply to end affairs and bring people more sexual sanity is a good in and of itself.

At the same time there is an explosion of pornography. The internet has brought the full range of sexual conduct and misconduct onto any willing screen. Simply to block such sites on our computers and phones is a good in and of itself. Yet neither of these is enough.

There is something far deeper, far more difficult, far more significant. It has to do with the sin that leads to our sins. Nor can we minimize the danger lurking here.²⁸³ Or the pain and effort to surmount the powerful desires that are inflamed. To cut off a hand or pluck out an eye points in the direction of how serious this matter is and how integrated sexuality is with spirituality. To “stumble” here is to risk final destruction in hell.

There are layers upon layers here. The person who is sunny and outgoing, who never met a person he or she didn't like, who cannot hold a grudge may feel Jesus' words on anger and mercy are commonplace. There is no problem in this for them. Yet they read the very next paragraph and find themselves caught in his net. The cool-headed may be the passionate hearted—and the sexually calm may be the mouthy hot-head. Our temperament may bend us in one way or another on these matters. What we cannot say is that we are so singularly aligned with the

²⁸² Chrysostom: “For he who has once kindled the flame, even when the woman whom he has beheld is absent, is forming continually within himself images of shameful things. The images often lead even to the concrete act. Hence Christ takes away even that embrace which is in the heart only.” Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13* (pp. 108-109).

²⁸³ “σκανδαλίζει [to cause to stumble]—Of the twenty-nine NT occurrences of the verb σκανδαλίζω, Matthew's Gospel uses it fourteen times. Although context must indicate the severity of the stumbling, virtually every time in Matthew it involves the very real danger of apostasy and damnation.” Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I*. (p. 287). This is why the hyperbolic action suggested is so extreme.

Kingdom of God that our inner and outer selves match the profile Jesus draws.

Jesus continually brings us back to the fragmented nature of our whole personhood and community life. We cannot exist without the blessings of the Kingdom of God, blessings that rest upon a given way of being oriented to life and God and other humans. Nor can we create the character we need without people who are salt and light: mentors, friends, spiritual guides, fellow travelers—people who can share with us the struggle to align our actions, emotions and habits with the qualities Jesus commands.

How do we cleanse ourselves of the inner pollution that stands behind the actions we know are wrong? How do we not simply avoid the evil but advance the good? If the righteousness of God exceeds even the exemplary righteousness of scribe and Pharisee, what hope have we of finding it overflowing within us?

1. We must resist the temptation to fragment this matter into externals or internals only. Whatever this means it is a whole-personed transformation, reaching into the inner structures of our human “nature.”

2. We need to stop the acting and speaking that is wrong by focusing on what is entailed in the qualities Jesus singles out as blessed by God. Change the inner orientation and the actions will also change.

3. We should be wise enough to stop fueling the inner fires—by what we allow our eyes and hands to do. We need not feed ourselves pornography or literature that inflames our desires. There is a level of habit that will take time to repattern. We have had all of life to become twisted. It takes time (and pain) to become straight. The point of gouging out the eye and cutting off the hand is that we need to take whatever possible means necessary to reach the goal of sexual sanity.

4. Continually we need to return to the Word of God and the words of Christ. That word is alive and active. By it we can become pure of heart, prudent in speech and proper in action. Those who observe and teach these words are great in the Kingdom.

[3]. Matthew 5:31-32: Marriage – no easy repudiation of commitments

An interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

This third antithesis protects the marriage bond. The most immediate connection in the context is with the probing of eroticism—unfaithful looking, touching and acting. Yet this command reaches back to anger as well. Enmity as well as lust corrupts the marriage tie and leads to a breaking of the marriage vows.

In modern times, these short verses are among the most controverted in terms of their intent, meaning and applicability. There are a number of variations in how this topic is expressed as well as permissible grounds for divorce (in Mark 10:12 we have a woman divorcing a husband, a Roman practice). These two verses can hardly be thought to represent the sum total of our Lord’s instruction on this matter. Marriage and divorce are about real people in real relationships – and modern Christian denominations are all over the map on this one!

This is likely the most difficult of these first three antitheses, given the current fragility of marriage bonds. It is also difficult to explore when so many even in the midst of the Christian community are single divorced or remarried divorcees and feel judged when this subject comes up. The first two items uncover inner drives and responses that can be easily hidden. A failed marriage and divorce are visible, right there for all to see. The first two antitheses are the context for this third: the frustration and anger that blows up in marriage, the wandering eye that thinks

of how much better life (and sex) would be with another. Both are major contributors to the failure of marriage vows

The phrase quoted comes from Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The situation was the question of remarrying a woman who had, in the meantime, been married to another. The husband was commanded to give a writ of divorce, putting in his former wife's hands an indication that he had divorced her. He could not take her back as his wife if she remarried someone else (and subsequently was divorced or widowed). The reasons for initiating divorce are vaguely stated ("if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her...").²⁸⁴

Jesus is striking at the trivializing of this (and other passages). Understandings emphasized "no favor" (if a woman was no longer attractive to the man), "some" thing in her (one stream read this as "anything" from poor cooking to a harsh voice), and the strictest underlined "indecency" (that is, sexual immorality). Jesus is agreeing with the strictest stream of thought. Except in the case of sexual immorality, divorce is not allowed. Divorce exposes the woman divorced to further sexual impropriety—it turns her into an adulterous woman.

This antithesis does not move inward into attitude but outward into social opinion. The structure of marriage attitudes was that adultery was a sin against the husband. The man could have relations with an unmarried woman and no adultery was involved because no husband was cuckolded. Jesus drives the scope of adultery much further. The man who divorces the woman is guilty of causing her to commit adultery. The man who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. This is a redefinition of boundaries.

A problem arises just here. The exception given in Matthew is not repeated in Mark and Luke. That is not problematic as such. Too much has been made of the differences when we should realize that we are in a high context communication world. What does not need to be said (because assumed obvious) is left unsaid. With other audiences, the unspoken may be spelled out to give necessary clarity to the force of the words. It would be astounding if Jesus spoke only once on this subject or if all he said was contained in just a few words without spelling out of some applications. This is why we should suppose the exceptional clause goes back to Jesus—and the so-called "tighter" words in Mark and Luke are not in conflict at all.

Part of our problem in grasping the significance of this is sensing the social situation and meanings that are at stake when we converse and put policies into practice. We begin with our own sense of marriage—what it means for men and women and children, how it is related to the larger kin network, what position it has in the occupational structure, how people get in and get out of it. Then we begin to read the words to see what sense we might make of it for moderns. In the process we get the terms out of context. The force is missed, and we wind up with the sorts of strange affirmations and rejections of Jesus' teachings that we find surrounding us today.

The other hermeneutical issue here is the distinction made in several ways by interpreters.

²⁸⁴ Deuteronomy 24:1 is ambiguous. The husband divorces when he is "displeased with her because he finds in her *something indecent* (or disgraceful)" [עֲרֻת דָּבָר]. The conservative school of interpretation took this to mean some sexual impropriety. The more liberal took it as if it were two words – a disgrace and something else. So even burning the soup counted. The Sermon on the Mount seems to take aim at the latter allowing of divorce for nearly any reason without qualms. "Thus the practice of divorce is justified as a matter of course. The writing of the bill of divorce is regarded as a minimum legal requirement of procedure to cancel the marriage, thereby treating marriage as a contract that can be cancelled like any other contract." Betz, *Sermon* (p. 248).

God's original and perfect will is no divorce. God hates divorce. God never brought two people together in marriage with the intention of later ripping them apart. God's grace is sufficient to heal whatever wounds there might be in the marriage history. The center of God's salvation is reconciliation rooted in mercy and forgiveness. Christians who experience that should find resources in their human relationships for reconciliation.

Having said that, God permits divorce because of the hardness of our hearts. Even redeemed, sanctified, well-intentioned Christians can sin here and find mercy. While divorce is not in the core values of God's best for people, it is not outside the limits of God's will altogether. The unconditional will of God is accompanied by his conditional will. Or we might say the permissive will of God supplements the categorical will of God. For Christians who continue to live in a sinful world, who continue to be in the process of growing into the likeness of Christ, there are no guarantees. Jesus gives this clear guideline. God's core value is no divorce and no remarriage. The exception mentioned is when the marriage is destroyed by adultery.

This is not a text on the center of marriage. It is a text on its limits and boundaries. It is also a commentary on the social realities of divorce and remarriage—aimed squarely at the men who are engaged in these events. Why are men in view and not so much the women?

The first answer is that this is a patriarchal society, a society whose decision-making processes and whose public space is defined largely by adult males. Women are embedded in the social order in such a way that most of their fate is in the hands of fathers, brothers, sons and uncles. The decisive structuring of choices and opportunities in marriage and in the public for women is in the hands of males. The Magistrates who hear cases and the witnesses to a bill of divorce are males.

This is not to say women could not exercise influence and at times authority and power. Nor is it to take responsibility out of women's hands, as though the only ones who could be given credit or charged with culpability were men. There is always room for action and responsible choice. This is the message given even to those who are slaves in the first century. The service of Christ is not a function of the degrees of freedom, but of the obedience within the freedom given, be it thimble or ocean sized. The well of providence is very deep—but we bring such small buckets to it. We must believe God provides enough room for us to be Kingdom-people.

We can be glad for many reasons that the social structuring of marriage and the public has changed. Paul himself recognizes that enhancing the realm of freedom provides new opportunities for serving Christ. The master has more opportunities to provide service and help for the many than the ordinary slave (if we exclude the Roman slave who was given great freedom, assets and possibilities by the master). The male had more freedoms than the female (and different ones as well). The law was laid out in such a way as to follow the profile of the gender division of labor—and to reinforce the privileges and powers of the males.

Jesus does not seek to address hypothetical social situations but real ones. In asking that Jesus speak a universal word, we cannot ask that he speak one that is irrelevant to the culture and society within which his historical incarnation occurred. What is written in the Old Testament and what we have in the New are words given for specific peoples in actual socio-cultural contexts. We cannot have a historical Jesus and a non-historical revelation. Nor can we suppose that the words given seek to legislate the social structure as such. These are words given within social structures, characterizing the will of God so as to use the possibilities present in those structures in ways to enhance Kingdom-living.

The comparable word in our generation will differ, not in spirit but in letter, just as our social

arrangements differ. We are not in the business of telling people to imitate the agrarian polygamy of Israel or the Roman *pater familias* of the first century. This is not about the correct social structure. It is a matter of role taking and role playing within structures that are this side of Eden and heading for the New Jerusalem. There are no perfect structures or people.

Jesus reiterates the consistent theme of the Bible: divorce is outside the boundaries of God's prescribed will. Divorce is present only as a concession, only as an emergency measure, only as a permission. It is not a command. It is not a directive that is necessary, even in the case of adultery. This does not restrict the freedom of either the guilty party or the partner sinned against. It is a last resort. Before that resort there is mercy, forgiveness, peacemaking, repentance and sorrow. Before that there is love and healing. Before that there is salt and light. Divorce is like healing the wound by amputating the wounded limb. It prevents more pain of one sort by inflicting pain and damage of another.

Until and unless we are clear on this center, it is easy for the margins of this issue to control the whole discussion. What about non-Christians, divorced and remarried before meeting Christ? What about those married to non-Christians who live by a different ethic? What about...what about...what about? All the real cases we can portray have eventually to be addressed. What disciples are to see and think as compassionate, realistic, faithful ways of dealing with good and bad marriages, with damaged and wounded marriages, with real life legal and social settings is to be framed by this: God hates divorce.

We might ask (as did the early disciples) whether marriage is worth the risk if divorce is as serious a violation of the will of God as Jesus makes it out to be. Or perhaps we can seek to hang onto our identity as Christ-following disciples and at the same time pick a church tradition that has found ways (like the Pharisees) to negate the force of Jesus' perspective. There are ways offered us whereby we can conform the Church practice to the societal mood. What we cannot do is the two-step dance attempted thereby of being friends of Christ and the world. Worldliness and godliness cannot coexist.

What we equally cannot do is set up the various words on marriage and family arrangements as a conflicting argument and pick the one we find most congenial. Paul and the Gospels writers were not engaged in a project that misunderstood and misapplied Jesus' words. We take the variety of words and see in them the central guidelines as well as flexible applications. More than one cultural matrix is involved in the early Church. Already in the Gospels we have the process of translation and contextualization occurring. Jesus did not speak into a culturally uniform world in Palestine.

Having said all these things, we must still acknowledge that there is puzzle and obscurity here. If sexual misconduct is sufficient to override God's prescriptive will and invoke his permissive will, then remarriage is also permitted without it being simply an equivalent sort of marital sexual misconduct. We must ask what is the high context here surrounding these short, staccato-like words of Jesus on divorce? What is left unsaid that leaves us in a quandary as to even the spirit and intentions of these hard words? Do we have problems here because our premises are out of line? Under what conditions is divorcing a woman a pushing of her into adultery? And when is marriage to a divorced woman also adultery? There are no simple answers here—and in some cases no answers for our questions. We have to ad lib, finish the line begun without knowing how the story was meant to end.

The first thing we need to do is step back from this single text and study the other texts that

deal with husband and wife, with marriage and divorce. The larger context is not the grounds for divorce (why), but the grounds for marriage. What is a family? What is God's intention for putting together humans as male and female? What is the goal of marriage? What does one-fleshness mean? What is the role and meaning of genital sexuality? How do religious norms and civil law fit? What sorts of creative initiatives can Christians devise that provide more of the sorts of perspective and support needed for men and women to live more deeply in terms of the goals and spirit of the marriage bond?

Part of the problem with the discussion is that it gets focused on teasing out who said what when and what is redaction, what is quotation, what is Jewish and what is Hellenistic. The argument then focuses on the grounds for divorce rather than the meaning and functions of sexuality and marriage. We find ourselves in detailed speculative reconstructions of tradition based on possibilities rooted in slight linguistic variations, none of which helps us make sense of the text as we have it.

The second thing we need is a commitment to go with the commands of Jesus, whatever we find them to require. We need not fear that we will find some unreasonable, illogical, bad-for-real-people message. We may well find something that is painful to us, challenging to our mindset, revolutionary to our practices and perspectives. The reason Jesus' words rub us wrong is not because they are wrong, but because our world and we are wrong. His words are right-setting words. If we twist them to fit us, we will have a religion that is wrong where we are already wrong.

This means we must be careful in our interpretation. Too much of "what the Bible says" or "Jesus says" is a mishmash of poorly exegeted texts that echo some modern cultural biases. What is obscure and difficult in Jesus is not always ambiguous simply because it offers a message we really dislike. Some of it is opaque because we live in another time and culture. We need to be careful in our dogmatism to be sure it is more than our dogmatism but represents a teaching of what Christ commands. We are not to make others our disciples, but disciples of Jesus Christ. It is his voice, not our interpretations, that must in the end be heard and observed.

[4]. Matthew 5:33-37: Words, Vows, Oaths – self-expressive speech

An Interpretation of Lev. 19:12; Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20, 23:31²⁸⁵

Entering into marriage involves the pledging of vows—the taking of oaths to affirm commitments to a future unknown and a person who may well change in ways unanticipated. Salt and light in human affairs mean that every word we give is oath-like in its honesty. What we say, we mean. What we have said pledges us to action and commitments we keep even in the

²⁸⁵ The Old Testament approach to oaths and vows appears in a variety of contexts: e.g., Ecclesiastes 8:2-3; Genesis 21:22-31; Psalm 11:8-11, 89:34; Exodus 20:16; Lev. 19:11-12, 20; Num. 30:1-2; Deut. 19:18, 23:2-23; Joshua 2:1-14, 6:22-25; Prov. 20:25; Jeremiah 5:7. The actual "quote" is not from a specific text but seems to be a crystallization of Old Testament teaching on oaths. "Jesus is not citing the OT here. The Second Commandment uses a different idiom that literally renders the Hebrew οὐ λήμψη τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου ἐπὶ ματαίῳ (LXX Ex 20:7; Deut 5:11)." Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 297); "Strictly speaking, therefore, the text referred to in Matt 5:33 is Hellenistic-Jewish halakah; it is regarded as a Torah prohibition, but it is not part of the written Hebrew text of the Old Testament." Betz, *Sermon* (p. 264); Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 127).

face of adversity.²⁸⁶

Oaths are used to solemnize an occasion, such as when testimony is given, or a contract is entered into. Jesus envisages a society where honesty meets honesty always and there is no need for oaths. Oaths (like locks on doors and windows) are needed only where evil is afoot. Within the community of faith, the transformation of character should be such that oaths are superfluous. Swearing to something firmer and more certain than human honesty no longer needs be done if humans have become true through and through. The purity of heart is at stake again—a person so singular in motive and goal that words are aligned with reality and with commitments made.

There have been a number of interpretations as to what Jesus was about in this word, especially given the practice of Paul and others (who use oaths):²⁸⁷

1. Jesus meant to prevent false or thoughtless oaths by banning all oaths.

2. Jesus does not forbid oaths in the actual name of God, but substitutes, those using euphemisms to imply the involvement of God without actually invoking God or which misuse the sacred name of God.

“Christ, therefore, meant nothing more than this, that all oaths are unlawful, which in any way abuse and profane the sacred name of God, for which they ought to have had the effect of producing a deeper reverence.”²⁸⁸

3. Jesus creates a sort of double standard or two-tiered ethics: the priest or religiously vowed are banned from oaths but the ordinary subject and citizen involved in everyday life will continue to use them. Here we have medieval Catholicism.

4. The two-kingdom interpretation makes the oath banned in the one kingdom and permitted in the other. Government and the civil public are constituted by oaths. When I am required by constituted authority to swear an oath, then it is proper. Here we have Luther:²⁸⁹ “A Christian should not resist any evil; but within the limits of his office, a secular

²⁸⁶ At question here is the force of the added *άλιν* [again]. Carson (*Matthew*, p. 187) argues it means it is continuing the comments on lust and divorce, adding an additional or explanatory reason why divorce is so serious a matter. Many commentators take it as signaling a new triad of antitheses even as it comments on the prior topics from a different set of angles: Davies, *Matthew Vol. 1* (p. 533); Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 238); Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1* (p. 297); Turner, *Matthew* (p. 172). Betz, *Sermon* (p. 263) The “everyone who” phrase used to this point is not used in these second triad of antitheses.

²⁸⁷ E.g., the fraudulent case in Joshua 9:15-20; or the incident of Jephthah (Judges 11:29-40). We find Christians taking oaths or vows: e.g., Acts 18:18 indicates Paul’s Nazirite vow; 21:20-26 young Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are ending a religious vow.

²⁸⁸ Calvin, *Harmony* (Vol. 1, p. 295).

²⁸⁹ “As we have said, where it is done with the authorization of a word of God, it is all right to swear, to get angry, or to desire a woman. But ‘the authorization of a word of God’ means a command that I do it for His sake in the execution of my office or an order through those who are in office. To give an illustration: If you should happen to be imprisoned by the government and were required to swear an oath of nonaggression, or if a prince demanded an oath of allegiance, or if a judge demanded an oath from a witness—then it would be your duty to take the oath... Now, Christ is neither prohibiting nor prescribing anything for the government here, but He is letting this realm take its own course as it should and must. What He is forbidding is unauthorized, capricious, or habitual swearing.” Luther, *Works Vol. 21* (p. 102).

person should oppose every evil.”²⁹⁰

5. This prescription is meant (as all these are) for the new eon. Insofar as we remain in the old, our falling short will continue. So, we swear oaths as an emergency measure, as a regretful acknowledgement that we continue to exist under conditions of evil. Just as medicine continues to be important for the health of individuals, oaths continue for the sake of the health of the social order.

6. Jesus means just what this passage seems to say: no oaths of any sort under any conditions. Swearing an oath is forbidden. What we see Paul doing is not in violation of this (and Jesus’ own words in Matthew 26:63 are also not an authentic “oath”). Here we have many of the Quakers and Anabaptists.

7. Some recently distinguish promissory oaths from affirmative, seeing the ban as touching the former but not the latter. So, I can invoke God as witness for the sake of affirming the truthfulness of what I am saying—but not in making a pledge for a future which I cannot guarantee.²⁹¹

It is clear we are again in the midst of difficult exegetical waters. Part of our problem is what we find oathing necessary in our social orders so as to ritualize those most solemn of occasions where life and death issues are at stake. We need people to know that what they choose to profess and testify in some cases is so profoundly important that we need to dramatize its importance.

Oaths also perform the role of formalizing speech in such a way that people know they are culpable for the precision and accuracy of what they say. We are not always as deeply thoughtful in our speech as we need to be when the life or death—or other profound goods of human life—hang in the balance. Oaths remind us how careful we need to be in this sort of speech event. We need not always be as precise—and there are many speech events whose meaning and import are not at this level.

We also must acknowledge that we are not clear what is to fill in the context for this high context communication. The social meanings and uses Jesus and his audience had in mind have faded by the time we receive this message. The assumptions we bring to the statement vary from those brought by the initial audience and the first century readers in ways we can’t even know. To decode this properly, we need to decode not only the words, but the social setting surrounding it as well.

Another way of approaching the matter of oaths is to examine this issue within Matthew and the rest of the New Testament (for example, James). It appears that there were Pharisaic traditions that drew a set of distinctions meant to loosen the stringency of the requirements of the Law. By focusing on the sacred name of God and the dread of taking it in vain, they set up a hierarchy of lesser and greater oaths. Speaking the name of God was banned because of a casuistry that avoided the saying of the name in order to avoid violating it in a culpable way.

Then they went to work on vows. Only vows that invoked the name of God were fully and definitively binding. If one were to swear by the temple or the altar, or one’s own head, the vow was not fully binding. But if one swore by the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, then the

²⁹⁰ Luther, *Works Vol. 21* (p. 113).

²⁹¹ See McCabe, D. R. (2013). “Oaths and Swearing.” In Joel B. Green et. al. (Eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Second Edition. Downers Grove, Downers Grove: IVP Academic. (pp. 629–631).

vow was binding. Jesus strikes against the sort of legalism of formula, as though only certain precise words can bind a person to a promise or asseveration. Jesus returns to the heart and orientation of the inner person. What is important is not the precise words said, but the intent and integrity of the person claiming to say the truth. Why should not our every assertion be truthful, our every promise be binding?

“If oaths designed to encourage truthfulness become occasions for clever lies and casuistical deceit, Jesus will abolish oaths, for the direction in which the OT points is the fundamental importance of thorough and consistent truthfulness.”²⁹²

It is similar to the game children sometimes play with each other. They can mislead and deceive so long as their fingers are crossed. Anything you say with your fingers crossed need not be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Such communications do not count as lies or reflect upon one’s ultimate commitment to fair play and abiding by the rules. These adults have created more sophisticated versions of the same sort of intent: to play the “games” of life but escape the rules that might equalize the playing field or nail one to the consequences of the real commitments one has verbally made.

The Pharisees even had an institution called “Corban” (gift) and used it to avoid responsibilities given in other parts of the Law. If one pledged something as if it were a gift already offered to God, that removed it from every ordinary, “profane” use. It reserved it for sacred use, whether it was ever actually given to God. This way even parents were not allowed the use of some goods that might meet their dire needs. The effect of this was to use the law of vows to negate other prescriptions of the written Torah. The problem was using an oath in such a way as to negate the self-giving love required by the law, especially toward one’s parents. The inner spirit that unites this strict observance of a vow with the former weaseling out of vows given is the self-serving seeking of advantage.

The problem is the intention of the person whose words indicate or presuppose truth-telling in giving promises or affirming the correctness of certain claims. What good are formulas apart from people who are bonded to the truth? Jesus is striking against ingenious evasions as well as against ostentatious obedience. Neither creates the sort of social bonds that mimic the Kingdom’s values or relationships.

Taking life and breaking marriage may seem to be heavy weight matters as compared with fudging the truth. Yet the claim is that discipleship of speech is as critically important as the discipleship of God’s law and prophets, of anger and hatred, and of sex and marriage. If we are acting in good faith toward God’s word, then we will act in good faith with our fellow human beings. We will avoid hurting others and seek reconciliation (dealing decisively with anger and conflict). We will love others, not lust after them (even removing precious elements of our life to stop our toying with others sexually). We will be trustworthy in marriage (seeing divorce as radical medicine for only the most radical of marital disorder). We will be trustworthy in our words (saying what we sincerely, simply and directly mean and do).

All of these antitheses deal with social and political realities. To be salt and light disciples is to be in the world—with a difference. We are counter-cultural at critical junctures. We are decisively so because we have the inner equipment that allows our selective non-conformity to

²⁹² Carson, *Matthew*. (p. 187).

display itself. This does not make us nuisances or difficult people. It makes us trustworthy, creating the lineaments for a stable and healthful community. Our religion is not in word only, but in character and caring.

(1) Some distinguish oath-taking from oath-making. We are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. When we are required even as Christians to participate under oath in an event, we do so. We are not to multiply oaths by invoking God over this and that, or by creating more and more liturgy requiring vows of youth, officers, candidates for ministry, etc. The institution of 'oathing' is not banned by Jesus in these words. Even he responded with a simple "Yes, it is as you say" when asked, under oath, if he were the Christ, the Son of God.

What this suggests is that we are not to use these literal words of Jesus to create a disobedience to other words. When lawful authority asks us to take an oath, we may at least do that. We are not to invoke God at every turn of our life, over-divinizing our language and relationships. In some ways, by this line of reasoning, Jesus is asking us to be less religious in our relationships with each other.

(2) We can overpromise ourselves and our lives. Whether it is appropriate to ask for a vow of celibacy from a young man before adult life in the larger world is a serious question. The sexual misbehavior of Roman Catholic priests has been appalling in recent years. The numbers of pedophiles and others who have admitted affairs with women (the Archbishop of Ireland) indicates either an over-vowing or poor discipline within the priesthood. There is question whether some oaths, taken solemnly and formally in public, are valid.

What is needed is some sense of reality and balance here. There need to be places where people can take large risks for God because of large faith. Paul's list of dangers and difficulties show that he did not play his own apostolic calling safely. He might well have sung the hymns that pledge us today to go anywhere, at any time, to do anything at any cost for the Lord. Yet we too often sing words that we do not understand and do not mean. Peter was sure he would never betray the Lord—but he did. One wonders whether Protestants don't live in an over-vowed world just as really as many Catholics who have vowed themselves way over their gifts and prudence. They have allowed the institution to play God and require things of them they cannot give.

To pledge obedience to superiors may be giving away one's obedience to God. We already know that our commitment to God means we live on the edge of the possibility of civil disobedience at all times. We cannot obey civil authorities when they ask what contravenes the will and way of God. The same is true of what we must allow to ecclesiastical or para-church authorities. They too have no mandate beyond the will and ways of God. To pretend that the tradition or the hierarchy can play the final role and require disobedient obedience is to pretend that we can give away the responsibility for our discipleship to others.

(3) Why do we retain oathing that invokes the Bible (swearing with our hands on the Bible) or God when so many in our culture are not Christ followers? Can we see this as a sort of residual, unwilling witness of the culture to God? Or is this a hypocritical metaphysical black-mail whereby we try to threaten people so that when we have very little else, we are willing to use to ensure their honesty? Do we create hypocrites by having people say, "So help me God," when there is little in their lives that indicates they want God's help? Yet note that Jesus himself quoted the oath-law of the Torah in responding to the Devil ("You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him and swear by his name" Deut. 6:13).

All of this brings us again back to the bottom line. What is at stake is the place of God in our human communities and the sort of people we are from the inside out. Those who are the faithful seekers of God do not need oaths to pry truthfulness out of them or to pummel faithfulness into them. Those who seek no good higher than their own self-interest are not intimidated by an antiquated custom that seems to have no effects in the real world of space and time (when's the last time you've seen God strike someone with lightening when they said, "If I'm lying, may God strike me with lightening"?).

(4) God makes oaths to us. The rationale for God swearing oaths to us is to reassure and encourage our faith. God does not become more trustworthy in the words where oaths are explicitly given. Jesus repeatedly used the phrase, 'Amen, Amen' or 'Truly, I say to you...' This also is there to encourage faith, to reassure doubt, to highlight the veracity of what was being said. Paul's oaths in his letters (Gal. 1:20, Rom. 1:9; II Cor. 11:10-11) fulfill the same function. Here oaths are made.

There are several contemporary examples of how this word plays out in the Christian community as well as the larger civil community:

1). We need to be clear in all these words of Jesus that he is not concerned with technicalities. Sometimes they can be important, especially where precision is important (in engineering and medicine, in ingredients and timing). The problem comes when our commitments to each other become dependent upon a precision that has little to do with forging relationships that nurture our lives and communities.²⁹³

There is the nitpicking of the conservatives—when playing rook is a legitimate card game but playing canasta with regular cards is evil; when square dancing is OK but social dancing isn't; or country music can be listened to but rock and roll is the domain of the devil. It illustrates the technically minded casuistry Jesus was undermining by all these antitheses. Once rules are no longer integrally connected to goals and spirit, they can unleash the finest furies of legalism.

There is also the nitpicking of our legal system. We have become so preoccupied with the forms of justice that we release clear-cut criminals because some minor detail was not observed properly. There is something wrong when we have to unleash a bevy of lawyers to fill contracts with just the right words to ensure we have loopholes if we find ourselves cornered by some unwelcome contingency. Companies hide behind the precise wording they put together to fool the consumer and protect their profit margins. To be sure, there are opportunists on both sides of the aisle (the consumer who is looking for some minor inconvenience to turn into a major law suit settlement). Technicalities signal a society where trust has evaporated.

There is the nitpicking of liberal political correctness. When trivial offenses are made into major incidents, we have lost the balance of free and open relationships. There is speech that is inflammatory, that is equivalent to crying "fire" in a closed theater with disastrous results. Not anything and everything is justifiable or even tolerable speech. Yet the attempt to not offend anyone who has been stigmatized or marginalized in the past creates whole new categories of non-truth.

2. The shocking thing to our system is to realize we cannot leave God out of any of our words, however we set up the scripts for swearing oaths or avoiding vows. There is nothing we can put

²⁹³ Stassen, *Living*: "Our focus must shift from whether or not we should swear oaths in court to how to become truthful people." (p. 377).

our hand on or over, nothing we can swear by that does not belong to God. We do not leave God out of it when we cross our fingers behind our back—or when we invent convoluted and ingenious wordings to evade the fair and just delivery of a product we seem to be offering. God is not fooled. God is a part of every transaction and every guarantee we make. We may intend to leave God out, but God puts himself at the very center of everything we are and do.

This does not mean God produces the bad results that come from our bad attitudes and behavior. God is not a cosmic policeman, cleaning up after our misbehavior by preventing it from happening. Rather in every relationship we must reckon with God. There is no escape and no exit from our divine appointment. Every word will justify or condemn us. So, we must not think we can play around most of the time and, only when we swear by God's name, put ourselves in the place where our words have eternal significance. We must remember the power of words and the serious consequences that come with them. As Thielicke indicates, we set the world on fire:

“By words that concluded treaties and other words that broke the treaties; by words that counselled aggression; by cunning words that inculcated ideologies and legalised even the most atrocious deeds; by words that called evil what was good and called holy what God has forbidden. Do not words cause and move and sustain our whole history? Who could even conceive of the millions of graves and the ruins – if there were no words? Do not blessing and joy prevail where a good word is spoken? And back of family strife, back of hatred and spite are there not always words, venomous, coiling, writhing, serpentine, death-dealing words.”²⁹⁴

3. We focus on the wrong things when we turn the spotlight on the rules and their precise wordings. The problem in murder is anger. The problem in adultery is lust. The problem in divorce is selfishness. The problem in oaths is dishonesty. We are crooked people from the inside out. Weighing accountability does not exclude the social facilitation and scripting of anger, lust, selfishness or deceit. But it brings us back to the reality that we are not the sum and substance of our social environment. We have the ability to distance ourselves from the roles we are given. Each can play his or her life without hatred and murder, without lust and adultery, without selfishness and divorce, without deceit and oath making. We can be people of integrity. But that does not happen simply by having the right rules in place. It happens when people are different on the inside so that they want to have and keep norms that are good for them and for the community.

4. There are institutional correlates with personal integrity. The problem with anger isn't simply that it leads to hatred, vicious verbal abuse and murder. The problem is also that there are institutions that promote anger because they foster injustice and treat people unfairly. Those under caste or racism's burden should be angered. Their dignity and the health of their children are being violated. The problem with lust isn't just that I'm a weak individual. It is also that my culture creates stories and symbols that seek to enflame and exploit my sexual weaknesses. Hollywood as well as advertising has long exploited lust as a means to money.

We need better institutions that help people learn to feel and express appropriate anger—and better rules or laws and courts to process the conflicts that ought to finish in reconciliation. We need less pornography, less sexual pushing by advertising, less appeal to lust—and more places

²⁹⁴ *Sermon* (p. 52).

where we can discern where and why our eyes and hands offend God because of the sexuality expressed through them. We need to stop tinkering with the laws of divorce and get back to an appreciation of the purposes and goals of marriage itself. If we didn't get married for such trivial reasons, we might not divorce for such insignificant ones either.

If we were simpler and more honest in our communication, we might have dramatically less reasons to want reassurance the other is telling the truth. We certainly need more training and discernment on what truth is and how we are to tell it (especially our advertisers and story-tellers). But we cannot place all the blame for our lack of integrity on a society that institutionalizes such lack. Simply because institutions may recognize we are not people who are single-minded, wise and mature (and may exploit or seek to protect us) does not make it necessary that we must act or continue to live in our weaknesses.

5. When we surround some words with the dike of an oath, a word of honor, we admit that we are surrounded by muddy floods of untruth. Ordinarily, we are asking for the latitude to not mean what we say. We want to live in a world where words can be sent forth like bats in the night, only to vanish when the sun arises. What we are saying is that we do not wish to put ourselves into our words until we see that they will do. We wish to own the good ones and disown the bad ones (good and bad being defined by their effects on us).

We sow a world where "white" lies are acceptable fare for negotiating uncomfortable people and subjects. "She is not here." "The stork brought the baby." "Santa Claus will not bring you presents if you're not well behaved." "How are you?" "That was wonderful." "I love your new outfit." Our ordinary speech becomes chatter from which we evacuate all eternal weight. We seek to turn speech into the weightless surface of everyday shallowness. Words become insulation from any depth of relationship, any commitment to responsibility, any clarity of open honesty.

"Hermann Bezzel, the great preacher, quite rightly said, 'White lies are silken threads that bind us to the Enemy, invisible webs that are woven in hell.'"²⁹⁵

We indulge in the everyday stupid talk of conventional scripts because we have lost the ability to be at home in our world. We find ourselves tied down by a host of silken threads. The tongue, that flame-throwing firebrand, sets about to do its work. It fulminates and curses. It deceives and lies. It slanders and assassinates. It inflames and irritates. It humiliates and shames. We teach it to serve our power and lust well. Then when we need a word in season, a word that heals, a word that is true and faithful, we look in vain.

Jesus invites us to leave the world of falsehood and enter the liberation of the children of God. The father of all lies is the evil one. Our shadings of yes and no are the invisible threads that bind us to him. If murder starts with the irritation of anger and adultery with the glance of an eye, the humiliation of the word begins with an oath. Once words become slippery slopes, we turn to images and pictures, the sensory— "Hath God said? ... Look and see, the fruit is beautiful and good to the taste."

All the worst of our world starts with small things: a murder begins with a few annoyed thoughts. An adultery with a glance or two. A war over a few trivial words that offend the ego of some nation. Small things, silken threads woven into a tight rope by the Evil one.

²⁹⁵ Thielicke, *Sermon* (p. 57).

[5]. Matthew 5:38-42: Resisting, Retaliation and Reciprocity – actions

An interpretation of Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21.

This deals with the difficult issue of resisting²⁹⁶ evil. When do we become evil in the very process of resisting evil? When are we like abortion resisters who murder in the name of saving lives? What strategy does Jesus give us for dealing with the evils we confront and over which we have some control?

There are several critical distinctions for dealing with the thrust of this section. We must remember that high context communication contains unstated elements necessary for decoding these words properly. Part of the way we can begin to reconstruct that context is to be sure we see how Jesus and the Apostles acted. Also, we need to take these examples as focal instances, not meant to be applied in a wooden or rigid way. They illustrate principles and approaches by giving one particular instance that we need imaginatively to apply to the full range of relationships and situations of our contemporary life.

The most immediate context is the legal provision cited: the limit on judicial action in rectifying wrong doing. The “eye for an eye” provision was meant to institute a measure of proportionality in the meting out of justice, to limit the recompense for a wrong or injury. This seems to give weight to the view that “retaliation” as the theme.²⁹⁷ This is a provision in the law given in a way similar to the divorce law because of “the hardness of our hearts.” It is an outer limit permission, not a demanded commandment that negates mercy. Jesus’ point is that this law was given to curtail vengeance and retaliation. It is aimed at justice.

The *lex talionis* was given to address two issues: severe retribution and self-appointed retaliation or revenge.²⁹⁸ It was also prescribed to remedy a false witness in a formal judicial procedure. The good it fostered was to minimize violence and enhance justice. Its goal and intent is what Jesus unfolds. What we have again is not a literalistic derivation of a new law but a pointing to the character that is to mark the disciple: one of hungering and thirsting after justice – and embodying the virtue of peace-making.²⁹⁹

Jesus is not giving a charter for indifference to the religious, or a permission for impunity to evil and unscrupulous people. He does not teach irresponsibility but forbearance. He asks for a longsuffering that seeks to do what is loving even to those who are doing evil to us. This is not about encouragement for dishonesty or injustice. It guts the response we find within us, the

²⁹⁶ ἀντιστῆναι is used at times of violent, military resistance. Carter, *Matthew* (p. 151) translates this verb as “do not *violently* resist.” But many commentators don’t agree, e.g., France, *Matthew* (pp. 219-220): “But Jesus words go further than that: even resistance is forbidden, and no distinction is made between active and passive resistance, violent and non-violent, legal and illegal.” Literally it is to set oneself against, to oppose, or resist. The questions that surround it include: is it general (about all life) or specific (e.g., about law courts); is it passive (as in resist) or more active (as in retaliate)? If resist is the correct translation, does it mean one is to allow evil to take its course? If so, how do we distinguish such a posture from collusion with evil?

²⁹⁷ See Betz, *Sermon* (pp. 280-281).

²⁹⁸ In ancient Israel it was a formula for judges to determine sentences: in cases of property violation (Exod. 22:4-6), personal injury (Lev. 24:12-20), manslaughter (Lev. 24:17, 21) and perjury (Deut. 19:16-21). It is a means to restrain vendettas and excessive retribution (such as Lamech, Gen. 4:23).

²⁹⁹ Pennington, *Sermon* (pp. 194-199).

response wanting revenge when we have been harmed in some way. Instead, we are to give our body, our clothing, our service and our money in submission to Christ for the benefit of the one who insults and harms us.³⁰⁰ How that works is modelled by Paul and Jesus.

Within the community of faith, we see Paul “resisting” Peter (Galatians 2) for his drawing back from eating meals with gentile Christians when Jewish Christians appeared. He also resisted Simon Magus when he interfered with Paul’s witness (Acts 13:8-12). Resisting another who does what is clearly wrong is not banned by these words. One is not being asked as the “meek” to do nothing, to turn away silent in the face of a wrong. Jesus takes the permission of Hebrew law to ask an eye for an eye and tells his followers not to claim that legitimate right. What he puts in its place is the willingness to double the cost to oneself in order to do good in response to an ill done to oneself.

Jesus himself refuses the offer of the sword to prevent him from being arrested unjustly—or to rescue him from the judicial process that led to his death. He did not exercise any of his considerable powers as the Son of God to punish those who crucified him. Instead, he interceded for their forgiveness. He left us an example of what he spoke of in this passage. When he was abused and insulted in the courtyard, he did not spew out explicatives, condemning and denigrating those who mistreated him. We find him dignified and strong. He did not cower, nor did he curse.

In the civic arena Paul teaches the state’s role in resistance to evil doers and rewarding of those who do good serves God, not the Evil One (Rom 13). To be sure the calling of the state to use the sword in this service can be subverted (Rev 13). God’s service and gifts can be distorted and destroyed by being misused. But that does not mean they are always of the Devil. Unless we consider Paul to have misunderstood the teachings of Jesus, we must say he is giving an exposition of what Caesar’s realm is and some of the duties we have to that realm.³⁰¹

We are to overcome evil. We need to hear that part of Paul’s word. We are not to allow evil its full course and triumph in our world. But we are to overcome it with good, not with a counterbalancing evil. This means at least that we take seriously what our anger, our lust, our selfishness, our words lead us into when we find ourselves being burdened in ways that seem unfair.

What are we to do in response to the stupidity and venality of others? What should we do when we find ourselves sexually betrayed by our husband or wife? What do we do when we cannot find a satisfying sexual alliance? What do we do when our words commit us to a losing project and we find ourselves in court? What is our stance in relationship to what we take to be our rights? Jesus gives several examples to show the sort of thing we need to do in response.

³⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*: “The overcoming of others now occurs by allowing their evil to run its course. The evil does not find what it is seeking, namely, resistance and, therewith, new evil which will inflame it even more. Evil will become powerless when it finds no opposing object, no resistance, but, instead, is willingly borne and suffered.” (p. 133).

³⁰¹ In the Old Testament we have the example of the Judges who resisted invading oppressors as well as King David resisting invading armies (e.g., 2 Samuel 5:6-25). There are just wars and there are important duties to the police (and even good Samaritans) to deliver those being unjustly threatened by violence.

“His examples reveal that ‘do not resist’ is as much a positive action of love as it is a negative posture. It could be translated, ‘Be ready for an act of grace.’”³⁰²

As Kingdom people we are not only to take the words of the Sermon seriously but the Preacher of this sermon as well. What did he do in the face of aggressive opposition? How did he use words—or see the opposite gender? Whatever we think these words teach, their significance is modelled by Jesus himself.

The command of Jesus not to resist evil can be clarified somewhat by looking at the verb “to resist” elsewhere. We discover that we are not to resist God. God has a will for us. We are to listen to it and to seek genuinely to implement it in our everyday living. We also find passages that tell us in no uncertain terms to resist the Evil One. We can only suppose that one of the ways we resist Satan is by following these very words of the Sermon on the Mount. So, the command in this paragraph cannot be taken woodenly to mean no resistance of any sort to anyone or anything, not even the Devil himself.

By proclaiming the Kingdom of God and claiming us for it, Jesus is setting up a counter-movement to the Evil One’s activities and agents in this world. That will entail conflict and confrontation. There is little hope for being left alone. Our engagement in the affairs of living will not leave us peaceful and calm in our holy cul de sac. Other passages from Jesus tell us of family conflict. Divisions created by changing allegiances in which some family members choose Christ-following and others Christ-rejecting bring conflict. The issue is how we Christians operate within the struggles that occur for righteousness sake, for Jesus’ sake.

“We should thank God that as the church of Jesus Christ we are permitted to be a company of people who know a better way to treat men than simply to slap down the enviers and haters and opponents, a better way than merely keeping our distance from base, unlovely, unlovable people and associating only with those we like and from whom we get something in return. In this world of hatred and jealousy, of denouncers and scoundrels, of profit-seeking and cold self-interest we need to keep looking for this lost sonship. In this world we Christians have had our eyes opened to see that all who make life hard for us and all who give us a sour reaction are dearly bought and paid for by Jesus Christ.”³⁰³

First, we are not to take a principle that was given for the sake of enhancing fairness and use it to justify retaliation. The *lex talionis* is not a law of vengeance, but a principle of equity in justice. In the time of Jesus judges often applied this by exacting a monetary equivalent. Rather than apply this law as a prescription requiring exactly or literally what it says, it was taken as

³⁰² McKnight, *Sermon* (p. 124). He also comments on Deuteronomy 19:21 “There is no way around explaining what Jesus is saying in our text: *Jesus overtly ends the Mosaic command to “show no pity” in the appropriation of the lex talionis and in its place orders his followers to be merciful.*” But this seems to pull the text out of its Deuteronomic context where it has to do with criminal cases being adjudicated by the central tribunal before priests and judges, specifically false witnesses seeking to do harm to one who is innocent by misusing the judicial system. See Craigie, P. C. (1976). *The Book of Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (pp. 269–271); Christensen, D. L. (2001). *Deuteronomy 1–21:9* (Vol. 6A) Dallas: Word. (pp. 430–431). In this context, the *lex talionis* is a deterrent against false testimony.

³⁰³ Thielicke, *Sermon* (p. 78).

guide. The principle was that fair recompense should be given when someone was injured in a way culpable under the law.

Jesus says to his disciples that they are to go beyond the principle of fairness in justice in the courts. We are not to be ready to sue the daylights out of others in order to protect our rights. People will come after us because we are identified as followers of Christ or because we will not compromise on issues of righteousness. Jesus promised persecution and its lesser cousin, harassment. There are forms and contexts of harassment and violence where we may well want to haul someone into court to get them to cease and desist (sexual harassment is one instance as is the shooting of persons). But there are times when we are not to resist evil in the courts. The examples show some of the sorts of time this is true.³⁰⁴

Jesus takes aim at our inner motives and character. This counsel is meant to free us from clinging to our possessions and precious rights. The first deals with our right to be free from insult and public humiliation. The striking of the right cheek would be done with the back of the hand. It was considered the strongest form of insult for which one could collect double indemnity in the court. Jesus says to offer the other cheek. This is about insults, not mugging. This is a slap to the honor, not an attack on one's health. We are to respond with a spirit of nonretaliation—not grasping our own status honor as significant enough to get into a court fight to humiliate the aggressor.

The second example has to do with someone suing me for my undergarment. That was allowed. The outer garment (the cloak) could also be taken, but it had to be returned each evening, so the person would have something to keep them warm in the night. The next morning it would be collected again. The outer garment was like a poncho or tunic, used as a blanket as well. Jesus' way means we are to give what we need not give up in settling disputes with others. Most would not sue for the outer garment because of the trouble involved. We are not to hang onto our comforts.³⁰⁵

The third example has to do with the Roman military custom of requiring non-Romans to carry a burden for a thousand steps. There was no recourse once pressed into duty. It was not a voluntary thing. Jesus' counsel is to volunteer a second thousand steps. The first was for Caesar. The second thousand would be for God's Kingdom.

The final example was loans for the needy. The mandate is to give to everyone who asks (not give everything to anyone who asks—or even give exactly what everyone asks you to give). The background issue seems to be the Sabbath year custom of forgiving debts. The closer that time came, the less the willingness to loan (lest one not be repaid). Jesus says to loan to those in need without calculating the likelihood of repayment. We are not to cling to our assets.

³⁰⁴ Betz, *Sermon* (p. 284): “The meaning of the controversial command $\mu\eta\ \alpha\nu\tau\iota\sigma\tau\eta\nu\alpha\iota$ (“Do not retaliate”) is not to recommend an attitude of resignation and defeatism concerning evil or a principled self-surrender to all kinds of villains. Rather, what is commanded is not nonviolence in general but desistance from retaliation in specific instances. The difference is that such desistance is in effect a positive method of fighting evil and helping justice prevail.”

³⁰⁵ The problem with a literal application of the focal instance is seen in Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, (unless this is as hyperbolic as Jesus' words): “When sued (in court) for one's shirts, we are to give our cloak as well. This means we stand there naked revealing the greed of the suitor in all its nakedness before the whole law court, thus confronting the injustice nonviolently and pressing for justice.” (p.154).

The superabundant righteousness involved in this case is a shift of focus in the goals one might have in involvements in the courts, in dealing with imperial overlords and with neighbors in need. It is not the precise carrying out of the literal words that is at stake so much as developing the inner character that, with wisdom and gentleness, knows how to deal with people who are in the business of taking away our honor, comforts, time and money.

Some live life according to the will to power. Their motto is take as much as you can get, intimidate as many as you can, step on whomever it takes to get to the top. If someone takes one from you, take seven from them. On this account the Jesus religion is the complete opposite, a slave morality.

Some live life according to the equity principle. They seek to be sure every transaction comes back to them with at least what it cost them. If there is profit, so much the better. But never, never will they settle for less than equal payment for their costs. Their motto is reciprocity. What they are given, they are sure to give back. When they are taken advantage of, they are ready and willing to defend their rights in the courts. They define life by means of an active principle of an eye for an eye.

Jesus goes beyond these. From the beginning, he makes it clear that the genuinely enviable are not the high and mighty of his day, sitting on thrones and exercising almost absolute control over their subjects. It is not the rich and powerful who are blessed. Rather, the blessed are those who know their poverty before God, who mourn because of the difficulties of a sin-torn world, who live gently with others because they know their sorrows—in short those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. These are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers who know their own shorthandedness when it comes to righteousness. These are even those who are harassed and insulted for their commitment to righteousness and to the cause of Jesus.

How do they live? By the principle of positive goodness and generosity. Their goals are not getting the most for the least or reaching the top whatever the price. Their goals are peacemaking, showing mercy, retaining purity of heart. They are committed to acting as salt and light, not as acid and fire. Even when they are pushed around, they respond with a spirit of generosity, not the spirit of reciprocity. They do not define their limits by the limits of the lex talionis. Their limits are defined by overcoming evil with good.

They are not touchy or defensive about their honor. They seek to turn away anger by forgoing rights in court to defend against insult. They are willing to allow a double insult instead. This does not come from the weakness that can do nothing, but the strength that does not need to do anything.

They do not hug their minimum or basic needs as essential to their lives. If their undergarment is taken, they will offer the overgarment along with it. Their dignity and sense of worth are not a function of their clothing. They are willing to believe that God, who clothes the lily with beauty, will give them what they need to fulfill his will for them in his Kingdom.

They are not stingy with their helpfulness, even toward the oppressor overlords. As Paul applies this later, even the Christian slave serves the master as though the master were Christ himself (which none were even close to being). Jesus' example is that of the soldier who presses one into the legally required duty of carrying his pack for a thousand steps. The Christ-follower will volunteer an additional thousand.

They are not calculating in their financial dealings with neighbors in need. The fact of the matter is that they will not resort to various subterfuges to get out of lending when the likelihood of repayment is extremely low. Here is one who is genuinely on his or her last legs. But it is only

eighteen months away from the Sabbath year forgiveness of debts. The Christ-follower helps as he or she can and does not calculate the return as a factor in lending.

These are the principles that help to define the greater righteousness of the Christ-follower. The spirit of Christ must be operative as well as the wisdom of mature discernment. These examples are not exhaustive of the operational decisions and actions of the Christian in all the complexities of the modern world. They are orienting foundations that need to be part of the tool kit of moral decision making and ethical action. Jesus provides the means for living generously with others—not for avoiding the struggles and tough love necessary for sticking close to him and the cause of righteousness.

The issue of coercion in civic society (and the Church) is a serious one. First of all, we must say that the Kingdom of God is a place without the sort of coercion we find in police, military and state Magistrates. There is no need for it because God's name is hallowed, his will is done gladly and perfectly. There are no thieves or murderers, no corruptors of children or beaters of spouses, no drug addicts or embezzlers. There is no temptation to evil for evil has been banished from the external world as well as the inner personality.

The final eschatological reality is a social world without the sort of coercion that is necessary to keep children safe in our world, to protect property and vital resources, to preserve biodiversity and ecosystems, to prevent murder and punish vandals. We do not live in that world. We are still in a world of evil where God's delegated Magistrate serves as an emergency agent to carry out the "strange" will of God, the will of judgment. Jesus counsels us to avoid the courts as much as possible. He orients us to a generosity of mercy and love even toward our enemies. This is not a signal that Jesus intends to banish courts from Christian circles. These words give us the attitude and spirit the Christian disciple is to adopt toward those who do things that are actionable or are even wind up in the courts.

Courts (and the police function of the state) are essential elements encompassed within the hunger and thirst for righteousness. Their function and official competence are the defense and maintenance of a just order of relationships and processes. Jesus is not asking the disciple to acquiesce here in the slapping of someone else's cheek, or to allow the powerful to strip the poor of even the little they have. These words are not a platform for indifference when someone exploits the labor of others. Through the offices of the state and its delegated agents, those who unjustly attack the character of others, who perpetrate fraud or coerce labor from the poor need to be checked by the corporate power of government and others who hold the power and authority to deal with such difficult situations.

We face the problem (as we do in all these texts) of not loosening the bite of these words and thus effectively teaching disobedience. What is clear is that our own personal relationships and working principles are to be those that seek to settle conflict. We are to sacrifice our own rights in the service of others. We are to do more than is legally or conventionally expected and to do it generously and gladly as part of our identification with Jesus Christ. Yet Jesus and Paul both protested when government officials violated the law.

None of this denies the necessity of government officials taking all reasonable and important steps to ensure civic righteousness. The official is not to use his or her office for personal

advantage or vengeance.³⁰⁶ Police, para-military, lawyers, judges and other regulatory officials serve the welfare of all subjects or citizens. In this sense the wrath that leads to murder is denied to the individual but mandated for the state in its bearing of the sword to end the life of the malefactor. The right to divorce is denied to the Christ-following disciple except for the grounds of adultery, but the means to grant a divorce is granted to the state. The use of oaths is restricted for the Christian in that every word is to be so real and meaningful that he or she says the truth and stays loyal to that word. Yet the state may require oaths from its officers and citizens as part of its legitimating the transfer of powers and the endowing of people with rights and responsibilities.

There will be continued dispute over how the boundaries between the Christian qua Christian is drawn in relationship to the Christian qua citizen of a nation-state. There are unwise and unjust laws that the state applies that the Christian must resist or refuse. There are demands state officials make that must be denied. So too there are Christians who inappropriately seek to evade legitimate demands of the state (such as taxation). There are matters where the appropriateness of boundaries continues to be a matter of dispute and litigation. In a fallen world we find ourselves in dilemmas: the demand to renounce force as a means for peace-making and the demand to love our neighbor (which may require force).

The issue again and again is the degree to which the state is a parable and servant of the coming Kingdom of God. Only when the wrath expressed serves as a vehicle of the wrath of God against the wrongdoer is the coercion of the state appropriate and legitimate. Parsing the syntax of the exercise and function of power is not easy in our day. The claim here is that Jesus is not getting us out of that difficult task. But the State is not evil in itself. Nor *prima facie* is its exercise of coercion. The problem is not power, but the evil use of power.

[6]. Matthew 5:43-48: Love and Hate, Friends and Enemies – the heart

An interpretation of Lev. 19:18 (Perhaps Psalms 139:21-22)³⁰⁷

In this final antithesis we have another general statement, summing up what the particulars

³⁰⁶ “He is not tampering with the responsibility and authority of the government, but He is teaching His individual Christians how to live personally, apart from their official position and authority. They should not desire revenge at all. They should have the attitude that if someone hits them on one cheek, they are ready, if need be, to turn the other cheek to him as well, restraining the vindictiveness not only of their fist but also of their heart, their thoughts, and all their powers as well. In other words, what He wants is a heart that will neither be impatient nor wreak vengeance nor disturb the peace.” Luther, *Works*, vol. 21, (p. 106).

³⁰⁷ “Since the first part of Lev 19:18 makes what may be a parallel statement, ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people’ (לֹא תִקַּח נֶקֶם וְלֹא תִכְזֹב עַם אֶרְצְךָ), a question arises concerning the relationship between ‘neighbor’ and ‘your own people.’ The reason for the parallelism in the Old Testament is to answer the question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ by saying that the command to love the neighbor applies to the people of Israel (cf. Lev 19:1). Clearly, however, the command applies elsewhere in the Holiness Code to a variety of neighbors: the parents (19:3), the poor (vs. 10), the hired hand (vs. 13), the handicapped (vs. 14), the slave (vs. 20), the aged (vs. 32), and the stranger (vss. 33–34); excluded is the profaner of the holy (vs. 8), because God is holy (vs. 2).” Betz, *Sermon* (pp. 301-302; see also pp. 303-309). Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “On the basis of such passages, the Qumranites explicitly taught hatred of those regarded as enemies (1QS 1:4, 10–11; 9:21–26).” (p. 134). Keener, *Matthew* (p. 203).

add up to. Love is the heart of the superabundant righteousness.³⁰⁸ Jesus leaves no doubt about the center of a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and scribes.

The implications of love are what is spelled out in so many terms. Justice without love is a terrible thing. Love without justice is even worse. Jesus is offering a righteousness that is free from legalism, oriented toward a generous and merciful service of others. This is the climax of this section of the Sermon. It rounds it off with the repetition of the necessity for a way of living that exceeds the standards not only of the devout, but the tax collectors and the gentiles.

In God's vocabulary "neighbor" includes the "enemy." This reflects God's own practice. While we were enemies of God, God loved us and sought our very best. When our enemy seeks our worst, we must seek his or her best. In that way we serve as visible parables of the sort of relationship God exhibits all the time. The maxim to love friend and hate the enemy is not found in the Bible or rabbinic literature. It appears to be a popular maxim, jumping off from a verse of Leviticus.

This paragraph states the positive to the preceding negative. We are not to retaliate, but to sacrifice our "rights." Instead of demanding the fairness of *lex talionis*, the Christ follower is to offer the favor of *lex Christi*. It is the "law" of generosity, mercy and peacemaking, the "law" of non-reciprocity. We not only do not do evil in response to evil or good in response to good (what humans commonly do). We do good in response to evil. To do evil in response to good is devilish. To offer love to those who hate us is divine. This is what Jesus asks from us by first showing us it is the way he lives. He ends the pay back system whereby we pay back both the evil and the good shown to us in similar currency.

Love that is simply a response to love received is a common experience. But it is no more than a reciprocity: 'I treat you the way you treat me.' This was built into the patron-client system of the Roman world. It is an exchange of favors and does not conform to the way God loves. It does not image God nor conform to the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12). The reward given for simple reciprocal love is earthly. But the blessings of the Kingdom of heaven is upon those who love as God loves (5:12). Like the "reward" that comes in public applause to the pious who seek recognition for their great piety (6:1-4), the earthly "reward" (if there is any), is inherent in the reciprocal act.³⁰⁹

Some have listened to this demand of Jesus and heard in it an impossible, utopian, unnatural demand. At one level they are correct. This whole sermon is about a righteousness that exceeds that of the extraordinary righteousness of the devout who follow a rigorously intensified Torah.

³⁰⁸ "...all antitheses of the SM are exemplifications of the love-command in Lev 19:18. This means that the love-command directs the interpretation of the Torah commandments. Correctly interpreted, these Torah commandments are 'fulfilled' in the sense that with the love-commandment, the whole Torah is fulfilled." Betz, *Sermon* (p. 205). Benjamin W. Farley puts it this way: "Based, then, upon biblical principles, virtue may be defined as *an activity of the whole person in conformity with love of God and love of neighbor*." (p. 160) in *In Praise of Virtue* (1995). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

³⁰⁹ Luke 6:32 uses χάρις (*charis*: grace, favor, gift, gratitude) instead of "reward" (μισθός, *misthos*) in the parallel saying in the Sermon on the plain (where the comparison is with "sinners" οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ). In Matthew the comparison is with lower level tax collectors who are despised for their affiliation with the Romans, hated by fellow-countrymen. But even these sorts love and are loved by their inner circle of kin and find support from other tariff collectors. See Cicero, Marcus T. (1913). *De Officiis With An English Translation*. (W. Miller, Ed.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge, Mass. (p. 153). Also Luke 18:11.

It is about something not simply natural. However, this is not suggesting that there are pinnacles of the human spirit who are pioneers showing us the possible. This is not about finding a deeper level of discipline we didn't know we had and sticking to standards far higher than we ever dreamed.

Jesus is giving us a glimpse at a way of life that is "unnatural" because it comes from outside our ordinary cultures and psyches. This righteousness is not rooted in civilizational evolution or psychological possibilities. It is rooted in the Father in heaven, in the Kingdom of the heavens. What is described here is possible only as the impossible possibility created in us by the work of grace. Jesus is telling us that we do not have the blessing of God. We are not living in the grace of God's Kingdom. We know nothing of the actual presence of God's perfection—if we do not love our enemy, if we have murderous anger, lust, selfishness, defensiveness. None of these demands are "natural" (as we know ourselves without God). This love is not the highest form of the natural human loves. It is a love that is alien to us and contradicts the natural responses we find within us. We have no inner resources to produce this sort of love. That much is true.

What is not true are the deductions some draw from it. Freud argues that this command is a way of sublimating aggression. When the enemy remains enemy, the aggression bursts out as hatred and wrath. Jesus sublimates that aggression. But the price of this impossible command is intensified aggression toward outsiders. Others argue that the standard is so unrealistic that it fails to produce practical and realistic steps. It leaves a vacuum that is filled by the more natural hatred of the enemy.

Over these words echoes G. K. Chesterton's statement: "Christianity has not been tried and found impossible. It has been found difficult; and left untried."³¹⁰ Jesus is not articulating an "answer" to the modern quest for living in line with one's "nature" (as that is often self-defined). This is not an ethic of irresponsibility or of pure intentions. The dichotomies that have been laid down on these words often obfuscate things when we look carefully at the details within the context of the early Church and the apostolic obedience. This is an ethic of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom expects and exhibits responsibility. That Kingdom requires pure intentions at the same time. That we find obedience difficult in a paradoxical world does not indicate there is something wrong with the ethic. It is a clear demonstration that this world is fundamentally askew—as is our human "nature."

Not only is this not an ethic of the natural, not even the natural raised to a higher level. It is also not an ethic rooted primarily in consequences. This is not a tactic or a strategy for winning or for finding the best way to evangelize the outsider. This is not the tactic of the weak, the resignation of the defeated or the generosity of the victor in order to succeed. The rationale and grounding of this love command is the character and nature of God. We are to become children of God, that is, we are to exhibit the qualities characteristic of our actual Father. We earthlings are to become like the heavenling who created us and now claims us to be his children. We are to be peace makers. This is one of the key ways we put an end to the cycle of violence and retaliation.

Several arguments are set forth. God is indiscriminate in giving good things to all humans, whether they be wise or foolish, good or evil, righteous or unrighteous. The sun warms all. The rain cleans the air and nourishes the plants for all. The seasons are not to be seen as a mute fluke

³¹⁰ Chesterton, G. K. (1910). *What's Wrong with the World*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company. (p. 48).

of chance, the impersonal operation of physical laws that structure our world with no meaning, no pity, no heart. The sun and rain are gifts of a personal God who extends them to the earth in love. If we claim to be the children of God, our behavior toward earthlings needs to mirror that of God's. To love our enemy is to pray for them, do good to them and greet them.

There is a bottom line to history and our individual lives within it. Reward is not the whole of the picture of Christian ethics. There is a notion of Christian hedonism that begins by subordinating righteousness to pleasure and ends by rejecting suffering within the calculus of Christian living. There is another notion of Christian hedonism that places reward, delight, and pleasure within the calling of discipleship to take up the cross and follow Christ. For it, hardship and difficulty, unjust suffering and persecution are not alien. If all the Christian does is reach as high as the common behavior considered admirable, then there is hardly any basis to speak of reward. Rewards are for what exceeds the ordinary, for what is beyond the average, for the surpassing.

The third argument builds on the second without returning to it. What is distinctive about recognizing and caring for those who are our own brothers and sisters? Even Gentiles who do not pretend to follow Torah or who have knowledge of the living God do that. For whatever reason, there is a clear tendency for kith and kin to consider each other as insiders. Call it genes, socio-cultural selection, or rational human choice—showing regard for my own kind is not an ethic. It is what is natural, normal and common regardless of what ethics or lack of ethics socio-cultural groups have embraced.

What Jesus presses in his argument is for a recognition that the ordinary qualifiers of love are not legitimate within the Kingdom of God. However, this is not a call for unintelligent or unwise "love." Love is not blind. It sees the persecutor and the injustice and bows the knee, asking for God's blessing and best for the oppressor. It wishes the very best for the enemy and sees that best as a form of justice and mercy. It responds to the stranger and the outsider—even the despised rejector of one's religion and oppressor of one's land.³¹¹

Jesus will not allow the marginalizing of the love command through overruling its applicability to certain categories of people. To love like God is to admit people into the circle of those whose good I seek who unfairly and viciously act in ways that damage my good. It is to extend the warmth of human mercy and compassion to them. It is to nurture in them the hunger and thirst for righteousness.

These words are not a strategy or tactics for love. Jesus was not in the business of creating blueprints for every step and motion of Christian discipleship. He was in the business of making disciples. As they observe all Jesus commands, as they sell all they have for the great treasure of the Kingdom, as they nourish the words of God in their lives, they will discern the will of the Father. They will build upon a strong foundation. Jesus' words are the rock-hard foundation that will survive the storms and floods that come. This command to love enemies is part of that foundation. It doesn't mean it will be obvious as to what to do or easy to enact love toward an enemy. The imperative dresses up differently for a variety of "enemies" that confront the disciple.

As is the case with all of these focal instances, not all situations are spelled out. Wisdom is needed since the disciple deals with real people in real relationships and situations.

³¹¹ Nietzsche hints at this in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where he has Zarathustra comment: "Tell me: where find we justice, which is love with seeing eyes?" (p. 58).

One important question is the relationship between this command of enemy love and the rest of Scripture. There are clear elements in tension with this teaching of Jesus in Old and New Testaments. How do we see them as part of the larger canon that governs our faith and practice? Or is this a case of true contradiction that only some sleight of hand can obfuscate?

In the **Old Testament** there are several threads that together weave a pattern that has been difficult to bring into relationship with Christ's spirit and commands:

- The commands to the Israelites to exterminate the Canaanites and expropriate their land is part of a larger pattern of strong hostility and hatred of Israel's enemies.³¹² The bloodiness of David's life as King and military commander is an illustration of later "reasons of state" that disqualified him from building the Temple of Yahweh. Yet it is there.³¹³
- The "imprecatory" Psalms are vivid in their language of rage and hatred. They fulminate a spirit that prays against the "persecutors" of Israel in a manner that seems hardly what Jesus meant in commanding that we pray for persecutors.³¹⁴
- Yahweh is portrayed as a Warrior, as a defender who hates the evildoer and takes active steps to bring judgment and punishment to those who are cruel and corrupt.

In the **New Testament** we also have a number of passages that appear to teach something very different than this and Jesus' own anger and colorful language in Matthew 23 strikes our sensibilities as exceeding the boundaries of his own teaching.

- In confronting the self-righteousness and impact of the Pharisees, Jesus uses stinging words that sound harsh. They seem to stereotype all Pharisees unfairly and are one-sided. The event does not seem to stand in alignment with the spirit of this "higher righteousness" Jesus commands for his own disciples.
- 2 John 10-11 is clear that those who are deceivers, who do not abide by the teachings of Christ are not to be welcomed into the house of the Christian. In particular this refers to those who teach a sort of gnostic idea that Christ did not come in the flesh.

One response is to create a canon within the canon. These elements that stand in tension with this enemy-love teaching are at a lower, less adequate level (or may be "non-revelational" noise that snuck in due to the fallibility of these documents' authors and editors). Jesus did not in actual history rip the Pharisees in Matthew 23. That, on this account, is a creation of a spiteful,

³¹² The practice of "herem" or holy war has disturbed commentators through the centuries. This is not the appropriate place to line out the various approaches. See Hawk, L. Daniel. (2019) *The Violence of the Biblical God* (Eerdmans); Wright, Christopher J. H. (2008) *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan); Heath A. Thomas, J. A. Evans, and P. Copan, eds. (2013) *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) for accounts that aligns Jesus and the Old Testament.

³¹³ There is an additional context in considering war and its justification. As J. G. McConville notes: "...if a war may ever be justified, on the ground rules explicated by St Augustine, then Deuteronomy's requirement of restraint in the case of a people that surrenders (20:10–11), of limitation in the effects of warfare (20:19–20), and of humane treatment in the case of captives (21:10–14) have a bearing, and indeed have entered into modern thinking about warfare." (2002). *Deuteronomy*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press). (p. 323).

³¹⁴ For a positive view of such prayer: Nehrbass, Daniel (2013) *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, Oregon).

struggling community of Christians in the stinging situation of the separation of Jew, Jewish believer and Gentile dominated Church of the late first century. 2 John is wrong-headed and mean-spirited and can only be critiqued by the spirit of Jesus.

Jesus defines the center and is the great Light of God. All margins and little lights must be tested by his core teaching of love. What is not compatible must be removed as a corruption within the body of Scripture. But this approach is built on the shifting sands of “historical Jesus” endeavors that, in the end as Schweitzer so clearly demonstrated, tell us more about the contemporary author and world than the original Jesus.³¹⁵ What doesn’t fit modern sensibilities and agendas are neatly sliced off as unworthy of Jesus and therefore not from Jesus.

Another response is to distinguish my enemies from the enemies of God’s teaching and way. What is banned is the personal response of vindictiveness and hatred toward persecutors, even those who persecute us for our religious commitments and ideas. But the community and the teaching must be defended and defined. The Canaanite religion was so seductive and corrupt that the only way to protect Israel was by the extraordinary “holy wars.” But these are the only holy wars of history.

Jesus and John’s strong measures are aimed against movement “insiders.” In Israel that was the Pharisee who is full of the oracles of Hebrew Scripture and claims to stand for Yahweh’s Kingdom. In the Church it was the Christian teacher who offers a teaching about Jesus making him an unincarnated spiritual being of a gnostic sort. In these cases, the very essence of God’s revelation is threatened from within and must be confronted. There is clearly truth in this option. The Jesus of the Gospels took aim at the religious “insiders” who subverted the ways and word of God. Enemy (and neighbor) love doesn’t mean ignoring threats to their well-being.

A third response is to admit that we don’t know how to spell out this enemy-love in the variety of contexts where it must be lived. Jesus’ shows us it does not mean ceasing strongly worded confrontations with people who are self-deceived in their claims to teach the truth of God. Nor does it mean the negation of the Old Testament revelation on even the smallest points—such as the imprecatory Psalms. We are permitted to pray curses, even compelled to do so by love that is motivated by justice.

[7]. Perfection as the standard (5:48)

The final punch line comes in a covering principle that underlies all the particulars so far.³¹⁶ But what can it mean that we are to be perfect as God is perfect? For some, hearing this is

³¹⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (1906). For a more recent recapping of this endeavor: Witherington, Ben III. (1995). *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Bond, Helen, *The Historical Jesus: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2012). London: Bloomsbury Academic; Dunn, James D. G. (2005) *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. Grand Rapids: Baker; Wright, N.T. (1996) *Christian Origins and the Question of God: Vol. 2 Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

³¹⁶ France, *Matthew*: “...its comprehensive phrasing serves also to sum up the nature of the whole new way of living which the six examples have together illustrated, and thus to put into a neat epigram the essential nature of the ‘greater righteousness’ introduced in v. 20.” (p. 228). Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (p. 320). Betz, *Sermon*: “...vs. 48 presents a final maxim summing up the doctrine underlying not only the sixth antithesis but the entire set of antitheses...” (p. 320)

confirmation that all this is simply pie-in-the-sky, impossible idealism. A splendid but unattainable ideal. But a deeper look finds something very different going on.

A number of synonyms or glosses have been offered: complete (fully matured), blameless, completely holy. Luke's parallel has "merciful" as the quality singled out in comparison. In addition, the force of the verb is not clear since it has several possibilities in context:

"It is not clear from the outset whether ἔσεσθε is merely an imperative ("Be perfect!"), or a prediction ("You will be perfect"), or an eschatological promise ("You may be perfect"). Grammatically as well as contextually, one could justify each of the options."³¹⁷

If it is both command and promise, it is not a seemingly impossible standard but a promise of hope: "you will be perfect." God's commands come invariably with the grace needed to enact them. Jesus is telling us we are offered hope for success, not just mercy for failure.

God is the measure of humanity. The analogy is from above to below, contrary (in this case) to all the theories that find God as the highest anthropomorphism of human imagination. We are created in the image of God. The actual norm of ethical life is grounded in the character of God, not some societal preferences.³¹⁸

Thus, our design and destiny are from God and toward God. We cannot pretend to stand as judge on these words of Jesus as though we now have the proper measure of ourselves. In the fall from the garden we lost the perspective and insight essential to see ourselves properly. We label these words as impossible, impractical, utopian musings. The Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky claims that Jesus assessed humans too highly for they were created weaker and lower than Christ estimated.³¹⁹

That is fallen nonsense. It is the wisdom that comes from below. Only when we accept these words of Jesus as the true measure of the ethical actuality of humans who are blessed by God and who live as salt and light do we begin to see the real issues that face us. Jesus is the only authentic realist. This is what we are designed and destined to do: to do these things persistently, consistently, from within an inner life that is aligned with the outward actions and words. That we find this not happening is definitive evidence of our need for salt and light.

To be perfect just as God is perfect is to have the sort of character able to live out these inner and outer characteristics. It is to be a unified self, without the division of inner ambivalence or the gulf between the outer actions and the inner spirit. It is to observe all that Christ commanded, without denigrating the smallest, seemingly insignificant part of his teachings. This is more than the vivid stimulation of the moral imagination (though it is that). It is more than a statement of an impossible ideal, held out in front of us to keep us striving morally. It is more than a challenging moral goal that remains forever out of reach. It is what Jesus commanded us to do.³²⁰

³¹⁷ Betz, *Sermon*, p. 321. Morris, *Matthew*, sees it as both command and promise. Most commentators take it as a future indicative used as an imperative.

³¹⁸ Betz, *Sermon*: "I conclude, then, that this concept of the imitation of God underlies not only vs. 48 but the whole of the SM." (p. 325).

³¹⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part V, Chapter 5.

³²⁰ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21: "What He wants is an entire, whole, and undivided love, where one loves and helps his enemy as well as his friend. So I am called a truly perfect man, one who has and holds the doctrine in its entirety. Now, if my life does not measure up to this in every detail—as indeed it cannot,

The term “perfect” is the Greek *teleios* (τέλειος – translated variously as perfect, whole, complete, fully mature, blameless). The English translation as “perfect” is somewhat misleading, or at least we tend to hear it as an unreachable, impossible, unreasonable demand. If the Sermon is an answer to the question of how we can flourish in the abundant life God designed us to experience, living a greater righteousness, this is like a great bone in the throat, impossible to swallow. This is very different from perfectionism. What are we to make of it?

1. The context of the Sermon emphasizes the single-mindedness, whole-heartedness of the disciple. Integrity means one’s inner motives, self-expressive words, and outer actions in the world are made up of a single thread.³²¹ No play-acting in “religious” duties. No attempt at divided loyalties (God and money). No using God or other people to advance “our own Kingdom” and its reputation. No anxiety and rushing about in order to have the best things – gourmet food, glittering clothes, multiple mansions etc. No conflicting emotions or an inner civil war against what we know is demanded of us by God’s Law and Prophets. One notion that resides in “*teleios*” is integrity, wholeness.

It has to do with character. Principles and rules as well as notions about the consequences of alternative patterns of conduct act as considerations that hover around us as guidelines and compass directions that orient us in the right direction. They are essential but not sufficient. Character is something we carry with us all the time, always present in every situation and relationship.

Character is made up of skills, powers, inclinations, dispositions: capabilities deeply ingrained and stable in our inner being.³²² Whatever specific guidance we get from principles, rules, or consequences, if our character is weak, it may thwart or distort our decision and action. “Perfect” means a character so well formed that it is good, whole, and strong. It can see what is right and has the capacity to do it even when it is personally costly across a wide variety of situations and relationships.

2. There are similar imperatives: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy’” (Lev. 19:2); “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” (Lev. 20:26); “You must be blameless before the LORD your God.” (Deut. 18:13). In Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, we have a different phrase at a similar location in the Sermon: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk. 6:36). In these cases, the imperative is the same: we are to be imagers of God by displaying in our whole being the “character” traits of God. Another way of putting it is, we are to be “imitators” of the ways God is and acts toward us and all creation. We are to act and be in ways that reflect how God is and acts. That is Christlikeness, godliness.

since flesh and blood incessantly hold it back—that does not detract from the perfection. Only we must keep striving for it, and moving and progressing toward it every day.” (p. 129)

³²¹ “Jesus marched in the footsteps of the great prophets of Israel in placing an almost exaggerated accent on the inward aspects and root causes of the religious action.” Vermes, Geza (1993). *Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press (p. 195).

³²² The ancient Greeks called these “excellencies” or “virtues” (ἀρετή). They are “habits” of the person, deeply rooted leading to actions that are done easily and with pleasure.

Notes Hebrew terms and the Greek telios:

There are a number of Hebrew terms that are translated by the Greek telios and its related words (338 verses in the Septuagint). Two prominent Hebrew words translated so are shalom (שָׁלוֹם) and tāmim (תָּמִים).³²³ Shalom is often translated as “peace” but carries a wider sense of restoration of creation to its condition of flourishing, one by-product of which is peace and tranquility. Tāmim has the idea of entire, unscathed, whole, having integrity, blameless and singleness – something in full measure. It is used as a synonym for the upright (יָשָׁר, yāšār) and righteousness (צֶדֶק, tsaddiq).

What to make of all this? Patrick Hartin has done a detailed study of the word tāmim as a primary clue to the meaning of teleios and comes to these conclusions:

“(1) The first dimension is the idea of wholeness or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution.

(2) The second aspect is the giving of oneself to God wholeheartedly and unconditionally, which includes a relationship between God and God’s people. Above all it rejects idolatry or the worship of other gods. It is akin to the adjective šaddiq. If the person was grounded in this relationship she or he would be seen as whole, perfect. Perfection includes a community relationship, not just an individual dimension.

(3) Third is the wholehearted dedication to the Lord that is demonstrated above all in obedience to God’s will. This in turn includes a life led in obedience to the Torah, the laws of the Lord. The Hebrew phrase “walking with God” (Gen 5:22, 24; 6:9; Mic 6:8; Mal 2:6) calls for moral obedience in which faith and works are intrinsically united....”³²⁴

In the rest of Matthew and the New Testament, we find the teleios words used in other contexts and they also give us clues as to the meaning of this demand for “perfection.”

(1). Matthew: the rich young ruler (19:16-22) whose treasure (and heart) are fixed on wealth. He lacks one thing if he wants to be “perfect” (19:21).

(2). James (1:4, 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2) uses it repeatedly.

(3). Hebrews uses it for wholeness, completeness, maturity (2:10; 5:9, 14; 6:1; 7:28; 9:9; 109:1, 14; 12:23).

(4). Paul uses it as the goal of maturity in Christ (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:12, 15; Col. 1:28; 4:12).

[8]. Concluding remarks on the antitheses and the law

In these extraordinary demands, we confront the struggle of the beginning of human history: Whom to believe? ‘Hath Jesus said...?’ We have definitive words that come in the form, “but I myself say to you....” This is given as authoritative teaching, meant to be received as the revelation of the divine will. It is definitional of what is genuinely healthy and holy for human thought and life. It is not meant simply to plunge us into the despair of hellish guilt and thus lead us to grace. These are words given to those who already have the call of Jesus upon them and who acknowledge the receipt of God’s blessing. This is what God’s grace looks like.

³²³ “The use of *teleios* (perfect) instead of ‘holy’ may derive from the requirement of total loyalty to God in Deut 18:13, where the Hebrew *tāmim* (complete, unblemished, blameless, perfect) is rendered by *teleios* in LXX. It is a wider term than moral flawlessness, and is used for spiritual “maturity,” for example, in 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Phil 3:15, and frequently in Hebrews.” France, *Matthew* (p. 228).

³²⁴ Hartin, Patrick J. (2003). *Sacra Pagina: James*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. (p. 72).

What more can be asked of us than these things? If we are no longer angered so as to hate or denigrate our fellow human beings, we will no longer have murder. If we are cleansed so that we do not lust with eye or hand, we will no longer have adultery. If we are bonded together by God in marriage, we will see divorce rates plummet. Without adultery to dissolve the bond, there will be no divorce. If we are so at home with our words that we mean and keep them without qualification and hence without needing an oath, trust will end the quest for security by verbal safeguards. If we act generously rather than according to the *lex talionis* principle, we will lower the intensity of the struggles for honor, possessions and self-advantage. If we love even our enemies, whom is there we can be asked to love besides?

Christ sets up a cameo of pictures meant to sketch the life of the Kingdom of God. These are the sorts of right thinking and living that exceed the ordinary and common as well as the most intensely rigorous followers of the Hebrew law. These are focused illustrations of normal Kingdom life. These tell us what it means to “fulfill” the law. What we find is far from a legalistic straight-jacket but rather a revolution that reaches into the inner recesses of our being.

Are these a blueprint for a holy community? Not really. They are touchstones, the framing timber needed for a holy community. Much more is needed than these six paragraphs. These set out a line of reasoning, a hermeneutic that fulfills the Hebrew Torah and Prophets. Jesus does not negate or annul them. We need to plumb them as he did to find more of the cross-beams, window frames, insulation and glass we need to activate and implement these words in our own socio-cultural order. We are to build on this foundation, but we are to build on it, not act as though it were the whole building.

We begin the Sermon as the poor in spirit. Not far into it we find ourselves being told to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. The distance between the beginning of this chapter and its end is infinite. We start with nothing and as nothing. We end with being told to be complete and perfect. It will not come by means of a more rigorous set of practices.

The very definitions and elements of this whole chapter are commentary on what that perfection means. Part of being perfect is being poor in spirit. When God chose to image himself perfectly on earth through the incarnation, he chose to come to a peasant household in the condition of modesty and humility. Jesus’ security was not guaranteed by wealth, status, power or pedigree. The starting point of this chapter may be need, but neediness is not the opposite of perfection. Nor is growth in experience and knowledge or the acknowledgement of mentoring and modelling the negation of perfection. Nor does “perfection” leave behind the poverty of spirit. If anything, it deepens it.

Nor is the everyday life context, where marriage and the giving in marriage, where contracts and conflicts, where oath-taking and lustful thoughts occur. Perfection is not something to be arranged by a dual ethic and a sequestered life for a set of religious virtuosi. Perfection is not something above and beyond the ordinary set of demands for the run-of-the-mill Christian. This is a requirement Jesus gives to all Christians in all generations and cultures.

Our tendency is to measure these requirements by our weaknesses rather than by the power of God. We suppose them to be the outer limits of a spiritual Olympics—only the rare talent could ever approach them (a sort of spiritual 3.7 minute mile). We minimize what God’s power can do because we have not allowed it to do as much as it can in our own lives. Again, we repeat Eden’s error: we measure God’s goodness by our own wisdom and perspective and suppose we are the paragons of prudence.

What Jesus teaches us is that God not only gives us our family and friends, our neighbors and

colleagues, but our enemies as well. We may not love their deeds or affirm their injustice, but we are asked to love them and pray for them. We must also pray for and defend their victims. Our enemy gives us opportunities to show in our action what we have been made in actuality: children of God. The enemy tests the limits of our commitment to being salt and light. Jesus does not ask that we be good disciples when it is easy or convenient. Persecution and slander are the times when our rejoicing and prayer for others displays its source and sufficiency.

We need also to note that Jesus does not throw a fog over reality either. The evil are evil and the unrighteous are unrighteous. There is a legitimate distinction between them and the good and the righteous. It is not a clear and perfect distinction we can always make. Relatively speaking, we may consider one unrighteous who is our “enemy” and we might be right. But we might be wrong. The hostility we experience might be rooted in someone’s resistance to the unrighteousness in us. The parables of Matthew 13 tell us that we cannot know infallibly the good grain from the weeds. We might mistake the good fish for the bad. The division can only happen finally at the end of time and then it is done by supernatural creatures.

Jesus may engage in a transvaluation of values, but not so as to abolish moral distinctions, not even those that are only of relative use to us. If we cannot see the difference between a Hitler and a Mother Theresa, between democratic open societies and totalitarian caste societies, between loving your neighbor and cannibalizing him or her, we have become moral and ethical idiots. There are objective ethical norms. Loving enemies and praying for them are not an ethical anesthetic nor social quiescence.

We are not led away from social or class analysis, from ethical discernment or prudence by these words. These command us to recognize our enemies, to see when and by whom we are being pursued for evil—and to pray for them, to greet them with the name of God (Shalom alekah) and bestow on them the blessing of peace. We are not asking God to facilitate their self-chosen path of evil but asking God that they too might enter the blessings of the Kingdom of God and be delivered from their slavery to sin. By so doing, we refuse to collaborate in the evil they may be engaging in.

The wholeness and breadth of mercy is built into these seven commands. The disciple who is as indiscriminately good in the civic community and church just as God is in shining the sun and sending the rain will be like God. What we have learned from Jesus in these words is what saltiness and light are like.

Disciples are people made broad and deep by their submission to the words of God. Spending the time and effort, they learn every word that comes from the mouth of God. They discover the relevance of each and live long enough with them so as to uncover their own internal resistance to each. We shall not be complete apart from the living words of God.

But it is not simply knowledge of those words that is in view. They must be properly interpreted. Jesus gives us a key in the six contrasting understandings of Hebrew Scripture. It is possible to mimic submission to the Word of God. Even the most devout and most learned among us may be the epitome of disobedience to God’s word. Our righteousness must burst the boundaries of the super-spiritual—and those who stand outside the boundaries of our religious community.

In each focal instance Jesus shows us how our understandings are not to leave room for continued evil. Every one of the contrasts Jesus draws is rooted in a rejection of whatever provides room for evil. We do that when we say: We may not kill, but we can hate and verbally abuse others. We may not have an affair but lusting after beauties is only human. We may not

divorce without giving the woman a bill of divorce, but there are many reasons why we can end a marriage. We should keep the oaths we make, but little lies and untruths are the polite lubrication essential to good human relationships. We must not be too harsh in exacting justice from offenders, but we should be ready to defend and maintain our own honor, person and property even in the courts. We should love our neighbor, but there are despicable cads whom we ought to hate. All these ways of taking God's Word are repudiated by Jesus. He insists on a love that penetrates even into the petty, hidden corners of life. As F.D. Bruner puts it:

“Maturity is looking at every person we meet and saying, at least to oneself, ‘I will never, God helping me, do anything to hurt you: neither by angrily lashing out at you, lustfully sidling up to you, faithlessly slipping away from you, verbally oiling you up, protectively hitting back at you, or even justifiably disliking you.’”³²⁵

The person who is salt and light finds less and less room for cutting these sorts of corners. Friendship with the world is what produces these very sorts of spiritual dance steps. We want the reputation of being a Christian. We want to have the promise and hope of eternal life with God. We want to fit in with the Christians who surround us. At the same time many of our Christian friends seem to want a consumer-friendly version of God and faith. Even the most intense of us seem to bridge the two worlds by modulating the key in which the Sermon on the Mount is given.

The result is the sort of focus on petty externals, the vigilant defense of symbolic borders, the amassing of great wealth and calling it the blessing of God. We find the faith parceled out in truncated parcels, each with a warrant to feel better than Christians with other bags.

There are the separatistic pietists whose personal perfections are as highly developed as their social irrelevance and political folly. There are the secularized social activists whose social analysis is as penetrating as is the hollowness of their own personal spirituality. There is the ex-fundamentalist now liberal-evangelicals whose dynamic is reactivity to their conservative past. There are pulpit shouting, Bible pounding fundamentalists whose conviction's strength is in direct proportion to their ignorance of everything else. There are the fire-baptizing, tongue-speaking, slain-in-the-spirit Pentecostals whose emotions burn fiery hot in the Church and who are convinced the icy-cold intellectual Christians are dead in the Spirit because they don't shout and dance.

Why do we sort the good grain from the weeds already? Where are those whose righteousness exceeds the Pharisees and scribes, who love as widely and deeply as our heavenly Father? Jesus' last question is absolutely penetrating: “What more are you doing than others?” It brings us face to face with the difference our Christian faith makes.

This is a test of our authenticity. We may have all the knowledge, all the accoutrements, all the verbiage and demeanor provided by our particular stream of Christian faith. We may have it in abundance. Yet it is not some external set of sub-cultural markers that matter. In the end the true disciple is marked by a deep inner secret. The words of God are fruitful and produce character, attitude, habits, ways of talking and actions that are different. Jesus' examples in these contrasting illustrations show some of the difference that Word will make.

1. The genuine Christ-follower is different in the inner basis of life. Something has happened at the very source of his or her vitalities. Motives move in another direction and with a different

³²⁵ Bruner, *Christbook*. (p. 278).

force. Motives aim for different goals and seek the approval of the invisible God. There is an inner confidence that God is present and active, fully capable of producing the very events and outcomes that will further the Kingdom of God. In short, the authentic disciple is conscious of being surrounded by the Kingdom of God. The blessing of God rests upon this one in the very experiences of poverty of spirit, of mourning, of meekness and hunger.

2. The genuine Christ-follower is different in response to the pressures of life. An old aphorism goes: People are like teabags. You never know what's in them until they are in hot water. When we face the terrible pain of trouble, whether self-inflicted or imposed by the unfair persecution of others, we discover the fault zones and tender weaknesses of our character. If Christ is alive in us, we will not lash out in frustration or hate in our anger. We will love our enemy and pray for those who unfairly misuse us. Jesus does not ask from us ordinary things done in the ordinary way. He asks from us ordinary things done in extraordinary ways. We are not to live on the natural plane but the supernatural. He asks a way of being and doing right that bursts the limits of the possibilities given us by cultural Christianity.

3. The genuine Christ-follower is different in piety and religious practices. In Matthew 6 we discover the "more" means more "secretly." There is a world of religious action that is done quietly, unobtrusively, without ostentation. More does not mean more frequently or more dramatically or more publicly. We are to give our tithes and offerings and special gifts without posturing for applause. We are to pray simply, clearly, directly, knowing God hears and answers. We need not impress God the way we think we need to impress other humans. We are to fast without making a big deal of it before others. We are to exceed the ordinary theatrics of religious virtuosity by not seeking to outdo one another, but by seeking God in faith, believing he is a rewarder of those who seek him.

4. The genuine Christ-follower is different in what gives him or her a sense of security and status. Much of our civilization thrives on housing, education, clothing and money. How much we have of each, what its market-value is considered, how cutting edge it might be—these are the things that drive us toward high levels of activity and discipline. We want the comfort and security of having what is rare, what is difficult to obtain. We define ourselves by what we have and what we have achieved. This "more" insulates us from needing a reward from God. The true disciple seeks security and status first and foremost from the invisible God.

5. The genuine Christ-follower is different in giving more status to the words of Christ than to other claims and messages. The foundation for life is forged increasingly out of the teachings of Christ. The worldview is found in the outlook of Christ. The stories told are those that carry the meaning of a hell-bent world, rescued by the salvation of a suffering servant of the Kingdom of God. There is a mindset that is shaped and sharpened by the Spirit's taking the word of Christ and making them more vital and vivid than the images and words of contemporary life. True disciples do more than say, "Lord, Lord." They implement the commands of Christ in their lives in practical and consistent ways.

(b) Matthew 6:1-18: Righteousness and Authentic Piety

The first major section clarifying the "greater righteousness" dealt with six "antitheses" ("you have heard...but I say...") that were focused on the "love of neighbor." They dealt largely with "limit" laws, the righteousness responding to "don'ts" and how the "not doing" points to "doing," and the "doing" to the "inner motives" of the heart and finally the actual bedrock of

character.

This second section of the body of the Sermon gives the first major warning. Jesus has clarified what greater righteousness is. He assumes that his disciples will be engaged in doing good deeds. The first verse is a chain-link: linking what has been outlined as instruction on law-observance in deeds of righteousness toward fellow humans. The following instruction concerns deeds of righteousness that are oriented toward God in particular. The corrupting motivation is the same for law-observance and for religious practices.

In these three cases dealing with “religious action” it is “when” you...not “if.” It highlights a key way spirituality can be corrupted and undermine righteousness: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness in front of others. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (vs. 1-2). The focus is not on doing them but the manner (“in secret”) and motive (“to be seen”) of deeds of righteousness.

Positive, loving “good works” can be a stumbling block, something we trip over and break our spiritual necks. Good works have potential dangers. If there are inner (or outer) “trumpets” sounding off celebrating what good people we are in doing the deeds of the Kingdom (not like other sinners or poorly performing Christians), it means trouble.

Jesus warns against dependency upon reputation (the respectability trap) and then in the next section about depending on material wealth (the security trap). Uniting both warnings is the notion of “treasure” (6:19-21). A treasure is something of great value to us, something we take great energies and effort to acquire and protect. We think and dream a lot about what we treasure. We will labor long and hard for it. It is something we seek after, run after.

The question is whether we treasure God or the honor and reputation we gain from our peers. Whose approval and accolades are we seeking when we give, pray or fast (or do other religiously motivated practices)? We cannot seek both human praise and the praise of our Father. This is a matter of single-mindedness, of a dominant motive. If our good works depend upon the accolades of others, our reward is complete on earth. If we are miffed that an appropriate recognition for our devotion and commitment isn’t happening, we may have the symptoms of the respectability trap.

“Hypocrite” is used three times (6:2, 5, 16), at the beginning of each practice. This is not labeling someone who professes righteous living but lives an immoral or unjust life. These are people doing authentic “good works” but whose motives are corrupted. A wrong motive turns even the most pious, religious act into spiritual poison. Good deeds mean things done not only in the name of God, but for the sake of God. Never for the sake or name of the disciple.

This first part of this second major section deals with “religious” activities, focused on “love of God.” It assumes a righteousness that is already “doing” the right things. The three examples illustrate the “secret spirituality” that attends authentic righteousness. As “light of the world,” our good deeds are to be seen so that people glorify God. We give people cups of cold water in Jesus’ name. We pray in public as well as private and even join in with others in fasting corporately. But the mode and motive of the doing is highlighted. The way of ostentation and vanity is contrasted with the way of secrecy.

Two things seem to be engaged: (1) Whatever the public face of our giving, praying, or fasting, it must be built on a vital private life of spiritual practices. (2) The intent and outcome of our spirituality (private and public) must be the glory of God, not our own enhanced reputation as “spiritual” people. It must be a real seeking of God, not an item of display. Hypocrisy cannot

hide from God, however much it may fool others. Hypocrisy is the death of any intimacy with God.

Often, we blunder around until we have a pattern that can give clarity and structure to a given practice. Jesus provides that here for religious piety. But the focus is not on the practices as such so much as their mode and motive. Too much concern about the outward ritual or gestures of piety rather than on their spirit and motivation and they slip into hypocrisy.

[1] Matthew 6:1 Principle³²⁶

There is progression in this Sermon. The focus shifts from character, to influence, to the righteousness that such character displays, producing the influence of salt and light. In Chapter five the emphasis is on a way of being and living that differs from the intensely devout Pharisee and the non-observant pagan or Gentile. The actual things considered good as well as the style by which they are done will differ. In Chapter six the concern moves from matters of social interrelationships to practices meant to express religious commitments.

While the emphasis has been on “doing,” suddenly we face “not doing.”³²⁷ If one main problem with the greater righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes was the emphasis on the negative (what not to do as the sum of the law), there is also a problem with the positive (what they prominently do). In addition, the focus was on the external more than the internal.

It’s most interesting that Jesus connects self-promotion and ostentation to these works of pious righteousness (almsgiving, prayer, fasting). Why is that? Perhaps because it is difficult to turn the previous matters of relational righteousness into the same sort of theater.³²⁸ One cannot imagine a person trumpeting the fact of not murdering someone even though he or she has been angered by that other’s bad behavior. Or a husband saying what a good person he is because he is not divorcing his wife this week—or hasn’t lusted after some woman. How can one create extra honor and adulation for oneself by advertising the love one has for the enemy? Any of these public demonstrations would probably have the opposite effect. The reality is it is easier to be a religious hypocrite than to become a celebrity for overall righteousness.

Yet our charities often need plaques or published names in a list of donors to stimulate higher giving. In the news we have pictures of celebrity benefits. People use prayer and fasting as a means of social action with publicity as the essential leverage against some injustice. We do admire the generous and the pious. Jesus warns us not to put ourselves in the limelight when we are either.

Matters of living as salt and light involves courage, avoiding cowardice (letting our good works be seen and thus leading us into persecution and opposition). In the case of religious practices, the sin close at hand is vanity (letting our good works be seen because we want adulation). In

³²⁶Note that the phrase τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν is the better text. Literally it is “your righteousness” and continues the theme of the body of the Sermon, contra NRSV (“piety”), NKJV (“charitable deeds”), KJV (“alms”). They either follow texts such as L W Z f13 33 etc. that have ἐλεημοσύνη (‘almsgiving’) instead of “righteousness” or assimilate “righteousness” to the examples that follow in this context.

³²⁷ See comments on “doing” that is the major theme of Matt. 7:12-29 in the last covering principle (the Golden rule) and the exhortation (the *peroratio*) concluding the Sermon.

³²⁸ Betz, *Sermon*: “If the intention of the performer is to be seen by the human audience, the rules and expectations of the theater prevail: impressive displays, playacting, applause, and so on. Worship is then turned into a public spectacle.” (p. 353).

either displaying works or hiding them the goal is glorifying God.³²⁹ We let our light shine so people may come into the rich experience of the blessing of God. We put our piety under a bushel so that God might be glorified, not our religious devotion. Those who “give” in hope of notoriety are not giving at all. They are “buying” applause and get the product so purchased.

In addition, there are two problems: (1) legalism: artificial limits placed on the force and contents of the Hebrew scriptures; (2) conventional paganism: living according to an ethic and morality that accommodates garden varieties of selfishness and the iron rule of reciprocity: “Do unto others as they do to you.” Jesus penetrates beyond limited ethics and the divided self to a whole-hearted generosity that shows mercy and sacrifices self-interest in a life-giving, righteousness-enhancing manner.

Chapter six probes the issues at stake in public expressions of religious devotion. Jesus bans the Pharisaic tendency of hypocritical play acting—the practices of righteousness such as charity, prayer and fasting to build one’s reputation and honor as “an intensely religious” person. These practices are engaged in an extrinsic manner. The motivation is damaged by using religion as a means of self-advancement and prestige building. Our “righteousness” can be more dangerous spiritually than our sins. Doing what is right, even in religious conduct, in order to make an impression in fellow humans for one’s own benefit is what is in view.

Jesus also bans the pagan tendency of ‘spiritual overtime’ involving repetitious disciplines in a formal and mechanical piety. The view of God behind the pagan practices is one of capriciousness or impersonal forces that can be manipulated only by rituals that attempt persuasion by the quantity of the deed. One thinks of the priests of Baal crying out for hours and cutting themselves (I Kings 18:25-39).

There is a tension between one command telling disciples to let their works shine before others and so glorify God—and this one not allowing others to see what they are doing. Several things might be involved. One is the sort of works involved. The sort used by Pharisee and pagan for gaining stature in the community was not what were to be outdone by Jesus’ disciples any more than Jesus made them even stricter legalists. Religious piety was not a matter to trot out and display so as to convince people of the greatness of one’s devotion to God or the gods.

Jesus does not stop the external practices of charity, prayer or fasting. They are to be done so that the one who sees them is God. Their primary orientation is to be toward God, not toward human recognition or acknowledgement.³³⁰ There is an inner contradiction when acts meant to glorify and serve God are used to glorify and serve one’s own reputation.

There is a reward (or wage) that goes with these activities. Repeatedly Jesus insists that we get paid only once. If the recognition and reward come now from fellow humans, they will not

³²⁹ Keener, *Matthew*: “Jesus’ warning does not, of course, preclude public acts of righteousness—even with the knowledge that such acts will draw attention—as long as the disciple seeks to be seen for God’s glory rather than his or her own (5:16). One does righteousness ‘in secret’ here lest one be praised, but for God’s glory ‘a city set on a hill cannot be concealed’ (5:14, using a cognate expression). This text warns disciples, however, how easy it is to justify one’s own desire to impress others as merely ‘being a light.’” (p. 206)

³³⁰ “And so, it is not virtue, but the motive of virtue, that has a reward with God. And if you turn aside a little from the right (recta) path, it does not matter whether you go to the right (dextram) or to the left (sinistram), since you have lost the true road.” Jerome. (2008). *Commentary on Matthew*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (p. 86).

come from the Father in heaven. He is the God of the secret life. As much secrecy as possible is to accompany our gift-giving benevolence, our praying and our fasting. To do these with ostentation is to guarantee that they receive no further recognition. It is also to undermine their meaning and value with a two-faced motivation. In effect, the reward fits the sort of action: if it seeks human recognition, that is what the deed receives, no more.

When Jesus commanded disciples (the “you” is plural in 5:16) to let their light shine so that people may see “your good works and glorify your Father in heaven,” he was getting at the same sort of orientation. Our orientation is toward people hallowing the name of God, not carving our names in stone for public acclamation. They are to see the good works of the Christian community and praise God’s name, not ours.

This prohibition of doing our “acts of righteousness” in order to be seen by others does not forbid others seeing what we do. Augustine puts it:

“From this it is clear that he did not forbid upright behavior before people but rather that upright behavior take place before people in order to be seen by them, that is, that such an outlook be the determining factor in our activity.”³³¹

The difference is subtle but crucial: we are to do works of righteousness. They will be done in the presence of other people. But the purpose and motive they spring from is not for us to be seen doing them, but for the good deeds to be seen and God glorified. But we are to do them whether we are praised for them or persecuted.³³²

Lurking behind these two cases of secrecy and visibility are two sorts of motives that might cause the disciple to stumble into sin. Hiding one’s light under a bushel or not being salty in society might be driven by cowardice in the face of hostility (fear of being maligned, despised, persecuted). Displaying one’s righteous deeds to be visible to others might be driven by vanity (longing for recognition and status).

What Jesus has already highlighted as good works are very different from what is conventionally praised. We are to reconcile quickly and hold anger’s tongue. We are to exercise sexual circumspection and divorce only rarely and only for the most blatant reason. We are to be non-defensive in the face of provocation and persecution. We are to be generous and merciful, praying for God’s blessing even upon our enemies. These are the works that ought to be evident and public. The practices of sociality are to be offered to others. Even in these cases good deeds can be spoiled by the motive behind them.

We ought not to stop those other sorts of practices that have been paraded so publicly and praised as worthy of imitating. The practices of piety are to be offered to God, first of all in secret. This does not ban public or community-wide exercises of these works. But they are grounded in each person’s own hidden life and inner motives.

³³¹Augustine, *Sermon*. (p. 70).

³³²Luther, *Works*, Vol. 21: “In short, whoever wants to be a Christian must make up his mind neither to undertake nor to discontinue any good work on the basis of what other people think, but only as a means of serving God through his office or station, his money or goods, or whatever other possessions or abilities he may have, doing what he can to His glory although he may never merit any thanks for it on earth at all.” (p. 136).

[2] Matthew 6:2-4: Almsgiving: “The merciful”³³³

Money is one of the most powerful forces shaping our character and our communities. It shapes us by defining the places and contexts where we work. Without money we can hardly survive in the modern world. Only a minuscule number choose to live outside the arrangements that are structured by money. Even in the days of Jesus, money and the goods of life exchanged with its help had assumed a critical significance in the events and identity of people.

The law of fairness in retribution had been redefined in practice so that money fines were assessed rather than the literal taking of a hand for a hand or an eye for an eye. The tithe was gathered from the four corners of the globe by means of the transport of money. Offerings could be concentrated in currency and then translated into unblemished (“perfect”) animals for sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem. Patron-client relationships were cemented by the giving of money by the Patron to the clients who gathered in a morning.³³⁴

Recognition and status is also a powerful force. People will cut their salaries in half for a job that combines much higher degrees of power and fame. In an honor society, reputation had enormous significance to the family and the person. Status ranking was key to patterns of interaction and solidarity. Marriage, political alliance, entertaining, public discourse, the operation of the courts—a host of matters hinged directly on the status claims that were validated or threatened in the larger community.

Jesus begins with almsgiving as a focal instance of a central practice of piety. Almsgiving orients us to the charity that aids the poor and needy. In the background is the audience from whom we seek adulation and a grant of respect. Our habits of devotion can serve either God or a larger public. Our reference group can either be our Father in secret or important others in public. Our payoff from the behavior can either be a reward from God or some public, this-worldly benefits. What God seeks is piety not public performance. We are not to turn righteousness into theater.³³⁵ God does not count our giving by the bottom financial line any more than he times our prayers and weighs their length and eloquence.

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What giving does is to break the bonds of covetousness and insecurity. We depend on money and frequently come to treat money in ways only God is meant to be treated. We come to define the limits of possibility by the size of our budget. We need to have opportunities to cut the size of our assets down. Most of us now have too much, keep it for too long and spend it too frivolously.

What giving does for others is to provide room for them to live another day, hope for a better tomorrow—unless we use money to humiliate and shame. Alms are not meant to create patron-

³³³ The Greek (ἐλεημοσύνη, *eleēmosunē*) for “almsgiving” means a “deed of mercy.”

³³⁴ Carter, *Matthew*: “Almsgiving was a linchpin of patron-client relations which maintained the hierarchical social structure by elevating the powerful and prosperous. It enabled them to secure honor and dominate the lower ranks by binding them into dependent relationships.” (p. 159)

³³⁵ Betz, *Sermon* (p. 353).

client dependencies but to facilitate the values of the Kingdom of God. We might suppose that the blessed are the poor—and so leave them in their desperation. If this means they will depend the more on God, what sense does it make for us in our affluence to take that away from them?! This is theological poppycock. God does bless the poor in part by moving the rich to provide resources to help to relieve their misery. The perfection of mercy practices the morals of almsgiving.

There are many Scriptures in the Old Testament dealing with care for the poor in the midst of the people of Israel. The book of Ruth is a picture of the “social security” system of Israel in action. There are many texts in the law and prophets that underscore the how the fortunate were to care for the unfortunate. The prophets have two large themes when it comes to the sin of Israel that led to its terrible judgment by God: false spirituality (idolatry) and false sociality (injustice toward the poor). Below are some key legal texts from Exodus and Deuteronomy that stand in the background of the commands to deal fairly with and care for the poor:

Ex. 22:25-27	No interest or security for a loan to a poor person
Dt. 14:28-29, 26:12	Special tithe every three years
Dt. 15:7-11	Lend freely even when Sabbath year & debt cancellation are close
Dt. 24:14-15	Pay wages by each day's end
Dt. 24:19-22	Part of the harvest left in the field for gleaners to harvest

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What giving does for others is to provide room for them to live another day, hope for a better tomorrow—unless we use money to humiliate and shame. Alms are not meant to create client-patron dependencies but to facilitate the values and ventures of the Kingdom of God. We might suppose that the blessed are the poor—and so leave them in their desperation. If this means they will depend the more on God, what sense does it make for us in our affluence to take that away from them?! This is theological poppycock. God does bless the poor in part by moving the rich to provide resources to help to relieve their misery. The perfection of mercy practices the morals of almsgiving.

It's most interesting that Jesus connects self-promotion and ostentation to these works of piety. Why is that? Perhaps because it is difficult to turn the previous matters of relational righteousness into theater. One cannot imagine a person trumpeting not murdering someone even though he or she has been angered by that other's bad behavior. Or a husband saying what a good person he is because he is not divorcing his wife this week—or hasn't lusted after some woman. How can one create extra honor for oneself by advertising the love one has for the enemy? Any of these public demonstrations would probably have the opposite effect.

Yet our charities often need plaques or published names in a list of donors to stimulate higher giving. We have pictures in magazines and newspapers of celebrity benefits. People use prayer and fasting as a means of social action with publicity as the essential leverage against some injustice. We do admire the generous and the pious. Jesus warns us not to put ourselves in the limelight when we are either.

These matters involve avoiding cowardice (letting our good works be seen and thus leading us into persecution and opposition) and vanity (letting our good works be seen because we want adulation). In either displaying works or hiding them the goal is glorifying God. We let our light shine so people may come into the rich experience of the blessing of God. We put our piety under a bushel so that God might be glorified, not our religious devotion. Those who “give” in hope of notoriety are not giving at all. They are “buying” applause and, when they receive it, they have the product they purchased.

If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will not starve when we do right things and face persecution or when we do religious things and do not hear the applause of other humans. By giving to the needy in some small measure we are satisfied. A little more civic righteousness occurs and we are glad. Whether there is more than this to the reward God gives when he sees our deeds is not clear. We are not the ones who determine the payment of this sum. God does the seeing and the rewarding.

Giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness (not even the left hand is to know what the right is doing). Self-congratulation can afflict us even in fulfilling the letter of Jesus’ law. We do something secretly and then puff up with our own righteousness because we do not place ourselves where we might receive others’ applause. We look at our “secret” piety and tell ourselves (before God!) what a good person we are. The insidious self can insinuate itself into secret giving as well as into public charity.

The key attitude is that we do this before God. God sees and rewards. We need not even see ourselves. God alone is the judge of the significance of our giving, praying and fasting. So twisted are we that we suppose we can evaluate not only our own actions but those of others.

Matthew 25 offers an expansion of these words. There the reward means entrance into the presence of God. Those who aided the needy weren’t even aware that they served the Christ. They know they served the needy. They have not forgotten that. They are stunned to find that those actions served Jesus as well. Those rejected are those who have not aided the needy. What is at stake in this later passage is not how charity is done but whether it was done.

In Matthew 6 the issue is not whether almsgiving will happen. If a person is a disciple, it will. What is at stake here is how it is done. In these words we learn that almsgiving can be spoiled by the way in which it is done and the reason for doing it. We can imagine people not seeking publicity or fame from their actions who are given it nonetheless. How does a Mother Theresa prevent the cameras of the contemporary media from focusing on her? Such a person may have come to terms with desires for comfort and recognition long ago and pay them no mind. The danger is doing these things “in order to be seen” by other human beings.

The invisible God is attracted to “invisible” deeds. How does that work in a day when we need massive public relations to tell the story of our good deeds in order to raise money for charity? Or are we lost in the money maze and sabotaged by good goals gone amuck? How do we let the light shine into corners of our world that need aid and mercy without basking in that light ourselves? If people give to organizations and charities because they have confidence in the leadership, how does that leadership avoid this difficult boundary set by Christ?

There may be subtle distinctions at work in this case. Jesus did his healing in public, even in the synagogue in the face of hostile people. Other times he sent all away except the inner circle of three and then told the people who received the help not to say anything to anyone. Once again, we must admit that we need to look at the larger context and practice. Jesus is the one who defines the liberties and limits of his own words.

Bottom lines: Money can corrupt or bless. Charity can heal and lift or corrupt the giver and humiliate the recipient. Even the most religious and pious of actions can become satellites of self-aggrandizement and status striving. The final question is for whom do we perform our actions? We can want the praise and blessing of human beings more than we want God's.³³⁶

[3] Matthew 6:5-15: Righteousness and Prayer³³⁷

1. Why and How we are to Pray:

Prayer is probably the least utilitarian act of religious piety. Giving's benefits are documented in the needy who are fed, clothed and housed. Fasting (in an age of flab) can be said to aid in health by reducing the caloric intake. But what does prayer do (prayer, not meditation)? It has been said to have a reflexive effect, lowering blood pressure and creating an inner sense of well-being. But that is an intangible that is difficult for scientifically oriented pragmatists to measure.

In Jesus' day, prayer in public might have been no stranger than we find public prayer in Muslim dominant countries. At the hour of prayer, Jews might be in the public square, not in a synagogue or close to the Jerusalem Temple (or one could arrange to be in a public square at the given hour). Standing was a normal stance for prayer. Posturing is the problem, not standing. A strictly "observant" Jew might well stop, dismount if riding, and stand and engage in prayers for that designated time.

Jesus says even prayer can be subordinated to the drive for honor. People can make prayer into an occasion for displaying status claims in public. The desire for human recognition must be mastered or it will emasculate prayer. What is hypocritical in prayer as theater is the contradiction between acting as though one were talking to God and calculating the effect the prayer is having on other human beings. It becomes theater as soon as the conversation with God takes place with humans as a primary audience.

Jesus is not ending public or corporate praying. He begins the model prayer with "Our Father..." He will give further instruction that assumes groups praying. He invites Peter, James and John to stay awake with him as he prayed in Gethsemane. The early Church is portrayed a number of times in corporate prayer. Paul lays down guidelines to bring appropriate orderliness to public prayer and teaching in common worship.

Nor is public or corporate prayer a subtle way of preaching, a sort of way of saying to people something one believes they need to hear and might hear it better in prayer form than in confession or profession.

³³⁶ Barth, *CD IV.3*: "What is the honour of man? It is the significance, the worth, the distinction, which he now has in the eyes of God; the value, which is now ascribed to him by the mouth and in the Word of God; the adornment, vesture and crown with which he is now clothed by God." (p. 663).

³³⁷ So much needs to be said about prayer: Yancey, Philip D. (2006) *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Peterson, Eugene H. (1989) *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. San Francisco: HarperOne; Willard, Dallas. (1984, 1999) *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Foster, Richard J. (1994) *Prayers from the Heart*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco; Thielicke, Helmut. (1960) *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; Tickle, Phyllis. (2000). *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime - a Manual for Prayer*. New York: Doubleday.

“Prayer as a demonstration of faith, as disguised preaching, as an instrument of edification, is obviously not prayer at all. Prayer is not prayer if it is addressed to anyone else but God. The relationship between prayer and confession consists in the fact that even the confession directed outwards must have no ulterior purpose, but even though it takes place before men it does so to God’s glory alone. Hence confession is nothing except in so far as it results from prayer and partakes of the nature of prayer. The special feature of prayer, however, is that even as common prayer it cannot take place at all before man, on a human front or with thought of a human opposite, but only as orientated on God, only as a word addressed to Him, only as a request directed to Him. Confession is the free praise of God before the ears of the world. But prayer is the same free praise of God in His ears alone.”³³⁸

In our day the problem is not so much a suborning of prayer to the service of prestige by public posturing. It more often is the lack of prayer altogether. It is not the native soil of our daily life. Reading the latest news, listening to the newest podcast, worrying about making the incoming bills, dealing with contentious or difficult colleagues at work, struggling with a child who is out of sorts – our lives are so full to the bursting that there is little or no room for prayer. Whereas Jesus came into the concerns of everyday life from prayer, we come into the world of prayer from the concerns of everyday life, if we come at all.

The issue is not public vs. private prayer. It is the driving purpose that resides behind any prayer. What is the significance we give to our religious actions? The sharpest probe is into our basic motivation: do we desire the acknowledgement and reward of God more than we do those offered us by our fellow humans? Whom do we seek to please? Ourselves? Important others? God? What generates the energy we give to charitable giving, prayer and fasting—or to church attendance and volunteering for community service?

Why we pray is the first matter we must examine in learning to pray aright. But Jesus also tells us how we pray is important as well. In both these issues (why and how), as in the ones that follow, the nature of God is the crucial datum. If we see God, really see God, then we will be done with the divided self that seeks two things of prayer. Seeing God leaves us with a singleness of purpose and heart. Purity of heart is essential. Single-mindedness is a mark of genuine prayer. If we see God, we will not consider prayer an interruption to regular life.

So too, seeing God takes away the burden of having to get the formula just right or screwing ourselves into a position of merit or wearing God down by the length of our prayers or the intensity of our shouting. The problem of the Gentiles is that they know not the character of the true and living God. So, they are caught in a variety of false means of prayer. They think the repetition of precise formulas of prayer will ensure a positive outcome.

In Roman times this may have been a logical result of polytheism. There are many names to mention, many gods and goddesses to call upon. The very process of ensuring that all are properly addressed and adored led the Athenians to post an altar to the “unknown god.” They wanted to be sure all gods were covered, even the ones whose names they did not yet know.

It is also the result of a view of the gods that takes them to be enlarged, cosmic-sized humans.

³³⁸ Barth, *CD Vol. IV.3* (p. 88).

If so, then prayers might work the way our petitions work with our patrons and neighbors. If we are importunate, if we are persistent, if we make a nuisance of ourselves, we can wear them out. They will give us what we want ('the squeaky wheel gets the oil'). Jesus later gives parables in Luke that refute this notion. God is not like the unjust judge who must be barraged by the widow (Lk. 18:2-8) or like the sleepy householder who gets up to end the pounding on his door by his desperate neighbor (Lk. 11:5-10). God is willing and ready to aid his people. So, we need not think the quantity of our prayer is the secret to positive hearing and answering.

Some note the unusual words used for pagan prayer practices: "babble" (βατταλογήσητε) and "many words" (πολυλογία). Ordinarily these words are seen as putting an end to repetitive words, stammering out the same formulaic words repeatedly, like a mantra. But they might also point to "babbling" in the magical, unintelligible language of the gods. If prayer is communication with God, simple human language is enough. As Ecclesiastes puts it:

"Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." (5:2)

Here too we must be clear. Jesus is not putting an end to prayer meetings that last a long time. Augustine's notion applies here: remove much speaking from prayer, not much prayer.³³⁹ We see Jesus praying all night long. There are other times the early Church is in constant prayer when it faced a crisis. Paul asks that we pray without ceasing. We are to pray every day, to pray regularly, to pray whatever our times may be (routine or harried). We are to pray, knowing the God to whom we pray. How different this is than our modern tendency to fit it in the margins of our busy life (unless there is a dramatic crisis staring us in the face).

There are two diseases that can afflict prayer: (1) too few words because we have spent our time and words on everyone and everything else and none are left for God; (2) too many words because we don't really trust God to do it or get it right. We think our many words are necessary to breaking through the reluctance and inattention of God to this or that matter.

"Don't you see that all your efforts, your chattering of empty phrases, your crying is like battering down a door that is already open? Don't you see what a terrible distrust this is of him who has opened the door and is waiting for you, as did the father of the prodigal son? What you are doing in these furious prayers is like writing threatening letters to your Father, telling him he is obligated to help you, when all the while this Father is thinking of you day and night and waiting for the first sign that you are willing to come home."³⁴⁰

To some what seems discordant in this passage is this matter of God's knowledge of us. We are encouraged not to use many words because "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." The logical question is: Why then do we need to ask him? It seems strange that we need to pray when God already knows what we are going to ask for.

There is another side to this that troubles some as well. That is the issue of the authenticity and nature of our human agency and freedom in the face of God's foreknowledge. God not only knows what we need before we ask him, he knows what we are going to ask—so that "before

³³⁹ Based on Augustine, *Works Vol. II/2*. (pp. 100-155). Letter 130.20 (p.193).

³⁴⁰ Thielicke, *Sermon* (p. 105).

they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear” (Isa 65:24). How then can prayer make a difference? If God already knows what is to be and what we will ask and can answer even before we pray, does prayer have any meaning?

In a way this addresses an even more basic question: Why start praying in the first place much less why be persistent and unceasing in prayer? The answer is that God remains God in our relationship. For God not to know us and even our future better than we do is for God no longer to be God. What we mean by God entails a being who is not like human beings. God is not limited in the same ways we are. If we believe God to be transcendent (as well as immanent), then God is beyond and outside the time-space continuum in which we experience all things. We are dependent upon sequence that is linear and irreversible. God is not.

If we are to begin to say anything to this God, we must begin with the acknowledgement that we pray to one who is above and beyond us. But we do not end there. Our social relationships are a clue to what conversation with a personal God is like. It is with those who know us best that we are able to speak most freely.

A small child’s needs may well be known more clearly and definitively by a parent than the child knows. The child even entertains the fantasy of the all-knowing, all-powerful parent. Yet that does not inhibit the child from asking for what it wants or from us giving our children what they need. In our adult relationships as well we pour out our inner beings to those who know us best and frequently do not tell them anything new.

The knowledge God holds of us is not an inhibiting factor. It frees us to be open and honest, to say what we want and allow God to give us what we need. We can be sure we cannot hide what we need from God, even if we hide it from ourselves or others. We can be sure that we need not achieve a certain volume of information or precision of petition for God to have the necessary basis to give a response. God’s knowledge frees us from the burden of the quantity of prayer and allows us to focus on loving God and neighbor. Sincerity is a mark of genuine prayer.

We need not be racked with anxiety about clothes, food or shelter. Our security is in the hands of God who knows what we need. Our prayers can be simple, direct, intense. They are an acknowledgement of our consciousness that it is God who is the final arbiter of our fate. God takes care of us. So, we need not be internally insecure even when we are not externally secure. Simplicity is a mark of genuine prayer.

We also become aware that the ground level issue is not finding the proper words but living in proper relationship. Even the groans that come from us when we are suffering and uncertain are sufficient when directed toward God by the Spirit. We wouldn’t be human if we didn’t have such responses. We aren’t Christ-followers when we stop directing them toward God in a relationship of dependent faith.

Chrysostom puts it this way:

“Wherefore must we pray? Not to instruct Him, but to prevail with Him; to be made intimate with Him, by continuance in supplication; to be humbled; to be reminded of thy sins.”³⁴¹

The purpose of prayer is not to exercise the tongue or to rehearse quantities of information

³⁴¹ John Chrysostom. (1888). *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*. In P. Schaff (Ed.), G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle (Trans.), *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Vol. 10, p. 133). New York: Christian Literature Company.

for God or other humans joining in with us. It is a matter of our turning toward God in such a way that the light we need can be received in the midst of our confusion and darkness.

We are commanded to pray and pray we must. This is not a matter of ‘pray when you are in the mood for it.’ This is something commanded, not something left to our personality or inclination.

“The real basis of prayer is man’s freedom before God, the God-given permission to pray which, because it is given by God, becomes a command and order and therefore a necessity.”³⁴²

How little authentic prayer depends on us – our eloquence, our worthiness, our earnestness. We need not find some spiritual footstool first to elevate us or be possessed by some pious and passionate feeling. Nor is a ‘sacred place’ needed. Any old closet will do.

There are matters that are accomplished only by prayer and fasting because we are in a world of where there are powerful agents in active resistance to the will of God. We do not know what God has in mind even when God is settled already. By praying we bring ourselves into partnership with God. In that conversation we express our poverty of spirit and mourn. When we find ourselves at prayer, we receive those things necessary for us to be salt and light.

Now the issue of the nature and authenticity of human agency. Here we push to the limit of one of the mysteries of our existence. If we take revelation seriously, then we must say that it gives us differing perspectives. The freedom of choice of human beings is part of the imaging of God. Moral freedom means we can think and act in alternative ways, ways that are not moral equivalents. I can love and respect my parents. I can also hate and kill them. These are possibilities I can actualize. They are within the capabilities that I have as a human being.

If by freedom we mean the possibility of choosing and going in different directions, then freedom is a phenomenological experience of every healthy human being. We recognize that freedom in our child rearing, in our reward systems at work, in our criminal justice system. It is so foundational that marketing is built upon appealing to that freedom and guiding it to choices it might not otherwise have made.

If by freedom we mean infinite possibilities, then we are not free. Our freedom is bounded by the limits of the nature we are given biologically. We are finite creatures and cannot (at present) extend our lives to 10,000 years much less 200 years. We cannot fly without mechanical help. We cannot read other minds telepathically. We cannot....we cannot...we cannot. There are dozens of ways of spelling out the limits we now experience. Freedom is freedom within limits. We do not choose and cannot easily manipulate those limits. We can fudge them a bit with the help of some fantastic machines and medicine. In the end the limits are only marginally flexible.

If by freedom we mean not just freedom from certain sorts of artificial limits but freedom for certain sorts of existence, then we must become more nuanced. Our freedom can be limited by slavery, by tyranny, and by the place in history and class structures we find ourselves. Technology provides us with choices beyond the imagination of the medieval or ancient society. The “accident” of our placement in the flow of time and technology provides differing sets of choices (as do our gender, physical features, family placement and position in the community). Freedom from means the gradual universalizing of standards and opportunities for those choices to be distributed more evenly within the human family as a whole.

³⁴² Barth, *CD Vol. III.4* (p. 92).

Freedom for is the positive side. What do we do with the possibilities offered us when the boundaries of choice and the horizons of the possible expands? Is freedom a matter of actualizing an inherent or created potential? The Christian believes there are some broad notions of human nature that are definitive of both negative and positive freedom.

God's foreknowledge does not undercut or preclude the capacity for the shape we give to our freedom. God's operative style has made room in a creation that is finite. Creation is largely dominated by preset regularity of a lawful sort for a creature who has limited transcendence of nature. We can actualize new possibilities that "go against nature." Medicine does it all the time, mobilizing one form of nature to "correct" or alter another form. Our technical capabilities render us increasingly more powerful within nature, able to understand and replicate limited sequences of the mechanisms of nature. What we do with these matters is not preset or coerced by some hidden hand of God.

God's creation of us was a limitation of God's own freedom as well as the establishing of our authentic freedom. God would not be God without some knowledge unlike our own finite knowledge. Yet knowing, even divine knowing, is not causative. In this God's knowledge is like our own. The knowledge of what we need before we even ask in prayer is no restraint on prayer. It is an incentive for us to ask.

We can conceive of bridges to span a great river or a supersonic transport to carry us across the Pacific. Conceptions can be rendered graphically in words and images and achieve a sort of "existence." But for there to be a Super-sonic Transport or a steel and concrete bridge takes more than ideas. The material world must be processed by material processes and actions.

God's knowledge of all possible worlds and of our own actual choices does not cause them. God knows them. In that knowledge God offers us a wisdom and care that we do not have and cannot have with our own limited knowledge and freedom. God invites us to use our freedom to live according to his will, in his Kingdom, even in the face of misused freedoms.

Prayer seems an irrelevance to some moderns, as they are steeped in secularity. That is because, as Dorothee Sölle indicates, prayer has become a substitute for action. She tells the story of the ship Captain whose ship was in grave danger sounding the word: "All we can do now is pray." The Chaplain's response was, "Are things that bad?"³⁴³

In this case prayer has been pushed so far to the margins that we resort to it only when intelligent action is at the end of its tether. Prayer is the last desperate act before disaster strikes. In that way it is an illusion, a daydream wish, the sigh at the limits of human technical capability. This is the "God of the gaps" in the practical realm. Prayer in this case becomes a flight from responsible action, a crutch taken up by our terror. It is Hume's proof of the real motive behind religion. Anxiety is coped with by the rituals of religion.

Prayer is not a substitute for responsible action for Jesus. It is not words sent to a heavenly realm instead of actions done within an earthly realm for our neighbors in need (or for what we need to do for ourselves).³⁴⁴ This teaching on prayer is joined as a hip to a leg to the teaching on

³⁴³ Recited in Oscar Cullman. (2010) *Prayer in the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press. (p. 151, n60).

³⁴⁴ "... I am often, I believe, praying for others when I should be doing things for them. It's so much easier to pray for a bore than to go and see him. And the other is like unto it. Suppose I pray that you may be given grace to withstand your besetting sin (short list of candidates for this post will be forwarded on

being salt and light in the world. Prayer does not substitute for confronting violence and murderous hatred, for ending lust and sexual misconduct, for rooting out selfishness from our marriages or ending the pursuit of our rights whatever, it costs others. Jesus has already given us very specific this-worldly actions and attitudes to clothe ourselves with in Matthew 5.

Even in Matthew 6 prayer follows giving and both are followed and facilitated by fasting. There is a logic to the larger context that addresses the one-sided excesses of our day. We are to sacrifice our resources for the sake of those who are genuinely needy and to do it in a way that it does not create a structure of dependency upon us or credit to us.

We pray at the very least because Jesus taught us so to act. We pray not because we have nothing better to do with our time, nor because we want to escape responsible action (as some prayed for the Jews in Nazi Germany and did nothing else). We pray amid giving. It is an acknowledgement that our human actions of compassion are not sufficient. Prayer confesses that compassion is often contaminated by the socio-economic passions of our day and by our own selfish drives for status and superiority. Giving can be no more than the balm on the guilty conscience of the bourgeois Christian. Giving and aid can be a substitute for justice as an obfuscation of the abdication of responsibility to a narrowly defined bottom line.

We pray because we need God's help if our help is to express the compassion and caring that God asks from us. We pray because we are dumbfounded in the face of all the human need that confronts us: where to begin? What are the most effective measures? How do we deal with the forces that oppose even the limited good we can do in relief and rehabilitation?

We pray also because we do not share in the folly of secularized mentality. God is not absent from things we understand and can control by human technique. We have not diminished the glory or mystery of God when we can trace the operations of molecules or the structures of economic action. God is present in the very mechanisms and principles that structure the regularities of our world.

For those who do not pray regularly, who do not express a deep and daily dependence upon God, who have not found that petition is but one of the forms of prayer, praying may occur only at the edges of their lives when their technique falters. But for the disciple of Christ, prayer is a form of spiritual breathing. It is part of a larger life-act that joins compassion and contemplation, justice and justification, pragmatism and prayer. Prayer as a life-act is not at the margins but at the center because it expresses in a concrete way the actual interactive relationship between God and God's children.

Prayer thus is more than helplessness crying out because it can do nothing else. It is more than the self-affirmation of self-righteous superiority. It is more than a pawn in a status game or an escape from responsibility. It is also more than verbal prayer. Prayer is the longing for the blessings of God's Kingdom in our chaotic world. The brother of Jesus tells us simply: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Prayer is not a form of anxiety about clothes, food or shelter. Our security is in the hands of God who knows what we need. Our prayers can be simple, sincere, direct, intense. They acknowledge our consciousness of God as the final arbiter of our fate. God takes care of us. So,

demand). Well, all the work has to be done by God and you. If I pray against my own besetting sin there will be work for me." Lewis, C. S. (1963,1964). *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (pp. 91-92)

we need not be internally insecure even when we are not externally secure.

One thing taught by this whole section is that sin is not present simply in the far country, far away from sacred things and sacred practices. Sin lurks at the doorway into the holy of holies. We are accompanied by sin even into the presence of the holy God. We are not protected from sin by being spiritual or religious. We are asked to believe that the righteousness we are to do is not gained by being “spiritual.” There are many types of spirituality. Even the most intelligent and intense cannot deliver the righteousness Jesus requires from his disciples.

Sin is not simply the alienation that exists between human beings—the hatred that leads to murder, the lust that makes other people sex-objects, the difficulties that lead to divorce, the dishonesty that underwrites oaths and vows, the oppression that leads to humiliation and exploitation. It is more than these things, though it is not less than them. Sin is also present as a religious counterfeit.

Sin is present in charity as a self-conscious one-up-manship. Sin is present in prayer used as spiritual status ladder climbing and inadequate notions of God incarnated in foolish praying. Sin is present in fasting as the mask of exaggerated discipline. Hypocrisy is not simply the game of the con who cheats people out of their life savings. It is the game of those driven spiritually. We must be careful when we are close to intense and dramatic expressions of religious practice. It is there, sometimes even more than in anti-religious indifference or opposition, that sin is most intense. Sometimes the higher the spiritual temperature, the stronger the virus of sin.

Jesus does not ask that we avoid religious sins by avoiding religious practices (any more than he tells us to avoid sensual sins by avoiding sensuous practices). Jesus is not a withdrawer or an other-worldly escape artist. He asks that we give, pray and fast. When we do, we are to be vigilant that sin does not master us here, thinking it masters us only outside the prayer closet, in miserly grasping of our goods in uncharitable stinginess or in the tepid or cold indifference of secular neglect of spiritual disciplines. Sin can master us in the depths of religious profundity as easily as in the shallows of secular hollowness.

What Jesus teaches us is that sin dresses not just in the rags and tatters of addictive destitution or the slick suits of the Mafia. It also wears clerical collars and speaks in the tongues of religious ecstasy. Sin’s face is seen in more than the photos of the police station or the mirror of vanity and the couches of laziness. It is seen in the smug circles of Church leadership and in the dedications of stained-glass windows.

We are not to be naïve in our analysis of how the world works. We may prefer “religious sins” to the “gross sins.” Yet religious sins too can distort and abuse—and in the process put a religious halo around sin, insulating it from the superabundant righteousness that reaches even into the cloister.

The abusive parent engages in evil. The one who justifies the abuse in the name of God compounds the sin. The rapacious capitalist may not give a fig about impoverishing a village and raping the earth. The one who suggests all this is God’s will seat him or herself at Dives’ dinner table. The Mafia soldier may be a devoted family man and faithful church attender. God sees beyond the window dressings of religious identity to the heart that constitutes the soul and substance of a person.

Sin is so subtle that it is parasitic on the very good we do, even the religious good. It is good to give generously. It is good to pray and call upon the name of the Lord. It is good to be so focused on God’s agenda on the earth that it overrides our normal appetites in favor of fasting. Nevertheless, self-righteousness, contempt for the “less religious,” competing for religious

status, compulsive anxiety about the statistics of religiosity—all of these things are chains that the evil one uses.

We have to return again and again to the Beatitudes. There we have the touchstones of vitality. These are the real questions: are we poor in spirit? Do we mourn sin in all its manifestations? Are we gentle with others and ourselves? Is our strongest appetite for the righteousness that matches that of the Kingdom of God? Are we merciful? Pure in heart? Peacemakers? Do we rejoice when we are hounded because of our alignment with righteousness and Jesus Christ? Do we pray for our enemies and bless them?

2. What we are to pray

Once the why and how have been dealt with Jesus moves on to the what. We pray because we believe in a God who is vitally involved in our affairs, who sees and hears even in secret. We believe in a God who knows what we need and can penetrate the fog of uncertainty and lack of clarity in which we often live. We pray simply, directly, openly without anxiety or superstition. We pray out of a hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice.

So, we reject prayer whose primary audience is other human beings. We reject the “much means much” formula. Not quantity or eloquence matter. What matters is the vital dependence upon God to give us what we need. Secrecy is a mark of a prayer life devoted to God. It is not the only place we must pray, but without it our public prayers ring hollow and shallow.

That leaves us with the question: what do we need? Our wants so frequently overwhelm our sense of necessity that we confuse desires with rights and longings with essentials. Furthermore, we often think individualistically, selfishly. Jesus says God gives you (plural) what you need. God’s answers are not individualistic. What I need cannot be properly addressed apart from what we need. The “we” includes my own family, my neighbors, my acquaintances, my enemies, and the whole of the human race and the earth and its abundance that sustains us all.

So, what ought I to pray for? What is it that my tongue should say when I come to God? I am not being brought into the school of prayer to become more self-conscious than I already am. I am brought there because I do not know how properly to pray. I do not yet know enough of the depths of sin or how they have affected me and those who also are struggling to come to maturity in Christ with me. I do not yet know enough of the breadth of God’s love and providence. My anxiety and superstition corrupt all my hesitant gestures in prayer. So, I need to have a model (not a strait-jacket). This is what Jesus provides.

Jesus tells me I am to pray in this way.³⁴⁵ I need not turn this prayer into vain repetition or into a gauge for how many words is too many in prayer. These short utterances give me some idea of priority and principle as I pray. What do I need to pray for? These few things encompass the territory where my life with Christ exists, where it will unfold and where it will be fulfilled. As long as I pray in this way, I can be confident I am coming to God with what we need.

Some worry that publishing “pulpit prayers” or other written prayers violates the spirit of this

³⁴⁵ Many have noted that the occasion and wording of this prayer is different in Luke 11:1-4. We need to be cautious in what we think we know as to the “original” and the “edited.” Given the importance of prayer, there is no reason why Jesus might have enunciated this instruction on several occasions with variations. Morris, *Matthew*: “If Jesus seriously meant this to be a form to be used verbatim or as a model, it is highly unlikely that he would have enunciated it once only. And if it was to be used as a pattern rather than as a rigid form, nothing is more probable than that it should vary somewhat on different occasions.” (p. 143). See Betz, *Sermon* (pp. 370-372) for just such speculation.

whole section on prayer. Yet this one is written and found in two forms (in both Matthew and Luke). We have the written expression of what Paul prays for the Christian communities to whom his letters are addressed. They too serve as models for our praying. We are not wrong in following this example and publishing prayers, studying prayers, reciting the prayers of others until they are our own. We do this with the Psalms as written prayers and the numerous prayers given in the narratives of the Old Testament.

In writing and publishing prayers we walk the fine line between admitting we are disciples, students who need instruction, and beginning the process of building a spiritual status ranking system in our religious community. It is easy to start rating the spirituality and eloquence of prayers. Public prayers can become indirect sermons or treatises on theology—even testimonies to one's professed level of devotion. The publication of prayers then becomes another way of establishing our religious superiority.

Yet we need the modelling and mentoring even here. Those of us who lead prayer need to learn how to get beyond the dichotomy pitting the spontaneous (and authentic) against the carefully prepared (and phony). Too often the spontaneous is shallow, thoughtless, vainly repetitious. We forget that in avoiding the sin of the hypocrisy of public religious practice meant to impress others we may fall into the sin of the slothful and sloppy public religious practice that insults God. We ought not offer to God that which costs us nothing. It is not a matter of spontaneity or careful preparation. It is worship that combines the Spirit and truth. For that we need a long time in the school of Christ.

The great encouragement of the Lord's Prayer is that the God to whom we pray is a God who is already in action and answering before we pray. If we are hesitant to pray because we are unsure what to pray, this model gives a prayer whose petitions are always, fully, gladly, actively answered. These requests have been put in our mouth by the very Teacher who will answer those requests as we bring them. Prayer is a human response to a prior instruction and action of God. We have need, not because of God's insufficient attention to us or to creation. God created those needs and they will play a positive role in bringing about the greater righteousness that is constitutive of the Kingdom of heaven. We are to bring them in prayer.

Jesus helps us greatly by this model prayer. Its shape and size, its elements and emphases, its focus and format show us the way toward prayer that springs from a pure heart that sees the living God. There is a structure to prayer that exhibits priorities and balance in the sorts of things that preoccupy us in prayer.³⁴⁶

The Lord's prayer is a model. It starts with a two-fold awareness: "Our Father..." We are never alone when we pray but we pray surrounded by brothers and sisters in faith who also pray – and whom we bring with us into God's presence. We pray in the knowledge that we are the children of God and God is our heavenly Father.

Having invoked the God who is "Father in the heavens," we are taught to begin our petitions with a focus on the person, promises and purpose of God. Our first "duty" in prayer is to acknowledge the centrality of God coming from a world and history where God is marginalized.

The **first** thing we need to do is to approach the living God and open our eyes to see God. In doing so we discover the godlessness of our world and our own personality. Our great temptation is to master "God," to domesticate or subordinate "God" to the great attractions and shining

³⁴⁶ Turner, *Matthew*: "In such prayer, doxology (exemplified by the first three 'your' requests) precedes and permeates requests for human needs (exemplified by the last three 'us' requests)." (p. 186).

passions of our day. The first petition is to “hallow” the name of God, to treasure the person and character of God, to reverence God with respect as the awesome One he really is. It is to magnify God in our thinking, feeling and outlook. It is to restore God to his rightful place in our existence.

The **second** petition is a longing, flowing from a heart that sees the Father of Jesus Christ who is in the heavens. Seeing God brings knowledge of how dreadfully disorderly are the socio-political orders to which we pledge allegiance. The kingdoms of this world may have the potential to act as servants of God for righteousness, but they actualize only a small part of that potential.

Bonhoeffer says the prayer for the Kingdom is not the begging of an anxious soul for blessedness nor is it a Christian embellishment for world-improvers.³⁴⁷ It is the prayer of those who are blessed, who taste the Kingdom of God and hunger for its righteousness to flood the relationships and structures of the earth. It is the prayer of those who have lived righteously as salt and light and know how little world-improvement improves our world. Without the active presence and ultimate triumph of God’s Kingdom, a world of improvement remains before us.

The **third** asks that the will of God be done on earth. There are many wills, innumerable imperatives, vast arenas of determinative forces that seek to define and shape all that lives on earth. God’s will is not the only one present. The God to whom we pray has the might to transform the universe in a single word, subduing all the unruly wills that assert themselves against his Kingdom. On the one hand, we pray that the final, dramatic day will come when those not submitting voluntarily will finally be restrained and removed. On the other hand, we are asking for more time from God for his will to be embraced without coercion, without domination. We ask that the today of heaven will be the tomorrow of the earth. This prayer is asking that God not abandon the earth.

The **fourth** is asking for our bread. We bring a request, knowing that God may give us better than our ignorance asks. Also, we come because we desire communion and communication with God, not just the gifts and grace of God. Prayer is more than coming to a divine lottery hoping for the jackpot. We begin, asking God to provide our bread. God frequently and habitually provides it by the work of our own hands. That does not deny that it is God who provides. We are asking that whatever the means, whatever the context, whatever the provision, God be our source and resource.

The **fifth** asks for forgiveness. On earth we create indebtedness to one another and then find ourselves unable to remedy the debt. Some of these are financial. Others are matters of costs we cause to others because of our actions for which we cannot give proper restitution for the pain or damage we have inflicted. Other debts are benefits received that we do not properly acknowledge or return with the thanksgiving or reciprocal benefit when our benefactors are in need.

The **sixth** is the test or temptation. Luther (and others) distinguished between temptation that comes in our weakness (our left hand) and in our strength (our right).³⁴⁸ When we are sick, hungry, cold, and discouraged during failure or tragedy, we may hear the loud voices telling us God does not care and does not feel our trouble. When we are despised or persecuted, when our

³⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, D. (2009). *Berlin: 1932–1933*. (Vol. 12). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (p. 290).

³⁴⁸ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 42 (p. 72).

plans fail and we are disappointed in rejection, then we may nurture the root of bitterness. We may envy those who succeed. We may question our calling and even our existence. We may be tempted to self-loathing and questioning of the reality of God. This is the tale of Job.

When we succeed and find ourselves in a privileged and comfortable position, then we may hear the quiet whispers that harden our heart. When fame and fortune fall into our lap, when good health and good community surround us, we are tempted to forget God and despise those who are afflicted. We are prone to become self-centered, preoccupied with our own persona and purse-strings. We can become world weary and our joy turn into boredom or nihilism (Ecclesiastes).

What we pray for here is that we be free from sin. Temptation and the evil that comes from embracing the enticement to sin produce the great rift between earth and heaven. It is the evil one who is at the root of our enticement to sin by thought, word or deed. A power of evil is afoot that is stronger than our own puny strength, wiser than our deepest intellect, subtler than the most clever among us. He can quote Scripture with more facility than we can. This prayer is the dual awareness: this is my Father's world and it is currently a world sitting in the lap of the Evil One.

[3a] Our Father in heaven

The beginning point is knowledge of the one to whom we pray. Jesus designates God as "Father." The center of this identification is that God is personal and desires a relationship of intimacy, dependence and communication.

The selection of "Father" to designate God grows out of seeking to capture a reality in a culturally appropriate fashion. Jesus as the eternal Son of God is the only human who is a son of God by nature. Jesus is the incarnate manifestation of the eternal Word of God, the historical entrance of God into space and time in a uniquely limited manner. Jesus addresses God as "my" Father, claiming an identity of substance and an intimacy of communion unlike that of any other human being. Ontologically, Jesus relates to God as "Father."

"In sum, God is Father because he has a Son and we can be his children because this Son stands for us before him. We are not then being presumptuous when we call God our Father, neither religiously audacious, nor enthusiastic, nor sentimental. We are simply being reverent."³⁴⁹

We are invited into just such a relationship. We participate in the divine nature by calling God "our Father." We are set alongside and in a similar relationship to God as Jesus experienced in history. Though by nature we have disqualified ourselves through sin for the intimate union and communion, by adoption we are re-enrolled in the inner circle of God's love. In terms of salvation, we become the children of God by the second birth, by adoption, by becoming authentic disciples of Christ.

God is not reluctant or distant, needing to be persuaded to take an interest in or be oriented toward us in a favorable way. God knows what we need before we ask. God takes up the role of heavenly Father toward us. As "Father" God does not lead us into temptation but delivers us from the evil One and the evil afoot in our history. God meets our needs and protects us amidst

³⁴⁹Barth, K. (2006). *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed according to Calvin's Catechism*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers). (p. 45).

the dangers of the real world in which we live. God is our foremost patron and mentor, our foremost teacher, model and protector.

Jesus shows us that “GOD” is not an abstract philosophical concept, a cipher for the highest civilizational ideals and norms or a transcendent, unknowable surd. God is the Father of Jesus Christ and of those who come to him through Jesus. God is known and knowable. When we come to him in prayer in this manner, we acknowledge that he is named and thus his character and nature are known. We know that God is not a private fantasy but a publicly shared reality. God is the One who dwells in the heavenlies. Beyond the cloud-girt glories of the sky, God lives and moves.

This is the Father who is not seen in earthly statues or who is mysteriously separate from human existence. This is a God who acts as “Father” and who does so as the dweller in the unseen realm of the heavens. We might wonder how the transcendent, the eternal, the almighty, the source of all being, the invisible is to be known—or why we might think the earthly, the weak and mortal, the contingent and visible might suppose it could have concourse with such a God. Jesus draws transcendence and immanence closely together. God is known through Jesus Christ and known by this prayer.

This God is a listener. God is shown to us as one who genuinely hears us. We might sense the total inadequacy we have before the claims and standards of the higher righteousness. Those of us with self-doubts make mountains of mole hills and Everests of mountains. Those of us with bravado and self-confidence are completely undercut by the words of Jesus in the Sermon. Together we need to know God listens and really hears us. We come not knowing the way or even the way to the way.

By the end of the Sermon we are ready to chuck the whole thing, so austere and impossible the whole thing seems. Who am I to think that I, as limited and fallible, as undisciplined and anxious, as fallen and false as I am, will be among the few who find the narrow way? Or that I have surveyed life clearly enough to see where the rock-foundations of Jesus’ way are to be found on which to build the house of my life and history? Or that I will not be salt that loses its saltiness in the storms of life?

By this prayer Jesus tells us that God is to be known as our mighty, transcendent Father in the heavenlies who listens to us. In ourselves we may not be able to guarantee any of the outcomes we hunger for. Our God can. What Jesus asks is that we come, hungry for righteousness, and in our prayer we will find satisfaction. Here we are invited to see God—and in that seeing to gain the purity of heart that keeps salt salty.

Why ought we believe a God who is in the heavens can help us? Does this not place God up or out there, distant and hidden, removed from the pains and irritations of our everyday life? Where is God in an earthquake that kills more than 4,000 and injures some 20,000 in Japan? Is this not mute testimony to the reality that God is not involved? Or ought we modify the saying of Jesus: he sends sun, rain and earthquakes alike upon the just and the unjust? Are we heirs of a world God made or a world in our own image?

In the heavens refers, first, to One who is above all authorities and powers. The God to whom we pray, who is fatherly in action toward us, is a God who is beyond the scope of all earthly powers. The combination Jesus offers us in his view of God is One who is good and great. God is not the sort of psychological projection of human powers onto cosmic scale: large-scaled but limited.

In recent years we have been offered such a God in attractive prose. The vivid confrontation

of the real suffering and absurd randomness of genetic defects or natural disasters has led some to reject the full meaning of “in the heavens.” God may be there. But the God who is there is limited in capability, not knowing the future in any qualitative way different than we humans. Since we are created with the agency of free will God does not know what we will do it until it is done.

Nor does God then unmake our mistakes of building on earthquake zones or exposing ourselves to chemicals or radiation that cause tragic mutations. God cooperates with us in our struggle against chaos and in an ever-surprising unfolding of an unanticipated history. God remains able to do whatever is compatible with his nature and purposes.

God could control by coercion and power but chooses to limit himself. To be sure God may have to exercise force and coercion and not just persuasion at the end of history to bring about the kingdom of God. But on the road to that point, God rarely if ever intervenes to ensure that choices and outcomes move us forward toward the final consummation of fallen history.

Yet we may wonder if this does not move toward a deist view of God. And why does God limit intervention of a coercive sort to the end but chooses not even a limited use of such power in the process approaching the end point of history?

We are right to have such hesitations. The intersection of infinitude and personal agency is the crux. One of the problems is with the notion of foreknowledge. How can God work with us in time and know the future in absolute detail? If all that is to be is known absolutely, how then can the future be open and undetermined, or have responsible freedom for our own choices? The traditional answer has been that the language of personhood, freedom, choice, change refers to real and analogical capabilities when talking of God and humans. Yet words do not and cannot apply in precisely the same way to both God and humans.

When we say “before and after” for our experience in history and use it for the history of the trinity as well, we cannot be saying exactly the same thing for both beings. God is beyond all created being. “Before and after” do not impose the same limitations on God that they do upon us. The same is true for “knowledge” and “freedom.” God is personal without being a person in quite the same sense as we are persons. We use the human word because it corresponds to the reality that God reveals himself as personal and became a human person within creation in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Further, our personhood is derivative from the personhood of God. The name “Father” is itself analogical, veiling and revealing at the same time. God is the loving source of our existence, the protector and sustainer of our being and history. “In the heavens” is also analogical. This is not a statement about some physical address in the skies above us, some place that cosmonauts might investigate, if we could send them far enough. It is an expression of the reality that God is beyond the seen and unseen world of the totality of creation. We will not discover God by penetrating to the depths of the sea, the tangles of the rain forests or the outer limits of space. God is beyond, “in the heavens.”

“Father” brings God near; “in the heavens” carries God far beyond. No longer does God dwell in Zion. No longer do we worship God on Mt. Gerizim or make pilgrimage to Mecca or Rome. God is over all and available everywhere. Wherever the “heavens” are found, God may be found as “Father.”

[3b] Hallowed be your name

This begins the section of the prayer that is adoration. Having invoked the God who is “Father in the heavens,” we are taught to begin our petitions with a focus on the person, promises

Matthew 6:9 “Our Father”

and purpose of God.

Our first “duty” in prayer is to acknowledge the centrality of God. We come into God’s presence from a world and history where God is marginalized and trivialized. Our world appears a godless place. “East of Eden” is where we were thrust when we rejected the rule and care of God in the garden. We have built our cities and lived our lives in defiance of God’s provision and purposes for us. Our politics and economics, our technology and philosophy, our military and medicine are all oriented to work without God. God is not the great premise of our worldview or the great attraction of our consumption.

The first thing we need to do is to approach the living God and open our eyes to see God. In doing so we discover the godlessness of our world and our own personality. Our great temptation is to master “God,” to domesticate or subordinate “God” to the great attractions and shining passions of our day. All the things we identify with “God” lose their luster and show their inadequacies.

To “hallow” the name of God is to treasure the person and character of God. It is to reverence and treat God with respect as the awesome One he really is. It is to magnify God in our thinking, feeling and outlook. It is to restore God to his rightful place in our existence. We who “believe” find that we are prone to minimize and marginalize God. We need to make God as large in the horizon of our existence as God really is in the actuality of our world.

God’s people were not to profane or misuse the name of God, for it represents all that he is.³⁵⁰ They were to think and only speak of God with the honor God is due. God is wise, just and good. Our words are always to reflect God’s dignity. We do so in naming God “Father.”

A conversation often begins by saying a name, and we often acknowledge the other person with whom we have a relationship by saying his or her name. Using the proper name for someone shows that we know to whom we speak. How we say the name indicates our attitude and posture toward them. Sometimes using a name is a way of asserting authority or power. Sometimes we whisper the name of the one we fear may be coming and discover our misdeed. Sometimes we say our own name to identify ourselves. What name we use and how we say it signals our posture toward the one we name.

This command requires that we not to invoke God’s name lightly, frivolously, or for selfish reasons. It is a wrongful use to invoke God’s name when we intend to revile, blaspheme, abuse or even swear falsely with God’s name. To say the name of God over an offering when our hearts are cold and indifferent to God is to use it wrongfully. It is hypocritical. We profess the name but do not live the life that is godly. We no longer hallow it.

Rather, we are to use the name reverently, with joy. We are to share the name and invoke it over our pleasures and pains, over our successes and failures, in thanksgiving for health and in petition for healing in sickness. This command invites us to use the name of God properly. Over the years, Jews have wrongly deduced that they were not to say the name of God at all for fear of misusing it. In reading Scripture, they substitute “Lord” (adonai) where the proper name of God appears. Sensitivity to this is seen even in the Gospels where Matthew, writing to Jewish disciples of Jesus and reflecting their sensitivity in this matter, changes the phrase “Kingdom of God” to “Kingdom of heaven,” avoiding using God’s name.

We hallow God when we set God apart from all other psychological projections and social

³⁵⁰ Gill, David W. (2004). *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles*. InterVarsity Press. (pp. 120-139).

constructions. We sanctify the name of God when we call upon God in a way we do not call upon other names. God is separated from all other names. To appeal to God is not the same as appealing to the United Nations, the United States, General Motors or Sony. God is something “other.” To invoke God’s name is not the same as invoking the Speaker of the House, the police chief, or the CEO of some great multinational conglomerate. Our intimate ties with powerful people and what they can do gives us small parables of what this means. We call upon closely tied persons who command resources and skills that can open doors and solve challenges for us. They are “hallowed” when we respect them for what they are and can do.

God is to be acknowledged in creation as and how he is present in creation. The name he gives us to know him by and to call upon him is the Father of Jesus Christ. We are empowered by Jesus to call upon God by the name of “Father” and know we are not playing an elaborate psychological trick. This is not some religious illusory salve upon the fundamental anxiety we have as finite creatures. The God whom Jesus teaches us to hallow is beyond our infantile projections and wishes.

The “Father” is a living, revealing, speaking God who is saving his people from their sins through Jesus Christ. In this sense Freud’s “god” helps us hallow Jesus’ Father-God by freeing us from psychological projections. Yet Freud did not hallow God’s name. This “Father” is not the sum of shortfalls intrinsic to childhood. He is an objective personal being beyond any and every psychological complex, projection or social construction.

God is to be acknowledged by us as more than the social construction and concentration of our dependence upon and relations with our larger group’s inchoate forces. Emile Durkheim helps us to see that the gods of cultural constructions are not the revealed Father “in the heavens.” Yet Durkheim does not hallow the living God who is not the expression of some ethnicity, class or national unity. This is a God who is in the heavens, not in the social structures of concrete historical human groups. Jesus’ Father-God breaks down the divisions between Jew and Greek. Jesus’ Father “in the heavens” is not captive to any cultural context or social structuring. To hallow God is to relativize all human group boundaries and social constructions.

We need to hallow God’s name in our world because of our captivity to psycho-physiological and socio-cultural passions. We continue the murders of Cain, the revenge of Lamech, the incest of Noah, the rape of Dinah, the idolatry of Jezebel, the contempt of Michal, the lie of Sapphira because we are godless.

So much in our world comes without a name. When tragedy strikes because jobs have not been done well, we can get no names in a bureaucracy to call to accountability. The “facelessness” of bureaucracy becomes a sign of the namelessness of misery in our world. Evil and the evil one have no name. The lordless powers have no name, however much we might try to label them as “the accuser,” the Prince of Demons, fate, kismet. They are like the anonymous letter, addressed to us, distressing and threatening us. We have no return address, no face or name to attach to them.

The modern world is becoming increasingly anonymous, nameless, faceless. But God does not insert himself into our existence in that way. God is given many names (Immanuel, the Holy One, the Father in the heavens, “I am who I am,” Lord of the heavenly host, Dweller in light eternal, the good Shepherd etc.). God signs his name to all of his works. He is a God who desires

to be known and acknowledged. "The Devil loves anonymity, but God has a name."³⁵¹

First of all, God is not a philosophical mystery for endless debate and cognition. God gives us a name and, in that name, tells us who and what he is. We too have our names. Even as we hallow God's person and reality, God hallows ours. God calls us by our names. God knows us as a Father knows his children. God respects us by giving us space and time to exist in responsible freedom. God does not abuse or neglect us, however much others may efface our names, deride our achievements, abuse our bodies, stigmatize our personal features. God calls us by name and treasures each one of us with an infinite love that willingly lays down its life in redeeming sacrifice.

What God asks of us is done first by God in relationship to us. God hallows us within creation by designating us images of God. In that vocation we are those who name of the rest of creation, uncovering and displaying the qualities and nature of the rest of God's creatures. God gives us the occupation of living in and with creation as stewards of its bounty.

The life and identity of the human being is marked off as unique. This is not "speciesism," the ultimate ethnocentrism. It is the acknowledgement that humans are distinctively present to and within the rest of nature. Arbitrarily to take another human life is to commit murder, not just to kill. It is different than the slaying of a turkey for Thanksgiving or the trapping of a rat that is spreading disease.

God acknowledges us at the level of the dignity with which we were created, treating and treasuring us as his imagers within creation. In contrast, we fail to treat and treasure God as God. So, we ask God to do what we have found ourselves unable to do in our sinful state. We ask God to bring about the hallowing of his name.

The disdain for God is everywhere present, sometimes in most concentrated form within those who have vowed to hallow God's name. The great ambivalence we sense within us when we call upon the name of the Lord reflects the rift at the heart of our world. It is not only within us. It surrounds us. It is not only in the world. It is in the church.

Disdain for God is the root of our disdain toward the bounty of the earth. We disdain the environment and pillage nature because we invoke other names over the land. We call upon capitalism or socialism, science or profits, libertarianism or the welfare state instead of God. We disdain females because we do not name God over them. Instead, they are mother, playmate, house keep, inexpensive labor, emotional "bitches," beauty queens, models. We disdain other races and cultures because we do not invoke the living God for them and their destiny.

This has application at the human level as well. Think of your close friend or your spouse. We are not to misuse their name or sully their honor by speaking about them in ways that degrade them. One thinks of an angry or hostile husband who starts out a complaint about his wife with the phrase, "My wife, the bitch..." or the wife who says, "My husband, the bastard..." It is inappropriate for us to speak sweet words to a colleague or our spouse, only to turn around behind their back and call them derogatory names. In not making wrongful use of God's name, we learn not to do the same with our fellow humans' names.

It also has a more extended application to the sorts of labels we put on one another. We know how easy it was as a child and even as an adult to impose a demeaning, trivializing or

³⁵¹ W. Lüthi, *The Lord's Prayer: An Exposition*, tr. Kurt Schoenenberger (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1961), p. 10.

derogatory name on others (epithets, slurs, degrading nicknames, or stereotypes that put people down or “in their place”). Instead of calling a person by their name, we say “boy” or “woman” as a way of imposing power over them and signaling that they matter not in their uniqueness or individuality. They are treated as a mere servant to us, a living tool to do something for us.

Jesus tells us of the danger of using degrading, derogatory “names” for others (Matthew 5:22) when anger fuels our abusive tongue. Naming others is a way of affirming their uniqueness and signaling our own interest in and care for them. The command about how we utter God’s name and the ways we use it also teaches us how we are to treat those made in his image.

God needs to do a deep work in us all, bringing within us that singleness of purity of heart that sees God, and in seeing God, also sees our fellow human beings with whom we live. Those who also call God “Father.” It is not enough to know about God, to memorize the words that we use to name God. We need to experience the reality pointed to by the words we are given for naming God. What we pray for is a deepening respect for God and for our fellow humans along with a broadening knowledge of the living God who made us all.

[3c] Your Kingdom Come

This second petition is a longing, flowing from a heart that has seen the Father of Jesus Christ who is in the heavens. Seeing God means knowledge of how dreadfully disorderly are the socio-political orders to which we pledge allegiance. The kingdoms of this world may have the potential to act as servants of God for righteousness, but they actualize only a small part of that potential.

The little “gods” who seize control of them often turn them into realms for their own advantage and advance. The bureaucratic “nobility” act in un noble fashion, extracting their pounds of flesh in order to demonstrate their power and patronage. They lord it over those of us who are dependent upon their services. They manage to divert the lion’s share of money into salaries and benefits for themselves, rather than maximizing the usefulness of such resources for relieving misery and lifting the socially disadvantaged. Every modern welfare system seems run for the benefit of the social workers and administrators, once one looks into the actual use of the money budgeted for them. Yet we cannot live without them.

In a godless world, we turn to guarantees other than God for our security and welfare. The endowment of governing powers—be they clan leaders or congressional members, kings or prime ministers, presidents or judge—serves as an acknowledgement that our relationships and agreements need more than good will and wisdom. We place locks on doors because of the knowledge that we constantly trespass boundaries set for our own good. There are lordless powers around us, rogue ruffians who respect neither rights, life nor property, much less the name of the living God. Without imperfect human kingdoms, we wind up with the chaos of anarchy, the terror of warlords devastating the earth to assert their will to power.

In brief compass we may say **the Kingdom of God** refers to the undisputed sovereignty of God in creation, established and expressed in a complete order of peace, justice and righteousness on a new earth within a new heaven. This entirely future new world comes in its unearthly powers at the climax of this Age at the Day of the Lord. This is a Day of judgment and rectification when all the enemies of Christ are fully made his footstool. No inch of space nor second of time will have room for decisions, relationships or actions that are not fully conformed to the direct will of God. All those who are aligned with evil along with the Evil One will be banished from God’s

presence (Kingdom). The abundance of eternal life and healing portrayed at the end of the book of Revelation will permeate the whole of the created universe.

The Kingdom of God is one way of speaking of the direct presence and power of God. The fullness of the Kingdom means God is triumphant in history and the Kingdom is visibly perceptible. All the promises and hopes of prophecy are completely fulfilled when the Kingdom comes. Then the events portrayed as necessary for the final things to be realized will be past events. God will dwell in complete harmony with creation and with all those who, through Christ, have entered this time and place.

The Kingdom of God involves the strong action taken by God to re-assert the divine will and way in the current rebellious creation. It is God's effective action against the hostile powers that have arisen and threaten the order and purpose of creation. The Kingdom of God is the royal exercise of dominion by God, intervening in nature and history to redeem, restore and rectify all things. This action is inaugurated in the ministry of the historical Jesus who is the messianic, Spirit-anointed servant of Yahweh. This counter action against evil will climax in the second coming of Jesus Christ when everything is brought into submission. Then a new heavens and new earth will appear, within which all evil and evil doers are permanently excluded.

This Kingdom is God-centered. It is of God. It is God's action and gift. Its source and dynamic is from God and acts for the agenda and redemptive purposes of God, not necessarily those of the institutional church, or the humanization of history, the political stability of given human kingdoms, the institutional well-being of para-Church structures or the existential well-being of religious people.

The Kingdom is also God-centered in the way it is presented in the teachings of Jesus Christ. As proclaimed and represented in the Gospel narratives, the Kingdom focuses explicitly on the activity of God. Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom only have an implicit concentration on Jesus as the Son of Man, the messenger of the Kingdom and its implicit King.

Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom primarily stress its future reality. Yet the Kingdom is also already present in its effects. The Kingdom has already arrived within this Age without abolishing it. This Age continues to structure existence until the coming of the un-earthly, entirely new world brought by the power of God in the unveiling of Jesus as King of kings and the Judge of the living and the dead in the parousia.

Jesus unveiled the "mystery" or "secret" of the Kingdom of God. This "secret," as expressed in the Kingdom parables (Matthew 13; Mark 4), is the startling disclosure of the actual arrival of that unearthly, entirely future new world "ahead of its time." That very Kingdom is inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Already that entirely future new world has come into this one without abolishing or ending the old. So near is the Kingdom of God that it can already be entered. The effects of healing, exorcism and power already manifest that Kingdom's power. Those who look for the coming of the Kingdom need now to acknowledge its limited but real presence already. The baptism in the Holy Spirit serves as a foretaste and guarantee of the coming new world. Already we are to live as active participants in the power and potentials of the Kingdom of God as though it is already present—because it is.

In the face of the startling first arrival of the promised future Kingdom of God, Jesus' call for repentance and faith demonstrates that the divine initiative and God-centeredness of the Kingdom does not exclude, but rather demands human response. In the light of God's gracious saving activity, human beings are to acknowledge the impossibility of their own efforts in fully rectifying the sin of this world (or of their own lives). They are to believe the good news of God's

Matthew 6:10 "Your kingdom come"

decisive strength initiated in Jesus Christ to remedy the destruction, denial and distortion of God's good creation. The limitless grace of God in his Kingdom is to be met by a limitless discipleship of gratitude.

Nonetheless, Jesus' teaching is an apocalyptic vision of human history and the intervention of God. Yet such an apocalyptic

- Maintains faith in God as Creator and Sustainer of the world despite the evil manifest in that world. It expresses hope for the salvation of the world (not salvation from the world)
- Views God as acting definitively to defeat the powers that have been allowed until now to continue to operate in the universe in manners contrary to God's order and will. God is at present the rightful ruler over creation. Yet that kingship has been contested and usurped by hostile powers. What is *de jure* God's rightful rulership, already actively expressed, will become *de facto* an uncontested, reestablished exclusive rulership. At present it is a real, though not fully actualized, overlordship. This apocalyptic expectation is not an escape from history but the claim that God is engaged in the redemption of history, not allowing history to be driven to complete futility by the nullity and absurdity of sin or its agents.
- Requires human beings to expect, look, and wait for the Kingdom; to enter the Kingdom; to pray for the coming of the Kingdom; to prepare for the coming Kingdom through repentance and faith. Nevertheless, God remains the primary active agent who establishes or brings the Kingdom, who denies or permits persons entrance to the Kingdom.

The prayer, "Thy Kingdom come," seeks from God something human beings cannot bring into being. The Kingdom is not an imminent possibility within the evolution of civilization or Church ("Thy Kingdom evolve"; or "Build Thy Kingdom through the Church"). The spiritual and ethical implications of that Kingdom's presence include the hallowing of God's person (name) and the doing of God's will on earth as it is done in heaven by humans who pray for the fullness of Kingdom come.

The Kingdom of God "may be described as social, political, personalistic (respectful of individual freedom), universal in intent, transcendent in origin, earthly in realization, present in sign, future in fullness."³⁵² Most difficulties have to do with the Kingdom of God's multifaceted nature.

One delicate question is the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church. In addition, various distortions of the Kingdom come about when the tension between various facets of the Kingdom are dissolved. These tensions exist because the Kingdom is both future and present, personal and social, spiritual and material, gradual and climactic, and involves both divine and human action. By removing one side or overemphasizing one dimension of the reality of God's Kingdom, such theologies plunge Christian thought and action into inadequate or truncated expressions of the mission and message of Jesus Christ. Some examples of these distortions may be found in:

- Individualized gospels that lack relevance to social worlds of oppression and poverty, that create communities of pietistic indifference or injustice often combined with a refusal of Christian civil responsibility or identification of such responsibility as completely fulfilled by personal evangelism and Church planting [such as in Dutch Reformed theologies that justified apartheid or elements of contemporary North American conservative

³⁵² W. Willis, *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (1987) Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, Mass. (p. 107).

Evangelicalism and fundamentalism]

- Social gospels that secularize the call for explicit individual repentance and faith in Christ as the sole remedy and hope for God's salvation and identify specific this-worldly socio-political action with the Kingdom of God ("properly changing the social environment will lead to a perfect society"). [This is embodied in postmillennial movements; in progressivist reformist movements looking to a Christianized society or world order brought about by human action; or in semi-Marxist initiatives looking to human revolutionary praxis as laying the foundations for a Christianized world order]
- An ecclesiastical confusion of the institutional Church with the Kingdom, either in the form of an overarching "Church-type" or theocratic state that encompasses the whole of society and persecutes alternatives [as in the Medieval Catholic Church] or as the "Sect-type" that sees itself as the counter-cultural kingdom community rejecting various involvements in "the world" as incompatible with authentic Christ following [as in a number of Anabaptist movements, communes or religious orders such as the early Franciscans]
- Movements driven by apocalyptic utopian hopes or eschatologically obsessed constituencies who seek to date the parousia and engage in radical withdrawal from or even attack upon the ordinary structures of institutional life [as in Thomas Münzer and the Zwickau prophets; various Adventist movements; elements of contemporary premillennialism; "cargo" cults and millenarian movements]
- A subjectivizing of the Kingdom of God into the mystical communion ("the Kingdom of God is within you"), either in an individualistic fashion [as in some Quaker inner light doctrines and medieval Christian mysticism] or in a communal direction ["the communion of saints" in liturgical forms as found in some eucharistically-centered Christian communities]
- A theologically liberal demythologizing or resymbolizing of the Kingdom in which the "husk" of myth, apocalyptic, and miracle are removed to expose the "kernel" or essence of the Kingdom: a set of ideals, values and categorical imperatives realizable through the on-going progress of education and social reform [such as we find in Albrecht Ritschl who argued the Kingdom was "this-worldly, monistic and ethical in character" or Adolf von Harnack's reduction of the Kingdom to the principles of the fatherhood of God and infinite value of the soul, the brotherhood of humankind, and the higher righteousness and law of love]

In praying for the coming of the Kingdom, we pray for the Kingdom of God, not our idea of it, not our hope for help from divine resources for our own kingdoms, not for a religious legitimation for our own life-style. We need a rule and governance that goes far beyond any and all of our own.

Bonhoeffer says the prayer for the Kingdom is not the begging of an anxious soul for blessedness nor is it a Christian embellishment for world-improvers.³⁵³ It is the prayer of those who are blessed, who taste the Kingdom of God and hunger for its righteousness to flood the relationships and structures of the earth. It is the prayer of those who have lived righteously as salt and light and know how little world-improvement improves our world. Without the active presence and the ultimate triumph of God's Kingdom, there is a world of improvement still to

³⁵³ Bonhoeffer, D. (2009). *Berlin: 1932–1933*. (Vol. 12, p. 290). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

happen after we've done all we can. This is not to say: 'do nothing.'

Nor is this the prayer of those whose world weariness has generated a sort of blasé spiritual or practical attitude. This is not the prayer of one who has grown otherworldly with disgust for this world. It is not a cry for an escape pod from the entanglements of the flesh. The New Jerusalem and the hard pavements of our cities are intimately related. If we have hope for the coming Kingdom, we have motive and energy for reforming our present kingdoms. Because the Kingdom is coming, time is always full of the possibility of becoming. We can be different; we can seek the righteousness of that Kingdom in limited ways now; we can make real change.

We are asking God to define our time by the coming time of the Kingdom of God. We are praying that we no longer commit the sins of "killing" time, frenzied distraction, or cultivated boredom. Because we know the Kingdom is coming, we no longer have time for trivial pursuits, for numbing our senses or raging against "life." The time we have now is not an empty vessel to pour in as much of our own agenda as possible. It is the time for imaging what is coming, for displaying the sort of righteousness God's power can create, for learning no longer to be satisfied with the righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes or the futility of the gentiles.

In praying that God's Kingdom come, we are asking that it come and displace our own kingdoms. By that we first mean our socio-political kingdoms. They will all perish, so we cannot divinize them (nor demonize them). In the meantime, we seek constantly to lure them into the service of God, even if they serve God only anonymously. We can never be satisfied with the sorts of compromise "righteousness" they wrap themselves in. Behind the face of civil justice is often a hidden injustice. The state is easily subverted into a partial service of the common good. "Good" programs become the servant of vested interest groups, whether the rich and powerful, the dominant economic actors or the army of bureaucratic wage earners.

But we pray for more than this. We pray for the perishing of our own small "kingdoms": the kingdoms of the professor unfolding the logic of a subject matter before struggling students, of the cabinet maker sanding an oak board to silken smoothness, of an aerobics instructor barking out the next moves over the stereo, or the company executive signing contracts. Our own kingdoms, be they those of the missionary, the homemaker, the lawyer, the mechanic, the researcher, the salesclerk, the book publisher—all of them we nurture as though they were life or death. We want God's Kingdom to "fix" those other scoundrels, and to help our own kingdoms flourish.

The Kingdom of God is a warning light about our own kingdoms. We must pursue them in this time between Eden and the New Jerusalem. But we confess with Koheleth: "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with" (Ecclesiastes 1:12). We continue to discover how many of our own endeavors wind up as personal and social dead ends. Those who want the world to remain as it is do not want it to remain at all (Eric Fried). The prayer for the Kingdom is a cry for ultimate, complete, final judgment. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the aroma of a dead and decaying world, the rattle of death in the throat of fallen humanity.

The cry for the Kingdom is ultimate repentance. It is the acknowledgement that what we have built—the cities we have fortified, the great references we have written, the elaborate technologies we have developed, the mighty cultures we have forged—have all put link to link in a chain that binds us more strongly than death itself. The cry for the Kingdom is ultimate hope. It is the confession that God is bringing a wholly new world in which humans will genuinely flourish without social and personal dead ends.

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[3d] Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

This is the third of the “your” petitions. Jesus directs our initial attention in prayer to God’s priorities and agenda. To some degree each of these three petitions repeats the others. What is God’s will? It is the hallowing of his name and the coming of his Kingdom. What does it mean to hallow God’s name? It is to submit to his ruling guidance and to do his will in the midst of all other guidance and wills. What does it mean for God’s Kingdom to come? It means the ushering in of a place and time where God’s name is perfectly known and revered, where God’s will is fully and gladly done from the least to the greatest.

The phrase “on earth as in heaven” can be taken only with “your will be done” or with all the prior petitions (“hallowed be” and “your kingdom come” and “your will be done”).³⁵⁴ All three are things that we are asking to be accomplished within the earthly realm as they already are in the heavenly. In any case, in praying that God’s will “as [it is done] in heaven [be done] also upon the earth,” we equally pray for God’s name to be hallowed and God’s kingdom to come on earth. They are included in what God wills. In either case, no matter how one relates these phrases, it adds up to the same conclusion.

There is a key distinction to be made. We must know God’s name if we are to pray aright. We must treat God as God if we are to be rightly related. The first step is knowing and praying to the living and true God. So, we call out to the heavenly Father, not the divine within, or the spirit in this or that bit of nature. We do not simply meditate and still all rational thought, as though God were an impersonal force and our problem was that we relate to the world and God via human words and thought. Nor do we call upon Shiva or Ahura-Mazda, Amidah Buddha or Amaterasu Omi-Kami—or hundreds of thousands of other names. We call upon the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

To ask that the Kingdom come is to pray for more than an inner spirituality, a point of focus and stillness in life. It is to ask that more than prayer be set right. We are not simply asking that people get their religious categories and practices straight. We are asking that the mess of the world be unmessed. All of existence (including “the natural”) needs revolution. We are asking for a total make-over of the universe, beginning with the little kingdoms we seek to build and keep in order.

To ask that the will of God be done on earth is to acknowledge that there are many wills, innumerable imperatives, vast arenas of determinative forces that seek to define and shape the life that lives on earth. God’s will is not the only one present. Our deepest longing is for a righteousness that grows out of consent. The God to whom we pray has the might and power to transform the universe in a single word, overruling and subduing all the unruly wills that assert themselves against his Kingdom. On the one hand, we pray that the final, dramatic day will come when those not submitting voluntarily will finally be restrained and removed from the field of action. On the other hand, we are asking for more time from God for his will to be embraced without coercion, without domination.

The Kingdom is already present in a partial, gentle, humble form. The message and meaning

³⁵⁴ Nolland, *Matthew*: “The best suggestion seems to be that the third petition encompasses the scope of the first two, unifying their respective present and future orientations by focussing on the common central thread: that in a comprehensive way people should come to act in conformity to the will of God.” (p. 288).

of the Kingdom are present in the words of Jesus and his apostles. Yet words can be ignored. Words can be manipulated. Words can be rejected. Words can be resisted. Nonetheless, people can listen and be persuaded, giving over their will in favor of the will of God. In this request we pray that the will of God may be known, understood, treasured, and embraced on earth as it is in heaven. In this small way the Kingdom will already come for people who embrace the word of the Kingdom, believing in a world of the Kingdom yet to come.

Either we say to God, “Thy will be done,” or God says to us, “Thy will be done.”³⁵⁵ We are praying for ourselves and our compatriots to say the former. We pray for this because we have discovered how strong, subtle and stubborn is our own will. Since Eden there is within us a will to have our own way. It dresses up in a thousand disguises, some of them as dramatic as a Cardinal or Pope’s hat; others as simple as an expressionless face. It is not a matter of how pious we are or how observant of social etiquette. This is not an issue of conformity or nonconformity. The person acting out can be less rebellious against God than the quiet person who acts in. This cuts across the cantankerous and the caring, the drug addict and the disciplined, the successful and the failure.

There is within us a will to will that will have its way, no matter what. We expel it from our psyche only to have it reenter seven times more powerful. God is not impressed with the whispers of prayer or the shouts of infidelity. God seeks those who will one thing, those who are pure in heart.

The ancients saw the world as strictly controlled by a deterministic fate. Humans were like dogs hitched to a cart, going downhill. Either the dogs run ahead of the cart or it runs over them. The Stoic proverb was: The willing are led by fate; the unwilling are dragged by it.³⁵⁶

This is not the meaning of this petition. It is not the Christian version of submission to inexorable fate, the drug of the devout in despair over the vast powers beyond their control. Fatalism is not the world view of Jesus or the Christian tradition. The prayer begins with an acknowledgement that the prime reality of this world is a loving God who can be intelligibly addressed and who has addressed us. This is a prayer that what God has shown to be his will will now be done.

This is not the quest for that will. The divine will has already been displayed in the Torah and the Prophets. Jesus has come to fulfill the will of God as expressed in the written oracles of the Hebrew Scripture. It is an acknowledgement that God’s will is not fate or an iron will that cannot be resisted or rejected. Were it fate, there would be little sense in such a petition.

We pray for the doing of God’s will because the resistant wills are not ignorant. We do not come to life without some sense, even if repressed, of that will. In all his unknowness, God is known and so is God’s will. There is in every culture a witness to the true and living God. Our problem is not that we do not know something of God’s will. It is that we do not act upon what we know. We assert our own autonomy or allow ourselves to be diverted from God’s wise ways because of our conformity to some other will.

On the passive side, submission means acquiescence. There are painful and troubling things that come into our lives (disease, tragedy, disappointment). We say “Yes” to God in the middle of them. Like a great flood, they sweep over our plans and hopes, our freedoms and rights. We

³⁵⁵ Lewis, C. S. (2001). *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (p. 75). New York: HarperOne.

³⁵⁶ Cleanthes of Assos, *Hymn to Zeus* found in Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 53; Seneca, *Epistles*, cvii, 11. This fifth line is not found in Epictetus.

are carried in a great current to places we did not wish to go. We may have little idea what they are “about.” We cannot rationalize them as instructors to lead us to God, for they wear the face of destruction and death. We know they will vanish in the coming New World. Yet we must say “Yes” to God even there.

On the active side, submission means active living. There are unrealized possibilities, futures that we can imagine and partially realize, degrees of additional freedom and justice, plans and goals that comport well with the coming Kingdom of God. We are not plankton, floating immobile upon a vast sea, carried whither the currents flow. We are people, able to remake nature and history, capable of startling expansions of fruitful and faithful response-ability. We are made to respond in a covenant-based world. We have more freedom than we dream. We can have more space and time to respond to God if we want it.

To ask that God’s will be done on earth is to ask that we be made into responsive, response-able keepers of the will of God. To that end we are like building contractors. God gives us the plans and materials. We are to build lives of activity that are grounded on the one foundation of Jesus Christ. In every age and every culture, the foundation is the same. The building varies because each of us is given differing energy levels, social channels, psychological temperaments, cultural arrangements and technological trajectories. What God asks of us is faithful creativity in continuing the unended story of Jesus and the Church on its way to the New Jerusalem.

What then is required of us by this petition? It is the faith that says the impossible is possible with God. In this world the will of God may be done, as rapidly, as readily, as resolutely, as radically as it is done in heaven. The heavenly pattern is not an unrealizable ideal, floating impossibly above human capabilities. It may seem so to us who have grown so accustomed to the ordinary modes of life on earth. Jesus’ understanding of the Law appears to us incredibly naive and unnatural. We may well imagine Jesus is simply giving us an ideal, far enough ahead to keep us striving and thus progressing all our lives. This petition puts an end to such a notion. It is something to be done, not just sought after. But not done without the help of God. But with the benefits and power of God done here and now as it is already done in heaven. We are response-able by what God makes available to each disciple.

This prayer indicates that we are never willingly to become an inter-twined, inward-looking community of faith.³⁵⁷ Jesus teaches us to pray for more than God’s will to be done in me, or in my Church community or para-Church organization. The will of God is for the earth: all God’s creation, all spheres of human life, all eras of earthly history, all peoples and cultures. This is a missionary prayer, encompassing the whole world. Its concern is more than “ecclesiastical.” The whole of the earth is under God’s care and gaze.

We ask that the today of heaven will be the tomorrow of the earth. Until now there is a division between earth and heaven. However much the seen and unseen of creation are bound together, there is a difference. In the unseen world of heavenly powers, the will of God is embraced and enacted. There is no place in heaven for the unruly powers of autonomous wills.

Only on earth do we find the strange world where God is a stranger in his own creation. Only on earth do we find voices seeking to drown out the voice of God. Only on earth do we find the deathly destruction of futility. “Earthly” has come to mean corrupted, finite, disappointing, short-sighted, destined for death. “Heavenly” has come to mean the height of delight, wondrous,

³⁵⁷ The exception to the rule is where the church finds itself persecuted on all sides and must lock its doors for safety or meet at night as a “banned” movement as was the case in the early Church.

perfect, the exquisitely desirable. But from the beginning it was not so. The earth was the very world pronounced good and blessed by God.

This prayer is asking that God not abandon the earth. What the New Testament reinforces is the revelation that the earth is the goal of God's redemptive work. The earth and the heavens are to be renewed. The New Jerusalem is located on this earth. The fact that this world is to be renewed lies at the heart of our current care for it. We cannot be like some Christians who take the eventual re-making of the earth as permission to trash it now. They have no right from God to take inordinate amounts of its treasures, supposing we are in the last generation to use this one.

In praying for the supply of our essential needs today ("Give us this day our daily bread"), we cannot make room for our greed. All of this prayer is for us, not simply for me and mine. So, we want the earth to be preserved in good condition for however many generations come after us—for our children's children for generations to come. We do not hasten the coming of Christ by polluting and impoverishing the earth. We are not like Marxists who stimulate revolution by creating the misery they claim they wish to alleviate. The will of God is to be done on this earth. So, we seek to move it closer to the garden of Eden.

That God's will is done in heaven is a signal to us that there is more history than our own here below the heavenlies. There is a whole world of activity, invisible to us—cherubim and seraphim, angels and archangels, saints dead and now alive unto God. There are spirits and powers good and evil. God's love is there received and responded to in the full knowledge of his holy being and glory. There his will is carried forward by the heavenly hosts. We ask that we may be a visible, earthly co-participant in the service of God.

In addressing the Pharisees (Matt 23:23) Jesus tells them there were three things they neglected: faith, justice and mercy. If we ask what the will of God is here on earth, we can do no better than let Jesus teach us. He does so in the Sermon on the Mount. God's will is to live according to this Sermon. If we will one will with the Father, then we say his will is the blessing of the poor in spirit, the meek and mourning, those hungry for justice, the merciful and pure in heart. It is God's will that the influence of his disciples increases (as salt and light), that we live with one another according to a very different code of commands than legalism or self-interest, that we be religious in ways that seek rewards only from the Father in secret. It is the will of God that we live according to

1. **Faith** in the capability, compassion and sanctity of God as our Father.
2. **Divine justice.** Our hunger for righteousness will be sated only with the coming Kingdom of God. Now we must be satisfied with small realizations of that righteousness as we live and build communities based upon the teachings of Christ.
3. **Love and mercy.** In the end, love coves a multitude of sins. We will fall short in our faith and our human righteousness. We must treat one another with love and mercy.

[3e] Give us this day our daily bread.

Now we move from the beginning and center of prayer to its middle and end. In both we have what ought to structure our coming to God—what fills our vision and sets the center of what we ask from God. We pray in a theocentric fashion and in a way that encompasses the whole earth. Now we begin to pray for some specifics, for resources we need to do God's will on earth. We are not heavenly beings. We need bread, forgiveness, protection and deliverance.

The prayer begins with our Father in heaven. He is one so majestic and glorious that the

Matthew 6:10 "Your will be done on earth"

greatest accomplishment is the hallowing of his person and reality. Then it asks that the heavenly God will bring his rule and reign into our history—and that even on earth his will shall actually be done. It brings heaven down to earth. Now the prayer turns to what earthly existence requires for us to participate and promote God's name, kingdom and will.

What we need does not come to us automatically. It is not more spiritual or authentic not to pray about these matters, as if we would be presumptuous. One might say: "Who am I to tell God how to run his show? Who knows better than God what I need?" Yet this confuses issues. After all, prayer is not commanding God to do something (it is "your will be done," not "Do your will"). We bring a request, knowing that God may give us better than our ignorance asks. Also, we come because we desire communion and communication with God, not just the gifts and grace God grants. Prayer is more than coming to a divine lottery hoping for the jackpot. It is no less than acknowledging our dependence upon God in all dimensions of our being. Yet it is more than the sum of all our requests for God to supply what we need.

There are other sources offering to meet our needs. In the short run, they may appear to have better prospects than God's provision. After all, saints starve to death just as quickly as the impious. Jesus wants us to be sure that, if and when bread is not given, God is the withholder. We can form alliances with the world, back up our dependence upon God with numerous provisos and fall back positions. Faust made a pact with the devil and paid for it dearly.

In a world where Christian faith has space and cultural acceptability our danger is transforming faith into the assets of status, power and wealth. In such a comfortable world Jesus told his disciples their religious practices had better be rooted in a secret life of piety and passion for God. There are other worlds, worlds of hostility and persecution for Christian faith. In them the danger is to have nothing but a secret life of piety and passion for God. We are Christians privately, but in public our commitment is hidden and silenced. Then we adopt a dual life again. In the case of comfortable worlds, we can tend to be darkness in private and "light" in public. Where the world is hostile, we can become light in private and "darkness" in public.

So, we begin by asking that God provide our daily bread. That God frequently and habitually provides it by the work of our own hands does not deny that it is God who provides. We are asking that whatever the means, whatever the context, whatever the provision, God be our source and resource. We can act on our own, in our own wisdom, for our own advancement. We can claw and crawl our way to the top of the economic mountain and there plant a religious flag when God has had nothing to do with the climb.

In asking this and accepting the answer that comes, we cannot look at any plate or any meal without thanksgiving and gladness. There before us again and again and again is testimony that God is pleased to feed us. In feeding us God is demonstrating his will that we continue with time and energy to be a part of doing his will on this earth. We need not wonder whether there is yet more God wants us to be and do. The meal before us is a clear "Yes" from God.

Yet we must also say that an empty plate for one who walks closely with God is equally a "Yes." In asking for bread for today (and tomorrow), we cannot suppose God forgets us ever. If we trust God and hallow his reality, then we must believe that all we need to do his will is present and available. Jesus was hungry in the wilderness for forty days. Nevertheless, God was with him, sufficiently and abundantly. We bring the request. God gives the answer.

There is a prayer used in Latin America that is relevant here: "O God, give bread to those who hunger and to those with bread a hunger for justice."

What we envisage in the promises of God is a world of plenty, of peace, of participation in the

Matthew 6:11 "Give us our daily bread"

abundant life God desires for his creatures. Shalom means a wholeness and healthiness of identity and the ensemble of social relations. It is a world where there is enough for all and yet a world without dissolution, distortion or destructiveness. People are not proud, slothful or false. Shalom means life and living that is not riven with the distinctions of wealth and status.

God says to come and ask for what is essential for each day. There is so much that is superfluous, so much that can capture our time and energy, so much we can nourish ourselves with and no longer be healthy. We want the essential bread, necessary for us to be God-honoring, God-hallowing, Kingdom-expecting doers of the will of God here on earth. God offers us bread. We must not eat the raisin cakes offered us by the Evil one. How do we know the difference?

One test is whether the bread we receive decreases our sense of dependency upon God as the source of all good things. Having eaten, am I now less keenly aware of those who still hunger? Am I growing more and more comfortable with the status quo? Do I still see the homeless, hear the cries of mothers for their children, cry over the death and destruction of the senseless wars and civil conflicts? What are the effects of accepting the bread that is given to me?

There is more as well. In the households of abundance, we see additional dimensions of difficulty. Having enough unleashed the sorcerer's apprentice. Consumption becomes an addiction. Food and its eating shift dramatically. We now watch with horror the extremes of fast food and lavish gluttony. People wolf food down as though they now have bread but no time: no time for social pleasantries, for eating with others as an expression and deepening of relationship. Food is an interruption to the real business of life. (We will not speak of the complementary waste stream created by the elaborate packaging of take-out food in ecologically unfriendly ways)

Or we have the expensive and lavish gluttony of gormandizing elitism. Lavish, expensive banquets with enormous amounts of food become common—so much at times it cannot be finished. Our tables not only groan with the weight of food in settings of luxury, but our trash barrels burst with what is thrown out. The meaning of food becomes status. We subordinate even food to consumption of things as signs of our wealth and power. It is no longer bread we eat but our own status advertisements. Consumption becomes the measure of all things and bread is one of its partners.

None of this is due to God's superabundant answer to this prayer: Give us this day our daily bread. We have been given what is essential and much more besides. We have then turned the surplus into an ever-spiraling tower, reaching up to the heavens. It is not to reach God but to make a name for ourselves amid our fellow humans. The rarer, the more valued. The more expensive, the more desirable. The more blatant the display, the higher the status.

In asking God for what is essential, we are pledging ourselves to accept just that with gladness. We do not need to have more to be happy. We can receive nothing and still worship the God who gives and who takes away. We hallow God's name and accept his will without denying our responsibility or drowning in some fatalistic ideology. It is bread we need and bread we ask for. Not just for me and mine, but for all of us. If we do not come before God bringing the earth and all who live on it with us, we cannot return with the bread that is essential. If we return with bread and do not share it with our fellow earthlings, then it is no longer the bread of God.

[3f] Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

On earth we create indebtedness to one another and then find ourselves unable to remedy the debt. Some of these are financial. Others are matters of costs we cause to others because of our actions for which we cannot give proper restitution for the pain or damage we have inflicted.

Matthew 6:12 "Forgive us our debts"

Other debts are benefits received that we do not properly acknowledge or return with the thanksgiving or reciprocal benefit when our benefactors are in need.

We transgress the rights and dignity of others. We fall short of what is due to others from us. We are disloyal and indifferent. We do not render aid when we are able. We grasp our second and third loaf and do not share with those who have none. We refuse to go the first mile and require some minion of ours to go three miles for us. We slander and gossip a person's reputation away. We gladly receive the help of others and then cut the ground from under them when they need our help.

When we are made creditors by folly, stupidity, compulsion or chance, we are placed in the balances. What sort of person are we? Do we experience ourselves as the blessed of God? Do we know ourselves to have access to the Father over all the heavens and the earth, able to ask and receive the necessities for doing his will on earth? If we do, then we will be able to release others from debts to us. We need not keep close accounts with everyone, making sure that the balance sheet is even at the end of the day.

I remember my paternal grandmother, owner of thousands of acres of land by widow's rights. She possessed a beautiful home in Portland and assets well over half a million dollars. Yet she kept account of every penny one of her children might owe her, to the penny. She held onto all the land and assets until her death in her nineties, even though it limited their freedom for decades. She was not able to release her children to authentic freedom for fear they might no longer have need of her—or some strange event might occur, leaving her dependent upon them for support.

God releases us from all our debts to him and they are many. He does so in confidence that we come to him not simply because of his benefits, but because of his company. When we know that we are no longer in thralldom to God, no longer treated as a freedman whose whole future life is one large debt to the patron who released us, no longer subject to the recall of an almost infinite loan, then we understand something of what releasing us from our debts means. We do not stop coming to God because we continue to do things that betray our commitment and love of God and neighbor. The great debt of sin is removed by justification. God continues to remove the great debts of sins in response to continuing repentance and forgiveness. God does not dole out all his gift of grace in one lump sum. He gives it to us as we need it so that when we sin again, he acts graciously toward us again. Grace abounds where sin abounds, not to free us to sin even more but to provide room for us to learn to sin no more.

So why is the forgiveness of God connected so intimately with our releasing others from the debts they incur with us? There are several things involved here. One basic fact is that the person who is unforgiving has not yet entered empathetically into the forgiveness offered to him or her by another. To be able to see oneself as hopeless and helpless, as a cad and scoundrel, as an inflictor of unwarranted pain and damage is to start understanding the logic and necessity of forgiveness. It is to put oneself in the seat of humiliation and regret, to understand the undeserved nature of the gift of release from guilt and debt.

Another reason is that an authentic relationship with God entails alignment of our character and behavior with the nature of the relationship. Knowing God is a bit different from knowing other sorts of things. In this case knowledge means a growing likeness to the one we know. It is a contradiction in terms to speak of a cordial and deepening relationship between a forgiving God and an unforgiving person. In fact, part of coming to know God occurs in the process of knowing what it is like when we act in ways analogous to God's action. We know what forgiving means

when we forgive; what loving is like when we love; what covenant faithfulness is about when we are faithful. So, we ask forgiveness, not some cheap substitute because we know what forgiveness is.

What does this petition have to do with economics? Does this place the disciples on the side of the sabbatical year, on the side of loans to the needy even when the prospect for repayment is low? Have we spiritualized this (and the beatitudes) too readily and thoroughly? Are the debts we are to forgive more than the transgressions against us, but the financial transactions that have gone sour? Does this put a monkey wrench into the sorts of business dealings that the market system imposes upon us all?

We are back in the business of probing the Bible's social and cultural context that is left unstated. Our first task is to attempt to hear as clearly as possible what this prayer item might have meant as it was said and heard in the first century. We must remember that these were peasants first and foremost. They lived in a land where nearly all grew part, if not all, of their subsistence and traded in a limited market for additional goods.

More importantly Israel existed within a religious world view that grounded all wealth ultimately in the gifting of God in land and its riches. The possibilities of fertility and mineral abundance have to be exploited by human labor and ingenuity. Yet the final owner of it all is the God who made it and is redeeming it within the context of the sin of human beings.

Most explicitly, the land of Palestine was a gift to Israel as a covenanted people. It was part of the promise to Abraham. The extended families were the holders of inalienable land units. The whole socio-religious structure of the nation was built on these landed families. Institutions of pledging land and family members when famine or difficulty occurred remedied shortfalls for some when others had plenty. Ethical norms and laws made provision for ensuring that people did not fall permanently into debt slavery or landlessness.

Parts of everyone's land was left fallow so that all was fallowed in a seven-year cycle. This left something always that could be gleaned by the destitute. There were tithes for the poor. The Sabbath year release seems to have been a giving back (for at least one agricultural cycle) of the land held in pledge to those indebted. The produce from those lands would help regenerate the assets of the debtors. There was even the possibility that a well enough off creditor could simply wipe away the debt and reestablish a family in its original land, releasing the indebtedness.

The problems of debt, dispossession, and latifundism could undercut the viability of families, plunging men, women and children into landlessness, debt slavery and even banditry. Whether it was a spiral of economic difficulty that underlay the growth toward the revolt of 66 A.D. or some other fount of frustration is hard to determine. There is some indication that people felt the debt situation keenly. The Zealots burned the debt records in the Temple as one of the first actions of their own participation. Certainly, the words of Jesus about the greed and practices of even the devout Pharisees indicates tension over the handling of property and wealth.

So, we must ask what the meaning of this phrase indicates in this prayer. Does this have the double orientation toward spiritual and financial debts? We already know that Jesus does not normally give us the sort of literalistic rule. Or we might say that rules are not inflexible absolutes in the sense that we need do no more than memorize and follow them, no matter what the context is or who are the people involved. To give to everyone who asks does not require that we give the exact thing and however much of it we are asked. The law of prudence and love are not suspended when a child asks of us the sorts of things that we know will not genuinely aid but might even harm. So too, the notion of forgiving debts must be probed in such a way that its force

is clear—without diminishing its bite or intensifying its application while losing its scope.

Placing this prayer item in the context of Jesus' larger teachings, we can say that money and our actions regarding assets are spiritual issues. If we are hard bitten pursuers of wealth, unbending penny pinchers who wish to outdo others and never make room to release a person from their debt to us, we endanger our relationship with God. In whatever way this request applies to money and property and our relationships with others, we can only say, we have a lot of homework still to do on this one.

Bread and release from the errors of our ways are two essentials. We moderns have come to think that the bottom line of economics is the bottom line of life. It is bread, then croissants, then cake—then humans will usher themselves into the promised land of plenty. With physical security secure, then the additional needs of humans can be addressed and satisfied. But this is a confusion of reality since we have not so much a hierarchy of need as an intertwined, wholistic human being in which all these needs are critical. We experience them with differing degrees of explicitness and urgency. But none are needs without them being fundamental to the nature and outcomes of life.

What Walter Lüthi writes is insightful: the stomach

“has a stronger voice, so to speak, for it grumbles if it does not get bread; it has been given the warning voice of the watchdog. The soul, however, has a softer voice and therefore often goes unheard. The soul does not grumble; it can only sigh.”³⁵⁸

Such a sigh is enough to tell us that we die with bread only. People without a reason to live can have all the bread or cake they need and still die. People with unremedied guilt also kill parts of themselves and finally they are consigned to the “second” death. This too is just as real as the first death.

Here we are not making a psychological argument or observation, even though such analysis points in the right direction. We have the articulate witness of numerous greats in psychology who testify to the tremendous power of unrelieved guilt feelings within the human psyche. The fault lines of guilt are like enormous zones of destructive power, leveling energy, redirecting capabilities, crippling structures, distorting and destroying other emotions.

So powerful is guilt that several basic schools of psychology have tried to be rid of it by denying the reality of sin or objective moral standards. The problems associated with feeling guilty are so strong that we must be rid of them at any cost. Given emotivism in ethics and a reductionist psychology, it is easy to begin to tell people their guilt feelings have no basis in reality. They are illusions that can be dismissed. The highest good is self-enhancement, self-fulfillment. The only thing we need seek is the unfolding growth of a self-defined ego. The only sin is the sin that hinders such fulfillment.

We wind up with people who are social idiots and relational cripples. They self-analyze constantly and become articulate masters at rationalizing any and every relational disaster. Encouraging the very life-style Jesus teaches us is contrary to the design by which we were created, they are engaging in a broad experiment with the way that leads to death. We have more and more psychological wisdom and increasing divorce, hollow personalities and shallow relationships.

³⁵⁸ Quoted in J. M. Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1990) pp. 108-109.

To be sure there are psychologies that admit a distinction between true and false guilt. What is destructive is false guilt (feeling guilty when there is no violation of the true will or norms of God). What is destructive is the denial of true guilt (the guilt I feel because I have harmed myself and others by transgressing real moral boundaries). What is constructive is experiencing the release from true guilt through the process of authentic forgiveness. What is constructive is learning to forgive others when they have inflicted unfair pain or damaged the goods of our life without adequate reason. There are psychologies that help us immensely with these distinctions and tasks. Such can be skillful accompaniments of spiritual growth.

We need to receive bread and forgiveness; we need to give bread and forgiveness. None of these transactions can be taken for granted. Jesus teaches us their importance. Jesus also lifts our eyes from a purely human or earthly level to the higher realities of God's involvement in these matters. We need to know that God is part and parcel of giving us bread and asking that we pray for others to be fed as well. We need to know that God's forgiveness is as basic in our personality as the process by which we forgive others (including ourselves).

[3g] Lead us not into temptation

This is the sixth petition we bring to God. Temptation comes more frequently and more powerfully when we are without bread and without the giving or receiving of forgiveness. Yet it is not absent when those are present. Different forms of temptation come our way. In some ways the temptation of the right hand can be more subtle and dangerous than the temptation of the left.

Luther (and others) distinguished between temptation that comes in our weakness (our left hand) and in our strength (our right).³⁵⁹ When we are sick, hungry, cold, and discouraged during failure or tragedy, we may hear the loud voices telling us God does not care and does not feel our trouble. When we are despised or persecuted, when our plans fail and we are disappointed in rejection, then we may nurture the root of bitterness. We may envy those who seem to succeed. We may question our calling and even our existence. We may be tempted to self-loathing and questioning of the reality of God. This is the tale of Job.

When we succeed and find ourselves in a privileged and comfortable position, then we may hear the quiet whispers that harden our heart. When fame and fortune fall into our lap, when good health and good community surround us, then we are tempted to forget God and despise those who are afflicted. We are prone to become self-centered, preoccupied with our own persona and purse-strings. We can become world weary and our joy turn into boredom or nihilism. This is the story of Koheleth (Ecclesiastes).

What we pray for here and in the following and seventh request is that we be free from sin. Temptation and the evil that comes from embracing the enticement to sin produce the great rift between earth and heaven. The poison at the center of human life is not that it is fleshly and embodied, i.e., material. The Greek diagnosis that the nub of our trouble lay in the entanglement with a material world is wrong. Rather the heart of our damnation comes from what we make of our unique blend of body and spirit. Temptation comes as powerfully from our "higher self" as it does from our "animality." We are divine-like creatures loose in a wondrous world of beauty and possibility. We find (sometimes to our own horror) that we despoil creation and squander the days we are given.

³⁵⁹ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 42. (p. 72).

The way in which this petition addresses the issue of temptation is striking. Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the Evil One. This sermon teaches the disciples to pray that they not be led into temptation. That raises questions in our minds. Why is Jesus led by the Spirit into temptation? Is this a special case or does this request recognize that God does this sort of unusual thing while acknowledging our unreadiness for temptation? Just as we may ask God for our daily necessities and not receive them as part of God's redemptive purposes for us and the world, so we may ask God not to be led to temptation, only to have it happen. Is this the sort of dialectic present in this very request?

One thing we may be sure of. The armor we need for the struggle of temptation is already provided in this prayer. Whatever we need to face the tests of the right or left hand, the tests that come from our fellow humans and God, the allures placed before us by the Evil One—whatever we need is already advanced to us in this prayer.

1. We are not alone. Whenever we pray or face various testings of our character or relationships, there are other Christians—and Christ himself—present. This whole prayer is given in the plural person.

2. Knowing the reality of God as Father means we encounter nothing that is beyond his care and knowledge. There is no power, no force or element we face that stands higher than our Father in heaven.

3. We should come to temptation from many days and years of hallowing God's name. Attending to God's signs of his reality in the Bible and knowing God's person equips us with faith.

4. Seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness gives us singleness of heart and hope.

5. By experience we will prove what is the good and perfect will of God and do it.

6. Our bodily destiny is placed in God's hands. We ask and accept only the bread he gives to us.

7. God's forgiveness gives us a holy boldness, knowing already the worst about ourselves we will not fear to venture into difficult or challenging realms. We are able to forgive others, even our enemies.

We are still left with the question of the force of this request, especially as we look at James and Paul as interpreters and appliers of the words of Jesus. Furthermore, if we listen to the petition at its face value in English, it appears to present us with a contradiction. The word "temptation" or "test" has the two possible references: to entice to do evil or to place under stress to demonstrate and further strengthen some quality. The first is something we are told God never does. The latter is something we see God doing all the time through redemptive history, beginning with the tree in the Garden of Eden.

The tension in our thinking then runs along these lines. We need not pray that God does not lead us into places where we are enticed to do evil. God never does that. We know God does lead us (even his unique Son) into places where our loyalty and faith are put to the test of their authenticity and strength. So, what reason would there be to ask God not to do what we see him doing repeatedly for the good of his people?

Some have distinguished between the normal, everyday sorts of temptation that assault us all—testings of our moral character that are endurable and for which there are escapes provided

Matthew 6:12 "Lead us not into temptation"

by the graciousness of God. Paul speaks of this. In contrast this petition (they say) is about the great Eschatological tribulation, the trial so great that if it were not shortened all would perish. What we are taught to pray is that we be spared that horrific event.

Others say that what we have here is clarified only when we look at the verb “to lead” (eispherein). The force of the word is “to enter into.” One place it is used by Jesus is in his words to the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane where he tells them “Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation.” It is used of “entering” the Kingdom of God. So, the force of the verb has to do with participation in or falling victim to something. It is not the simple matter of finding oneself along a path where there is a solicitation. Solicitations to evil will come every day. What this is asking is that God protect us along the way that we not be caught by the claws of tempting invitations. We are asking that we not conform or correspond to the reality of temptation.

This second clarification makes more sense of the passage than the eschatological interpretation. While it is true that we may well seek to be spared the great trials and tribulations of the end times, this prayer does not seem so focused eschatologically. Rather the great priority need of daily bread here and now and the more profound need of forgiveness for things in the past is complemented with the need for guidance and deliverance in the future. Knowing what forgiveness entails, the costliness of releasing us from the debt we incur before God, we pray here that we may have God’s help so that we need not come for forgiveness so frequently or for such disloyalties as we have in the past.

We are taught not to be so foolish as to think that our association with Christ as disciple and our knowledge of God’s standards will bring us to perfection. Nor to think that the gracious forgiveness of God permits us to live in such a cavalier or flippant manner as to say with the last words of Heinrich Heine: “God must forgive me. That’s his job.”³⁶⁰ Sin is so serious a matter that we must not only ask for forgiveness, we must put ourselves in the hands of God lest sin spoil us again and again. We don’t simply want the debt removed. We want the reasons for our indebtedness to be removed.

When Shakespeare’s Macbeth was incited by the witch’s prophecy of future greatness, it was because there lay within his character the possibility of temptation. He was a successful young man with great fires of ambition already kindled within. Her words inflamed him because the fires were earlier lit within. What life makes of us is largely dependent upon what life finds within us.³⁶¹

Jesus recognizes this and gives us this protecting petition. We are not asking that temptation will be removed. That will not happen as we live in a world that needs prayers that acknowledge God’s name, kingdom and will. Nor will our interior suddenly be completely pure and perfected. We are asking that the confluence between ourselves and temptation may be such that God keeps us from falling into sin.

[3h] But rescue us from the evil (one).

This is the climax of the prayer. In many ways this explains everything that precedes it. We are in a world under thralldom. There is a power of evil afoot that is stronger than our own puny

³⁶⁰ “Gott wird mir verzeihen, das ist sein Beruf.”

³⁶¹ Macbeth’s inner ambition makes him vulnerable to the witch’s prophecy and the urging on of Lady Macbeth to commit the murder essential to seizing power. Banquo hears the prophecy and is equally ambitious for his sons but his morality guards him from pursuing his goal at such high cost.

strength, wiser than our deepest intellect, subtler than the most clever among us. Our Father in secret is not fooled by the calm exteriors we show one another. He knows the desperate situation we find ourselves in.

If we are met constantly by temptations that are common to one and all, we are faced by a tempter who is most uncommon. He quotes Scripture with more facility than we. He presents himself as easily as an angel of light as a power of darkness. He dresses enticements to evil in a thousand costumes, each more attractive than the one before. If he cannot catch us by anti-religious enlightenment, he will catch us with a most highly religious revelation. If we are unresponsive to goodness, he will offer us the vilest forms of wickedness. There is no pose, no hypocrisy, no necessity, no ruse below him.

There is a mystery of personality here. The devil is not a personification of evil, a contamination of Persian sensibilities, snuck in during the exile of Israel. Jesus' encounter with the demonic was not simply a mythological imagination at work amid a pre-modern superstitious world view. However, we make sense of the mystery of iniquity, we will find ourselves bumping up again and again against something that acts with personal agency not simply reacts with impersonal necessity to our acts.

In praying for deliverance, we are asking for more than the quenching of our inner embers that temptation can blow into raging fires. We are asking that God will bring about the decisive defeat of Satan in human affairs. Only then will God's name be truly hallowed, his Kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Only then will all have bread fairly and freely. Only then will forgiveness penetrate so deeply that none will need say to the other, "Forgive me. I have sinned."

At the heart of the resistance to God is something more than our individual or corporate rebellion against God. There is something prior to our own decision to exist apart from God. It does not excuse our own choice or orientation against God. But it admits that we are not alone in the universe. If we are the makers of our destiny, we do not do it on our own or in a vacuum of pure freedom. We are not only limited by the finitude God built into us in creation, but by the ferociousness of a fallen beast, roaming about in human affairs seeking whom he may devour. The inner smirk of sin is matched by an outer hiss of the ancient serpent of the garden.

The deliverance we pray for is couched in the plural: deliver us. This is not looking for an escape hatch out of a bad situation, leaving the rest to face evil by themselves. In this case we ask, as we do for bread, for a good for us all. In this sense this is an eschatological prayer, looking forward to the outworking of God's program of redemption to its uttermost. We hope for the day when there will be no need to turn over the stones of our path to discover what dark and strange things crawl thereabout. It is a prayer focused not just on "me" but "us." We are in this together.

One day God will banish the presence of the evil one and all those aligned with him. One day evil people, evil circumstances, evil thoughts will march off the stage of history into the strange world of separateness from God and goodness. It is not true that we need evil to have good. Good is not a sort of binary equal of evil, any more than darkness is the equal of light. Evil is an absence of goodness, a parasite without substance apart from the powers of goodness. The very energies and intelligence of evil are borrowed from the goodness of God's creation. So, the more basic reality is good, not evil.

What then do we make of this petition? It is asking that we find real rescue when temptation overtakes us and the evil one has us in his grasp. Then it is too late for us to pray not to fall victim to temptation. Then we can only pray that we will be snatched out of it by a power and wisdom

Matthew 6:13 "Deliver us from evil"

far greater than our great immortal enemy. This prayer begins in heaven and ends in hell. It tells us we need to pray for escape from the cosmic final solution. Our struggle is more than bread for the body or forgiveness for our social relations. It is against powers of evil that transcend our imagination.

The tag end, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory,” seems most definitely not original. It is an addition from later scribes, providing an appropriate close to this prayer. In teaching others to pray and in praying standard prayers, some such model prayers were left unfinished. The notion was that following the model prayer, worshippers would add their own petitions and finish off with whatever praise they might add. This was known as a “seal” (Heb. *hatima*). It may have been that Jesus gave a prayer with an unfinished “seal” ending. This doxology at its end was added when the prayer was used frequently by Christians in worship, thus providing a fixed “seal.”

What it does suggest is a trinitarian echo—as might the petitions. This is certainly a God-centered prayer, beginning with the agenda and person of God. In this way it undercut the selfishness of those who prayed for effect, who used prayer for fulfilling themselves or accomplishing social ends through spiritual means. It also undercut the meaningless repetition of some pagan practices by a thoughtful simplicity that covers the whole of human life and God’s redemptive purposes.

God the Creator provides us with the resources for our food. God the Son entered human history to provide us with the forgiveness of eternal mercy. God the Spirit indwells and leads us so that we are triumphant in the temptations that come and are delivered from the Evil One. The doxology celebrates this one: The God whose Kingdom comes in Jesus Christ; the Son into whose hands all power has been given; the Spirit who will reveal the glory of the godhead in the ages to come.

It is striking in this regard that we see Jesus praying and fasting in the wilderness. We do not see him giving alms. It is also striking that we do not have fasting commanded. It is assumed that there will be voluntary fasting and probably fasting on the day of Atonement by the Jewish Christians. Almsgiving and prayer are repeatedly urged upon us as essential habits for discipleship.

If we compare the three practices in terms of what we are taught about them, prayer is given the most detailed instruction. Whether this reflects importance or our own tendencies, we cannot say. Jesus gives us a model prayer—and then we have examples of his prayers, those of the Apostles and the prayers found in such abundance in the Hebrew scriptures. It is as though we cannot share resources or fast properly unless we know how to pray properly. Prayer is not substitute for these other practices. But it is the core practice that informs all others.

Its climax in the deliverance from the Evil One is a warning as well as an encouragement. Prayer can become a sort of spiritual onanism. We can turn practices that relate to a life of service into the extremes of professional spiritual virtuosity. The teaching of these habits of piety are set within struggles to live life in ordinary circumstances. It is hardly likely that Jesus envisaged the sorts of Olympian separation and discipline informing extremes of monasticism and eremiticism. We do not avoid being led into temptation by multiplying the spiritual practices so we are engaged in them 24/7. We can err by making piety public performance or by staying in our prayer closet and never coming out.

We pray, fast and give because we sense our constant need for empowering, guidance, and discipline when we seek to live the super-abundant righteousness Jesus gives to us in this

Matthew 6:13 “Lead us not into temptation”

sermon. Without the connection with everyday living, they make as much sense as building body strength but never using it for anything but to build more body strength.

These are not self-referencing practices. Giving relates to the genuine needs of others. Praying is grappling with God for the material, spiritual and moral realities that face us in a god-denying world. Fasting disciplines us as we concentrate on keeping first things first.

[3i] Comment on forgiveness

Tagging the end of this prayer is a reinforcing comment on the connection between God's forgiveness and our forgiving others. This places real forgiveness for real harm at the center of the communication and concourse between us and God.

There are no addendum or qualifications here. God does not ask of us "reasonable" forgiveness, for the minor infractions of everyday life. This is not about being congenial and easy to get along with others as people who "forgive" the petty frictions of life. This is not about the annoyances of a person starting too slowly to allow me to get through the traffic intersection before the light turns red or the spouse who does not clean up the sink after using it. This is not about the small slights of relationship such as when a person can't remember your name or does not notice that you have tidied up after them when it wasn't your turn. This is not about being a good sport when your team lost or being gracious when you came in second (but thought you were clearly first in the competition). These are not "forgiving" matters. They are matters to "overlook."

This is about dealing with those who "sin" against you. What do we do as disciples when people persecute us, jail us unjustly, send bullets through our front window or torch our home? The persons we must forgive in this sermon are already present. They are people who dispossess us of our property, who slander and ridicule us. They misuse us by taking advantage of our compassion and charity. They are the persons who insult and humiliate us, labelling us fools and destroying our dignity in public.

He or she is a spouse who commits adultery and violates the center of the vows of marriage. Without forgiveness Jesus' command against divorce would be a cruel and draconian measure. Without forgiveness the death of marriage is ensured. Without it there never is admission of guilt or the healing of the wound and reestablishment of trust. Marriage is filled with minor and major sins and can survive only when the heart of what is communicated and shared is forgiveness. Forgiveness is needed when people leverage our honesty against us. Knowing that our yes is yes and no is no means that people can build strategies to our disadvantage. It is needed when we are betrayed by those who have pledged loyalty and service to our needs.

It is needed when people infringe on our rights. Without forgiveness we will not continue to be positively oriented in our relationships with those who unfairly burden us. Jesus has asked of his disciples that they live by the principle of positive goodness and generosity. Their goals are not getting the most for the least or reaching the top whatever the price. Their goals are peacemaking, showing mercy, retaining purity of heart. They are not touchy or defensive about their honor. They do not hug their minimum or basic needs as essential to their lives. They are not stingy with their helpfulness, even toward the oppressor overlords. They are not calculating in their financial dealings with their needy neighbors. All of these will work only when surrounded by the spirit of forgiveness because of how others will continue to live.

Jesus has also required of us that we love our enemy. He asks of us: "What more do you do than others?" What difference does our supposed commitment to Christ make? If we forgive only

those things pagans forgive, what changes can we demonstrate because of our redemption?

Forgiveness is a form of mercy. It is a voluntary sacrificing of our own rights in the relationship. It is giving up our demands for redress, for the balancing of the scales. We have been damaged and hurt and we react with an instinctive demand for justice and retribution. It is a stepping out of the world of rights and law and a stepping into the world of mercy.

Forgiveness is also a giving of notice: a demand that the person who has inflicted wrong confront the wrong and the pain inflicted. It is a revealing to the other the nature of their action. It is a healing of ourselves from the bitterness we are tempted to feel. It is not a condoning of injustice or a denial of the damage such wrong does. It is an ending of its power over us.

Forgiveness is practicing the presence of God. It is the way we get to understand experientially and deeply what God lives out toward us every day. It is the way other humans begin to sense what God wishes to be toward them in grace. Forgiveness is a small coming of the Kingdom of God to earth.

(c) Matthew 6:16-18; Righteousness and Fasting – “Those who mourn.”

Fasting is the third practice of religious piety that forms the trilogy of matters Jesus addresses in this part of the Sermon. Righteousness involves our religious practices toward our needy neighbor, toward God and toward the presence and power of sin within and around us. Fasting fits into righteousness as one of the tools and signs of our hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This is likely the “strangest” item since fasting is no longer a common religious practice in modern middle class Christian America and Europe. Some folks can only think of it as a way to try to lose weight. But it can be an expression of grief over our sin and the sins of the world and a hunger for righteousness; or an expression of such a deep preoccupation with something (such as a crisis) that we forgo eating for a time to give ourselves to prayer and seeking God; or an act of solidarity with the hungry of the world; or an act of spiritual discipline, to confront a weakness in our character and break some controlling power. We see examples of it in the Old Testament and in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament (Luke 2:36-38; 4:1-2; Mark 9:29; Acts 13:2).

In fasting we follow the example of Jesus who fasted in the wilderness. But we fast first and foremost as an expression of our unworthiness to continue to live in our sinful condition and sinning ways. We fast as sinners, unlike Jesus. As Barth puts it:

“Fasting expresses man’s knowledge of his unworthiness to live, his readiness to suffer the death which he has merited for his sins, and therefore the radical nature of his repentance.”³⁶²

When we peer into the Old Testament, we find only one fast commanded in the cycle of Israel’s life. That is a fast connected with the Day of Atonement. It functioned as a dramatization and signal of the seriousness with which Israel was to take sin and the atoning for sin. The prophet Joel calls the religious leadership to fast and put on “sackcloth” (a very public sign of fasting): see Joel 1:13-14; cf. Joel 2:12, Jonah 3:5. This is an indication that “public” fasting is not banned by Jesus. Community-wide or ministry-wide fasting is a legitimate sort of public fasting and all Jesus is concerned with is the self-serving individual who is seeking his or her own enhanced reputation by advertising their individual practice.

Fasting can be from things other than food (such as from social media, alcohol, music etc.).

³⁶² *CD, IV.1* (p. 260).

One of the things fasting does is to help us develop self-awareness (of things that have come to control or distract us) and self-control (sometimes our congeniality is simply a full stomach and comfortable circumstances, which, when removed reveals a short-tempered, self-absorbed person underneath). Not everyone can fast from food (due to medical or health conditions). Fasting acts as a divine magnet in my life, bringing weaknesses to the surface. Fasting shows me what I genuinely rely on for my sense of happiness and peace of mind.

There are numerous other occasions when we see fasting: when a person is grieving for a grave personal loss such as the death of someone close; when Israel is facing national crisis and potential tragedy; when a person was in a difficult and uncertain situation and seeking a decision from the King that would have major impact on God's people. In many cases prayer is the partner of fasting. Together they express the deep sense that God needs to intervene, protect, deliver or restore his people. Nothing is more important—not eating, not working, not planning, not celebrating. It is the dramatic gesture saying to God: "Take this matter seriously, O Lord. Come and act on our behalf."

In the New Testament people and groups fast as preparation for intense periods of ministry or testing. Fasting is also part of discerning God's will. The Pharisees and others engaged in repeated fasting as an ongoing discipline in the face of the humiliation of Israel under Roman dominance. They felt the threat to Israel's ways so seriously that they took up fasting weekly, not just annually.

Fasting concentrates our energy and attention on the specific issue being addressed. It removes us from the ordinary routine. It places us in a time where we experience a heightened awareness of the world and ways of God. It is a doorway into the reality of the preeminence of God's world over the visible world in which we live. In fasting we confront the reality of the power our appetites and connections with the world have over us. We are prone to self-deception, to illusory and unreliable opinions about our own commitments to God and goodness. Fasting strips us of some of those falsehoods.

Jesus' again attacks the turning of this part of a righteous life into a means for social status or ecclesiastical recognition. When fasting becomes a means for achieving status honor, it loses its ability to function properly within a righteous life. It becomes an instrument of unrighteousness and hypocrisy. It no longer is something the Father (who sees what we are and do in secret) rewards. Whatever rewards might be connected with fasting are terminated in the positive experience of social accolades.

What Jesus asks is that we take measures to minimize the awareness others have that we are fasting. Our fasting is to be oriented toward our unseen Father in heaven, not the "fathers and mothers" who see us here on earth. Fasting is to be concerned with the honor of God's name, with the coming of his Kingdom, with the doing of his will—not with the building of our name and kingdom or the triumph of our will.

Fasting gets us in touch with those who have no bread and sensitizes us to ways we may share our surplus with them. Fasting clarifies our sense of sin and the profound need for forgiveness in human affairs. Fasting prepares us for the struggle against the evil one and the allurements of temptation. We will recognize more vividly when we are being allured into a false pleasure or attitude.

Jesus does not prescribe times or frequencies of fasting. When we see Jesus fasting and praying, it is in the power of the Spirit, not by the pattern of the Pharisees. As with the Sabbath, there is a new freedom, a new attitude, a new purpose. Fasting is no longer a mark of distinction

from the irreligious. It is no longer a regularized routine meant to ensure that more than the law requires is accomplished. While Jesus is present with his disciples on earth, fasting is rare. Only after his death and resurrection is it more common.

Once again, Jesus shows that the key thing is our God-centeredness in our acts of religious piety. We are not to become so spiritually self-conscious or self-centered that God becomes another “consumable”—something we process as part of our own spiritual self-fulfillment.

Repeatedly in all three of these religious practices, we find the issue of “impression management” emerging. Erving Goffman makes us keenly aware of how much human social interaction is grounded in the presentation of self.³⁶³ People are negotiating a definition of the situation with audiences—and in that process a definition of themselves.

Jesus tells us God is not subject to this same sort of impression management. He does not stand with a stop watch, timing our prayers. He does not have a calculator, adding up the sum of the wealth we give to worthy causes. He is not impressed by how great or many are the pains we feel when undertaking various fasts or other disciplines for spiritual ends. We cannot play a role and secure the applause of God because of our eloquence or talent in carrying out such a role better than the average slob.

Our problem is that our fellow humans—religious or otherwise—are subject to such presentation. They are impressed by the timbre of our voice, the gravity of our demeanor, the length and extremity of our spirituality. Jesus’ warning is as clear in this arena as it is about the connection of anger and murder. There is nothing deadlier to the vitality and validity of our relationship with God than our lust for recognition spiritually.

To be religious for effect is no longer to draw near to God. When we begin to ask how some line of action, some set of words, some planned program will play in the pews or in the press, we no longer are in touch with the Spirit of Christ. This is not to say there is no divine prudence or heavenly wisdom. God’s fools are not to be damn fools. At issue is the motivating drive behind the desire to be all things to all people. If it is part and parcel of a passion to bring people to faith, to the life of righteousness and to mercy, then it follows in apostolic footprints. We are called to be light and salt, not to be known as light and salt.

1. We need not win **the approval of God**. That affirmation God extends to us through the victory of Christ on the cross. Giving is not a payback to God. Praying is not twisting the arm of a reluctant patron. Fasting is not spiritual blackmail (‘give me what I want, or I die’). We are to engage these practices, but not on a false basis of inadequate notions of God. God is not deaf, ignorant or callous.

2. We are not in a spiritual competition, set the task of making it on a cosmic bell curve. We need not win over **our fellow Christians**. The vocation we have as disciples is not spiritual one-up-man-ship. We do not demonstrate Christ-likeness by out-doing the disciple next to us or setting ourselves the task of giving more than Wesley, praying more than Hyde, or fasting more than the ascetics. God seeks more faith, not more religiosity. We are to outdo one another in love and mercy, not in so-called spirituality.

3. We are not in a public relations blitz for a good reputation with the world. We need not win **the approval of the cultural elite**. We need to be clear how and where it is most appropriate and effective to exercise our Christian responsibility for proclamation and action. We are not

³⁶³ *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959)

measured on a scale of how many “come to faith” through our ministry or what impact our life has for civic righteousness. Our prime imperative is what God wants, not what is currently “in” with the in crowd.

4. We are offered a secret life with Christ. It is no less than a narrow gate and a hard road, given the sort of people we have become. We need to win **the race of faith** on the “narrow and difficult” way (Matt. 7:14). The road we are asked to walk is difficult to find and difficult to traverse. Jesus informs us that there is a way in and a way forward. It is not the way of impression management. It is the way of self-forgetfulness and mercy for the needy, of self-surrender and faith in the Fatherly care of God, of self-discipline and identification with the troubles and trials of a sinful world. It is the way of persecution for righteousness sake, of the death of murdering anger and adulterous lust, of the end to the defensive demands of one’s own rights. It is the way of a love that reaches out beyond reciprocity to the love even of enemy. It is a narrow and hard road.

5. We are promised **treasure in heaven**. The alternative of the two ways is either rewards here and now or treasure in heaven. Jesus is showing us the only way in which we may discover and collect the rewards the Father offers.

(d) Matthew 6:19-34: Righteousness and Priorities

Scholars either group the first three verses (6:19-21) with the “reward” God offers in recognition of single-hearted spiritual service (6:2-18) or with the following section on attitudes toward material possessions and wealth (6:22-32). It appears that 6:19-21 is a “chain-link” connector: the two treasures (earthly or heavenly) looking back at what has been said about giving, praying and fasting (rewarded by the Father) and looking forward to the comments about the two eyes, two masters and two anxieties (material possessions and money). The linking back is clearer in the Greek than the English: 6:16 uses the word ἀφανίζω (*aphanidzo*) which the NIV translates as “for they disfigure their faces.” In 6:19-20, the same word is used but translated differently “where moth and rust destroy.” That word links to both sections.

This section warns against a second deadly “virus” that can destroy us spiritually, despite all the appearances of our piety or good works. Our ambition and priorities can mean we attempt to fit God into our lives as we are running them rather than fit our lives into God as He is running things. We attempt the folly of making God into a sort of Cosmic Assistant to our ambitions and priorities. We live like unbelievers: running after success, wealth, security, “the good life.” This section raises questions about motivation, what we spend our life energy on.

It taps into our very real anxieties and worries. It can be heard as a pie-in-the-sky romanticism, thinking our lives can be like the carefree birds and the beautiful lilies, when our daily lives are anything but. The parent fusses over the child, fevered and ill. The student over the exams that will determine entrance into only no or only an average school rather than the best. The business leader wonders about the political climate, tariffs and trade competition. The aged retiree is anxious over the difficult choices of paying for heat or getting essential medication. Surely, Jesus’ words here are Pollyannaish nonsense!

What can reside at the center of our striving is a seeking after many earthly things that our culture tells us are the real rewards, the highest treasures, the pinnacle of any human’s life: beauty, fame, status, wealth, power. In our passionate pursuit of “the good life” we find ourselves

fretting and losing sleep. We are tempted to say to ourselves: ‘Church and God are important accessories, insurance policies in case things don’t work out in this dog-eat-dog world. To be sure, they are good things. We live in a rough and tumble world and must be realistic about what it takes to make it out there.’

These paragraphs are about pairs: two treasures, two eyes, two masters and two worries. The main point appears to focus on the importance of unqualified, single-minded service of the God who sees in secret and rewards. In each there is a clear contrast.

The heart and eyes are the zone of human interaction (3-zone self) that refer to the innermost emotion-infused thoughts. The heart holds what the eyes take in; as they scan the world the eyes attend to what the heart is occupied with. Together they summarize much of what Jesus has been teaching. The center of his ethic lies in the internal meanings and motives that govern a person’s actions and attitudes. The habits of the heart determine the habits of the hands and mouth.

This is also built on a dynamic model of human psychology: what drives us, what triggers emotions and moves us into action to “run after” certain things. “Treasures” are dominant incentives that we see and move us to seek them. We tend to see the world as we are, not as it is. Our inner needs and drives scan the external world for what will satisfy. Sometimes, those drives are so powerful they master us like an addiction. We spend inordinate amounts of time seeking those incentives. Sometimes, we know what motivates us by what generates our fears, anxiety, or worry. We see so many obstacles or uncertainties in securing our “treasures” that we worry and stew. How we adjust refers to habits and settled response patterns that typify us.

[1] Matthew 6:19-24: God and Possessions

(1a) Matthew 6:19-21 Two Treasures: The accounting “exam”

These three paragraphs are about pairs: two treasures, two eyes and two masters. The main point appears to focus on the importance of unqualified, single-minded service of the God who sees in secret and rewards. In each there is a clear contrast.

The heart and eyes are the zone of human interaction that refer to the innermost emotion-infused thoughts. The heart holds what the eyes take in; the eyes see what the heart is occupied with. Together they summarize much of what Jesus has been teaching to this point. The axis of his ethic lies in the internal meanings and motives that govern a person’s actions and attitudes. The habits of the heart determine the habits of the hands and mouth.

Treasure in heaven is contrasted with the assets we can accumulate on earth. No earthly treasures are secure or permanent. Many are subject to deterioration. The moth consumes our clothing. Decay and rot affect our buildings and furniture. Thieves tunnel into the places we have buried our jewels or gold. In contrast, the treasures we store in heaven are permanent and secure. The main point is not about material possessions as such, as if they were evil. Rather, it is about what we treasure, whether we are affluent or poverty-stricken. The problem is one of our perception and attachment to earthly goods.

Jesus does not tell us what those true treasures are or what we are to do to deposit them in heavenly bank accounts. We begin with the encouragement that the Father gives rewards. Even then we are not told what the rewards might be. We suppose that some part of that refers to treasure in the heavens. It may refer to the blessings Jesus says are bestowed on those who possess qualities God approves. Those blessings are bestowed in fullest measure in the coming

Kingdom. We may say that the treasure in view is part and parcel of participation in that Kingdom. The state of existence and quality of life is of greater value than all the things that catch our fancy now.

Some say it refers to whatever we can take with us makes up that treasure (our virtues and holiness of character, our obedience to God, the persons we have helped enter the Kingdom). But it is more likely the recognition and reward God grants upon our entrance, not something we bring with us.

If we treasure God's name, kingdom and will, if we accept our bread from God's hands and forgive, if we pursue holiness by the Spirit's deliverance from temptation and evil, then we lay up treasure. Every debt we forgive, every mercy we show, every enemy we love, every cheek we turn, every persecutor we bless, every law we observe, every cup of cold water we share in Jesus' name—every time we do what Christ commands, we build another brick in the house whose foundation is the rock. That life of discipleship stores up treasure in heaven or not. Whereas earthly goods perish, our good and bad deeds do not. Matthew 25 gives a picture of the consequences of how we decide to use our earthly goods. It is the difference between seeking first the Kingdom of heaven or seeking the security of accumulated earthly goods.

The negative command (not “to store up treasures for yourselves on earth”) needs clarification as well. We know enough from other Scripture that this is not the opening salvo in Jesus' attack on possessions or private property. This is not the basis for the “communism” we see in the Church in the early chapters of Acts. Private property as such is nowhere forbidden. In fact, almsgiving requires that we have some possessions to give away.

Nor is this a ground for being imprudent. We are commanded elsewhere to provide for our family and to work with our hands and make a living. Proverbs praises the prudence of the ant who stores up food in season and thus can survive the winter. This is not a ban on life insurance or an excuse for not taking effective steps to meet the needs of dependents. Nor does this offer an ascetic attitude of non-enjoyment of the material world. The joys of wine, wife and song praised by Ecclesiastes is not withdrawn.

In short, this is not condemning possessions, commending improvident living nor disparaging the enjoyment of material things. It bans covetousness, ambitious materialism, improper attachment to our possessions. The question has an old formulation: do we possess our possessions, or do they possess us?

The issue is what we treasure. That is an inner orientation and passion. Jesus' words are a precaution. He knows that the earthlier assets we have, the more the temptation to be preoccupied with and impressed by their comparative size. We cannot suppose that God's rewards for genuine righteousness is a larger payday and bigger barns for our harvest. We are possessed by what we love. Jesus attaches us to the secure, indestructible things of heaven. This is true for those called to ministry:

“...we should not proclaim the Gospel so that we may eat but rather eat so that we may proclaim the Gospel. For, if we proclaim the Gospel so that we may eat, we are valuing the Gospel more cheaply than food, and our good will now consist in eating but our necessity in proclaiming the

Gospel.”³⁶⁴

If we follow what Jesus teaches in general about money and possessions (as well as the rest of the New Testament), then the “for yourselves” is one key note. If we pray, “give us this day, our daily bread” then our orientation to wealth, money, possessions will be in the “us” mode. God owns all we have and are, completely, fully, unqualifiedly. If we are given significant wealth and possessions, it is not “for me” or a limited family circle (“for us’ns”) but for use in kingdom priorities and purposes (which may mean we may sell property to give it to the “Apostles” to serve the poor among us – Acts 4:32-37). The “us” includes fellow disciples and our neighbors on earth. We cannot deceive ourselves here, thinking we are treasuring and seeking the Kingdom of heaven while ignoring the poor and downtrodden at our front door.

(1b) Matthew 6:22-23 Two Eyes: the eye “exam”

What about **the two eyes**?

The “healthy” (NIV), “single” (KJV), “sound” (NAB), “clear” (NAS) eye: the word translated these various ways is ἀπλοῦς (*haplous*) – a word that means sincere, without guile, straightforward, open and aboveboard or can mean generous. It is a sight that is not defective in any way. By contrast the “unhealthy” (NIV), “evil” (KJV), “bad” (NAB), “diseased” (NET) eye: the word translated is πονηρός (*ponēros*) has both moral meanings (evil, degenerate, vicious, worthless) and physiological (sick, unhealthy). We know from a lot of psychological research that what we “see” depends on our inner mental and emotional state. We scan our environment and notice those things that link to our inner mindset.

There are two very different ways of viewing sight here. The dominant interpretation considers the text according to a modern notion. Sight is a matter of “intromission,” that is, the eye lets light into the body. On this approach the interpretation runs as follows.

The metaphor contrasts the diseased or blind eye with the healthy. The eye is seen as like a lamp. If it lets in light, the body is flooded with light. What the body wants to do is possible because the eye can guide the action. If the eye is blinded, the body is plunged into darkness. The body cannot see where things are. Things such as painting, doing surgery, engineering, getting a speck out of someone else’s eye, deciphering ancient scrolls become very difficult if not impossible. It is the eye that enables sight.

The words used seem to refer to the “generous” eye as opposed to the evil eye (the covetous eye). If we know that we have treasures in heaven, we will not be looking out to ensure our own affluence. We can afford to be generous because of what we know. The evil eye looks upon the success of others with envy and wishes the worst for the fortunate, covets that success for oneself. It will not respond with generosity and mercy to the misfortune of others. It is niggardly, miserly.

Just as our vision affects our whole bodily action, so our spiritual vision affects our whole life. If we are preoccupied with money and success, if our ambition is to amass a great fortune, if we are heavily invested in the fate of a given human endeavor, then we will see the world as it bears upon what we treasure. If we are controlled by covetousness, dissatisfied with the life-style we can afford, longing for more and better, then we will perceive every situation in terms of its contribution to our advancement.

Jesus suggests that a covetous eye is one that will fill our life with darkness. Just as the light

³⁶⁴ Augustine, *Works I/15 and I/16* (p. 95)

that our eyes let in controls our responses, so the ambitions we let into our hearts will control the use of our energies. We are warned here to be sure our eyes are generous.

The second possibility is an “extramission”³⁶⁵ view of sight and light: that is, the eye itself is a source of light, sending light out from the person as a lamp sends out light. This seems to be one of the common ideas of the ancients. The interpretation in this case would run something as follows.

Here the eye is a sign of or evidence for what is within. The eye in this sense is a window onto the condition of the heart. If the heart is set on the treasure in heaven, one’s whole inner being is lit up with the light of the glory of heaven itself. Knowing that our treasure is there, we look upon the affairs of life and others with a generous eye.

On the other hand, the heart that treasures the amassing of possessions and gold on earth will be filled with darkness. It will be miserly and covetous, and the eye will reflect that. The “light” that it sends out will create an evil eye, looking for and seeing a world full of threats and dangers to one’s assets. This miserly eye will not see needy people or opportunities for generosity and mercy. The problem is not the eye as such but the heart it reflects. If the “light” within is darkness, how great is that darkness indeed! The eye is unhealthy or unsound because the heart is full of darkness.

In either case, it asserts an intimate connection between one’s moral responses to money and need and one’s inner spiritual condition. If we are to have a singleness of purpose, a purity of heart, a generosity of vision, then we must have an inner light. This light is found in the heart that sees God. It is the person who is blessed by God’s salvation and thus dwells in the light of God’s care and compassion. It is the forgiven sinner who forgives. It is a person who left the kingdom of darkness for the kingdom of light. This inner light leads to love of neighbor and enemy whereas the inner darkness creates a person who is miserly and ungenerous.

(1c) Matthew 6:24 Two masters: the management “exam”

What about **the two masters**?

It was not impossible in the ancient world to be owned by two masters.³⁶⁶ Jesus’ point is not the impossibility of actually having two masters (cf. Acts 16:16 “owners”). It is on the impossibility of serving them both well. The premise of ownership is that a person belongs to another completely and unequivocally. It is not like contract employment where one may work a day job and moonlight in a second or even third job. One can have several employers. But one

³⁶⁵ “The ancient world had multiple theories of how vision worked (see Betz). One view, called ‘intromission,’ assumes that light comes into the eye from outside, and the eye is the first step in processing that light. This is more or less our modern understanding. More common in the ancient world, however, was the view called ‘extramission.’ In this view, the eye is the source of light, or at least channels that light as it originates from within the body.” Hartsock, C. (2013). “Blindness and Deafness”. In J. B. Green, J. K. Brown, & N. Perrin (Eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (p. 90). Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP.

³⁶⁶ Acts 16:16. Keener, *Matthew* (p. 233). Also, Hagner, *Matthew* (p. 159): “The literal translation of ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἕνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ‘for he will hate the one and love the other,’ is misleading since this Jewish idiom of loving and hating intends to express a matter of absolute versus partial commitment.” See Bradley, Keith (1994). *Slavery and Society at Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Glancey, Jennifer A. (2002/2006). *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

cannot give two masters full time, round-the-clock service.

In the context Jesus is dealing with several issues. We are to care deeply about people and be sensitive to maintaining peaceful and positive relationships. We are not to insist on our rights or draw hostile boundaries between ourselves and our enemies. But we are not to become preoccupied with what other people think of us. We can become so human-centered that we genuinely lose touch with God. We can wonder and worry over the esteem we are or are not getting from people and no longer live our life primarily for the eyes of God.

Jesus is saying something like this: You can't dance to two orchestras at the same time. Either we will dance well to one or the other. Either we will want to rumba and see the fox trot music as interference or vice versa. The focus on the context has to do with all the earthly assets we have accumulated. We can grow anxious and preoccupied with our wealth. Wealth engenders esteem and applause from fellow humans. Wealth is the most visible measure of our civilization's passion for success.

Jesus tells us that the most important success we can have is with God. The real wealth we possess is that which we have with the Father. The greatest approval we can experience comes from God.³⁶⁷ The central vision that gives us light and life is generosity. The service of God cannot be compromised by being yoked with the service of earthly possessions. The choice is an either/or. Where do we invest our treasure: here or with God? How do we view others: generously or with an evil, covetous eye? Whom do we serve: Mammon or God?

This is a tricky business for affluent Western Christians. On the one side, it is clear that the Bible allows us to acquire money and property. It is no sin to have money or wealth. There are proverbs aplenty telling us how to be prudent and wise in the use of resources that come into our hands. Paul exhorts the rich among the Christians, telling them to be rich in good deeds and generous with their money so that they may lay a good foundation for the future (I Tim. 8:17-19). Righteous Job was a wealthy man who cared for the poor and paid his laborers fairly and on time. There were rich women who supported Jesus and the disciples as they wandered the countryside in ministry.

On the other side, there is a clear polemic against the quest for wealth, against covetousness, against miserliness and the love of money. The rich are seen as endangered because of their wealth. It is a miracle possible only to God's grace that one of them might enter the Kingdom of God. The powers of money are that entangling and damning.

“Money has a way of freezing our hands and feet and stiffening our hearts; it has a way of becoming, like Gollum's ring, something we cannot do without and that becomes the focus of our attention.”³⁶⁸

Jesus does not say that it is difficult, unwise, dangerous or unspiritual to serve two masters. He says it is impossible. In this case the powerful dictates of money are such that, if you set about to follow its logic and accede to the pressures for acquiring and maximizing wealth, you will

³⁶⁷ Slaves of Caesar (*Caesaris servi*), by virtue of such association, gained significant status. The educated/skilled slave could hold very high offices, own their own slaves and become wealthy over time, a freedman with children born free. A.H. M. Jones, (1940) *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford University Press): “while some public slaves got little more than their keep, others ranked socially high enough to be elected to cult societies and athletic clubs of citizens and were rich enough to buy deputies who did their work for them while they enjoyed the emoluments.” (p. 242).

³⁶⁸McKnight, *Sermon* p. 212. A reference to a character in *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien).

inevitably begin to override the logic and imperatives given us in the teachings of Jesus.

We are asked not to practice the impossible. To desire to be rich, to envy the lifestyle of the famous, to covet the very best luxuries and perquisites money can buy, to long for heads to turn as we drive up in a fancy car, to want to be known as successful and rich—all of these desires will take us far from what is required for us to please God. You cannot do two different dances with two different partners at the same time.

This is the final issue in these three pairs. Where our heart is and what fills our eyes is a function of whom we serve. It is Jesus OR money. There is no third option. Jesus demands that such service be focused on God without compromise or conniving to see how we may also build our portfolios. This is not a demand denying prudence or asking for a fanaticism that will not even touch a coin. This is asking for an unequivocal allegiance to one Master. Peter reminds us about this matter (since money is not the only thing that can master us): “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.” (2 Peter 2:19)

[2] Matthew 6:25-34 God and Anxiety: the lifestyle “exam”

Jesus underlines what he has been saying with a series of comments about two anxieties: food and clothing. In this all parts of this chapter, Jesus instructs us to be God-preoccupied. If we first seek God’s Kingdom and his righteousness, then we will not be obsessed with our kingdoms and our own righteousness. We are faced with two choices: faith or anxiety. We can live from one or the other, but not both.³⁶⁹ If we have decided to be “mastered” by God rather than money, then we should know our Master takes care of us. That is part of the “deal.”³⁷⁰ To serve mammon is given a face: focusing on what we will eat and how we will be clothed.

These sayings are anti-selfish. They are not antisocial. In teaching us not to harbor anxious thoughts about food or clothing, we are not told to be imprudent or without foresight. It is anxious thought that is removed from us, not all thoughts of any sort. The problem with fearful anxiety is that it is an acid to faith. Faith and this sort of anxiety are incompatibles.

Jesus tells us that we should not be anxious for ourselves. We are not to be preoccupied with wearing the latest fashion (or even simple clothes) or having enough to eat. God gives us the greater (life itself) and so we should be confident that God will give us the lesser (food and clothing to nurture that life). What we need to do with material things is to pray to God for them and to believe that God will provide. The command is: take no “anxious thought,” not take no thought for these everyday matters. This digs down to the central things that motivate us, things we love and fear losing or have anxiety about due to uncertainty about securing them

Prayer for bread is joined with the petitions for forgiveness, guidance and deliverance. Having the essentials releases us to care for those who do not have them. If we are not to be occupied

³⁶⁹ Barth, *CD Vol. II.2*: “We can realise the absoluteness of the seriousness and rigour of the divine command, as rooted in its freedom, if we remember the commands which occupy so dominating a position in the New Testament—that we are not to be anxious and that we are not to fear. ‘Take no thought for your life’ (Mt. 6:25). ‘Take therefore no thought for the morrow’ (Mt. 6:34). ‘Take no thought how or what ye shall speak’ (Mt. 10:19).” (p. 597).

³⁷⁰ Masters were expected to take care of their slaves. For example: see Cato (d. 149 B.C.E.) *De Agricultura* (pp. 56–59, 107–15); Varro (d. 27 B.C.E.) *De Re Rustica* (pp. 1.17–18); and Columella, *De Re Rustica* (written 60–65 C.E.) (p. 1.8). Seneca (in *De Beneficiis* 3.21 and *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* 47.11–14) also considers adequate provision for the slave by the master an important duty.

with ensuring our own security, we are to be concerned with the security and essentials for others. When the Great Judgment occurs (Matthew 25) we find clothing, care for the sick, care for prisoners and the thirsty on the list of criteria for pleasing God. We are not to have unbelieving anxiety about our own needs. But we are to have faithful anxiety over the needs of others. An essential way God takes care of us as our Master is through other “slaves” who have given their allegiance first to God rather than money. The early Church demonstrates that sort of care (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37).³⁷¹ Almsgiving starts within the household of God.

Why ought we to believe God will care for us? Jesus appeals to the simple observation of nature. The birds of the air are fed. The lily of the field is resplendent. The God we serve cares about the earth we are upon. To be sure, the bird is busy from morning until evening seeking food. This is not a counsel for indolence or sloth. We are also told to learn from the prudence and forethought of the busy ant. But the focus is not our own participation in God’s provision. It is upon the faithfulness of God. God’s intentions are writ large in the dramatic character of the world that surrounds us. Jesus asks that we open our eyes in faith and see.

The view we have of God is One who cannot be confined to a small closet of life called religious or spiritual. The God we serve is God of the heavens and earth. The God who sees in secret also sees what we are and need in public. Not simply the inner life but the practicalities of everyday living comes within the care and provision of God.

Just as Jesus tells us we are to look quite like our normal and natural selves when we engage in “spiritual” activities, so we are to be very different in our actions and relationships (Matthew 5) as well as our motives (Matthew 6). Our life is not to be about better and more abundant things. Our concern is not with dressing better. We are to seek to clothe ourselves with the garments of God’s right ways and to share our bread with those who have none. We can do that because of what we know: God will take of us, so we are free to take care of others.

Balance in these matters is a problem for us because of our hyper-charged consumer environment. Jesus’ words are not the basis of an asceticism, as though we do not really need these earthly things. This is not opening a door for repudiation of clothing and food as contaminating to the spiritual health. Jesus is telling us we can serve and trust but one God. If acquisition and success are the center of our passion, then we serve idols and cannot trust the true and living God. Jesus says that God knows we have need of these practicalities and we can trust him to gift us with what we need.

Nor is this a guarantee of earthly fire and moth insurance. God’s saints have often lost all God has given them. Just consider the case of Job. God’s saints are not protected uniquely against stock market crashes or bad business deals. This is a promise that we can keep our focus on the

³⁷¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy (1981, 2011) *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith*. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Krodel, G. A. (1986). *Acts*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House: “But the historical practice of sharing possessions at the church’s beginning as well as Luke’s idealized picture put all modern churches and their members on the spot and asks, What is our attitude toward our possessions and toward sharing with the needy? Is our church merely society on Sunday, or God’s eschatological alternative to the society around us?” (p. 118). Also see: Deborah E. Watson (2006), *Paul’s collection in light of motivations and mechanisms for aid to the poor in the first-century world*. PhD. Thesis, Durham University available at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/2580/>; Craig S. Keener (2012–2013) gives an exhaustive overview of such practices. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28* (Vol. 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. (pp. 1012–1028).

things of God (both heavenly and earthly) and God will keep his focus on our things.

The argument in this section begins with a ‘therefore.’ Jesus is drawing out a conclusion that comes from the material already given in the sections just prior to this. We do well to think our way backward before going forward.

1. The immediate context is the saying about God, mammon and serving a master. The largest issue in the Sermon is the nature and character of God. We see a God who is active in caring, pure in holiness, providential in creation. This is a God whose kingdom is contested and whose creatures have rejected the right ways of living. God invites all to a righteousness different from and more penetrating than that of the devoutly and intensely religious Jewish Pharisees and scribes or those who seek God in religion as pagans.

This God desires that we be his children and call upon him as Father. He is a God who seeks to bless us (and blesses rather strangely positioned people). He sends prophets to convey an intelligible word to us to which we must give heed. We already have the Torah and the Prophets, if we desire to know what this God seeks from us. We can give time and effort to understanding those words. He does not so much desire religious drama and outward gestures of intense devotion as a secret life of piety joined with an outward life of generous mercy, forgiveness and peacemaking. We are not to be deceived: if we are captivated by the pursuit of such life goods as food and clothing, anxious about and clinging to our physical well-being, we may well be serving a god called mammon.

2. Joined with this are **several specifics** leading up to the conclusion Jesus draws:

a. Do we seek reward and treasure? Then we must ask: what sort of treasure is worth giving our hearts to? Which is more durable—treasures on earth whose guardians are rust, moth and thieves or treasures with God, held in trust by the archangels and principalities of heaven? The things our heart embraces and loves shape our whole perspective and life-plan.

b. Do we wish to be joyful and enlightened? Do we want to be rid of the shadows and confusion that we find within? Then we must ask: what condition of the eye will facilitate a light-filled existence? Which is more life-giving: a generous or miserly eye? What our eye shows to us as opportunity or threat will reflect what our heart treasures.

c. Do we wish the mentoring and sponsoring of wise and powerful patrons? Do we wish to be part of the inner circle of a powerful master who can open doors and give us meaningful occupation for our energy and talent? Then we must ask: what master among all possible Lords is worthy of our life allegiance? Which is the more sensible: God or wealth as master?

3. Because treasure with God, the generous eye and God as our master are the **wise alternatives**, we need not worry over the things that sustain our life: food, drink and clothing. After all, Jesus tells us, such worry is

- Irrelevant and needless. God has given us life itself. He can be trusted to provide the things that are necessary for us to carry out the tasks for which we are created. The real change we hunger and thirst for will come finally by God’s initiative.³⁷²

³⁷² Barth, *CD Vol. IV.2*. “The life of man becomes an unbroken chain of movements dictated by his anxious desire for assurances: either against possibilities which he fears and tries to avoid because he has to recognise in them the approaching shadow of the frontier which he approaches; or in relation to

- Irresponsible and useless. Worry cannot change the world we live in or the parameters of our own being. We cannot grow taller or change the color of our hair by moderate or intense anxiety. It burns up our time and energy without realizing constructive changes.
- Irreverent and godless. The pagans are the very ones who set their ambitions and devote their energies to the pursuit of magnificent clothes, fabulous assets and gourmet foods because they are not acquainted with the true and living God who can be trusted for these things. It fails to acknowledge the God who provides for us through life.

None of this denies the need or the value of embodiment. This is not about the value of the spirit over the body. It is about the focus and mainspring of our life: is it realistically connected to the way things are created and destined. If we become preoccupied with our bodies—its aesthetics, comfort, toning and tanning, cooling and warming, exercising and feeding, or housing and adorning it— then we focus on something that is unwise and unworthy. We are made for a life that is more than physical and a purpose that transcends the physical qualities of our earthly history.

Because God is who God is (and not something else) and because we are human creatures made in God's image, there are ways of living that stand in stark contradiction to prime realities. The prime reality is that God made us and wishes to live with us as our heavenly Father. Anxiety contradicts this.

Faith is mentioned for the first time in Matthew at this point. Given its importance, this might seem an oversight or strange way to begin a gospel that is so strongly focused on discipleship. Faith becomes a theme following this introduction. It is a theme that is not as strongly portrayed or emphasized as obedience. But we shall later see (especially in the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13) that faith is not a side issue.

Its mention here is to refer to the hearers of the Sermon as being of "little faith." What does this mean? What is great faith? How does faith relate to what is being taught in this Sermon?

Faith has to do with **the grasping of the reality of the true and living God**. Faith is not used generally for any sort of confidence placed in some object, process or principle (though that is a legitimate way to speak of faith). We are in a sea of "faith" in the modern world stretching from trust in ideological scientism to positive mental attitude. Positive, confident self-affirmation is even considered "faith." People tell us to have "faith" and mean we should be optimistic and hopeful. This is not what Jesus is talking about.

Faith is a **response of the whole person to an understanding and knowledge of God**. It is the awareness of who God is and what God can be counted upon for doing. It is not credulity because faith is rooted in reality, not illusion or wishful thinking. It is not believing wild things or accepting stories of bizarre "miracles" that are truly startling to the modern mindset. It is the inner trust that develops as we gain increasing clarity on the God to whom we pray and in whose name we fast and give.

We may not worry about the reality that we rest in the hands of God, but we do often worry

possibilities which he desires because he expects from them fulfilments which for a time at least conceal his certain end, allowing him temporarily to forget that which is before him. Care is the remarkable alternation and mixture of this fear and desire against the background of what we think we must regard as a threat rather than our hope." (p. 469-70).

about the means by which God takes care of us. We suppose it must be in such and such a way, in answer to our fumbling prayer that decides what God must do to take care of us. We are so sure about the door that must be opened, the path that we must take, the program we have so carefully planned that anything different looks like we have been abandoned. Our expectations fill in the details about what we need and how God must help us, driven by an anxiety not rooted in trust. We limp between faith and anxiety, doubt and trust. We are keenly aware of our need; less so aware of God's providential care for us.

The notion of the "leap" of faith is simple nonsense, as though "faith" is believing something without a reasonable basis, or even what is contrary to reason. Faith may go beyond reason, but it does not go against reason. All reason for that matter is rooted in some taken-on-faith indemonstrable postulates. There is no human "view from nowhere" as though there is a reason that stands outside the human condition and sees the world without any filters. "Blind" faith is not faith. It is credulity. Faith sees and what it sees is sufficient to bring about the end of anxiety and unfaithful worry.

Faith comes in at this point of the narrative because of our tendency to limit God, to confine God to small parts of our world and life. In a sense, this "trivial" matter of food and clothing is a test of our view and relationship to God. How do we know our eye is sound and perceives the world properly? By our freedom from anxious concern over these most basic mundane matters. Anxiety is proof that we are serving another master. It is proof that our faith is infinitesimally small. How so?

Jesus is asking that we believe several very fundamental realities:

1. God is the creator of our life—its time span and embodiment. We are to believe that God made us as and when we are, just as we are. The great mystery of our individuality, our ethnicity and gender, our energy levels and drives come from the hand of God. To be sure we experience them only as fallen creatures in a fractured world that repudiates such notions, giving value to the few and denigrating the many.

2. God is the creator and sustainer of the life forms we see in nature. This world and its abundance are not accidents, a cosmic happenstance of chance and fate. Yet we are not reducible to nature. There is a dignity and value to humans that means humans stand as "lords of the earth." To be sure we are stewards and caretakers of God's creation. But it is God's creation and his caring extends even to the smallest of living things. We are not the only thing God cares for, but we are of infinite value.

3. God looks after the details of our lives, including sustaining our physical being. We cannot confine God to "spiritual" things. Faith that does so is small because of its small view of God. God is much larger than a pietistic confining of God to the inner and hidden life of the human spirit or the "spirit" that inhabits all of nature. If we have faith in God, then we will not be anxiously worried over the necessities of our physical life. Little faith is a cup too small to receive all the truth offered to it by Jesus' teaching.

Faith needs to be apportioned in a measure appropriate to its object. If it is God we trust, then we will know that our food, drink and clothing are part of his fatherly compassion. Serving this Master is having a Lord who does not guarantee luxury or ease in this life. Our Lord secures for us treasure in heaven and on earth he watches over the necessities we need for doing his will. But even Jesus' life was hardly birdlike or lilylike. We may trust God for good days, sunshine and bright prospects only to be confronted with hard days, stormy times and dead ends. Perhaps, like

Job, we need hunger, nakedness, illness in order to learn not to trust in our own strength, to learn the blessing of empty hands and spiritual poverty.

So how do we grow our faith? We will find later that it is portrayed in a number of ways. It is going on a journey through a narrow gate and along a difficult path. It is building a habitation on the solid foundation and enduring the storms that come. It is doing what Christ commands. It is receiving the word of God sown into our hearts and minds and bringing forth the fruit that is suited to such seed. In the immediate context, growing faith happens when we strive above all else for God's kingdom and righteousness.

In these matters Christ's call away from anxiety in favor of trust must be placed squarely within the sort of experience he had. To say that God gives "all these things" (food, drink, clothing) does not mean that they get to all of us who need them. The use of birds and lilies to illustrate God's provision does not mean we will have a birdlike or lilylike experience, any more than Jesus did. Its proper context and reality is within the arrangements of the kingdom of God.

It is helpful to ask how it was that Christ (who had nowhere to lay his head) was well provisioned by his heavenly Father? Or we might wonder about Christians in refugee camps or famine conditions. If God knows our needs so well, why are there so many poorly provisioned?

"Perhaps the best way to think about this is that Jesus doesn't call us to be care-less about provisions but to be care-free. Some folks find in this text an opportunity to be lazy, or an opportunity to give away everything in a reckless or unwise manner. Jesus isn't encouraging his disciples to be reckless. Instead, he's calling them to follow him and to see that following him, or (in our text) seeking first the kingdom and righteousness, reshapes what we value most."³⁷³

With the birds and the lilies, we observe that the provision is not a simple matter by any means. God's provision for the birds is general, within nature. The birds are busy and fit into various complex niches—some insectivores, other carrion eaters or seed eaters. Migration takes them thousands of miles during the season of the year. The lily itself is nourished by a complex chemical and hydraulic mechanisms whereby moisture carries nutrients through the soil into the cellular factories of the plant itself.

So too, God has put within our nature and within the larger earth all the resources we need for food and clothing. The shortfall is not due to God's provision but often because of human venality and greed.³⁷⁴ We do not plan wisely ahead. We give ourselves to social systems that enforce stunning inequalities and wasteful consumption. War devastates the assets of nations and pollutes the environment. The sinfulness of human civilization takes from the hand of God and withholds the bounty from the weak or its enemies.

³⁷³McKnight, *Sermon* p. 223.

³⁷⁴Blomberg, *Matthew*: "...the major problem with the promise 'all these things [food, drink, clothing] will be given to you' is the contrary experience of many Christians throughout history One possible solution ... is to reserve all guarantees for the age to come. ... To be sure, the fullness of the kingdom will eradicate all suffering for God's people, but it is hard to see why Jesus would rule out worry in the present age if his promise applies only to a distant future. And if God's kingdom has already been inaugurated, then believers should expect to receive in this age the firstfruits of its material blessings. Hence, v. 33b is probably to be interpreted in light of Luke 12:33 and Mark 10:30a, which presuppose the sharing of goods within the Christian community. When God's people corporately seek first his priorities, they will by definition take care of the needy in their fellowships." (p. 126).

This observation applies especially to those who place themselves within the scope of God's Kingdom. Jesus tells us that we are the agents of God. Through us the hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for. God's provision frequently comes first to us and through us to others. We need to wonder how much of what we point to as counterproof to the providence of God is actually proof of our own selfish preoccupation with how we are fed and clothed. Or how much reflects the powerful effects of social and economic orders that orient wealth to benefit the rich.

It is important to say that Jesus does not say we are to be without trouble, only without worry. At the end of this section Jesus tells us every day will have its irritants and obstacles. The last of his beatitudes promises a blaze of vituperation and persecution. Troubles are bound to come. Some are the flea-bites of finitude and the friction of living with one another. Some are crushing burdens we cannot carry alone. Jesus commands us not to add to the troubles we will have by entertaining faithless anxieties over basic necessities.

What worry does is to double our trouble. Anxiety happens now about some future event. Much of the time what we fear never happens. In the mean time we have wasted time and energy by our preoccupation over what might be. If the anxiety is strong enough, it can displace any other healthy occupation. If the feared matter comes to pass, then we have worried about it twice. Jesus is lifting from us the heavy burden of doubling our trouble by needless and senseless worrying. Today, we are to have faith and deal with its own troubles without worry.

We may not worry in faith, but we can plan. Trouble will happen. Tomorrow will have its fair share of troubles. Just as we are not to be anxious in the moment (today), so too we are not to be anxious about tomorrow. Each day's trouble is sufficient for that day. Yet we need not seek trouble out or walk right into it. If persecution and opposition come because of our alignment with Kingdom righteousness, we need not add to it by our own unrighteousness—or by our inattention to the practical affairs of life. In faith we are principled people. We seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. So, we care about details and work to ensure that all the affairs we are a part of are done well.

(2a) Concluding comments

These pairs summarize much prior teaching. Jesus sets up the unequivocal alternatives: the broad and easy road and the narrow, difficult way. This is a genuine choice. It may not always be obvious to us because of our immersion in the cultures of falsehood and illusion within which we live. But the choice is there.

In the end the vast diversity of historical experience is such that we wind up either blessed by God or persecuting and reviling those who are blessed by God. Either we are salt and light or we are corruption and darkness. Either we excuse ourselves from the "little" things of the law or we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Our frame of reference is either the applause and approval of fellow humans (even religiously devout ones) or we live through and unto God alone. We cannot live a divided life.

We are built so that we will treasure something. The choice we make here is not completely voluntary. At a very basic level all of us know that our emotional attachments spring out of an inner source seemingly beyond our control. We cannot get up one morning and suddenly change the life orientation we have been following for years, even decades. There is an inner motivational dynamic that is already shaped and shaping us. Jesus puts before us three tests of

that inner motivating character. Our habits and what we treasure are self-referencing and self-reinforcing:

1. How we look at the world: with a good or evil eye.
2. Whom we serve in our world: money or God.
3. How we live in “today”: with faith or anxiety.

In calling God “Master” Jesus tells us that there are possibilities beyond the horizon of our prior character and history. God is Master of our inner life no less than our external. The synergistic mystery whereby God’s grace changes us as we change ourselves is not one that comes into view in this passage. We are commanded by Christ to live and long and feel and act in given ways. When we face these stark alternatives, we wonder how we can live that way. What we learn from the Epistles is how the gift of the Spirit enters our rock-hard habits and longings and gives them new direction and dynamic.

The first step we are asked to take is to change Masters. That we can do. That will begin the process of inner transformation as we discover where and how we are resistant to the ways of the God of our Lord Jesus. These stark interpretations, offered to us in the Sermon on the Mount, are a key to the stark rebellion that has rooted itself within us. Once we begin to spell out these meanings as our core values, we will discover the conflicting core values according to which we have been socialized to live.

The alternatives are real. We cannot minimize the awesome differences between them. Our culture does so by creating a non-god as God and by providing us with a religiosity filled with hypocrisy and meaningless repetition. We are taught how to shave the sharp edges of Jesus’ demands to fit the comfortable couches of our civilization. A dozen “fanatics” are used as sticks to warn us away from absurd and unreasonable commitments. We are led into a dance room where we are told the music is more soothing, the dance partners more attractive, the party more enjoyable than any we might have listening to the music of this Sermon.

To be sure, one of the reflexes we have that drives us from the depth of meanings resident in Jesus’ words are those fanatics that have taken these words out of context and made a new legalism of them. St. Francis of Assisi’s refusal to touch money was a dramatic gesture going far beyond the warning about Mammon in this text. Tolstoy’s literalism destroyed the spirit and meaning of the Sermon. His harsh disobedience to other clear teachings of the New Testament negated his supposed saintliness. In wanting to avoid the extremes of the right and left, we cannot fall into the extreme of the middle. There are dozens of ways of leaning but only one angle at which we can stand straight. Jesus says we can test the alignment we have with the Kingdom of God by these three criteria: (1) Where do we invest our ambition and treasure? Where is our heart and what is it longing for? (2) On what do we fix our eyes? What fills our vision when we take in the sight of our fellow human beings? (3) What drives our responses and action? Whom do we really serve? Answer these questions honestly in the light of our inner motives, desires and the expenditure of our energy and we can begin to see the quality of our discipleship.

This was at the heart of the testing of Job – and much of the health-wealth-prosperity gospel of our day. The question raised is what is at the heart of the motivation for being people of faith and commitment? Is it because of some earthly benefit? Is piety the means to the goal of a successful life? Do we love God for his benefits or love God whatever comes? When Job was faced with who his master was in the midst of the loss of all the earthly benefits, he was sorely tempted to waver:

“Job began to doubt God and his own piety. As soon as he found himself staring at grinning meaninglessness, as soon as his philosophy of a just order of life vanished like a bubble, his faith, too, collapsed. The dreadful thing about this story of Job is that the devil’s corrosive scepticism turns out to be right. Job really did not lead a blameless life only for the greater glory of God; he was pious and good because he thought that ‘God does not allow the wicked to enslave the good,’ and therefore that if a man is good he will have more freedom and happiness in life.”³⁷⁵

The question is how we approach all of life with faith in our heart. If we are calculating the benefits that come with undertaking given activities (including church going, Bible reading, praying, giving to charity, fasting), we serve the god Mammon. When “bad” things happen to “good” people, the test of their authentic faith is whether in the end the questions are not, ‘How could God allow this to happen?’ or ‘Why should God do this to me?’ But the affirmation, ‘though he slay me, yet will I hope in him’ (Job 13:1).

Peter tells his reader who were enduring all kinds of trials to “cast all our anxieties on him” (I Peter 1:6-7. 5:7). The real transformation of anxiety, as with everything, comes when we turn them into prayer and trust in the God who cares for us. We still will face the mysteries and trials of life when we may seem abandoned and our horizon murky. But the promise remains: “I am with you to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

[3] Seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness first: the final “exam”

The summary principle at the end of this section zeroes in on the fundamental motivation: what do we run after, strive for, seek with high energy? What “ambition(s)” occupy our thoughts and plans? In many ways the phrases “to be anxious” about and to “seek after” are interchangeable, the one a negative emotion, the other a positive.

This is another of the generalizations or principles that animate the particular examples Jesus uses to help us understand what the greater righteousness is. We may not worry in faith, but we can plan. Trouble will happen. Yet we need not seek it out or walk right into it. If persecution and opposition will come because of our alignment with Kingdom righteousness, we need not add to it by our own unrighteousness—or by our inattention to the practical affairs of life. In faith we are principled people. We seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness above all else.

In this sermon, Jesus calls us to a greater righteousness, a broader love, a deeper spirituality and a higher ambition.³⁷⁶ What will deliver us from our anxiety about “petty” things is having something higher and greater that preoccupies our motives and desires. It is well and good to highlight the folly of anxiety. But what do we do about the degree of such worry we already have? Jesus tells us. Refocus your ambition on the highest of all goals: The Kingdom and righteousness of God. Then secondary ambitions will fall into place and the necessities of life will be properly ordered and received. If the vision of the Kingdom of God does not reshape our ambitions and priorities, then we are not living out the righteousness of that Kingdom.

In seeking God’s Kingdom and righteousness, we are not asked to seek the spiritual or the mystical. This is not counsel to slow down and go deep within our spirits so as to “find God”

³⁷⁵ Thielicke, *Sermon* (p. 86).

³⁷⁶ Stott, *Sermon*, (p. 169).

within. This is a counsel to become committed to those things to which God is committed.

What Jesus has already told us is that God is committed to things on earth as well as in heaven. The argument includes such things as the infinite care God expends upon the grasses that last only a short time before they are cut and used to fire the cooking oven. God is the one who determines the span of our lives. We cannot add an hour by anxious worry. God is the supplier of our daily bread. He provides us with intelligent counsel in the Torah and the Prophets. We have this wisdom of Scripture (and science). God even watches over the ravens and sparrows of this planet. When one falls to the earth, it is not missed by this God of details.

In seeking God's kingdom and righteousness we are lifted again out of the circle of our puny egos. The great burden of having to preen and present the perfect person, the most accomplished and distinguished, the shining knight in armor, the saintly heroine, the magnificent infallible intellect, the invulnerable all-together one, the ever righteous my-conscience-is-clear, the never-without-the-answer computer-brain—all these poses of divinity are lifted from our shoulders. In seeking God's kingdom and righteousness, we admit that our own versions fall miserably short. We fall infinitely below what it takes for the earth to be a place where the doing of God's will flourishes, where God is hallowed, bread is shared, forgiveness overflows and the Evil One is frustrated on every hand. We are not our own savior or lord. God is. What a relief!

The command to seek God's Kingdom and righteousness comes in tandem with the observation that the pagan Gentiles set their sights and energy on food, drink and clothing. They act as though the end of life is the adornment of life, not only with the "necessities" but with rare and valued goods. The body and its pleasure, its presentation, its powers become the center of their universe, around which all takes up orbit. Everything is filtered by the test of compatibility to enhancing and furthering bodily "necessities."

Jesus makes clear here that there is nothing suspect or evil about bodily "necessities." To be sure, our own age has used relentless advertising to leverage our sense of need. Consumerism must insinuate itself into our deepest levels of self-consciousness if it is to pry more and more money out of our pocketbooks. If the list is food, drink and clothing in Jesus' day, in our own it is mouth wash, deodorant, facial cream, diet pills—a thousand-fold increase of items in our civilization. So, we must listen carefully lest our age's gross exaggeration of necessity not distort what Jesus is saying. He does not open the door to the health and wealth gospel, as though the mere possession of "all these things" is proof of God's additions rather than our own ambition.

Jesus tells us to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. That is our task. That is to be our preoccupation. That is to inform our emotional attachments. When our focus is more on the things that are being added to us than on the extension and vitality of God's kingdom, then we are no longer seeking the one thing needful. This is not natural or easy, given the nervousness and distress that afflicts us as we listen to the daily list of disasters and threats on the news. Or as we anticipate with some apprehension the coming downturn in the economy or the potential next worldwide pandemic. Nor is this a counsel to be optimistic about the future as though God's providence lifts us into a Pollyannaish positive attitude that hides from the worst.

We can agree with John Stott on these verses. In its broadest sense God's Kingdom refers to the totality of his sovereign rule, exercised over nature, the universe, time and space as well as human and superhuman realities. We have indicated earlier that **the Kingdom of God** refers to the undisputed sovereignty of God in creation, established and expressed in a complete order of peace, justice and righteousness on a new earth within a new heaven. This entirely future new world comes in its unearthly powers at the climax of this Age at the Day of the Lord. We seek

that coming world. We seek the effects of that world already unleashed in this day.

So, we extend the kingdom of God by sowing the good word of the gospel, by living the gospel life of greater righteousness, broader love and deeper spirituality. We invite people to take up a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That is the way they enter the kingdom—and that is what we seek first in our own lives in every arena (home and work, private and public, secular and religious). That is what we seek for our family and fellow countrymen—and for peoples of all the earth.

We also extend that kingdom when we suffer its “labor pains.” We are richly blessed when we suffer with the inhabitants of our globe and even suffer at their hands. Not only did Jesus suffer but so too his Apostles, not least among them Paul (II Corinthians 11:23-27). The “all things will be added” includes suffering with Jesus in this world. Often the authenticity of our faith is heard most clearly when people see what Christ followers will endure in faithful discipleship in his name.³⁷⁷

If seeking the kingdom here and now entails the wholistic task of evangelism, seeking God’s righteousness equally commits us to the wholistic task of justice. The one is not spiritual and the other social. They are both spiritual and social, social and spiritual. Yet they are distinguishable.

To have the kingdom engage our ambition is to identify ourselves with the future hope of Christ’s coming in power and glory. It is to see the largest horizon of our personal history as framed by the coming future world—and to know that admission tickets to that world are available. Seeking that kingdom is bending every particle of my being to see that I will be admitted to that world. Jesus gives repeated instructions about this very matter. We are not left guessing what this is about. It is a narrow gate through which we are to enter with the directions of how to do so given in a dozen ways in Matthew.

To have the kingdom engage our ambition is to identify ourselves with the kingdom as it has already entered human history in the words and history of Jesus Christ. It is to embrace his teachings and follow his example, it is to accept his challenge and rejoice even in the opposition that comes because we are identified with him. Hence, we sell all we have and are to possess this pearl of great price. We sort our emotions and motivations and reorder them that nothing has higher worth, nothing gains greater attraction, nothing proves more significant than the presence and approval of our heavenly Father.

To have the kingdom engage our ambition is to identify ourselves with the kingdom as word preached and life lived. Underneath and alongside and before all our human words, we acknowledge the presence and power of the one Word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ. We proclaim it and share it. We celebrate it and study it. We give it space in our lives and communities, so it may flourish and bring forth much fruit.

³⁷⁷ Augustine, *Works, Vol. 21 Bk. II 17.58*: “When we read [of the troubles of the Apostle], we must not think that God was wavering in His promises, so that the Apostle suffered hunger and thirst and nakedness while seeking the kingdom and righteousness of God, since we have been told, *Seek first the kingdom and righteousness of God, and all these things will be given to you as well*. The physician, to whom we have entrusted ourselves totally and once and for all and from whom we have the guarantee of the present and future life, knows well that these things are like remedies, and sometimes he bestows them and sometimes he removes them, according to what he judges is beneficial for us.” (p. 99)

To have the kingdom engage our ambition is to identify ourselves with the righteousness that structures and defines that kingdom. Not only are we advocates and examples of the word of the kingdom. We are also advocates and examples of the justice of that kingdom. We seek the righteousness that is to be part of civic life and organizational processes. God's kingdom is not an abstract feeling or inner centering of our personality. It is the place where God is hallowed, and his will is done. It is where evil must give way to the rectitude and purity of God's ways.

On the one hand this means there is no sphere of life that remains beyond the touch and influence of God. The governance of God reaches into every arena. To the pure, all things are pure. The house is a temple; clothing are vestments; food is a sacrament; work is the service of God; every day is a holy day. If we seek God's righteousness, we will find it in every moment, every relationship, every expenditure of energy and emotion. Rowland Hill is quoted as saying that a person was not a Christian if his or her dog and cat weren't better off. Righteousness is a practical matter that affects the specifics of our way of living.

The problem with much of what we observe as empirical Christianity is that it has little to do with God or righteousness. It is hermit crab spirituality. We have annexed the shell grown by another and installed ourselves inside it. We walk about with the form of religion, but it is not intrinsic to us. We keep it as long as it is convenient and comfortable. When it isn't, we give it up and switch to something else. Or we climb into the shell on Sunday and out of it on Monday morning.

Jesus is not telling us to seek for a spirituality or religious way that is comfortable and convenient. To seek the kingdom of God is to go in quest of the reality of a transformational relationship with God. It is the surrender of the convenient and the fearful. It is the embracing of the path of continued growth and learning by repeated encounter with the intelligible word of God, giving ourselves the luxury of allowing God to be God for us. It is like the difference between having a collection of sugar cubes to store and view and putting the sugar in our coffee or tea. If it is dropped into our drink, it will flavor the whole. The kingdom and its righteousness, dropped into our lives, will flavor and sweeten all our relationships and realities.

Both kingdom and righteousness thus have an inner and outer circle. The inner circle is the fellowship of those who have entered the kingdom and experienced justification by faith. It is the circle of those who know the active rule of God here and now and celebrate it in fellowship within the conscious community of the King.

The outer circle is where God's rule is present but only anonymously, real but resisted. The inner circle is in the business of inviting people to cross over into the inner circle—and about the business of reminding the outer circle of the standards that exalt a nation. We cannot expect the outer circle of God's rule to know and acknowledge the Bible or the patterns of law and administration that comport well with it. As citizens and leaders, we can advocate policies and practices that enhance righteousness within the Church community and the civil arena.

Jesus asks that we seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness first. This means there is a second and a third and a fourth. This is not 'seek that kingdom and righteousness only.' Nor is this a command that is meant for a spiritual elite who can set aside all normal life involvements for the convent or monastery. This is a command for all Christians in all stations of life and situations of experience. Married or unmarried, young or old, rich or poor, healthy or sick—we are to discover the compulsion and passion of the kingdom of God. It is to throb through our

veins and excite our imagination, consume our energy, tingle every nerve and inflate our enthusiasm. Above all else we are to seek God's Kingdom and righteousness.

Seek it first **in time**. When we are young and green, when we are just beginning the planning and unfolding of our lives, we are to seek God's rule and righteousness. Why give God only the remains of our years, after stroke and heart attack, after we have been worn down and used up? God wants the best of us from beginning to end. We are to seek God at the beginning of the day, at the start of the year, when we initiate a new project or job. First God—then we can attend to the secondary and tertiary things. Our daily schedule ought to give God the best of our energy and attention. Seek God when we are alert and energetic.

Seek it first **in importance**. When there is a choice between doing the will of God and some alternative, if it is money or God, if it is a little shading of truth or righteousness with social advantages, then we are to choose God. There is nothing that is to surpass our commitment and loyalty to God's cause and ways. We will not avoid hardship or sacrifice, suffering or loss if that be the cost of hearty seeking the Kingdom. We will not sacrifice the poor, engage in shady finances, go along with deceptive advertising, settle for shoddy workmanship, be satisfied with half-efforts because we seek first the righteousness of God.

Seek it first **by looking for God's involvement in every situation**. Too many of us look for what is wrong, what can feed our complaining pessimism, what is the cynical twist in every corner of life. God is at work, even in the horrendous wastelands of human conflict. We seek God's kingdom by asking where God might be and what God might be doing here and now. Then we will know what doors we are called to enter.

Seek it first **by being prepared to do the right thing**. We may be like the person who was a Christian but hadn't been working much at it lately. We are not being saved by our own good works. But, if we are saved, then we will work hard at being good. Entering the kingdom does not exempt us from the arduous, long range process of rooting ourselves in the love and Word of God and building our lives according to God's wisdom so that we are strong in the Lord. We are weak in the beginning and must apply ourselves to the exercises and practices of righteousness. First, I learn to walk with God. Then I learn the many other things I need to work and live amid my time and culture. Then I might run long and strong in the race of faith.

Seek it first **by giving, praying and fasting in secret**. Jesus is teaching us in this very Sermon what it takes to put God and his righteousness first. Implementing these matters in our lives are the means we are given to seek and find. We are not left confused or ignorant. Jesus gives us enough in these words to show us the righteousness that comes from God and how we may enter his Kingdom.

Jesus faced us with abundance and told us not to covet. He took us through necessities and banished anxious preoccupation. Our greatest gain is to know God in every circumstance in which we find ourselves. Whether we are in the midst of affluence, or on the margins of simple necessities, God's Kingdom and righteousness are at stake.

The Kingdom is a gift for which we pray. We cannot build it or bring it into existence. We pray for it and seek it because it is the great treasure hidden in the fields of history. We seek it above all else because its worth is above all else. When we are graciously made a subject of that Kingdom, we are given demands that we engage in an appropriate righteousness. That involves a righteousness greater than we see advocated or lived by the intensely religious, greater than the self-styled aprons we make out of our selective plundering of the leaves of the Bible. Not even the least matters of the law or prophets can be sacrificed in this righteousness.

Matthew 6:33 Seek first the kingdom

Neither today nor tomorrow is a day without God. So, we are told not to be anxious over tomorrow. It will become a today and every today has its own share of evil. Storing up treasure opened this whole section of Jesus' sermon. There we were told to exercise wisdom as we put aside resources. Treasures looked after by moth, rust and thieves are not a wise investment. Instead, we are to store up treasure in heaven where it is looked after so well we need have no anxiety about it.

In this world, the larger the assets, the more opportunity there is for moth, mice, men and women to destroy or defraud. Our affluence becomes our anxiety. We become preoccupied with whether we are well invested, well protected, well-guarded or insured. We wonder whether we can trust this advisor or that financial planner. We wonder whether the employee who has power of attorney or who does our books is a person of integrity. Today everything may be safe—but tomorrow—what evil might come and snatch the results of all our carefully planned discipline away?

This is the reason why the more some people build their assets the less they are. Their substance becomes a matter of their bottom-line net worth. They are architects of their fortune and destroyers of themselves. They are diminished as their prosperity increases. They become an adjunct of the family fortune, unable to move or live without constant consideration of their assets. "Friends" cannot approach them freely and in terms of their own intrinsic character. They are eclipsed by their fortune. They wonder who cares for them as opposed to caring for their fortune and thus for them. They wonder what they might be if there were no money or property.

The bottom-line issue in this whole section is highlighted in this punch line. Are we people who have found the Kingdom of God and his righteousness? Do we know the God who rules in love and providence, caring for us in the same infinite detail he does in clothing the flower on the grasses and feeding the birds of the air? Can we trust to this God our tomorrows and thus not be preoccupied with anxious care over even the bare necessities, much less over the fate of the treasure we have here on earth?

If we know such a God, then we will not be fearful of being generous. We will not be foolish either. Neither covetousness nor anxiety will eat our inner spirit and distract us from observing all things Jesus commands us. We will have time enough for the genuine evils of each day and no time for the phantoms our troubled imagination might create. In each today we are to seek God's Kingdom above all else. The sorts of resources we need to do the righteousness of God in that very context will be added to us.

The challenge in the end is not the resources (which a gracious God promises) or the troubles (which Jesus guarantees will come), but **who we are**. Are we salt and light? Are we building on the rock-solid foundation? Are we entering by the narrow gate and following the difficult road? Are we trusting or anxious? Are we performing our life for the eyes of God or the accolades of fellow humans? Are we generous and merciful or judgmental and harsh? Are we filled with light or is the light in us darkness? Jesus' words are the crisis of our very being and existence.

(e) Matthew 7:1-12: Judging and Discerning, actions and consequences

This is one of the most misunderstood and misused texts of Jesus' teachings. In our day tolerance is the chief public virtue. Rather than deal with the difficulties of pluralism, we pretend that differences are nothing more than preferences, culturally rooted and equally valid. Jesus has

been recruited on the basis of this text as the advocate of radical relativism.

But we should already know that something is not right here. Jesus made the evaluative judgment that the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes was not sufficient for the Kingdom of God. He claimed that some of the repetitive rituals of the non-Jews of his day were meaningless mumblings with no spiritual value whatever. He elevated love of enemy over the hatred or killing of the enemy. He claimed that sexual immorality was a legitimate ground for divorce, but that divorce was not the will of God. He meddled in the arena of oath-taking and rights-protection. Every paragraph of this Sermon burns with judgments made on proper and improper ways of living life. Jesus' words on judgment cannot mean the easy live-and-let-live practices they are quoted as supporting.

Nor can they mean that civil courts are not legitimate. He is not withdrawing his followers from pursuing or participating in the process of seeking judgments from sitting groups of elders in the gates or from judges in courts. Part of the hunger for justice is satisfied only when there are wise, fair, incorruptible judges who will not pervert justice in favor of the wealthy and powerful. When the young man came aggrieved and feeling he had been cheated out of his fair inheritance, Jesus refused to provide him with a "judgment" (Luke 12:13-14). The reason was because there were judges in courts who could and should make the determination in such cases. The early apostles took the teachings of Jesus and said that honor was due Magistrates and others in authority. They were not written off as hopelessly entangled in the power of evil.

Another way of putting this is to say that Jesus is not dealing with the legal process or with the process of discernment to follow God's wisdom and will in difficult human affairs. This saying has to do with the sort of harsh opinions we form of one another where we are censorious. He is ending the habit of some who are constantly critical, always able to find something wrong in what others think, say or do. He is telling us to "mind our own business."

In the context the first business at hand is to be critically discerning of our own faults. Until we have removed the log in our own eye, we cannot see clearly enough to remove the speck in the eye of our fellow human. The thrust of this accompanying comment shows that we are not to live in denial or false blindness. We are to see the speck in the eye of our brother or sister. Our first item of business is to tend to our own faults. We need to see where we have shortcomings and deal decisively with them before we pretend we have competence to aid others with faults.

Love is not blind. Neither is it an unrelenting hunt for the faults to correct in those we are to love. We see what is there because we have discernment and wisdom. But we also know our place within the community and in our relationships with others. We are not called to correct all we think is wrong or not as excellent as it could be. We are called to love. We are called to correct our own performance. Each of us is the servant of Jesus Christ. Before him we stand or fall. It is not our job to set everyone straight on exactly what even this Sermon means and how it applies to them.

Already Jesus has taught us that outward acts of piety can be either good or bad, depending upon the intention that motivates them. But we know our own intentions (most of the time) and only poorly see the intentions of others except in very clear situations. If the trumpets are sounding before a person announces their generosity, it is clear the motivation is "to be seen by others" and not to be seeking the approbation of God. When it comes to judging others, we are at a disadvantage.

"Certain actions, then, are indifferent and we do not know the intention behind them,

because it can be either good or bad, and it would be rash to pass judgment on them and especially to condemn them.”³⁷⁸

The thrust of this whole section is that we are not God and therefore cannot pronounce judgment that is fair and balanced upon others. We do not know their motives nor their past history. Nor are we to be hypocrites who criticize others for the very things we do ourselves. Too often what we see in others as faults are the projections of faults within our own person. Projection allows us the pleasure of self-righteousness while putting others down.

This is a generosity of another sort—not financial but relational. Here the evil eye is one that sees only the tragic shortcomings of others and condemns them for it. We are to know that God will hold us accountable for the very standards we use to judge others by—measure for measure. Still, in human affairs a certain sort of discerning judgment must happen. But how? For what purpose? When? Jesus does not leave the question hanging.

When we are told our manner of judgment and our standard of measuring others will be the way we are judged and the measure used on us, it is not referencing our rashness or false measures. God does not repay us with rash judgments or false measurements. Rather the point is that when we judge without mercy, we will be judged without mercy. It is a similar reciprocity underlined previously about forgiveness. Our unforgiveness of our fellow human will find its twin in God’s unforgiveness of us.

[1] Matthew 7:3-5: The speck and the log

This communicates the same truth in picture form. The contrast is between the speck and the log. We cannot help making distinctions and evaluations. We must assess religions to see which hold truth and to what degree they express the truth. We must measure others in terms of their performance against standards. How else will we know to say, “Well done!” As a teacher I must certify that a student has learned a given subject matter at a C or B or A level. None of this violates what Jesus is seeking to end.

The speck and log attack another sort of issue. They have to do with faults and failures that are rooted in character and habit. They have to do with the relationship between how I view myself and how I view my brother or sister in faith. Just as we are to be generous with our money, we are to be generous in our evaluation of others. This is not a matter of not seeing what is obviously there. We are to live in the light and by the light.

What Jesus gets at is the habit we have of seeing the best in ourselves and the worst in others. There are those who think everyone around them does it poorly or wrong. “If you want it done right, do it yourself!” We know people who can find nothing to praise, nothing to admire in others. Their narcissism and insecurity lead them to inflating other’s faults and their own virtues. There are those who seem to act as though there is a spiritual gift of correcting others and they have the calling to use it. They are eager, conscientious, well-meaning and self-righteous, censorious people.

The difficult balance is negotiated finally by acquiring the habit of taking one’s own shortcomings seriously (“logs”) and being generous when dealing with the faults of others (“splinters”). Self-examination and decisive action regarding one’s own habits and responses is

³⁷⁸ Augustine, *Works Vol. I/15 and I/16*. (p. 100). Further, Augustine notes: “Let us not censure those things whose motivations we do not know, nor censure those that are manifest as if despairing of improvement...” (p. 101).

the beginning point (but not the end). Only then can one begin to be helpful in seeing quite clearly what the fault is (truly is) in the other. Only then can we be helpful to the other person. Only then can we receive help from others.

How do you get something out of your eye, once there? Especially in a culture where mirrors provide only a dim reflection, not the clear (even magnified) image of our modern mirrors? You need a friend to help you, someone with good eyesight and steady hand. Dealing with faults is frequently a matter needing the compassionate help of another. If the eye irritated by the speck needs help, how much more the eye with a log jam in it!

Jesus aims at an end to unfair and uncharitable judging and at a beginning to the sort of help that will remove specks from the eyes of us all. One of the troubles we face each day comes in the form of people with annoying (even harmful) faults. What do we do with them? I may not be troubled about what tomorrow may bring, but I am disturbed by the performance and attitude of the person beside me today! What do I do about that trouble?

Jesus tells us not to leave it alone. Whatever we dish out to such people will be reflected in what is dished out to us. We might take the passive to mean, "God will deal with us on the same basis we deal with others." So, if we do not forgive those who harm us, then God will not forgive us. If we are harsh and judgmental of others, God will be harsh and judgmental with us. But it might also include what we get back from other humans. We all know that the censorious, hyper-critical people elicit a similar response from others in their circle of influence. After a while we don't like to be around them and judge them as difficult and unhappy people.

The spiral of judgment is broken by people who are generous and merciful with others (they are generous and merciful only when they see they have grounds for a more serious and severe assessment). When they can create a climate where others are secure enough to let someone reach into their eye to remove a speck, then this sort of judging is at an end. It begins always with oneself and the willingness to remove from one's own character the faults and shortcomings that create trouble for oneself and others.

Where mercy and forgiveness are thin, faults are thick. Jesus is undermining the spirit of condemnation, crusade and "charity."

The **spirit of condemnation** is the hyper-critical damning of others. It is writing them off because of this or that fault. Paul may well have done this to John Mark in his disagreeable argument with Barnabas about his suitability for continued ministry. There is a fine line between the judgment that condemns and the judgment that discerns. We must be able to weigh the attributes and performance capabilities of others lest we rely on those whose weaknesses will destroy an entire endeavor. That is different than labelling them as unfit and cutting them off or assassinating their character behind their backs. The spirit of the community will not survive condemnation if it flourishes under some "banner" of seeking God's righteousness or hunger for justice.

The **spirit of crusade** is an even more insidious fault. It finds root in all sorts of contexts and guises. On the one hand, we must draw boundaries around the movement of which we are a part. Christian identity cannot tolerate an undiscerning toleration of any and all sorts of sins and sinners. Forgiveness and mercy do not mean legitimating unrepentant or repetitive sin. High standards of morality and doctrine are crucial for the health and viability of Christian identity. On the other hand, we must live with one another in love, mercy and forgiveness. How we draw the boundaries and what we do with those who cross them is equally important.

Crusaders see themselves as called to be champions and warriors for the sake of gospel truth

and righteousness. Even when they do not take up arms against the “infidels,” they may struggle verbally and ecclesiastically in ways that are damaging to the quality of the life of the Body of Christ. These are people who have not carefully read the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13). They see their contribution as the uprooting of evil persons within the community. They may be televangelists who slander fellow Christians on national TV or simply the colleague who labels a fellow Christian “heretic.” Their condemnation is an active, “heroic” form of damning. It not only condemns but hates and destroys. They are the professional purifiers of the community.

The **spirit of “charity”** (notice the quotation marks) is to be distinguished from the spirit of Christ’s charity. Love is always our gift and our task. Yet there is a perversion of love that flies under the banner of loving helpfulness. There is an aggressive and eager “helpfulness” that feeds off insecurity and self-righteousness. There are people who see their life calling as the removing of logs and specks from those who surround them (this is not limited to its stereotyped missionary superiority complex). They always know the right way to do it, the right attitude to exhibit, the correct way Christian virtue walks. They are eager to help younger Christians, younger churches, immature movements. Their “gift” of discernment and their “love” and “maturity” is experienced by others precisely as a form of the rigid, nitpicking, self-righteous, overbearing, controlling, know-it-all judging that Jesus is banishing.

The goal is helpfulness that sweeps away the hindering, blinding, abrasive splinters of moral and doctrinal laxity. We are to be salt and light. How do we keep from losing our saltiness, if not in part by others helping us remove the impurities that leach into our lives? How do we shine brightly if we begin to mix darkness and light? We need one another because of the logs and splinters that are stuck in our eyes. Jesus helps us begin to learn how we can create the atmosphere and context where mercy, justice and love can coexist in a community that gives itself above all else to God’s Kingdom and righteousness.

Jesus limits the spirit and practice of purification within the community of the King. Judgmentalism, carping criticism, back-biting, character assassination, even overzealous “helpfulness” in correcting others are banished. Does that mean there is no limit on the spirit and practice of mercy, forgiveness and love? If confronting sin has limits, are there limits on not confronting sin or shortcomings? The following saying brings us up short if we think we can never say, “There’s a speck! Let’s see if we can remove it.”

In sum, we find ourselves in the condition where we need to see into the character of those about us as well as into our own. Discernment is to be cultivated and utilized. The following metaphor about dogs and pigs dramatizes the importance of such discernment. (Prov. 9:7-9 “Whoever corrects a scoffer wins abuse; whoever rebukes the wicked gets hurt. A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you. Give instruction to the wise and they will become wiser still...”)

Our tendency is not to see into someone’s character so that we see the good with the bad, the foolish with the wise—all in proportion, all clearly and fairly. Our tendency is to fix on the faults and magnify them. We examine our colleague’s faults with a microscope and our own through the wrong end of a telescope. Theirs appear as Alpine mountains while the same shortcoming in our character is hardly a bump in the road. We have two names for all character afflictions. The minimizing or dismissing one we use for ourselves; the ugly, magnifying one for our colleague.

Psychologists remind us that we often see our own vices in the behavior of others. The need for justification is so strong within that we project our own sins without. Looking into the eye of another, what we see as a speck of sawdust may only be the reflection of the log sticking out of

our own.

The absurdity of Jesus' picture suggests a blind ophthalmologist practicing medicine. The log is so large and obstructive that we cannot genuinely see the speck in another's eye. To see a tiny piece of sawdust requires careful examination. Additionally, we must see clearly. Our first problem is not the irritating and damaging character fault of the other. It is our own folly and sin—which we are prone to project onto others.

In beginning with ourselves we learn what pain comes from confronting our own beloved evils. It enables us to realize how tender and painful self-awareness can be. That pain will gentle our rash haste in pointing out to others the faults of their ways. In removing those pampered pets from our inner world, we discover how merciful and forgiving God is toward us. God's mercy to us empowers us to be merciful and forgiving toward those who struggle with putting to death the sinful inhabitants of their inner world as well.

Only the wounded healer can heal in this sort of operation. Only those who have had the radical surgery on their own eyes will have the gentleness and steadiness to help others remove specks from their eyes. There is a bond of understanding and credibility that springs up between those who have walked the same difficult path. The cancer-surviving doctor can relate to the cancerous patient in a unique way. She will hear the doubts and fears, the exhaustion and anger, the longings and hopes when they do not even come to the surface in the patient's words.

The removal of the log from our own eye gives us more than the ability to see the character of others clearly. It is the basis for an ability to heal. No more magnifying the faults of others or peering into an eye and not seeing the beauty and marvel that is marred by the splinter. We will see the whole and not the part; the good and not just the bad. We will see it in proportion and fairly. In seeing the splinter in the other it will not be part of a self-congratulation that our eye has nothing in it by contrast.

To live a life of abundant righteousness requires that we remove the unrighteousness that stands in the way. Jesus did not suggest such a task would be easy or automatic. Some in our day suppose that "who they are" justifies no challenge to their inner demons. They identify their nature with what has distorted it and declare it a creation of God rather than evil. Such fundamental misperception leads to the condition Jesus warned against: an eye that confirms the reality that the so-called light within is in fact darkness.

There are those who tell us some eyes just naturally have specks and logs in them. We should not attempt to remove such matters but celebrate such eyes with the specks and logs as essentially beautiful and good. They are even the things that make us really and truly "human." Those who seek to remove them from their own eye—or from the eyes of others are guilty of "eyeism"—supposing there is only one sort of eye that is good and healthy! "Judge not" they say in their blindness.

Jesus does not develop the figure in this bizarre way. He turns to another sort of metaphoric picture to indicate that there are those who will not and cannot be helped. Seeing this indicates a clear eye.

[2] Matthew 7:6: Dogs and Pigs

If there ever was discernment and evaluation (with judgment), here it is! One has to distinguish what is holy from the unholy, what is of great value from worthless and who are dogs and pigs. Whatever Jesus teaches us about judging others, the context makes it clear that we are

not being given a moral or critical thinking lobotomy.

Jesus himself gives voice to very strong conclusions about logs in the eyes of the religious elite in his setting. These categories and conclusions show that Jesus' words on judging are not to be taken to the extreme of making no discriminate conclusions about people with whom we must deal. He will warn us against "false prophets," again showing that spiritual discernment is not the issue here. Love, justice and mercy are at stake in how we approach shortcomings, in ourselves as well as in our fellow humans. There are times and places where we must terminate conversations and even relationships.

What is not clear is exactly when, where and who! This is a passage where the proper high context is unclear. Hence this communication's meaning is less clear than much of the rest of the Sermon. As animals, dogs were considered unclean. They were normally not kept as pets or used for hunting as we do in modern time. They were wild animals, living off carrion and scraps they could find.

Pigs were categorized as unclean by Old Testament law. People do not take the sacrificially dedicated food stuff and feed it to the dogs. Nor would they offer pigs something such as the highly valued pearls. There is a gross incongruity in such behavior. The priests who had meat not burned in a day at the Temple would not throw it on the garbage heap where scavenging dogs might find it. It was holy and needed not to be desecrated.

Furthermore, there is danger in such behavior. The animals might treat such highly valued things as worthless ("trample them underfoot"). They might scorn and repudiate them. Then they might turn upon the givers and rip them to shreds. The end result would be the spoiling of the gift and the wounding of the giver. But who is the giver and what are the gifts being offered? What is the metaphor and its meaning?

The immediate context that precedes this has been noted. Could the holy, valuable gift be the removing of the speck once one has removed the log from one's own eye? Many of us have known the extraordinary sensitivities that are activated when seeking to correct another's shortcoming. Sometimes help offered is thrown back in our face. We find we have made an enemy rather than a friend. We can come without judgmentalism, in humility and gentleness, according to the spirit and pattern of the Scripture. Still there are those who will savage the attempt, reject the teaching of Scripture and turn to attacking Christians as hypocrites and scoundrels. There are some, even in the faith community, who refuse correction.

The context following this saying turns to questing for very valuable things—the good gifts of the Kingdom and God's righteousness. In striving first for that we are assured that God will give us the good things we ask. We may be evil, but even we provide good things for our own children when they ask. There is an appropriate fit between what people seek and what they are given. What do dogs and swine seek? What sorts of things are appropriate to offer to them? Jesus says, don't give the holy or pearls, since neither is appropriate, neither will be received as an authentic gift.

Perhaps the meaning runs along this channel: There is a great division between authentic and spurious disciples, some of whom are dogs, swine, and even ravenous wolves (vs. 15). We cannot contain them within the community of faith, as though they might be allowed to handle and manage the holy and valuable things committed into its trust. Do so and the community is opened to a desecration of that which stands at its center. Instead of the true and living God being hallowed, there will come a dramatic condemnation of the very God we hallow. These will turn on authentic disciples and savage them. The things of greatest value in the community of

faith will be despised and held up to ridicule.

If this is right, then this metaphor is another pictorial way of saying that “judging not” is not an unlimited norm but is applicable only within a larger set of norms and a broader base of practical wisdom. We are to discern whether offering what is at the core of the holy and the valuable to certain persons will only lead to even stronger rejection and may even elicit persecution. What appear initially to be hard and fast rules, turn out to require wisdom and prudence when implementing them.

Such an interpretation leads into some of the other deductions drawn from this passage. The most common has been to take the holy and the pearls within the context of evangelism (and at times within civic righteousness).

The evangelism interpretation notes that we cannot and ought not impose the gospel on others. People are not all alike in their responsiveness or openness to the gospel. Jesus taught his disciples to leave villages that rejected them, dusting off their sandals and robes as they left. Paul and the early apostles performed that very symbolic act on occasion. There are times when the harshness and rigidity of the rejection of the attempt at evangelism is such that we do best to terminate it. Wisdom is important even in an evangelism that seeks to call everyone everywhere to enter God’s Kingdom and live by his righteousness.

Sometimes silence is the best response (look at Jesus’ silence before the “Jewish” King Herod who had executed John the Baptist after listening to him on several occasions). There are people primed to ridicule, to mock and argue, to shame and humiliate. Normally it does not make a lot of sense to engage them in direct evangelism. The light in them is darkness. There is little to do in the way of removing specks from their eyes so they can see clearly. There may be settings where conversation can be constructive and productive. But it may not be in public and may not be now.

The civic righteousness deduction considers it the church’s responsibility to ensure right living by everyone in the community. So, it imposes the standards of the Sermon on believer and unbeliever alike. When it has the position of power, it seeks to be the righteous city set on a hill. Yet, just as we are not to impute sin to others in a judgmental way, so we are not to impose holiness on others in a foolish manner. Jesus’ saying undercuts the zeal of the righteous from subjecting its essence to the treatment of “the unclean.” People are not made better simply by legislation and enforcement, however much we need good laws in our communities.

There is a delicate balance through this whole Sermon. Striving for God’s Kingdom living and righteousness is not obvious or simple. We must grow into it. We will find ourselves again and again asking, seeking and finding because we will constantly be in relationships and contexts that are far beyond our understanding or inner response habits. To be salt but not acid or tasteless crystals means we must retain the qualities Jesus puts at the center of our character and community. The cross-pressures will push us off the narrow path to the right or to the left.

The community must be loving and merciful, full of forgiveness, meekness, peacemaking and hunger for righteousness. Yet it must be full of those things, not of bitter people who are judgmental, or the adulterers and murderers, the covetous and ambitious for “the better things of life.” There is a balance between discipline and discipleship. We are always on the path of learning. We always learn too slowly and even contradict by our conduct what we have learned. The dogs, wolves and pigs must be discerned. Otherwise, there will be hell to pay.

When does mercy become the hand maiden of lax tolerance of dogs and ravenous wolves who destroy faith and lead many into sin? When does striving for righteousness become

judgmentalist nitpicking that is self-righteous and unmerciful? At times we don't know when we hear the growling of the professional purifiers, savaging the flock or the growling of the false prophets also destroying the flock. The professional lovers allow the corruption and destruction of the flock by the wolves; the professional purifiers turn themselves into dogs and swine who savage the flock in the name of the purity of the community.

It is no wonder then that we are driven to asking, seeking and knocking. We do not have sufficient wisdom to draw the lines between virtue and vice or balance on the difficult and narrow when the winds shift. We are not to suppose that a single tune will do for all occasions nor that the same amount of salt in the same place will do for all dishes. What we need to do and say changes as we find ourselves with people of different sorts of need and maturity. Jesus tells us to ask, seek and knock—and assures us that the goodness we need will be supplied.

[3] Matthew 7:7-11: Ask, Seek, Knock – God is good

The birds scurry about from the dawning light of day to find and take in the provision of God for their well-being. We humans who serve the best Master and seek to lay up treasure in the heavenlies also must scurry about. God provisions us but does not turn us into spiritual slugs or passive infants waiting for a cosmic parent to bring the bottle. We too have work to do in seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness. We too must take decisive steps to grow beyond our little faith. What is it we are to do?

Jesus teaches us that prayer is subverted when it is used as a means for fortifying one's honor status, one's reputation as highly spiritual. It is also subverted when we treat God as reluctant or ignorant. It is not a matter of how many words we use or how long we pray that is crucial. Sharing our resources with the poor and fasting are also subverted when they are engaged in as "duty" or as reputation builders. He teaches a few things important for us to be doing—being generous, praying to God in heaven, fasting. The Sermon teaches a number of things important that we not be doing—serving mammon, taking anxious care over our physical necessities, being unhelpfully condemning of others for their faults, giving holy and valuable things to any and all indiscriminately.

Now we learn more about the passion and drive that is to infuse our actions. God is not ignorant or reluctant. That does not mean we are to develop a lifestyle that takes him for granted. Faith believes what is not seen. It believes in the goodness of God and the fact that God rewards those who seek him. Seeking God's good gifts are part of receiving them. So, we cannot simply mention them once and be done with it, as though faith always was complete and need only mention the need. God is not a cosmic servant. Part of the meaning of prayer is its location within a life that is actively seeking fellowship with God and coming again and again for the good gifts God wants to give out of his fatherly heart. N.T. Wright comments:

“But, for most of us, the problem is not that we are too eager to ask for the wrong things. The problem is that we are not nearly eager enough to ask for the right things.”³⁷⁹

This text raises many questions and issues for Christians. Its sweeping claims and promises seems to reach far beyond our own experience and that of Christians down through the centuries. How is it that we are given the guarantee that God will hear our prayers as we come by this broad and commodious road? What does it mean that “everyone” who asks will receive? Are there no

³⁷⁹Wright, *Matthew Part 1*. p. 72.

conditions? No qualifications? Does this include the foxhole desperation of the “dogs and swine” of the preceding paragraph—or the hypocritical religious showoff asking in prayer on the street corner?

We have to shout to ourselves again and again: context, context, **context**. We cannot suppose these words drop out of the blue and have no larger context that give us a sense of their meaning and function. If we start to insist that “everyone” can be understood as a theological universalist does, then we have simply removed it from its context and the larger thrust of Jesus’ warnings that not even everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the Kingdom of God, when they have chosen not to live now by Kingdom norms.

At the least we can say the function of this text is to encourage (infuse courage) into the disciples as they live and pray. It takes a sort of holy boldness to come to God with the variety of issues that confront us or to come again and again in seeking the holiness and forgiveness we need. We can wither under the firepower of this Sermon, increasingly realizing how far short we are of the divine will. It is so easy to come to God when we are superficial and not conscious of the logs in our eyes. We aren’t even aware of how unclean and unfaithful we are, how little our faith and tiny our hunger for God’s Kingdom and righteousness. So, we waltz into the place of prayer and strut about in private as the Pharisees did in public.

When we realize what the will of God is, what his plan is for the redemption of the world, what sort of person he intends us to be, then we begin to wonder how we are tolerable to God. Jesus gives us an analogy to help us overcome our fears and illusions here. Just as our parents’ love covers a multitude of our shortcomings in mercy, so too does our heavenly Father. We are selfishly evil and prone to see the logs of failure in our children sometimes more sharply than in others. Yet when they come and ask for food, we do not give them stones or snakes. We know how to give good things and delight in doing so. How much more the one who is truly good and without an atom of evil?

John Stott and others underline several issues that arise due to the phraseology and thrust of this passage. They are worthy of stating and exploring at this point:

(1). Does this text contradict or stand in tension with the earlier teaching about prayer?

The present imperatives used for ask, seek, knock seem to indicate repeated and persistent prayer. Yet Jesus has undermined prayer that operates according to “many” words or vain repetition of the same formula again and again. Are not these words teaching us to do what he has already told us not to do? Is this not suggesting God is ignorant of what we need or must be bullied out of a reluctance to give us what we need?

This is not the only place that persistent prayer is taught. Even in the Old Testament we find that God’s people are portrayed as crying out for deliverance for some time without relief. Faith is no less faith when it must wait upon God’s timing and perfect answer. Yet it can seem, as it did to the psalmist that God is taking his good time or maybe is not even listening!

Repeated and persistent prayer can be a form of faithful prayer rather than merely vain repetition. The reason it happens is twofold. This is not a matter of our “prevailing with God” (as if God’s reluctance must be overcome). It is a matter that we are still in the process of being prevailed with by God. There are times when nothing less than long, repeated, deeply felt prayer is essential to the work God wishes to do within us. The evil inside us and about us is firmly rooted and strongly oppositional to the will of God on earth. We cannot suppose we can wave some Magic wand of prayer and all is settled. Our words and our inner emotions and priorities

may be mismatched as we begin to pray. Only persistent prayer realigns us.

Even Daniel had to wait in prayer for three weeks before he had knowledge that his prayer was heard (Daniel 10). The resistance in the heavenlies meant the answer was some time coming. Nor do we suppose Daniel's weeks of mourning and prayer were wasted, even though his prayer was heard the first time he shot it up to heaven. His faith was as firm and authentic the twentieth day as it was the first—but he was not the same person to whom the angel finally appeared.

“Some of the wisest thinkers of today's church have cautiously concluded that, as God's kingdom comes, it isn't God's will to bring it all at once. We couldn't bear it if he did. God is working like an artist with difficult material; and prayer is the way some of that material co-operates with the artist instead of resisting him. How that is so we shall never fully understand until we see God face to face. That it is so is one of the most basic Christian insights.”³⁸⁰

Secondly, the persistence commanded is one of the means by which we learn to submit to the will of God. Gethsemane portrays even Jesus repeating the same words three times. He was seeking the will of God while asking to have the tremendous pain of his coming execution removed. It could not be, given God's loving wisdom. The will of God was done but it included this horrific crucifixion that followed Jesus' own persistent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We find ourselves in a fallen world that is confronted by the redemptive activity of God. There are numerous times when we pray intelligently and faithfully for what we know is included in God's finished work in Christ. We long for a cancer to be healed, for a friend to be saved, for funding for a justice project to appear. We know these things are aligned with God's full goodness and Kingdom conditions.

Yet we also know that we are on a road that takes us through the valley of the shadow of death. We are not yet removed from the sufferings and troubles of this fallen world. Cancers still remove dear ones. Friends remain obdurate and strangely unresponsive. Money flows into gambling and unnecessary luxuries while our Kingdom projects shrivel. Still, we persist because we know what God wants in the larger scheme of things. Frequently, we don't know what his goodness and wisdom want here and now. Persistent prayer is a means by which we learn to submit our ideas and emotions to God's very best for us.

What turns prayer words into vain repetition in the end is the sort of relational context within which we pray. If we come with the deep experiential knowledge that our God is both good and wise, then we will pray with all our might for the good things our wisdom suggests. We do not come because we consider God ignorant or reluctant. It is in fact the opposite. We are ignorant and need to learn. We are reluctant to embrace the fullness of God's wise goodness—still supposing we know how properly to discern good and evil. So, we must ask, seek and knock—in the confidence that God hears and showers us with good gifts. He is a rewarder of those who seek him. Persistent prayer is seeking prayer.

(2). This suggests that “everyone” who asks will receive. Does this not contradict our experience—many ask and do not get what they ask, even vital, mature Christians? Is not prayer actually unnecessary since many get without asking—and unproductive because many ask and never receive what they want?

³⁸⁰Wright, *Matthew, Part 1*, p. 73

First, “everyone” is an absolute for a relative. James and others recognize that we can ask and not receive because we ask for the wrong things from the wrong motives. One might think of the boozy gambler at the slot machines in Atlantic City whispering under his or her breath: “God, give me a big payoff.” Their master may well be Mammon, not the true and living God. They pray with the voice of greed. Or the voice of lust expressing itself in a prayer to get a date with so-and-so. What they seek is the status of a date with a popular person or the opportunity to seduce someone particularly desirable. They are not seeking the Kingdom of God as they invoke the name of God.

“Everyone” in the context is referring to every single disciple. Prayer and its answers are not specially designated by God for the “saints.” One does not have to be perfect or meritorious to come to God in prayer. But one must be able to call upon God as “Our Father.” The relationship precedes the request. It is true that God on occasion answers the prayers of those who come in ways other than that of discipleship. God hears the prayer of a sinner calling for salvation. God even heard the prayers of the god-fearer Cornelius who needed to hear the words of salvation. But that is not the central point of these words.

“Everyone” of us listening to the voice of Jesus are in view. No one is excluded from this possibility of living faith. None are beyond the scope of this intimate experience with God. We can ask and be given his answer. We can seek—and find God. We can knock—and have the door to a new world opened to us.

Second, many people do get what they ask and seek without calling upon God. Much of our own life is supplied by our own planning, sweat and effort. John Stott says we must distinguish between the goods of Creation (sunshine, water, the earth’s bounty) and the goods of Redemption (salvation, holiness, forgiveness and deliverance).³⁸¹ To everyone, nature’s bounty is given along with their bodily historical existence. Harvests and babies, health and healing, creativity and pleasures—all come indiscriminately from God’s mercy and kindness. These are good gifts that come from God whether people are aware of him or grateful for them.

Redemptive goods are not distributed in that way. We are saved only by calling upon the name of the Lord. We experience forgiveness by asking for it from a merciful God. We are made holy and given the gift of the Holy Spirit only when we seek God. We enter the Kingdom of God only by knocking on the door that leads into it. So, it is necessary for us to call upon God in prayer.

To be sure, once we know God in spirit and truth, we also pray even for the Creational goods. We praise God for them and seek their distribution to all who are in need. We cannot any longer be indifferent or insensitive to the faithfulness of God in the abundance of Creation. Necessity adheres to these matters because of our knowledge of the source of all-natural gifts and graces.

Third, prayer is not shown to be unproductive simply because of the brute fact that some keenly felt and deeply desired prayers are left unanswered. We need not revisit the seeming “no” answers to prayers that are unaligned with the will or character of God. Unfortunately, sometimes people “pray” for something evil and get it. There is a sort of “productivity” they regret (as did the Israelites in praying for meat in the wilderness). In ignorance or hardness of heart we can and do ask for things that are foolish and wrong. Then we ought to desire a God who is right where we are wrong and does not give us the stone or snake we ask.

What about the unanswered asking for something obviously good, something numerous Christians of wise and mature demeanor agree is worth asking and seeking? What then? Here we

³⁸¹ Stott, *Sermon*, p. 187

are at the place of mystery. God is good and wise. His thoughts are above our own, even of the best and most mature of us. All of us would have agreed on Jesus' deliverance from the cross to continue teaching and healing. But God had something better in mind. We hardly ever know what that good is. But we know the God who has it in mind always gives what is good.

(3). Is this teaching about our method and manner in prayer? Do we not receive because we do not ask, seek and knock with enough passion and persistence? Is this the how of prayer, just as the Lord's model prayer is the what?

We should already know from all that Jesus teaches about prayer that the how is not the critical matter. What lies at the roots of effective prayer are the "whoms": the loving God and the righteous (or unrighteous) disciple. Prayer is not a magical matter. We might suppose we haven't asked with the right words or the right methodology or the right formula when there seems to be no answer. Jesus tells us later what is critical: asking in accordance with the will of God, not the how of prayer.

The Lord's prayer suggests this by its very content. We begin with a focus on the most important issue of all: the proper acknowledging of the majesty and dignity of God. Our prayers are genuine and valid when they are placed within the world of God's honor and will. We pray aright, however stumbling and unclear are words might be, when we pray because we love God and long for his glory. That's the beginning and the end of the matter. All the other matters are deductions from this one premise.

Why three words instead of one? It may be that such multiplicity suits the strong encouragement to pray we find here. We are too timid and of such small faith that we need to be told again and again to come to God in prayer. One word would have been enough to teach us that we are to pray. Yet we are given three words—and given them twice each. Jesus wants us to know with our inner emotions that God is waiting for us to come and come again that we might receive from him the good things that he wishes to bestow upon us.

It is not how we come, if by that one means that there is a set way of asking, seeking and knocking. It is that we come—with all we are and as we are. Our problem frequently is that we do not know what to ask. The situation surrounding us is grave and our faults hang about our neck so heavily. So, we need to seek the knowledge of the will of God. We've not paid enough attention to it. We are still unbalanced and ignorant. So, we ask for the wrong things and discover we've not yet sought the knowledge of the right.

Jesus sends us packing to seek the face and knowledge of God. Only when we've sought and found will we know what we must and can ask and receive. Our notions of God and what God is doing are fragmented and foreign to the reality of the operations of the Kingdom of God. We do not hunger for it. Nor do we passionately seek the Kingdom and its righteousness. We seek many things to consume with our expansive covetousness. We seek a dozen things in the place of God and good things apart from God. Our seeking is often the wandering of a sheep from the way until it is lost.

So, Christ calls us to knock. How many doors and hallways have we explored, only not to find God? How many doors opened with the beckoning of wonder and adventure, only to lead us to a dead end for hope and aspiration? Knock and keep knocking. There is a gateway that leads to life. There is a door that opens onto the face and future of God. There is a door that already is unlocked by God's merciful forgiveness. Jesus invites us to enter the Kingdom of God, to find the one door that unlocks the mystery and meaning of all other doors. In the next section, the

“door” we need knock on is a gate-door: the narrow gate that opens up to the narrow way leading to life.

Why must we do this again and again? Because our needs are not remedied with one answer, with one discovery, with one opened door. Our sins do not leave us alone, nor do the daily troubles that come our way or our need for daily bread. As often as the sun rises, so often are we to seek the face of God. As often as we are called to be salt and light, so often are we called to seek the open door for a new audience with our heavenly Father. As often as we need to be forgiven or delivered, as often as we need to have a log removed from our eye or need strength and steadiness to remove a speck from another eye, as often as we have an unruly part of our person that needs removal—so often do we need to ask, seek and knock.

There are two actors in this passage. We are told what we are to do: ask, seek, knock. We are told that God’s work is to answer, let himself be found, and to open the door. This takes a great burden off our back. Our success in these matters is not dependent upon ourselves but upon God. Still, we must act.

This is not a matter of finding the right moment or mood, the best ambience or attitude. We are to put ourselves into the asking, seeking and knocking. We are not told we need to have the answers when we come. Had we the answers we would not be on the quest. Were we already on the inside we would not be knocking to hear “Enter.” Had we found what we are looking for we would not still be restless in our work and relationships.

There is deep within our personalities a memory telling us our living does not yet touch the fullness of what is meant for human life. We wander and wonder and worry and lose the élan we once had as children. The joy and hope, the excitement and longing turn into the ashes of adult cynicism. We have tasted it all, seen it all, been there, tried that and are blasé. Yet we are not satisfied. There is a still small voice within telling us something is gravely wrong.

Jesus comes to us and says: ask, seek, knock. There is more than you have yet experienced. There is more than you can grow out of your own resources and capabilities. There is something that must come to you only as a gracious and free gift from beyond. God has stored up things your wildest imagination cannot encompass. It does not respond to worry, to selfishness, to lust, to hatred. It cannot be had by perfectionistic judgmentalism. Nor does it come to the compulsively religious. It is not the result of intense piety nor the product of practiced indifference.

Jesus is telling us we need not worry whether there will be an answer, a finding or an open door. God’s goodness guarantees that. Jesus speaks from the lengthy experience of one who has asked, sought and knocked. This is not the trembling excitement of the scientist who is on a frontier of ignorance, engaging an experiment whose results are unknown and uncertain. This is the confidence of one who has done this very thing hundreds and thousands of times and knows exactly what the results are.

It is not enough to say that there are many who have done these very things without a reply, a successful discovery or an opening of the door. Everyone has prayed at some time or other—every skeptic, atheist, moral degenerate or terrified victim—and not heard an answer. How is it that Jesus can give this promise so glibly and generously?

Helmut Thielicke relays the comments of Rilke: that this telephone called ‘Jesus’ has been picked up by many and dialed. When they said, “Hello, who’s there,” no one answered.³⁸² Yet

³⁸²Thielicke, *Sermon*, p. 166.

we must ask when they dialed whether they dialed themselves rather than Jesus. Were they so engrossed in their own agenda, their own fears and ambitions, their own lusts and goals that they were simply talking to themselves over the hum of an unconnected call? Were they seeking Jesus or their promotion, their vindication against an enemy, their runaway teenager, the success of bypass surgery after a life of gluttony?

Prayer that does not break the circle of self-concern does not ask from God the good things he has to bestow. The asking does not rise beyond the ceiling for it is still within the walls of our own anxiety and ambition. It still is no more than a medicine for our own anxiety, a truck to secure more clothing and better food, a sword to strike against others in the struggle for place and honor.

When we are told to knock, we are taught that there is a door into the presence of God. We are not in a world where knocking is not needed, as if we could simply walk into the presence of God in nature or in great art or music. We cannot leap into the fullness of God as though he were present in every brook that babbles and bird that sings. God's majesty and holiness is such that his bright glory hides him in light unapproachable. Were we to spring into his presence, we would wither like flowers in an atomic furnace. We come through the door of Christ. His name is the calling card that gives us entrance. Knocking is the sign of respect, the acknowledgement that we do not have the right simply to enter or the key to unlock it.

It is the person and work of Christ who gives us the right to knock and enter. Were we to come into the actual presence of the holy God with our unclean hands and lips, we would not find ourselves in a comfortable fellowship of likeminded. The terror of being unholy in the presence of holiness, the shame of coming before radiant glory in ragged wretchedness, the shock of finding ourselves face to face with a stranger whom we have harmed would overwhelm us.

When Jesus spoke of us in this passage, he drew an infinite distinction: "if you who are evil..." He did not say "we." He does not include himself in this evaluation of the human predicament. We are evil. Those words are like the great lock being shut on the heavy door of divine mysteries. Given that we are evil, how is it possible that we should know the majestic depths of a holy God? How can we peel the scales from blind eyes and see the invisible who hides from the gaze of sinful humans?

How can we penetrate the jungle of vines and undergrowth in the luxuriant forest called religion? There are so many thousands of miles, such meandering rivers and dangerous creatures, a climate so hot and debilitating. Where do we begin to search when we do not even know what we are looking for? We are evil and no longer have a compass or a map.

How can we decide on which door to knock and what sort of tap we should give it? We are evil and lost in the great maze of hallways. Ariadne's thread is broken in a thousand places. The Minotaur hides quietly behind many doors. There are so many guidebooks, so much advice, so little time. We are evil. The words ring like the bells of the city signaling the descent of disaster. The army is at the gates and we have not yet found the door that leads to safety.

The bleakness of this distinction would plunge us into the hopelessness and helplessness of despair were it not for the one who stands on the other side. We are evil but he is not. That glorious reality is what signals the overcoming of all our difficulties and diffidence when being given this task of asking, seeking, knocking. He, the sinless one, sees with crystal clarity into the heart of heaven itself. He is the pioneer who hacks through all the pretensions and illusions of the vast undergrowth of human religion. He shows the way to the Father. His death on the cross opened the door to the holy of holies, shredding the veil of mystery. Through him and in him we

have the freedom to be confident that God will answer, will be found, and will open the door.

God wants to give us good things. Three of those good things are the joy of answers to persistent asking; the finding that comes from a hard search; the welcoming presence we experience when the door opens and we are invited to enter. Of what value is it to be told that we already are inside and simply need to change our mindset when we have not even knocked? With whom and with what are we inside? We are evil. Part of the insidious iniquity of it all comes when we are told our own psyche is the expression of the divine nature. God is already there within. When we no longer know the difference between communing with ourselves and with God, we are plunged back into blinding darkness.

The distance between us and the true God is measured by what God did to unlock the door slammed in his face in Eden. The whole story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the sound of the divine locksmith, turning the cylinders of the lock our sin placed on the door. That it took the incarnation, the suffering and death, the resurrection of the sinless One; that it required the sending of the Spirit, the martyrdoms of millions; that it took thousands of years and dozens of prophets and continues to consume the efforts and resources of millions—all of this is the demonstration of what this simple distinction is about: “you who are evil....”

Jesus does not focus on that reality. Even in our evil condition we remind ourselves of the goodness of God. In giving good things to our children we show we still understand the destiny for which we were created. We show that we are not without knowledge of this distinction. Jesus tells us, who are evil, to ask, seek and knock. His pledge is that we will receive only good from such activity.

[4] Matthew 7:12: The Golden rule

The first challenge is discerning the role the Golden Rule plays in the Sermon on the Mount. It is at the very end of the major body of the Sermon, ending the exposition of “the greater righteousness” that is demanded by the Law and the Prophets. One way to look at it as the summary principle that lies behind all in that central part of the Sermon: ‘here is the key, the sum of it all.’

Once we are led into the room beyond the door, we discover that it is not simply a tryst alone with God. The door does not lead to a place just of “Jesus and me.” We discover the large crowds of people who are seeking along with us. We are asked to serve them as we would want ourselves to be served, to do to them as we would want done to ourselves were we them. God’s promise of good things bestowed often is fulfilled by some agent who brings those gifts to us. We are claimed by Jesus to be such agents by this “golden rule.”

If we look at it in its immediate context, it comes right after the two sections on “judgment” and imperatives to keep asking, seeking and knocking on the basis that we have a good God who gives good things to those who ask. In this case what is emphasized is how we wish our fellow humans to treat us, given our “logs” and “specks” – what sorts of judging and measuring we want. Hungering after righteousness, we should want to eliminate the “logs” and “specks” of unrighteousness that infect our very being – and be glad to have others help us deal with them.

This rule is not something separate from what has been taught throughout this Sermon. This is a summary guide, a covering principle. It sets us free from the sort of legalisms that some attempt to read into Jesus’ teaching. Our sanctified imagination can roam into a variety of settings and personalities and discover how to be sensitive to others. Our compassion and mercy are put in the service of others. Only when we attempt to do for others what we would have them do for

us do we begin to discover how opaque their true needs are and unempathetic we are. This rule is not refuted by the oft heard: “Don’t do to others what you want them to do to you. They are different from you.” The golden rule is not a literalistic guide but a stimulus to give to others what is best for them by putting oneself in their shoes and situation.

Our asking, seeking and knocking is to include our fellow human being, especially our brothers and sisters in the faith. If we do not bring them with us in prayer, then we will not pray aright. We may be able only to ask for what we have in our heart. What Jesus asks is that we have others there. There is no genuine piety that does not include our fellow humans, no seeking God that does not include seeking the best for our fellow humans. Loving God and loving our neighbor may not be the same thing, but they are Siamese twins.

The golden rule is not a contentless, early anticipation of the Kantian universalizability principle. The imagination and empathy that are harnessed together for this labor of love are those that dwell in people who are light and salt. The neurotic may well dream of many “labors of love” for others that facilitate their neurosis and defend against responsible and realistic living. The sexually perverse may want others to inflict pain on them and wish to do the same. The code of criminals may well include lying as a way of avoiding implicating one’s comrade in crime. There are several things that will not pass muster even though the sinful “I” might wish others to do that for me.

The “me” involved is the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. This cannot justify a sort of calculative egoism and reciprocity. This rule is not offering a pragmatic psychologism for enhanced relationships with others. I do not sit down and ask: “What sorts of things do I want to experience? How can I get others to give that back to me?” Then I practice those things to elicit from others the sort of behavior I wish on the understanding that we generally get back what we give. Jesus is in the business of creating people who want to give others the experience of love, whether that is what they get back.

Nor is this a universal principle that is rooted in some natural law. There is a rationality here. It makes sense, if we accept the premise that we all are of equal dignity, that each ought to have equivalent consideration. I contradict myself when I argue for certain rights for myself but am unwilling to give the equivalent to others. Jesus does not appeal to self-evidence or universalizability. This is not offered as the fundamental premise for an ethical logic of human relationships.

Jesus says that this is the law and the prophets. What force to give to the “is” is problematic. He may have been saying, this is “the essence” of the law and prophets. Their center and significance are meant to bring about a sociality, an ensemble of human relationships in which sensitive, positive, active love is at work. If that is what results from an intense commitment to and practice of the law and the prophets, then it is being apprehended appropriately.

Or it could mean “the key to” the law and the prophets. The purpose of creation is not for us to be rule creators and keepers. We need them because of our sinful nature. We are created to live in covenant with other humans and God. The purpose and goal of these oracles of God is not to generate religious virtuosi or to test the ardor and persistence of those who seek after God. This is not a cosmic divine maze to see who can run it the quickest. These “rules” are there to help us get back to co-humanity.

There cannot be a rule for every situation and challenge of human relationship and life. The law and the prophets offer us an enormous body of revelation and rules. Even these are contextualized for the agrarian society as well as the cultural world and specific history Israel

found itself in. We work with the stories as well as the imperatives to move from then to now.

The golden rule is one of Jesus' ways of restating how we might make that translation. Not only do we need to know the law and the prophets, but we also need to know ourselves and the people with whom we intersect. This Sermon has a few focal instances of what Jesus says is God's righteous ways. As we think through them, we realize that the details are not spelled out. We are frequently given provocative guidelines for our behavior and speech. They turn us toward the inward roots of our action, demonstrating that God is not interested simply in rule-conforming behavior. The law gives us hundreds of patterns for our external action. These are important for they show us the sorts of things we will be doing if we are aligned with God's rule and righteousness.

God's full interest is not exhausted by the formal, legal conformity to all the patterns found in the law and prophets (though Jesus makes it clear that we are not to denigrate nor dismiss as insignificant even the smallest of matters dealt with in those writers). God's concern reaches into the wholeness and unity of our being. Our motives, feelings and attitudes are foundational. They are not the whole. Yet without them, we cannot do the will of God. Our calling embraces the wholeness of our personality. We can break the law of God while strictly following its detailed externalities. Nor can we appeal to our inner feelings as sufficient to not take the external actions (James shows us that sympathy for the poor needs action to be credible).

Hence, we need more than simply rules and regulations with illustrations. We need people who live by a dynamic different than simple rule conformity. Obedience is not exhausted when some action takes place. Attitude, motive, purpose, spirit, goal—we can think of a number of ways of underlining the interior life that supports the exterior speaking and acting. Integrity demands that we be single in our outlook and pure in our heart.

Jesus adds something with this summarizing principle. He tells us that there is something more than our inner motive and character, something more than norms and rules. There are people engaged with each other. Positive love needs imagination and creativity. It needs flexibility and sensitivity. People were not made for rules; rules were made for people. We may not get our principles from the context and the relationship, but we cannot embody proper norms of right living apart from them. Situation ethics was reaching for something that it sensed as missing from traditional Christian ethics. That it picked up the wrong end of the stick was unfortunate. But we must not miss what was valid in its quest.

Jesus tells us to think in a person-centered manner. Here is where the eye without speck or log is needed. We need to see into the character of others and into ourselves as well. We are to love thoughtfully, not according to some cookie-cutter book of rules. If the only tool we have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So much of our communication with others, so many of our organizational structures, so often we respond **not** to the person before us but to the rules in our manuals and the habits of our past.

Jesus asks that we think about the person before us—genuinely take thought of them—put ourselves in their shoes and see the world through their eyes. What then would we want others to do for us if we were them? We may not lust after the attractive person, says Jesus. That is the negative abstention. What are we to do positively for that person? We are not to denigrate or degrade the other by our words. What words then are we to use of them? So here are some “dogs” or “swine” to whom we are not to give holy things. What are we to give them? That is the positive impetus behind the golden rule. Abstaining from what is wrong is not enough in the higher righteousness Jesus advocates. What we do is the goal, not simply what we do not do.

We are released from the spiritual stupidity of adding up the number of rules and regulations and spelling out a casuistry to ensure all are “kept.” Life is too complicated to be encompassed that way. Jesus gives us a positive basis for living into our relationships in a positive, thoughtful and obedient manner. He orients us in the right direction by giving us focused illustrations and guidelines that can enable us to be wise and righteous in all relationships and situations of life.

This summary rule also prepares us for the conclusion to it all. The stress in this last rule and in the following exhortation is on “doing” (Ποιέω, *poieō*). *Poieō*, in its various conjugated forms is used throughout the conclusion (its forms are used nine times in the *peroratio*).³⁸³ Having “heard” these words, it is essential now to “do” them. It takes us full circle to the beginning of the Sermon where the character strengths of the “blessed” are immediately followed by the calling to engage the larger world in deeds of righteousness (salt and light).

(f) Matthew 7:13-29: Two Choices, Ways, and Destinies (Peroratio)

Two gates—strait, and wide;
 Two ways—broad, and narrow;
 Two classes—many, and few;
 Two destinations—life, and destruction
 Two trees—good, and corrupt;
 Two fruits—good, and evil;
 Two things done to trees—hewn down, and cast out;
 Two houses;
 Two foundations—rock, and sand;
 Two builders—wise, and foolish;
 Two storms;
 Two results—the one house stood, the other fell.³⁸⁴

This begins the last section of the Sermon. Jesus underlines the serious choice his teachings provide. There are two ways or gates. There are false prophets offering the wrong way. There is good and bad fruit. There are doers of God’s will and those who are lawless. There are two foundations on which to construct one’s life. The various metaphors belong together in that each offers a somewhat different angle on the same reality.

This also ends the first major section of Jesus’ teaching in a way that will occur again several times. In the parable collection in Matthew 13 the coming judgment serves as the major emphasis of the end parable. It is followed by the assurance that those who are well disciplined will be able to cope with the challenges by bringing things new and old out of the treasure-house of Scripture. Matthew 25 ends with the division of people into those going away into eternal punishment and the righteous into eternal life.

Jesus indicates that positive reception and implementation of his words are the key to abundant righteousness. After all, had all those in Matthew 25 “done to others as they would have done to themselves” they would have helped the helpless and used their resources for neighbors in difficulty. Unfortunately, some were tied up in religious duties, some in secular

³⁸³ “Do” 7:12, 21; “bear”(fruit) 7:17-19; “perform” (miracles) 7:22; “put into practice” 7:24, 26.

³⁸⁴Moody, D. L. (1895). *Notes from My Bible: From Genesis to Revelation* (Chicago; New York; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell) pp. 102–103.

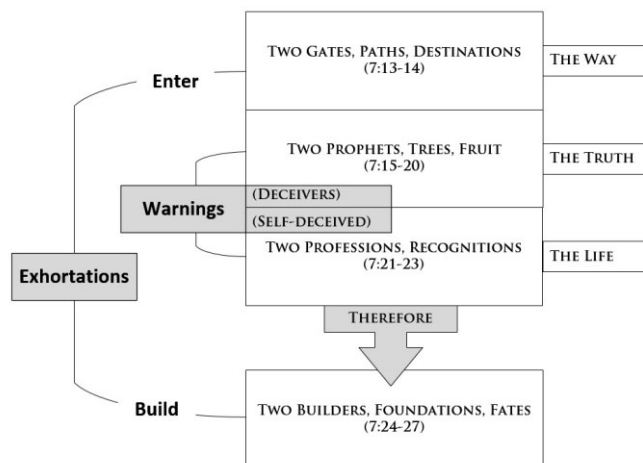
ambitions. It did not matter. What was important was the doing of the righteousness that springs from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Those who did not enter the pain of others and extend themselves and their resources to help were turned away. What Jesus underlines in the warnings of this Sermon are seen in their end results in Matthew 25.

There has been a lot of discussion of the structure of the last parts of the Sermon, particularly how the “cultic” section, the section on possessions and the last part on judgment fit the larger theme of righteousness. After reviewing many proposals, Betz concludes:

Conceivably, the sayings are arranged with a view of the life in mind that is further described in the next section (7:13–14). Accordingly, the readers are challenged to imagine that they are wandering on the rough and troublesome road, trying to find their way through crucial experiences and hard choices. If my suggestion is correct, the section 6:19–7:11 sets forth the experiential scenarios for what it means to travel on the rough road through life. Having been equipped with the instructions about the Torah, ethics, and worship in the preceding parts of the SM, 6:19–7:11 confronts the reader with episodes of life on the metaphorical road designated in 7:13–14 as the “rough” one....

In other words, the road through life involves an itinerary that has outward and inward dimensions. The outward dimensions one faces are episodic and imply the coming to grips with material possessions concentrated in the figure of money. Temptation and choices come not with poverty but with abundance; one has treasures to store, Mammon to serve, and so on. Making the hard choices and steering around the cliffs of temptation, however, depend on one’s inner disposition and orientation, beginning with the heart (6:21).

The image and the goal should be clear. The struggle on the rough road is one of choices to be made in life. Making the right choices will then mean to remain part of the small company of those who will find the narrow gate to the heavenly realm and life eternal (7:13–14).³⁸⁵ This chart suggests the structure we see in this final concluding section.



³⁸⁵ Betz, *Sermon* (pp. 427-428).

[1] Matthew 7:13-14 – Narrow and wide gates.

It might seem strange that we have this saying about the narrow and wide gates, the broad and hard ways. If the golden rule is such a universal sentiment, if human nature is so naturally benevolent, we may wonder why finding the way of righteousness is so difficult. Why don't most or even many find this way? Why are there only few who enter and persevere on the hard way?

It is not clear whether the gates and the way are functionally equivalent ways of talking about the same reality or each meant to stress something somewhat different. Nor are we told if the ways begin with the gate or end with them. The pictures are different when we think about it. A gate or door is something through which we go and, having done so, we are on the other side of it. It is a boundary marker and gives us access to some place from which we were previously excluded. A way is something that continues before us. To traverse it is to continue going and going and going for however long the way might be. The one pictures a sort of event. The other a longer process.

In the context the first thing that comes to mind is the saying about knocking. We are not told where to knock for entrance. Jesus portrays two possibilities—a constricted and difficult way that brings us to a narrow door or gate-way and a broad and easy way with a wide gate at its end. It may be that the picture in mind is between a broad plain coming to the main city-gate as opposed to a narrow path up a hilly or mountainous side leading to a less-well known small door into the city. Whatever the precise metaphor, Jesus is commanding that we knock at the narrow door and not at the broad door. It is the door that must be sought and found. It is not obvious and is not the door most around us knock on.

The difference between the two is that between hearing and doing what Christ commands and hearing but not doing what he teaches. It is also the difference between becoming a disciple of Christ or a disciple of false prophets (who are very religious—even very “Christian”). The one way involves trouble and persecution. That is guaranteed by Jesus. The other way does not take the same effort, persistence or perseverance. The one way leads to life; the other to destruction. Given the difficulties of the road to life, we might well become confused as to its true nature. Jesus warns us here not to be fooled by appearances.

We might agree with F. Dale Bruner: there is the evangelical gate through which we must go (the hearing and positive response to the call of Christ to enter the life of discipleship) and the life road we must traverse as disciples (the daily on-going embodiment of the life that exhibits the greater righteousness).³⁸⁶ It is not one or the other. We must listen to and practice the patterns Jesus gives to us—again and again. Whatever the pressures (the floods) we must build and build well on the foundation of rock.

The contrast between the two ways is the sharpest summary of a division that has been evident throughout the Sermon. There are two sorts of people: those blessed by God and those not blessed. There are two sorts of righteousness, two types of religious activity, two treasures, two masters, two things to strive for, two ways of relating to one's fellow humans. Whether we are fully aware of it, we are being taught that life places us in the unavoidable condition of having to choose one or the other. There may be many things that are not an either/or. But not here. This is an absolute choice. There is no mediating or third option.

John Stott has captured it exquisitely:

³⁸⁶ Bruner, *Christbook*, p. 349.

“...there are according to Jesus only two ways, hard and easy (there is no middle way), entered by two gates, broad and narrow (there is no other gate), trodden by two crowds, large and small (there is no neutral group), ending in two destinations, destruction and life (there is no third alternative).”³⁸⁷

The subtle drama in our lives is that we do not experience the affairs of our history in that way. We may see the larger landscape of politics and war as either/or but not our own life. There may be the wicked fascists, socialists, communists, imperialists, capitalists or some ethnic group. We label the larger social world in terms of clear-cut categories, despite the complexity of our world. But our own life seems filled with grays or many colors from which to choose. We do not seem to face a fundamental either/or.

Jesus suggests by his imagery that one way hardly requires effort or “choice.” The broad gate and easy way is one we can find ourselves in simply by the process of drift. We go with the majority, with the large crowd, hardly noticing that we have made a choice by that action. There doesn’t seem to be a choice because the possibilities are not equal. The narrow gate is one that must be found. It must be sought and can easily be overlooked. It does not sit side by side with the broad gate. It is not as large, visible or attractive. To enter it requires the sort of effort the broad gate does not.

In another passage Jesus describes the entry port into salvation as the “eye of the needle.” This hyperbole has been interpreted in ways it probably was not meant. But it has suggested some of what might be more appropriately found here. Through the narrow gate in the wall of a city one cannot take the full caravan of luggage and trade. It is wide enough for a person to slip in, but not for everything else.

The narrow way is hard because it means leaving behind many things. One cannot bring Mammon, or censoriousness, lust or adultery, hatred or applause for religious piety, legalism or license. This is not a way that permits any and every thought, any and every emotion, any and every human behavior—on the proviso that no one be “harmed.” This is not a “do your own thing” ethic. It is bounded on the one side by truthful thinking and on the other by good living. Light and salt are the qualities that mark the person who is blessed by God to walk the narrow and hard way. Jesus is “the way” and that way entails truth and life.

It may seem to many contemporaries that life and thought are stifled, confined to such a narrow and archaic pattern in Christ-following. But the truth is the opposite. Here we are freed from following the majority currents, from believing only what is comfortable and au courant, from stampeding after the latest fad or drug. The road less travelled is the flight from self-deception and destruction. It is not to be confused with the intensely religious path. Jesus distinguishes the narrow gate from such an error. He is not demanding more religiosity but authentic righteousness in all realms of life, attitude and thought.

He lets us know where that path begins as well as where it ends. It begins with his words. What he teaches are the words of life. If we construct our lives out of them and allow them to be the road map for what we are to be and do, then we will find the difficult road that leads to life. What we find in implementing those words is that they uncover astoundingly hard and resistant response habits deeply rooted in our personalities. Christ-following means dealing death to parts of our selves—cutting off the hand, tearing out the offending eye. It means surgery to remove

³⁸⁷ Stott, *Sermon*, p. 196.

the log from our eye. It means stilling the raging lust for recognition, the ambition for success and wealth, the icy-cold hatred that wishes another dead, the superiority complex that despises the faults of others. Jesus says to come after him on the road that leads to life. It is a road of suffering and learning hard things about ourselves and our world.

[2] Matthew 7:15-20 – True and false prophets

The broad way has its own advocates: false prophets. We are warned that among those who claim the name of Christ-follower (who say, “Lord, Lord” and even do signs and wonders) are false prophets. The one who most obviously comes to mind is Judas Iscariot. We know that he was sent out as one of the twelve. He proclaimed the kingdom and worked miracles. Yet secretly he was a thief and later a betrayer of his “Lord.” There is no more dramatic indication of how close people can be to Christ and be false.

This passage leads us to a clear conclusion: there are those who appear to be insiders, loyal followers of Christ and gifted leaders of his people, yet who are both deceptive and dangerous. The strange thing about these is that they do not seem to be quite the same as the hypocrites. The hypocrite leads a double life: acting from an inner set of motives and ambitions that contradict the outward profession and actions. They know themselves as discordant, professing righteousness but practicing self-advancement, projecting pious concern for the things of God but pursuing human applause.

These false prophets appear to be self-deceived, unaware of any discordance. There are those of whom one might say “the light in [them] is darkness” (6:23). They think themselves ready to enter the narrow gate, to enter the Kingdom of heaven. They are propagators of the message of that Kingdom (“did we not prophesy in your name”) and agents of its power against the oppressive demons (“and cast out demons in your name”). Their lives were marked with “deeds of power” in the name of the Lord. At the last day they will claim entrance rights with the recital of these three proofs: profession of the Lord, prophesying in his name and productive works of power delivering people from demons and disease.

The danger is that they might also deceive others who seek to find the narrow gate.³⁸⁸ They not only traverse the road to destruction but persuade others to go with them. Some of the many on that road are professed disciples of Christ with charismatically endowed prophets as their tour guides. Finding the narrow gate cannot be entrusted into the hands of some certified leadership with obvious capabilities. One of the dangers in the search are these very sorts of people.

There appears to be a major criterion for unmasking them. The ultimate test is to be found in their “fruits.” Jesus banishes them from entrance by calling them evildoers. These violate the spirit and boundaries of Jesus’ ethical teaching in this Sermon. They are salt without saltiness; light that is darkness. On the one hand, Jesus does not come to abolish law or prophets. On the other, only a correct understanding and obedience to the law is sufficient. Only giving heed to authentic, not false prophets will place us on the right path. It is not any sort of law-conformity

³⁸⁸ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*: Chrysostom writes: “Notice that along with the dogs and pigs there is another form of ambush and plotting that causes far more trouble than that of dogs or pigs. For the dogs and pigs do not hide their nature. They are obvious. But the movements of wolves are hidden in shadows. Hence he commanded that one should not only avoid the dogs and pigs but also that one should continuously and carefully look out for wolves, because one cannot see them the moment they attack. For this reason he says, ‘Watch out!’—to make his hearers more careful to distinguish deception from truth.” (p. 153)

nor any sort of giving heed to prophets that marks Christ-following.

We have one true prophet whose words always guide us into the path of life: Jesus Christ. In the end he serves as the normative center for truth and life. All who claim to be his spokespersons and teachers of his way are tested by this: do they conform to the words and way of Christ? To be sure, we have Jesus' words only as given within the community of faith. We have the witnesses of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—and the interpretation and applications of Paul, Peter, James and others.

The difficulty lies in finding the balance in the midst of all we are given. How do we know when the sheep's clothing covers a sheep rather than a ravenous wolf? There would not be a problem were the disguised wolf obvious. What enables recognition of one or the other are their "fruits." But what "fruits"?

Jesus was challenged by John the Baptist as to his identity. Jesus responded with the invitation to his disciples to stay with him, listen and observe. What they heard was the message of the Kingdom of God and the powerful effects in works of power. He appealed to the very things these false prophets appeal to before the gates of the Kingdom. His appeal was sufficient. It was not final. There followed a life incapable of being authentically accused of evil doing. He who gave this Sermon lived it. The charismatic gifts and effects are not sufficient proof. Power and prophesy must be wed to a greater righteousness.

One of the things Jesus may be saying is that it sometimes takes time for reality and appearance to show themselves. People are complex and the truth we have in Christ is also complex. What people are, whether their Master is the Lord or some other, is not a simple thing to discern when they are prophet, preacher or miracle-worker. Only their "fruits" will tell the tale. Even then we are not told what to do with them. Only to beware of them.

For those of us who are Christian leaders, the first wariness we must exercise is about ourselves. The first question is over the great gulf that exists between what we are and what Jesus asks us to be in this Sermon. The first fruits of our response to such probing should be poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness and hunger and thirst for righteousness. Who knows whether I am false or true? Only you know, O Lord.

We let the word Lord slip off our lips so easily, so thoughtlessly. In it we find both our condemnation and our justification. How can we say it when so much remains at war within us? How can we suppose that we, people such as we are, might say "Lord" and actually have every emotion, every motive and outlook, every thought and purpose within shout "Hosanna" and bow? So much remains confused, conflictual, contrary even after years of "discipleship."

There is a ravenous wolf within us, snapping and biting at every command and condition Jesus lays down in this Sermon. If we cannot nullify it by claims of ethical impossibility, human improbability or eschatological naivete, we shroud it in the claims of ambiguous impenetrability. What does it mean, after all? No one really knows. Next verse.

The first false prophet we need to remove is the one who sits astride the log in our own eye. The first dog to whom we throw holy things roams the corridors of our own heart. The first pig who savages us is our own evil nature, knowing how to give good gifts, yet trampling every sign post to the narrow way under foot. Questions of authenticity begin first with us. Yet we cannot end there.

Jesus' words are a warning to us about others. It is astounding to hear how frequently people talk about the "ego" strength of the "great ones" among us. It is widely known that the popular and power preachers and miracle workers of our day are not only "full of the Spirit" but full of

themselves as well. We talk about it and shake our heads in wonder. We tolerate the inflated egos because we find them fascinating and even helpful. Beware, says Jesus of false prophets. By their fruits you will know them (and then Jesus promptly takes away the fruits of profession, prophesy, and power).

We are not to condemn one another. Yet we are to discern the dogs, pigs and wolves among us. We are to be able to see the difference between the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30). But we are not to uproot those we suspect of being children of the evil one. The angels of God will uproot them at the end. Jesus will deny them entrance. The goats will be separated infallibly from the sheep (Matt. 25:32). We are not to give the holy to dogs or pearls to swine. What are we to do about false prophets?

We have no answer here. To beware of them is to develop sensitivity to their presence and activity. How can we do that? One of the basic assumptions here seems to be that we can know them, even if they do not know themselves as such. To do that we may well need to look more broadly at who the false prophets were in the Old Testament. The high context for this passage would come in large measure from that source. We can also see what else Jesus said about trees and fruit as well as false prophets.

Matthew 12:33-37 Jesus responds to being attacked as a false prophet. He accused the Pharisees of not following the principle that a good tree brings good fruit and vice versa. They admitted that his works of power had good effects but that he was from the devil. Jesus said, on the contrary, these words of the Pharisees are bad and indicate the badness of their source. One clear mark of the false prophet is the “prophet” who speaks against the identity and authenticity of Jesus Christ. Those who cannot recognize the work of God’s Spirit in him are corrupted in their hearts. The light in them is darkness. I John later uses a similar criterion. Jesus must be confessed as the holy One who came in the flesh or we have a false spirit speaking.

In the Old Testament false prophets were active. One mark of them was that their prophecies did not come to pass. Also, they said what was welcome among the power elite in the court (saying “Peace” when there was none). They misled and divided the people of God. They were instrumental in the persecution of the authentic prophets. The spirit that motivated them was a lying spirit and not the Spirit of Yahweh.

The problem with false prophets is that it is difficult to tell who they are. It takes time to discover what sorts of fruits might come from their activity. Not all of them are recognizable simply by the test of doctrine. To be sure some are false simply because they teach a noxious doctrine. In the early Church there were those who denied the deity of Christ (I Corinthians 12:1-4) and those who denied his true humanity (I John 4:1-6). There were others who taught toxic moral notions, leading people into the sins of immorality by their very “super spirituality” (the Corinthian Church). These were singled out in the correspondence of the Apostles, showing that we have the ability to discern some of these individuals.

We are commanded to be sensitive and take care on this matter. We are not given permission to go on heresy hunts or to slander people. There are false prophets whose separatism and argumentativeness mean they are constantly maligning and savaging authentic followers of Christ because of disagreements over minor issues. They are not being wary. They are being censorious and judgmental. Sometimes there is a sort of ecclesiastical paranoia that comes from a sectarian hardening of the theological arteries. Those on the left tend to identify some political or social agenda as an essential mark and set out persecuting all who do not join their cause. Those on the right tend to identify some theological and personal issues as essential boundaries

and begin painting all who disagree as heretics and immoral people.

Jesus assures us there are core matters of teaching and living that serve as foundational planks for his followers. These are not on the margins but belong to central worldviewish matters that provide the framework for Christ-followers in all cultures and times. Every generation the Church has to reclaim that central ground and rearticulate it so that the boundaries regain enough clarity to protect the sheep from the wolves.

Some wolves show themselves with absolute clarity. But there are others where we remain uncertain and unclear. These are people who command special respect within the Church to the very end. They are great preachers, effective healers and demonstrate signs and wonders. They say, “Lord, Lord” in acknowledgement of Christ and work ever “in his name.” Their falseness does not readily appear because their public behavior (and sometimes their private) appears sheep-like through and through. We may test their fruits and pronounce them good. Yet they are not doers of the words of Christ.

[3] Matthew 7:21-23 – True and false professions

The ravenous wolves may be Christ-like as we encounter them yet teach things that take us far from Christ. Christ-likeness is not enough. There are others who are Christ-centered, teaching us the wonders of salvation and grace in Jesus Christ. Yet they may live in lust, judgmentalism and hatred or in love of position and money. Christ-centeredness is not enough.

There are others who are charismatically powered. Their lives are dramatic in effects. They have great power for others, but the power of Christ over and in them is blocked. Displaying the charismata is not enough. One thinks of the tragic personal failures of some televangelists and mega-church pastors (Jim and Tammy Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard, Bill Hybels).

The terror and strangeness of this passage is that we have people who honor Jesus, while he dishonors them. These are people who work for Jesus but do not work under him. They “know” him, but he does not know them! This phrase means in effect ‘I never recognized you as one of my own’ (John 10:14; I Cor. 8, 3; II Tim. 2:12). Those who belong to the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd hear, recognize and follow his voice (John 10:3-5).

These false disciples come to him impressed with all their Christian service record. Their piety and powerful spiritual gifts are trotted out as the marks by which they should be recognizable to Christ. He dismisses them as strangers to his kingdom. “Lord, Lord” is heard even on the broad way to destruction.³⁸⁹

There is no poverty of spirit here, no meekness, no mourning or hunger for righteousness. They do not display purity of heart, peacemaking or the marks of persecution in their flesh. They live “lawless” lives. Their spectacular works are masks behind which they engage in the very evil Jesus demands we end. They are dressed up in the powers of Christ but not in the obedience of Christ.

[4] Matthew 7:24-27 – Two foundations: two builders

This brings us to the conclusion of the whole matter. Jesus has taken those listening to him through the beatitudes, the “you ares,” the commandments for life and piety, and the

³⁸⁹ Barth, *CD Vol. IV.2*. “We are reminded of Mt. 7:22f. which tells us that we may speak as prophets, or cast out demons, or do many mighty works in the name of Jesus, and yet do that which is against God and therefore belong to those whom He has never known. It is love alone that counts—and not this brilliance, however great it may be within this limit.” (p. 831).

relationships within which we must live out our public and private life. John Stott has summarized this last section sharply:

“As a brother the Christian hates hypocrisy, criticizes himself and seeks to give constructive moral support to others. As an evangelist he prizes the gospel pearl so highly that he refuses to expose it to scornful rejection by hardened sinners. As a lover of all men, he is resolved to behave towards them as he would like them to behave towards him. As a child he looks humbly and trustfully to his heavenly Father to give him all the good gifts he needs. As a traveler on the hard and narrow way, he enjoys fellowship with his fellow pilgrims and keeps his eye on the goal of life. As a champion of God’s revealed truth, he heeds Christ’s warning to be watchful for false teachers who would pervert it and so ravage Christ’s flock.”³⁹⁰

Now the importance of the whole of Christ’s teaching is displayed in a dramatic portrait of the results of how one responds to such knowledge.³⁹¹ The division is not between the true and false, the moral and immoral, the quietly pious and the dramatically pious. It is between the thoughtfully wise and the thoughtfully foolish. There is a way of engaging even the words of Christ, however scholarly and deep, that is pure folly. It is not a matter of the one using thought and the other not. There are the thoughtlessly foolish. There are also the highly intelligent, carefully reasoned fools. Sometimes we distinguish fools and damn fools. Jesus is talking here about damn fools. They build on the sand of deceptive and false worldviews and life ways.

Two treasures call us to cling to God rather than Mammon. In the two gates we are awakened to seek the road less travelled instead of following the immoral majority. In the two trees we are sensitized to the toxic doctrine of Christ-like pseudo-prophets. In the two “doers” we are confronted with sensationally successful, Christ-centered, charismatically powerful ministers who are not Christ-followers. In the two houses we encounter the sum of the matter.

The words of Christ are not given that we might simply memorize and recite them without integrating them into the actions we do. Jesus is not seeking admiration for the eloquence, insight or authority of his words. He is seeking deeds that display the meaning of those words. Only those who do his will are his disciples. It is possible to hear and celebrate his words as profound, the pinnacle of religion, the breadth of wisdom, the heights of aspiration and then constitute one’s life on very different principles. Jesus is looking for much more than what we say about him. He wants to know what we do about him.

The dramatic contrast between the two houses raises the issue of the eternal security of the Christ-follower. The portrait here is not between the pagan and the Christian. It is between two sorts of people who have had the opportunity and taken the time to listen to Christ’s words. The one hears (even gladly) but does not take the words seriously enough to change the operative

³⁹⁰ Stott, *Sermon*. (pp. 203-204).

³⁹¹ Note the emphasis in the Greek: *μου* τοὺς λόγους τούτους – “of *mine* these words.” When the modifier is placed first above its noun (fronting), it is signaling particularly salient information. Jesus is indicating what we have in this Sermon are *his* words and are considered final. Cf. Gundry, *Matthew*: “In both Matthew and Luke *μου* has an emphatic position ahead of *λόγους*. Thus a stress falls on Jesus’ words as the standard of final judgment. “ (p. 133). Davies, *Matthew 1-7* (p. 720). The Law and Prophets find their definitive exposition in Jesus’ own words. Starting out with the Torah and the Prophets, we end with Jesus’ words. His words stand alongside them as authoritative interpretation and instruction.

manner of life. Hearing and not doing are equivalent to building the structures of one's life on sand. It may have wondrously strong and attractive walls and windows, finely polished floors and well-appointed rooms. It may appear magnificent besides what others have managed to erect. But it is vulnerable.

The other person hears these words and goes into a reconstruction crisis. Hearing these words makes him or her realize how much is out of kilter and not yet proper. It may mean demolishing a house as magnificent as might be found on the block. This one takes all these words seriously and rebuilds the whole of life based on their meaning and significance. This, says Jesus, is like building on the rock.

Like the rock, Jesus' words are reliable and strong. Everyone is building a house, a life in all its manifold endeavors. Many are deceived as to what they take as stable and secure as the essential, best ground on which to build.

The same rain and floods come to both houses—only the one falls in dramatic fashion. It expresses the dangers so many times warned against: serving Mammon, laying up treasure on earth, seeking the status and security of possessions here and now, leaving logs and specks in one's eye, not cutting off the offending hand, entering the broad gate, listening to the deceptive false prophet, bearing bad fruit. It is possible to follow Jesus and be destined for destruction because the hearing of his words is not wed to doing them.

This picture reinforces earlier claims. There is something either/or about where a house is built. You cannot build on the high hill on granite and in the valley on the flood plain's soft soil. You cannot struggle with the rock face, finding or dynamiting a suitable spot and settle the matter with a shovel for digging in sand. There is an either/or here that has no third option.³⁹²

Some might think they can build on the rock on Sunday and the sand the rest of the week, as though Jesus did not claim the totality of their living. This is as absurd a maneuver as seeking to drive down the narrow way on Sunday and the broad way the rest of the week. You can't be driving for Denver all week long and then suddenly stop and drive the New Jersey turnpike toward New York City. The roads are not next to each other.

Why this narrowness? Because it is realistic to life. We are not protean beings who can live several lives in the boundaries of the same body, the same time, the same space. It simply is not possible. It is no more possible than having mathematics turn into creative writing. The math teacher is not impressed by the sort of creativity that argues for several right answers to the problem of 25 times 35. When one thinks of 875, there is not much difference between that and 865, 880 or 874. But the narrowness of mathematics is such that there is only one correct answer, not many. The geography teacher is also narrow. Try telling him that Nairobi is the capital of Ethiopia or London is in Switzerland. To be sure, both matters are quite different than novels. There are many excellent and powerful novels, each unique and delightful. So too there are many superb operas and even several excellent stagings of each by great singers.

The demands Jesus makes of life correspond to the notion that, in the midst of all our cultural and social diversity, there are some things more like math and geography (even if there are others

³⁹² Many have noted the differences between Matthew's picture (building on the rock) and Luke 6:47-49 (where the builder labors to dig down to the rock). But the differences appear to be due to Luke's adaptation to his more Hellenistic audience who were more familiar with houses having a basement. Cf. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 190); Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 134, fn. 103). Luke does not miss the point as asserted in *Davies, Vol. 1* (p. 721).

more like novel writing or the composition of operas and their stagings). Jesus is dealing with the mathematics of the spiritual life in this Sermon. There are some things on which there is only one right answer.

Jesus has already told us we are to be salt and light. There may be many ways in which light is produced and diffused, but one cannot confuse light with darkness. There may be many things that taste salty, but sodium chloride is narrowly defined by its chemical make-up and effects in our world. We cannot suppose that it is narrow for us to insist that the salt we allow in food stuffs be simply and only sodium chloride.

Jesus' view of sexuality was narrow. Adultery and fornication are wrong. Lust is wrong and must be rooted out. Divorce is a great offense against marriage with only a narrow door of exceptions. Tinker with the math here and we begin to unravel the mystery of what faithful love must give to life.

Jesus' view of murder was narrow. It is wrong. But so too is hating fellow humans—and even assassinating their spirits by harsh words or denigrating and humiliating epithets. Constructing contracts and relationships based on a double standard (oathed and non-sworn words) also is a maggot that eats the life out of us. Defensive retaliation on those who harm us fractures divine logic. So too does hating one's enemies. There is a narrowness here because Jesus believes the moral world in these matters is more like math and geography than creative writing or music.

Haddon Robinson provides an illustration to help us sense what is going on here.³⁹³ People call up for a fix on their leaking faucet. When Jesus comes, he tears out the whole plumbing system and excavates the source of water. His intention is not to make minor repairs in our lives, but to renovate the whole. Our problem is far more than a few leaky gaskets or a defective pipe.

Robinson also had a friend whose blurred vision brought her to an ophthalmologist to change her prescription. He discovered cancer. She could not even go home. She was into surgery almost immediately. She went in for new glasses and came out with radical surgery.

Jesus is not about taping up our current plumbing or giving us a new prescription for glasses. His righteousness is a matter of radical surgery and rooting about in our thinking and emotions to find the source of our being and then purifying it and giving us completely new plumbing. New eyes, not just new prescriptions.

(g) Matthew 7:28-29 – Response

The immediate results of this Sermon were registered by the crowd: they were astonished. They had never heard anything like this. Here was one who did more than quote the great authorities of the past (speaking by authorities). He spoke with authority. Constantly he appealed to his own conclusions in reframing what his contemporaries had made of the Hebrew scriptures. He created his own word pictures to dramatize the truth he was articulating.

As we have the time to consider his words at leisure, this impression only deepens. We discover several claims that are directly and indirectly present in the content of what he had to say. He saw himself as the pivotal figure of Israel's history. He came with a destiny of fulfilling the law and the prophets. He portrays himself as more than another prophet or even law-maker. Whatever the intentions or intuitions of the Old Testament authors, he claims to be one who provides the definitive and precise understanding of the force of their writings.

³⁹³*Solid Rock Construction Company: How to Build Your Life on the Right Foundation* (1989). Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI., pg.122.

He also declares himself more than simply a child of the Kingdom or of God. His words demonstrate that he arrogates to himself the right to define the laws of the Kingdom. He sets forth the sort of righteousness that is required for Kingdom-living and declares that he will be the one to admit or banish people from that Kingdom. In this he sets himself on a level equal with God. If the Old Testament prophets suffered for the sake of Yahweh, New Testament prophets suffer “for my sake.” If the Judge of all the living is Yahweh, Jesus is the Judge who tests the profession and authenticity of the supposedly righteous.

We can hardly validate the superficial analysis that admires the Jesus who gave these words only because it interprets them in ways that remove them from their context and from the claims made by the one who gave them. It is astounding how people can pick four or five catch phrases from the Sermon, interpret them with a meaning they didn’t have and then claim admiration for a sort of Jesus who never existed—and expect that we should imagine they have said something intelligent or even brilliant.

There are moderns who bypass the very perception and impression had by all who heard him: that he spoke with authority. Instead of crediting that impression, these people suppose they know better than his peers (and even than himself) what he ought to have meant, even if he didn’t. They do to his words what Jesus scored his contemporaries for doing with the words of the Hebrew Scripture. They re-interpret them, fill these old wine-skins with the new wine of the Enlightenment, Hinduism, Buddhist notions, philosophical humanism, utopian Marxism and then try to fill our cups with “Jesus’ words.” What they deny in practice (his authority) they seek to use in order to get us to drink the dregs of their false philosophies.

It is not proper to suppose we are building on rock-foundations when we first change the meaning of Jesus’ words (either by loosening them, tightening them or dismissing them). To “do” his words entails the responsible submission to the authority present in those words. We cannot bring to them another authority or another prophet’s words.

There is a sort of ventriloquism in which we move Jesus lips to gain his vote of confidence for some alien philosophy or pragmatic outlook. When our houses begin to leak and crumble or even fall under the hard rains and powerful floods, the problem is not Jesus’ words but our misinterpretations. We are asked to submit to him. In saying, “Lord, Lord,” we are committed first of all to obeying what he teaches, not what our modern worldviews whisper in our ears.

What also will not wash is the professed Christ-follower who worries overmuch over the plurality of interpretations found in Church history. To be sure, we can learn a lot from the conflict of interpretation over this sermon. We can listen carefully with all those who have done so in the past. Yet, we all stand or fall before our common Master.

What we cannot do is justify our laziness in not coming repeatedly to the Scripture, cocking our ears to listen as carefully as we can, and giving up our formerly immature and limited understandings as we hear the voice of the Master. What will not do is thinking that we can plumb the depths of these words simply by listening. Their meaning and reality shines most clearly when we must live our life, sticking close to his commands and grace. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life. If we do not experience that we are on the wrong road.

The sum of the matter is in our response to Jesus of Nazareth. The contrasts throughout the Sermon prepare us for the situation where people admire him without reordering their worlds to conform to the pattern found in his teachings.

There is a view of life that makes all the difference. Jesus portrays it repeatedly in this Sermon. It is the sound eye that demonstrates that one is filled with authentic light. This Sermon

is not about trying harder or doing more. It is about being transformed from the inside out. The metaphors suggest that Christ-followers will be people of ultimate integrity. They are people who continue to embody the central qualities of those blessed by God, those who are acknowledged by Christ for entrance to the Kingdom even in the face of great adversity.

Part of that adversity comes from within. The demands to be done with lust, with hatred and censoriousness, status-seeking, preoccupation with wealth or anxiety about necessities—these are demands that strike at the heart of inner dynamics that are immensely powerful within us. In the case of sexual striving Jesus is graphic in telling us to tear out the offending eye or cut off the hand that aggravates lust. This is a violent, decisive action taken against one's own self. The self is not the highest good in life. It is a divided, driven, distorted and distorting center of evil. We cannot dismiss our feelings or habits with, "That's just the way I am."

Part of that adversity comes from without. Jesus informs us that living by the patterns that mirror the character and agenda of our Father in heaven will bring ridicule, persecution and temptation. The majority around us are not only not searching for a difficult way. They will discourage those who take a path different from the broad way. Then there are dangers from false prophets who are Christ-like and false disciples who are Christ-centered and charismatically endowed.

Without the eye that can discern character and provide help for others or see what is good as opposed to evil, what is true as opposed to false, we will not survive. We need to be able to see several things: the narrow gate, the Father who sees in secret, the place where rock instead of sand is available. Jesus gives us a few useful rules of thumb. In seeking righteousness, we can imagine the parent considering what is good for a child or consider our own desires and aspirations and what we want others to do for us. Both rules of thumb show that we already have a limited ability to discern what is good and evil.

Jesus does not reduce all the powers of discernment and wisdom to these rules of thumb. They are minimal tools that get us into the arena. In working with them we discover how impure our hearts are, how few inner resources we have in advancing mercy and in making peace. Then we can see how mixed our motives and purposes are even when we set about to be charitable, pray or fast. They confront us with the power money has to distort our sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful. We are driven back to the poverty of our spirits before God and before the demands we experience when and if we attempt to live by these words of Jesus.

Matthew leaves us where we began this sermon: with Jesus. We finish the tour of his basics and plunge back into the "fruits" of this prophet. In the section that follows we are confronted with charismatic powers to heal. He who claims to give or deny entrance to the Kingdom, who redefines its laws and specifies its righteousness, who claims his words are the basis for living properly before God in this life—he must now show that he is more than a sage who speaks wise and wondrous words. What are the demonstrable indications that this one who speaks so well is more than a golden tongue?

The astonishment over his words and manner of speaking will now give way to astonishment about the unique powers he exercises in the midst of real life crises. He is more than fancy words. He is fearsome power, finely tuned mercy, the fullness of purity, the freedom of those bound and the foremost among powerful authorities. At his word the evil spirits and even death flee. The elements of nature and the ravagers of human happiness bow in humble submission. In Jesus the powers of the Kingdom already reside.



III. Galilean Ministry continues (8:1-11:1)

A. Narrative 2: Three Cycles of miracles and discipleship (8:1-10:4)

Matthew 4:23 (with 9:35) provides the author's clue as to the pattern of the section enclosed: Jesus went about "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness." Matthew 5-7 is an indication of what "the good news of the kingdom" is about in terms of the sort of thing Jesus taught: authority in word. Matthew 8-9 indicate how Jesus cured disease and sickness: authority for those in need. Together they show Jesus' authority, exercised in word and deed. In this cycle of miracles, we have half of the miracles recounted in Matthew.

The section that runs from 8:1-9:34 that is thus bracketed with the Sermon on the Mount has its own structure using triplets.³⁹⁴

- 1. Miracle (Healing the leper), 8:1-4
- 2. Miracle (Healing the centurion's slave), 8:5-13; "faith" (v. 10), "believed" (v. 13)
- 3. Miracle (Healing the mother-in-law of Peter and mass healings), 8:14-17
 - 1. On following Jesus (nowhere to lay his head), 8:18-20
 - 2. On following Jesus (Let the dead bury the dead), 8:21-22
- 4. Miracle (Calming the storm on the sea), 8:23-27
- 5. Miracle (Casting out of the demons), 8:28-34; "Son of God" (v. 29)
- 6. Miracle (Healing the lame), 9:1-8
 - 1. On following Jesus (question about tax collectors and sinners), 9:9-13
 - 2. On following Jesus (question about disciples not fasting), 9:14-17
- 7. Miracle (Raising of the daughter of Jairus, healing the woman with an issue of blood), 9:18-26
- 8. Miracle (Healing two blind people), 9:27-31; "believe" (v. 28), "faith" (v. 29)
- 9. Miracle (Healing the dumb and possessed man), 9:32-34.

At the end of this section, Jesus expresses his compassion toward the crowds as he continues to teach and heal throughout the towns and villages. He tells his disciples to ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers (9:35-37). The answer to that asking comes in Chapter 10 with the sending out of twelve disciples.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount there is astonishment at the authority with which

³⁹⁴ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* (pp. 1-2) notes there are ten miracles (echoing Moses' ten miracles in Egypt) but only nine miracle stories. See also *Vol. 1* (p. 67). France, *Matthew*: "The collection consists of nine separate miracle stories comprising ten individual miracles (since one of the stories, 9:18-26, contains two intertwined miracles of healing), which are arranged in three groups of three (8:1-17; 8:23-9:8; 9:18-34). Between these three groups are two narrative interludes (8:18-22; 9:9-17) each of which focuses on the call to discipleship and the response of a variety of individuals to that call." (p. 300). Turner, *Baker: Matthew* (p. 227) adds 9:35-10:4 as the summary/transition.

Jesus taught. The last of the ten miracles in this second panel end with “the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.’” (9:33). It is immediately countered with the response of the Pharisees: “By the ruler of demons he casts out demons.” (9:34) The net result of teaching and miracles is a division in the house of Israel. All are astounded. However, some embrace explanations that dismiss Jesus’ validity as did those among the Pharisees who were threatened by his authority.

One thing present in these two chapters is a string of labels people use as they seek to understand the character of this miracle-working teacher. They are names for Jesus that begin to fill in the meaning of his person and work.³⁹⁵

1. Lord (by a leper, the centurion, blind men)
2. Teacher (by a scribe, the Pharisees)
3. Son of God (by demoniacs)
4. Son of Man (by Jesus)
5. One authorized by God (by the crowd)
6. Son of David (by two blind men)
7. Servant of Yahweh (by the use of a quotation from Isaiah)

The fullness of meaning in these names is set over against the negative labelling of the Pharisees. Those who encountered him named him in these various ways so as to grasp the fullness of the many things he is: the Messianic servant of Yahweh, the royal son of David, the holder of preeminent power as the Son of God, the great teacher of God’s way, the one whose position and mission is authorized by God.

The use of the term “lord” is ambiguous. As healer of the infirm and cleanser of the impure, as fulfiller of the Torah, as the eschatological Judge and exorcist, Jesus presents many faces. “Lord” can be a term of deep respect, an acknowledgement of his dignity and honor-status. It can also be a way of confessing Jesus as the broker of God’s power, as one with the power to dispose over the well-being of those who become his clients. It also is a way of acknowledging the divine character of Jesus as God. It appears to mean that people see him as a potential patron, a broker of the power of God to heal.

Jesus serves in both these “panels” (5-7 as teacher; 8-9 as miracle worker) as the model whom his disciples (in Matthew 10) will imitate. What he teaches and the power by which he heals and exorcises will be delegated to them. They will be sent into various villages and towns into which Jesus has not come. There they will repeat his words and display his power.

In this larger section Jesus confronts the “house of Israel.” These who hear his words and see the effects of his miracles confront a demonstration that the Kingdom of God is now near. They are called upon to acknowledge its reality and accessibility, despite the continued signs of submission and humiliation of Israel before Rome. They are called to enter the narrow gate.

The three sets of miracles in Matthew 8-9 are divided by two sections on discipleship. The point of the miracles (as of the teaching) is not simply the gracious deliverance of those who are distressed and downtrodden by some condition or other. Help given is gratefully received and dramatically impactful for those who are its recipients.

Yet with it there is giving “a testimony” to the people. A message needs to penetrate the

³⁹⁵ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* (p. 4).

consciousness of all who encounter Jesus. Those who have been touched by Christ must also be taught. Just what that means has been spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount. In this section we discover why and how we might expect we could ever live the sort of divine “absurdities” of that Sermon.

(1) Three Miracles and discipleship (8:1-22)

Each of the first three stories focus on someone in Jewish society who is disadvantaged: a leper, a gentile centurion, and a woman. What each demonstrates is an acknowledgement of Jesus’ authority. The centurion’s faith is even elevated above that of any in Israel. These say “Lord, Lord” and receive what they seek.

(a) A leper (8:1-4)

There were large numbers of people in the crowd. One, a leper, came with a specific request. He had concluded from the reputation of Jesus that he was capable of more than silver-tongued oratory. He wanted to be clean from his skin disease. He came and prostrated himself before Jesus: “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.”³⁹⁶

Jesus chose to do so, reaching out and touching him, in seeming contravention of the Law (Lev. 5:3).³⁹⁷ Yet, his own power was such that he cleansed the leper; the leper did not render him unclean. Even if some may have viewed it as the other way around, Jesus was not respectful of such boundary lines nor of ways of constructing this event that would make his action illegitimate. Jesus desired and chose to heal this diseased, unclean man. It happened immediately, demonstrating superior power.

His faith expressed a mixture of respectful hesitation and confident probing. Faith does not demand or command God (“Do this. Do that.”). It does not presume that the mind and wisdom of God can be so well plumbed that we know what God wills to do in the pursuit of redemption and righteousness. Faith asks, seeks and knocks. It does not push through the door with insistent and petulant demand. It comes saying, “If you choose....”

³⁹⁶ The “bowing down” is προσκυνέω, the term used for worship (as in the last of the Temptations – Matthew 4:9-10). But it is not clear that the Leper was aware of the significance of his calling Jesus “Lord” or prostrating the way one would in worship. Matthew’s fronting of this story may be a part of a larger agenda, clarifying who Jesus is. Barth, *CD Vol. IV.2*: “He Himself in His own person was that which He proclaimed in word and deed: the imminent kingdom of God impinging on all other kingdoms and therefore on every man. It was quite unnecessary to ask concerning the time and manner of the coming of this kingdom, ‘for, behold, the kingdom of God is among you.’ It is among them as Jesus Himself is among them (Lk. 17:21). For ‘if I with the finger of God cast out devils, ἄρα ἐφθασεν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ—no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you’ (Lk. 11:20). The King and His kingdom, the Lord and His lordship, are one. As Origen puts it, He is the αὐτοβασίλεια [kingdom-in-himself]. This was how His community saw Him...” (pp. 162-163).

³⁹⁷ “First, in contrast to Moses and Elisha (Num 12:10–15; 2 Kings 5:1–14), Jesus touches the leper (Mt 8:3). In so doing Jesus is portrayed as breaking the law. However, just as his teaching was not intended to contradict the law but to reveal the divine intention in the law, so the touch of Jesus expresses the divine intention of healing. The willingness of Jesus to touch the man also emphasizes his association with the social and ceremonial outcast. Further, Jesus’ power is evident in that he is not thereby diseased but instead cures the leper.” Graham H. Twelftree (1999). *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (p. 108).

But it also comes with “you can.” Faith is confidence in the capability of God. Modesty does not contradict confidence. Knowing that God can does not entail knowing that God will—or even what is the best thing God might do in a given situation. This man falls on his knees (the Greek word has the connotation of worship) and asks in a very indirect way for this miracle. Jesus does not leave him in his questions. This person wants to help, however many others may have fled at the sight or sound of this leper. This one chooses to help and gives what he can to the leper, touching him and banishing the skin disease.

The act of touching was the beginning of the process whereby those who are ostracized by society because of their diseases are accepted into the Christian fellowship. Everywhere Christians have been in the forefront of ministry to those whose “leprosy” has excluded them from society. They have extended this touching of Jesus to hundreds of thousands of others, touching them and embracing them into the full fellowship of Christ-followers.

Part of the tension in this story is also over the nature and meaning of the authority of Jesus. He has come to fulfill the law. Yet the manner of this miracle seems to violate that law. The command to the healed leper to fulfill the requirements of the law for priestly recognition of cleansing is a means to show that this boundary crossing is selective. It is not meant to teach or create a climate where other boundaries of the law are lowered or held up for contempt. His authority is more than the power to work miracles. It is the authority to structure our relationship to the law.

The purpose of these miracles seems to be to demonstrate the character or identity of Jesus. Just as we discover something about him from his Sermon, so from his miracles we also see the extraordinary qualities that reside in him. In responding to the Leper’s request, Jesus does not say, “God is willing” but “I am willing.” The miracle authority rested in him. Just as he taught on his own authority, he works miracles on his own authority. The testimony that is to be given to the priests is one that needs to be given to us all. Numerous agents and observers will be involved in the variety of miracles of this section. The question posed repeatedly is, what to make of Jesus?

Also, in these first three stories there may be an emphasis on the role of faith. In the first case faith is implicit in the unusual courage of the leper to come into the presence of Jesus surrounded by the large crowds. Jesus responds by touching this man and granting his request. The centurion’s faith is commented on as unusual (“such faith” was not found among Israelites). Such faith sustained a miracle at a distance, using only a word. Peter’s mother-in-law is healed without any indication of anyone’s faith involved. She was sick and Jesus went and healed her. A summary paragraph indicates many were brought to him. He healed all.

The miracle of healing is thus not tied tightly to faith. Faith is not irrelevant, but it is not a magical key either. God’s willingness is not released by human believing. Nor can we say (at least here) does it need to be elicited and displayed openly for healing to occur. Only the centurion is told that the miracle is “according to your faith.” The others are presented more as matters of “according to the will and power of Jesus.” How the two are related is something we will have to discover as Matthew’s story continues.

(b) A Centurion's Slave/Son³⁹⁸ (8:5-13)

The Kingdom is open to all, guaranteed to none. Only those who enter by faith find themselves in the presence and under the power of the God of the heavens. A Gentile may show that he has found the narrow door more clearly than the devout of Israel. Jesus commends this man's faith because of its dramatic indication of confidence in Jesus' authority. Jesus is the broker of God's power on earth and only a word is necessary for its release and effects.

This story contrasts with the story before it. Jesus crosses the purity boundaries in touching the leper. In this case there seems to be an implied surprise and question: "Am I [a Jew] to come to heal him?"³⁹⁹ What is at stake is the uncleanness that would accrue to a Jew entering the household of a Gentile. Yet Jesus was willing to acquire or risk acquiring the uncleanness of the leper. Why not that of a Gentile as well?

Also, in this case there is the matter of faith being explicitly mentioned. It is not directly indicated in the case of the leper. In all the cases of healing (except for the following story of Peter's mother-in-law), people approach Jesus with the request for help. Thus, there is a sort of implicit faith involved. In most cases there is the direct contact between Jesus and the one to be healed. How else might one single out the individual (among all in similar distress) who is to be granted the benefit? In this case the Centurion is willing to admit that Jesus can channel the help without sight or contact. He need not meet the individual to direct the power of healing effectively to the right individual.

This is such a quality of faith that Jesus marvels at it. It elicits from him the dramatic comments that seem to indicate faith per se may not be enough to enter the Kingdom of God. Even those who consider themselves children of the Kingdom (by virtue of being good Jews or even following Jesus) may find themselves cast out of the messianic banquet. By contrast there will be people from east and west who will be admitted and will partake of that great event. This is another way of characterizing his warnings at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

Who are these people who come? Perhaps other Jews who are not present in Palestine, not within the sound of John the Baptist or Jesus as they declare the nearness of the Kingdom. Perhaps they are other Gentiles such as this Centurion. He has come from elsewhere to be stationed in Palestine. There he has heard the stories of Jesus. Surprisingly he exercises the very sort of faith necessary to enter the Kingdom. Faith erases the sort of barriers that might otherwise exist and exclude. God's covenant people ("the sons of the Kingdom") will themselves be excluded from the great events prophesied by their own prophets if they do not give heed to the

³⁹⁸ The Greek *παῖς* can be translated as servant or little child. The minority view is to take this as "son" (Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 204; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 10, fnnt. 17). Virtually all versions translate it as "servant." Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*: "How should the word be translated? It can mean either 'son' or 'servant'. Although the equation with 'servant' increases the distance between our story and the healings in 9:23-6 (the daughter of the synagogue ruler) and 15:21-8 (the daughter of the Canaanite woman), yet only once in the NT does *παῖς* clearly mean 'son' (Jn 4:51). For the rest it seems to mean 'servant' (cf. Mt 14:2; 12:18) or 'youngster' (cf. 17:18). And in the LXX *παῖς* rarely translates *bēn*: it is most commonly the equivalent of 'ebed. So we prefer to translate 'servant'." (p. 21)

³⁹⁹ This can be taken either as a statement (Turner, *Baker Matthew*, p. 232; Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 141; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 201, 204; KJV, ESV, NRSV, NJB, NET) or question (Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1*, p. 415; France, *Matthew*, p. 312; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 10; Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*, pp. 21-22; Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 354; NIV, TNIV). I have taken it as a question.

authority of the One who stands in their midst. This warning to the religious elite echoes strongly in many places in Matthew.

The question that issues from the Sermon on the Mount is where and how we might build on solid rock—or where we might find the narrow door through which to enter—or become a tree that bears good fruit. Jesus has already said the difference lies in how we listen to his words. Only those who do them are building properly. Only thereby can we find the narrow door or bear fruit that indicates we are aligned with the realities of Jesus Christ. In this story we see that such a life-orientation includes confidence in other sorts of “words” from Jesus (not just ethical or doctrinal teachings). We believe Jesus can choose to intervene in the concrete matters of our everyday life. He can heal if he chooses. He can heal with no more than a word.

This passage is not only about Jesus’ authority but about the effects intercession can have. There is not a word about the young man’s faith, only the severe pain accompanying his paralysis. The Centurion’s faith is sufficient for releasing this power to heal him. We are encouraged to believe that Jesus will act in ways to deliver those for whom we pray. They may not be able or faith-filled to pray. We can if we have faith and take the initiative.

Both initial miracles also show how diffident the supplicants are. Neither know quite what to ask. They both are more descriptive than imperative. They do not demand. They only bring a grave disorder to the attention of Jesus with the confidence his power and goodness are sufficient. In both cases Jesus acts and gives to each the very best he might have wished or asked.

(c) Peter’s Mother and many more (8:14-17)

This marks the third specific miracle of healing that is singled out. A note follows about many with fevers, debilities and demons who likewise were healed in the evening.⁴⁰⁰ In each of these miracles an ordinary person is healed. In this event ordinariness combines with low social status within the Jewish world. The centurion had a great deal of power. Yet as a gentile he was an outsider. The leper was completely outcast because of the particular disease. Peter’s mother-in-law was a woman—possibly a widow, living in Peter’s home.

Jewish readers may find echoes of the Temple and its degrees of exclusion in these stories. The leper could not go into the Temple precincts. The gentile could enter the court of the gentiles, surrounding the Temple proper. The women could enter the Temple but only the first court. Beyond were the areas reserved for males, then for priests and finally the holy of holies where the high priest entered only once a year.

The circles of exclusion were a means of dramatizing the reality of the majesty and holiness of Yahweh. Approaching God was an even more somber and sobering reality than approaching a human King or Queen. God was an awesome being and must receive the utmost of respect. These miracles show Jesus as the one who brings all, from the most excluded to those only partially excluded into the blessings of the Kingdom. The narrow door is open to all.

Singling out these sorts of miracles is an indication that Jesus as miracle worker does not exercise the power of his healing word to advance his own status. He is not a social-climbing thaumaturge whose dramas of power are reserved for the wealthy and powerful. He responds to the needs of many who are brought to him by the villagers of Galilee. For the most part there is

⁴⁰⁰ Mark 1:21-32 gives us the detail that this all happened on a Sabbath. Matthew has omitted this detail, perhaps not to raise, at this point in his narrative, the issue of Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-13). Peter’s mother in law would have been healed and served him on the Sabbath.

little they can do for him.

This passage raises several critical issues for contemporary thought patterns, some of them particularly challenging:

1. **Ministry to the outsider** is the pattern we see in these first miracles. Jesus presses us toward the margins of society and provides the blessings of the Kingdom. The beatitudes already indicate that the narrow door is found by those who identify themselves with those normally thought unfit. This does not mean that all who are marginalized are treated the same.

In the West the gay and lesbians are a peculiar community of relative wealth and education who are stigmatized. The Church needs to balance mercy, justice and holiness in its attitudes and actions. It needs to seek room for their civil rights and security within an orderly community that does not slander, bash or march them off to some holocaust. Jesus shows us that love for the enemy also means love for the outsider.

On the other hand, it cannot affirm their sexual behavior as permissible within the halls of the Kingdom of God. It is part of the broad way just as are the many sins of the heterosexuals. The broad way is not defined as the way of the majority but as the way that is easy (according following our inclinations as fallen creatures; dismissing violations of even the small parts of the law). Jesus never contravenes any Old Testament definitions of sexual sin. The grace of God is broad, heightening our powers that we may serve Jesus on the narrow way. We need to say to everyone caught in sexual sin: "Go and sin no more." That foremost means heterosexuals.

2. **Peter is married.** That needs to be said every time the Roman Catholic Church raises the issue of a celibate male clergy as the "higher" way. There is no way higher than that taught by Jesus. The problem with the argument of the Catholic tradition against marriage in priesthood is that it has no roots in Jesus (or Peter). Furthermore, having restored Peter's mother-in-law, she also serves him. Catholics need to think about that. Jesus serves her and then she serves him. This alone does not show the full range of service women are gifted and permitted to do. But the ancient restrictions on women come more from culture than Scripture.

3. **The healing power of Jesus is tied to the servant ministry of Isaiah.** Whatever we take Jesus' healing to be, it is tied here to the "bearing" and "taking" of our diseases. This is a striking phraseology for it suggests that even our diseases are part of our fallen existence. God's intention is to carry them away, even as our sins are removed. Jesus is not simply an ethical prophet. He is a healing power-worker. This ministry is in the context of the Servant of Yahweh's full set of accomplishments. This is part of the larger demonstration of God's Kingdom power released in the person of Jesus Christ.

The picture is of a miracle-worker whose effects are immediate and effective. All he need do is speak the word or touch the afflicted. It is a sign and token of the authority Jesus possesses. He does not screen those who come to him in dire need, only choosing to touch or heal certain sorts of cases. His words and deeds serve as a template or model for his disciples. He will send them out to do what he has done and said.



Discipleship: healing and faith

The quotation from Isaiah 53:4 grounds the meaning of Jesus' healing as part of the ministry of the Suffering Servant. Whatever salvation means, it is a reversal of all the ills brought into creation by the rebellion against the Creator.

For many, even in the modern world, diseases and injuries are far too common a human experience. While they may serve a positive role in reminding us of our mortality, our vulnerability as embodied beings in a physical world, our fragility and sorrows, they are the enemies of the full flourishing of human beings. They fall upon the righteous and the unrighteous alike. As such, they are not a manifestation of justice being meted out for some sin a person has committed. While there are sinful life choices that can lead to disease, that is not what is in view in this passage.

This frames the miraculous deeds of Jesus as part of the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. The larger context (Isa. 52:13–53:12) is about the atonement provided by God's Suffering Servant so some see it as indicating that physical healing is in the atonement. This has led some to the false deductions that (1) God promises physical well-being in this life and it is God's will to heal all believers in this life and (2) only the lack of faith or ignorance can hinder that. There are even those who refuse any medical intervention as a sign of lack of faith. There are serious problems with these claims.

1. While there are no reasons to believe God no longer can heal miraculously or gift people with healing powers, there are likewise no reasons to believe all Christians should be healed.

Christ and the Apostles (to whom Jesus gave the power and command to heal) never turned away someone who came to them for healing, there is no indication they healed everyone. A multitude of people lay sick by the Pool called Bethesda, but Jesus healed only one (John 5:1-9). There is no indication there weren't others ready and willing to be healed. We have no indication as to how common or widespread modern day healing should be in the Church or that God never has a larger reason for leaving the faithful and righteous in a physical condition that is very painful (Job).

2. The nature of the healings narrated for Jesus (17 of the 33 miracles in the Gospels are healings along with 4 exorcisms) are tied to fulfillment of Scripture and evidentiary demonstrations ("signs and wonders") of the of the Kingdom of God in the person of Christ.

They pointed to the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the son of God and to the Apostles as his accredited representatives after him. When imprisoned John the Baptist wants to know if Jesus is the promised one to come, he is told "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached them." (Matt. 11:4-5). These miracles had a specific function in salvation history that is no longer necessary. So, while it is possible for miraculous healings to occur (and evidence they do), they are not necessary nor promised to all modern believers.

3. We cannot exempt sickness, disability, genetic defects, injuries from the sufferings that come to Christians as they are pilgrims in this life.

Along with the suffering that comes from being maligned and persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12) comes weaknesses from bodily afflictions (2 Cor. 11:23-30, 12:7-9; cf. also Romans 8:17, 35; 2 Cor 1:2-5). Even those with great faith, asking for deliverance, as Paul did with the thorn in his flesh, are humbled at times by a refusal of deliverance. Job is part of the Christian Bible. These sufferings (even from sickness that is physical or even emotional) are one of the means God uses in our formation and conformation to the image of Christ. We enter into his sufferings when we

suffer with him.

It is equally clear that Jesus draws a strong line between faith and healings (e.g., Mark 6:1-6; Acts 14:13). But there is something deeper. We find two patterns for prayer: “ask and it will be given” (whatever you ask in prayer, in faith – Mark 11:23-24) and “let your will be done.”⁴⁰¹ The problem is whether God has promised to all Christians healing in this life, whether in a particular case a prayer for healing is in accord with God’s will. Single-minded faith is asked from us while at the same time submissive faith to God’s will is essential (faith, not presumption). There is a mystery in our concrete experience: sometimes the deliverance is healing; sometimes an extended if not life-long suffering; sometimes death brings the complete “healing.”

Part of the larger picture of discipleship is the reality that we are not exempt from the slings and arrows of this fallen world, some deserved, some undeserved, some essential to our growth, some seemingly meaningless and growth-inhibiting. We can only continue to walk with those who are afflicted, provide the best help we can, and, along with the elders of the Church, let them know they are of special concern before God (James 5:14-16).

We find ourselves in this issue with what Philip Yancey calls “the problem that won’t go away.”⁴⁰² In the coming Kingdom of God, we know sickness and sorrow will be erased from creation. All the things evil let loose and our tears over them will cease. In the here and now, disciples are not removed from the sicknesses or sorrows that come to all their fellow human beings. Living faithfully when such cups of suffering are not removed but must be drunk to the full is a challenge only those who follow the Lord into Gethsemane will surmount.

(d) The Cost of Discipleship (8:18-22)

This is the first of two sections that stitch sets of miracles together. Two incidents are recounted. Both have to do with the issue of following Jesus. Both show that willingness is not enough. The conditions for followership are strict and difficult. The time to learn from Jesus is limited. Being with Jesus will hardly be a health-wealth life of comforts and career success and an easy and agreeable life, the quiet dialogue of like-minds in dwellings with every convenience.

A scribe comes declaring his readiness to follow Jesus wherever he might go. He addressed Jesus as ‘teacher.’⁴⁰³ Jesus’ response indicates that this readiness must first be tested by realism. Jesus tells this would-be student that homelessness is part of the conditions under which his discipleship will occur. The sort of normal rabbi-disciple conditions he might well have in mind does not apply to his disciples. This is not school as usual. The routine, taken-for-granted setting for learning does not occur in the school of Christ. His itinerant preaching and healing mean he does not have a settled place, surrounded by a set of eager students.

Somewhat of a theological point is made back to this Torah student. Specifically, the “Son of Man” is the one who will experience this homelessness. Whatever this scribe may have understood by the term from the Old Testament (might it have been the triumphant coming deliverer of Daniel?), Jesus is underlining his own understanding.

As we continue to read, we discover Jesus uses this circumlocution to refer to himself. Its ambiguity lies in the fact that it can mean either “I” (someone such as me) or the coming

⁴⁰¹ C.S. Lewis (1967). *Christian Reflections*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (pp. 142-151).

⁴⁰² *Where is God when it Hurts?* (1977/1990 Rev. ed.) Grand Rapids: Zondervan. (p. 17).

⁴⁰³ In Matthew only outsiders address Jesus as “teacher” and only to outsiders does Jesus refer to himself as “the son of man.” France, *Matthew* (pp. 325-327); Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 430).

redeemer of Israel (Daniel 7:13-14). There is an invitation in the way Jesus answers this scholar to think more about who the Son of Man might be and what significance it has that he will have nowhere to lay his head. (In fact, Jesus will have a boat within which to lay his head and sleep, in the midst of a terrifying storm).

A second man described as a disciple already asks for temporary release from disciple duties in order to accomplish one of the few tasks that freed even priests from Torah requirements. He wishes to bury his father. He wants a leave of absence or a postponement. Jesus is about to set out across the sea of Galilee. This suggests a sort of hierarchy of demands. If Jesus comes not to set aside or negate the law and prophets, nor does he come offering a sort of newly leveled field in which all laws have the same weight and importance.

Jesus' demand to follow him has precedence even over those things that take come before Torah observance. If we ask whether there are borderline situations in which the ordinary requirements of the law are suspended, the answer is yes. Even the Jews recognized these. The priestly or Levitical duties to remain clean were suspended in the case of the death of a close relative. The responsibility to honor parents took precedence over other demands of the covenant. What is one to do when a parent inconveniently dies during Passover or on the Day of Atonement? How can one sacrifice the duties toward God to tend to the dying or already dead? How do these various requirements dovetail into a set of commitments that can be carried out within the will of God?

Jesus indicates that the rules that override the Torah requirements do not override his demand for discipleship. In this sense, the ultimate borderline situation is the call of Jesus to come and follow him. It strikes across ordinary and extraordinary requirements of law, piety and custom. There is nothing that is more central in Kingdom living than this. One cannot appeal to the law of love of parents as overriding the stringent and urgent requirement to follow Jesus. This is the difficult way that may even mean a dramatic neglecting of filial piety.

The saying Jesus uses to answer this request is extraordinarily difficult: "Let the dead bury their own dead." Whatever it means, it seems to mean that this business will be taken care of. When there are dead, they get buried (by the spiritually dead?).⁴⁰⁴

The force of Jesus' answer is to deny this permission. He will not agree to a sort of mediating moderation: "Follow Jesus, but just don't get fanatical about it—sacrificing home and family." There is nothing that cannot be asked of the disciple by the Master. It may be difficult to tell the false from the true disciple (the tare from the wheat), but those who say, "Lord, Lord" and then do not put Christ first are out. Even nature will obey his word. Will we?

Jesus is after us—not just to heal us but to disciple us. We may want only the comfort and consolation. Jesus offers challenge, difficulty, pain and dilemma. Jesus comes, not to facilitate our priorities or responsibilities, but to subordinate all of them to his call to discipleship. Nothing is more important. Seeking first the Kingdom means first.

The strangeness in this account is that Jesus does not simply accept anyone who wishes to be his follower. In contrast with our ready and eager seeking of people to join our churches, Jesus

⁴⁰⁴ Gundry, *Matthew*: "The command to 'let the dead bury their own dead' may mean that the spiritually dead (cf. Luke 15:24, 32; John 5:24; Eph 2:1) should be left to bury the physically dead. Alternatively, the statement refers only to the physically dead and is laden with irony: 'Let those who have been dead for some time bury those who have just died.' Impossible? Yes, and in the very impossibility lies an irony that implies, 'Let the business take care of itself—it is no concern of yours.'" (p. 153).

challenges those who would come after him with the costs of that discipleship. To the intellectual he explains that there is no “place” where he might find comfort and security as a follower. Discipleship is not an avenue to advancement. It is not an offer to become the darling of contemporary intellectual and cultural salons. If this scribe thought Jesus was the finest of thinkers he had yet heard, he needed also to know that Jesus would be the most difficult to follow with the results not guaranteed.

The second disciple was challenged to assess his priorities. The Torah and the New Testament does not idolize family life. Yet they provide clear counsel about honoring and supporting one’s parents. One cannot use pious oaths as a means of getting out of economic duties to one’s parents. The Pharisees had manipulated the law (through “Korban”) to provide means for holding onto more of their acquisitions. As Bruner puts it: “Jesus is not summoning disciples to human cruelty and least of all to family callousness.”⁴⁰⁵

Nonetheless there are decisive choices that must be made. The issue is what is “first.” “First” let me go and later... We are full of firsts that all seem to come before the demands of discipleship. One of the most critical is our family ties. Here is a man who wishes only to carry out what he sees as the most important duty of human relationships. Jesus says no. First, he needs to come after Jesus in this time and place in history.

It takes years of intense, concentrated work to begin to be well equipped in the knowledge of the Scriptures. Most of us never get around to it. In this matter the monastic movement has a correct instinct. It senses that the ordinary worldly affairs of simply living and carrying the duties of civic life take enormous amounts of energy and time. If we are to have certain sorts of leadership and spirituality, we must have people who cut across all the firsts of this world and have only “one” first.⁴⁰⁶

The problem for disciples in this context had to do with the limited time and contact they might have with the earthly Jesus. Jesus may well have sensed this. Though these were not among the twelve, they were among those who sought the same sort of instruction and knowledge. For that to happen they would have to be with Jesus, even if that meant no comfort and the sacrifice of the most significant of human relational responsibilities. Whatever else discipleship might mean, it means spending the time and making the sacrifices essential for the quality of that discipleship to produce its fruits.

To be sure, our setting and condition has shifted. The Spirit of Christ is always available. There is no intrinsic limitation as was the case with an embodied earthly Christ. We do not face the concrete reality of Jesus about to leave and cross over the sea of Galilee. We live continually in the presence of Christ. Yet there is a difference here as well. We are disadvantaged in that we cannot see and hear Christ in specific interaction and reaction. So, we too have to structure our lives in such a way that the real tasks and outcomes of discipleship occur. The demands are no less. The difficulty of finding the narrow gate is just as high.

Whatever else these two wanna-be disciples might teach us, they show us Jesus’ uncompromising response to such desires. We are not doing ourselves or the church a favor by

⁴⁰⁵ *Christbook*, (p. 316).

⁴⁰⁶ “Those only live, he tells us, who devote all their thoughts, and every part of their life, to obedience to God; while those who do not rise above the world,—who devote themselves to pleasing men, and forget God,—are like *dead men*, who are idly and uselessly employed in taking care of the dead.” Calvin, *Harmony Vol. 1* (p. 390)

creating easier paths for discipleship, by pretending that we can do with a little purity, a dash of mercy, some meekness, a “pastoral” approach to adultery and divorce, a “caring” response to well-intentioned people who want to follow Christ. Jesus demands a draconian and decisive step through a narrow gate and onto a difficult path. Whatever the cost, wherever the direction, whenever the demand, following Jesus is an absolute first.

In all of this, we must not miss the reality that this is the word of Jesus, not our own inner drivenness nor the external voices of legalists. The “fanaticism” of Jesus is truly healing. The fanaticism of Jesus’ followers is often debilitating and devastating. Jesus asks that we follow him. His yoke is light and brings the healing we need. We must be certain that the claims and sacrifices we make are in response to his voice, not to some inner psychological or external social ventriloquism.

(2) Three Miracles, Tax Collectors and new wine (8:23-9:17)

Three miracles fill this section of Matthew. The stilling of the storm and waters is the first and most dramatic. It is a manifestation of the capability of Jesus’ person as expressed in his words. The unmistakable punch line is given by the astounded disciples: “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” By the time we reach the third event there will be clear suggestions of an answer. The demons confess him as “Son of God.” He will claim the authority to forgive sins on earth, indicating the brokering of a divine prerogative by a human being. These three display Jesus as Lord over nature, the demonic and sin itself.

(a) Stilling of the Storm (8:23-27)

These disciples are following Jesus, leaving behind whatever other priorities or illusions they might have had. Yet just because they have thrown their lot in with him does not mean they are fully aware of what that means. At this point their faith is small and their understanding even smaller. But at least they had entered the narrow gate and determined to follow Jesus. The call of Jesus leads to faith and faith to discipleship and discipleship to surprising experiences. They are about to learn a great deal about themselves and Jesus.

Jesus is asleep, exhausted by the presence and pressures of the crowds. The one with nowhere to lay his head is at home everywhere, even in the worst storms of life. The sudden storm is a severe one, such that waves begin to swamp the boat. The desperation of the disciples is directed to Jesus (which is where it ought to be directed). They were not prepared for his response: “Why are you so fearful?” Initially it seems to be a bizarre question: just look around!

The reaction of Jesus is that they are of “little faith.” Their calling upon him as Lord is proof of faith. Their desperation is indication that their faith is small—as small as if it were none. There is a fine line between little and no faith. This is not the great faith of the Centurion: “Speak but a word...” The words flying out of their trembling lips are: “Lord. Save. We perish.” What they don’t know is:

No water can swallow the ship where lies
The Master of ocean and earth and skies.
They shall sweetly obey my will:
Peace, be still; peace, be still.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ From the hymn, *Peace be Still* (Mary Ann Baker, ca. 1874).

How often we find their fearful emotions bubbling up in ourselves when we are stressed, with Jesus apparently asleep. On the one side we are convinced by our theology and instincts that Jesus is with us wherever we find ourselves—especially since we have chosen to follow him. This is not the prayer of the wayward or the non-disciple. This is the cry of one who is in the same boat with Jesus, terrified at the enormity of the situation (and four of them were fishermen whose life previously was spent on this lake). This was an “earthquake”⁴⁰⁸ of a storm. The waves were like tidal waves, tsunami crashing over the boat about to send it to the bottom. Nonetheless, they knew themselves to be there because they had followed Jesus.

On the other side they and we are pragmatic enough to know that Jesus or no, the real world has us soaking wet in a storm that we know our seamanship will not bring us to safety. Why are we afraid? Because we are finite, vulnerable, puny creatures who are dwarfed by the powers of nature and the cosmic struggle of the evil One against God. Because it appears our Lord does nothing but lie silent, asleep. We are intelligent enough to know that such storms kill. They are not play-acting on some divine stage. These are real dangers and we are very mortal. Given our own powers and the tangible prospects of “reality,” we have every expectation to find the sort of inner chasm that creates strong terror.

Yet Jesus does not view the situation in this manner. However naturally “human” and “normal” may be the response of anxiety, Jesus does not see it as faith-filled. It is one thing to have an abstract theology that is rooted in the Bible, to believe in some way that God stilled the sea in Jonah’s day. It is another to have confidence that God will still the sea by which I am being thrown about. Faith is far more than assent to given ideas or the professed belief that certain events were historical or even a world view that is theistic in its shape. Faith reaches the emotional level as well as the intellectual. Faith has its eyes fixed more on Jesus than the waves.

The fruits of a good tree are not evident in this response. The disciples have heard the words of Jesus and seen his power manifest in several miracles. They know enough to look to him for some idea of what to do in this crisis. But they do not yet have the faith of the Centurion: “Only say the word....” Healing the sick is one thing. Stilling the howling wind another altogether. If the words of the Sermon on the Mount seem insurmountable demands on everyday life, this seems equally an insurmountable demand on our realistic emotions.

What Jesus does in response is to rebuke the winds and immediately a great calm sets in. The astonishment is about this rapid, dramatic change in the situation. The mark of the miraculous in all these cases is the immediacy of the results as well as the lack of ordinary means. They knew Jesus was powerful. But they were not expecting something of this sort. These humans marvel and wonder what sort⁴⁰⁹ of human this one is whose word is obeyed by the natural elements. One minute he is a normal man, asleep due to exhaustion. The next... From the Old Testament they would already know that Yahweh commands the winds and waves. The Psalmist had sung: “Whatever He pleases, He does, in heaven, earth, and all deeps” (Ps. 135:6). So, what sort of person is this who does the same thing in their presence?

They marveled because the magnitude of this wonder was so great that not even the stories of Elijah or Elisha could match. There had been others who healed and exorcised and would be in the future. Even in the present day we have reports of miracles of that sort. But our modern

⁴⁰⁸ Greek: σεισμός μέγας (*seismos megas*). A great storm. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 221).

⁴⁰⁹ Greek ποταπός (*potapos*). More than “who is this” (NKJV, NLT) but “what sort of” or “what kind of” (most translations).

world has made us blasé and inured to the amazing outside of science and technology.

There was a young man in the class just ahead of me in college who was diagnosed with cancer of the throat (the voice-box to be specific). Yet when he returned to the doctor for additional work, the tumor had vanished completely. I have heard the stories of doctors who tell of “spontaneous remissions.” They marvel at what they cannot now explain. These may not be “objective” miracles that transcend ordinary natural processes. But they certainly are marvelous wonders whose occurrence is beyond contemporary medical science.⁴¹⁰

What is astonishing in this stormy event is that it is an objective matter of nature, public to a variety of people who found themselves in the midst of the crisis. The calming of wind and wave was immediately connected with the word of rebuke by Jesus of Nazareth. Again, one might say that the coincidence was happenstance and the processes were natural. Nonetheless, there is a limit to such an argument. When such unusual, unique and “miraculous” sorts of events occur again and again, it becomes at least plausible that “coincidence” is not a proper explanatory category. Such an “explanation” may simply be no more than an admission of complete ignorance of how that could have happened (without admitting it).

After all, what we mean by coincidence is precisely that we have no explanation for something. It was not planned or managed by us. It is unusual and unexpected. Yet we do not want to give up a world view postulate that tells us “miracles” are not the result of some unseen powerful agent (god or demon). “Luck” functions in the same manner. It is a confession of an event that is “random” or happens “by chance” based on some notion of possibilities falling out of small probabilities. No one arranges it. It simply “happens” (in other words there is no explanation or reason why it was as it was). Why this? Why now? Why thus?

Miracles have become a difficulty for those who have imbibed the skepticism of our post-Enlightenment world. Though the philosophical and popular arguments against the feasibility of miracles are all flawed and rest upon larger world view postulates (rather than evidence or reason), we must still admit that some account must be given of the meaning and role of miracles. What is their place in the biography of Jesus, the cultural world of his day, the accounts of the Gospel writers and in our own modern-day faith? What do we make of miracles?

What we make of them is first of all dependent upon what we bring to them. The data are the same to all who read the records or encounter the particular events in the lives of individuals. What is different are the sort of assumptions one brings to such events. If we consider the miracles of Jesus, then we are all at a distance from them, dependent upon the witness and accounts of the gospel records.

Those miracles that appear are presented as manifestations of the power of the New Age of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ. They are signs of that Kingdom and act as part of the message of Jesus. In revealing God’s activity, they also veil it—as do the words and incarnation of God in

⁴¹⁰ See Keener, C. S. (2011). *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 Vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; N. T. Wright (1996) *Jesus and the Victory of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (pp. 186-196); Meier, J. P. (1994). *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Vol. 2, Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. New York: Doubleday; Brown, C. (1984). *Miracles and the Critical Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Cotter, W. (1999). *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories*. New York: Routledge. See Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*: p. 62 for four ways scholars have ‘explained’ the mighty deeds or miracles in the Gospels.

Jesus. They confront people with even more dramatic gestures than did his powerful words in the Sermon. The “authority” present in the abilities demonstrated in miracle-works is less deniable than that found in his words and preaching.

The response given to these miracles by these direct witnesses is the proper one: the miracles are a demonstration of the person who works them. They invite people into the dialogue with the teachings, character and biography of this One. What sort of person is he after all? There is no independent function for miracles apart from the message and other actions performed by Jesus. He does not set himself up only as a healer or miracle-worker, seeking to generate more interest or coerce conclusions by a stream of powerful effects. They are a function of his compassion for the misery of humans in his historical context and are worked in such a way as to give glory to the Father in heaven. They also offer an answer by their very nature. What they provide (in light of the Old Testament) is indications of one who works the very actions of Yahweh (or as John’s Gospel puts it, the works of the Father).

Miracles are not a sort of independent, objective, verifiable datum as a proof of Christian revelation. They are part of Christian revelation. They are fruitful for life and thought only when tied closely to the theological framework within which they were originally performed and understood. They show us that God’s power and purposes are placed in service of our redemption. They are anticipations of the new age that comes with the entirely future new world of the Kingdom in its fullness. The miracles themselves are of several types, displaying in style and content the actions of God.

Some are miracles that remind us of the original Creation (turning water into wine; feeding the hungry by multiplying the loaves and fish). Some point to the new Creation (raising the dead). Some are manifestations of the contemporary struggle of Redemption (exorcising demons, forgiving sins and cleansing the leper). Deliverance from the miseries of a tragic present creates a new future for those who are direct beneficiaries of the miracle. For those in the boat on lake Galilee this calming of wind and sea was what gave them years of life to come. There are also miracles of Judgment (the cursing of the fig tree), intimating what Jesus already taught about the destiny of the broad way and those who follow the false prophets.

Most often (as here) Jesus was not the initiator of a miracle. He did not reach for miracles to deliver himself from the horrific outcomes of his messianic identity (as he could by calling upon angels in his passion). He did not use miracles to compel belief or to satisfy curiosity. He would not “prove” his identity by creating signs that might put the Pharisaic or general doubts finally to rest. The nature of his actions required discernment and invited those who saw or experienced the miracles to an appropriate response.

The “grammar” of this particular miracle comes from Old Testament’s words portraying Yahweh as one whose power can still raging seas and whose capabilities included trampling the sea under foot (e.g., Psalm 89:9). The distinctive language of “rebuking” the winds and the sea suggest that even the ordinary powers of nature are not exempt from the redemptive crisis. Creation’s own disorderly deadliness is an expression of powers that are loosed from the Creator’s original design and intent.

If we discover in Jesus Christ what original and final humanity are to be, then we may say that this miracle is an intimation (as are the others) of the sorts of powers within nature we are meant potentially to possess. While we are mastered by nature and embedded in most of its powers without recourse, Jesus was able to command that very same nature (to life, to calmness, to blush into wine, to wither and die). He was complete master of its elements. For him nature was not a

simply mute determinism, manipulable only by the agonizingly slow mastery of its mechanisms through science and technology. His walking on water as well as his command to be still is expressive of the sort of realities unleashed to a resurrected and redeemed humanity.

When we are confronted with liberalism's "abridging the gospel" by smudging over the miracles as an embarrassment on the face of Jesus, we must decline the cosmetics.⁴¹¹ The plastic surgery needed here is not on the Gospels but on the assumptions of a skepticism that has never definitively made its case. Hume's arguments are fatally flawed by a doctrinaire assumption about a closed nexus of laws of the universe combined with a denial of knowledge of anything like cause.⁴¹² So long as our knowledge of nature is not exhaustive but limited, we cannot build a case that "knows" miracles do not happen. Yet we must also say we cannot rigorously demonstrate that any "miracle" that happens is caused by God. Our knowledge is limited in both directions. Proving a negative (as philosophers have known) is nearly impossible.

We are confronted with witnesses, first century people, who saw and experienced extraordinary effects that were clearly beyond their own regular or normal powers (or any other powers they knew). While there are some parallels to others who did healings, there are many miracles that are unparalleled. Even we moderns, taking the accounts as largely descriptive reports, are still so astounded that we either must deny them (in the name of a scientism) or explain them away (in the name of a materialistic naturalism) or confess our befuddlement. Miracles are like the court of the Gentiles in the Temple: they bring us to a place where we are near God, but we must take additional steps to enter the actuality of God.

The striking thing about Jesus is that his whole life act was both so thoroughly human and so profoundly mysterious. The gospel records indicate that he is the word and wisdom of God present, giving us truth and knowledge of God. He is also the Spirit anointed worker of that truth in human affairs. So together we have words and works that amaze and puzzle. His words did not run in the normal channels of earthly things, conforming to the highly developed traditions for making sense of life and God. His works too were something new in the face of the old and

⁴¹¹ "You can't separate God from the miracles (as Bultmann thinks); instead, you must be able to interpret and proclaim them *both* 'nonreligiously.' Bultmann's approach is still basically liberal (that is, it cuts the gospel short), whereas I'm trying to think theologically." Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. (p. 372).

⁴¹² Hume sought to produce an argument against miracles that would amount to an "everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures." (David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," in *The Harvard Classics 37: The English Philosophers of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Charles W. Eliot. (1910) New York: P. F. Collier & Son. (pp. 396–397). His epistemological empiricism and metaphysical naturalism meant no fact could be admitted that would count against his case, no matter how well attested. The assumption such arguments make is that nature is the whole, the absolute, nothing but the material universe of atoms in motion. If nature is absolute, then miracles are impossible. But if there is an absolute God, then miracles are more than possible but expected. C. S. Lewis (2001), *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. New York: HarperOne: "By definition, miracles must of course interrupt the usual course of Nature; but if they are real they must, in the very act of so doing, assert all the more the unity and self-consistency of total reality at some deeper level. They will not be like unmetrical lumps of prose breaking the unity of a poem; they will be like that crowning metrical audacity which, though it may be paralleled nowhere else in the poem, yet, coming just where it does, and effecting just what it effects, is (to those who understand) the supreme revelation of the unity in the poet's conception." (pp. 97-98).

ordinary.

The issue that arose between Jesus and his contemporaries was not whether these happened. Even to his enemies there was no doubt that wondrous things occurred in accordance with the exercise of his authoritative speaking. Rather the question was the source and nature of this power: was it from God or from the Evil One? The opposition moved from what they considered theologically impossible (claims to forgive sin on earth, the assertion that he was to be identified with the Servant of Yahweh, that he was the Son of God who was the Son of Man etc.). Given his “erroneous” theology, they could only conclude (in their framework) that he was the worker of Magical powers by the power of the demonic. He would have to be removed from Israel to ensure its purity before the Holy One.

The miracles of Jesus are defiant gestures of the power of the Kingdom of God now present. They are signs of his quality as the Son of God doing the works of the Father by the power of the Spirit. They are also prophetic indications of the coming eradication of the powers of destruction. Each of the miracles is an indication of the subduing of the unruly rebellion afoot in creation and a pointer to the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand. God’s mercy is active and effective, responsive to the suffering and misery brought about by a world of sin and calling for an answer of faith and gratitude.

While there are similarities with other “miracles,” there are also some relatively clear distinguishing marks of their enactment by Jesus. Karl Barth’s summary is helpful here:⁴¹³

1. In the majority of instances Jesus acts occasionally. There is no indication of a plan or initiative on his part. They are “forced” upon him by people he encounters or who come to him with requests. He sees the need or confronts the crisis and does them. Miracles are not his “bait” to get a hearing or the main event.

2. He does not use some Magical art or craft. We have no indication of incantations or technique. He does not counsel or pray with people or practice medicine as a healer. There are a few times he touches people or anoints them with spittle. Yet these are exceptional and appear not to be part of a regular praxis.

3. He rejects spectacular miracles that are rooted in self-preservation or self-advancement (to make bread for himself or leap from the Temple pinnacle). He does not call for the legion of angels to avoid the cross. Miracles are not compensated for with gifts from those who benefit. He is not self-seeking in these signs.

4. Nor are miracles, for all their mercy and compassion, part of a general program of amelioration of world conditions or improvement of the human lot. He did not establish a Lourdes or a Möttlingen where miracles are continuous. He fed the hungry and then they hungered again and had to feed themselves. They are beginnings without continuations.

5. His miracles are cosmic actualizations of his preaching and serve to call people to a commitment of faith. They are indissolubly connected to his proclamation. They are not independent or isolated wonders to be gaped at and stir people out of boredom. They push people toward faith in God’s redemption.

6. There is probably not a single miracle that does not have a sign quality or symbolic (parabolic) nature. Each tells us in its form and style something about the nature of the

⁴¹³ *CD. Vol. IV.2*, (pp. 216-218).

actualization of the Kingdom of God. Jesus makes actual history with these events while at the same time doing so in such a way as to instruct us in the nature of faith and the Kingdom. The frail ship facing the “earthquake” of a storm is also a picture of the frail bark of the Church and the disciples in all ages needing the Master’s word to save it in the midst of a demonic world-order full of injustice, conflict, disease and tragedy.

(b) Restoring two demon-possessed men (8:28-34)

This story takes us a step further in understanding the sort of authority exercised by Jesus. In this case we meet two very wild men (Mark and Luke recount the story of only one of them). They are so fierce that none could pass that way. Yet Jesus comes into their territory.⁴¹⁴

If the disciples were in a quandary as to how to think about Jesus, what sort of person he was, the demons speaking through these men are not. The disciples arrive with Jesus only to hear the demoniacs tell them who he is: The Son of God.⁴¹⁵ In whatever way this designation is understood, the demons take this Son of God as the one who will “torment them before the time.” He is a powerful authority in the hierarchy of beings above them. The implication is that he is the eschatological judge whose power includes the decisive judgment upon the demonic realm. This is at least one answer to the question raised by the quelling of the dangerous storm.

Allowing demons to remove themselves from the men and indwell the swine is granted by Jesus’ one word response in Matthew: “Go.” The reading of this text in terms of modern movements of animal rights or other sorts of cultural grids distorts its meaning and significance. Given the reality that pigs were used in idolatrous pagan sacrifice and were forbidden to Jewish agriculture, this event would be viewed by Jewish readers as a positive, righteous act.

In any case, it is to be noted that Jesus did not command the violent action of stampeding the swine over the cliffs to their watery grave. In permitting the demons to enter the animals, Jesus does not thereby compel them to their final act of violence. If there are those to blame in this story, they are the demonic powers. Yet such an action was a visible demonstration that the demons had left the men and entered the pigs.

They have held these men in uncleanness, in separation from ordinary life and as a threat to passersby. They are the agents who destroy the pigs, not Jesus. Their obeisance and obedience to him indicate the magnitude of authority they acknowledge. It does not mean they become in every way subject to his will at this point. We do not even know what happened to them (the plural verb for perishing in the waters most naturally refers to the pigs). There is suggestion that they not only recognize the identity of Jesus but the reality that a time is coming when they will be subject to the torments of judgment.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, on Matthew 8:28, Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26 for the textual difficulties attending the location of this event (is it Gadara, Gerasa, Gergesa?). For more: Keener, *Matthew* (p. 282); Gibbs, Vol. 1 (p. 447); Carson, *Matthew* (pp. 258-59); Turner, *Matthew* (pp. 249-50).

⁴¹⁵ Luther takes this confession as a lying flattery, to tempt Christ. *Works Vol. 67* (p. 54).

⁴¹⁶ Barth, *CD IV.2*. “There is a grotesque side to the matter. We have only to think of the story of the demoniac in Mk. 5:1 and par. Someone has described it as a burlesque. And why not? For all its final seriousness what happens to evil in its confrontation with Jesus is grotesque and (if we like) farcical. In Lk. 10:18, for example, it tumbles down from heaven. And in this story it can only ask for permission to go, itself unclean, into the herd of unclean swine, to plunge with them over the cliff into the lake and to be drowned, thus perishing finally from the world. If only the community had let it rest at that, or learned again not merely to laugh, but genuinely to rejoice at this sign and what it so drastically signified!” (p. 231).

The response of the swineherds and the city to which they were connected is to remove this powerful miracle worker. Whether they were fearful that other herds might suffer the same disaster or loss (were they controlled by the demonic powers of Mammon?), whether this was discomfort in the presence of a miracle worker, we are not told. They want Jesus away from their area and beg him to leave. It is clear he values people over property. He represents a dire challenge to their ordinary lives. This anticipates the later instruction to the disciples: they will face hostile reception from some cities and need to be ready to depart from them.

“The conflict has multiple levels: economic, since the pigs are a source of food and income from sale and taxes; political, since Jesus has challenged their control and destroyed a symbol of Roman imperial control; social, since Jesus has taken the side of the expendables, at the expense of the elite; ethnic, since Jesus is a Jew asserting his authority among Gentiles; religious, since Jesus has destroyed an animal with important roles in religious rites.”⁴¹⁷

As is the case with the power of nature, Jesus works a miracle simply out of the sheer power of his grace. There is no mention of faith (whether little, entire, great or otherwise). Again, this is a case of a miracle that happens without planning and occurs as a sheer act of gracious deliverance from the controlling power of destructive evil. Jesus acts as an exorcist without all the paraphernalia or techniques of exorcists. The fact that there is a two-stage conversation in Mark and Luke does not alter this. There are no all-night prayer meetings or repeated rebuking. There is a command that will have its way—followed by a negotiation of what is to occur as a by-product of their leaving. Matthew simply recounts the final results.

The condensation by Matthew gives us a story that emphasizes the person of Jesus Christ. Matthew does not spend time on the details of the exorcism or the final call to discipleship of those delivered or even the benefits that came to these men and the region of the Decapolis. The sheer ability to deliver these demon-possessed men is what is underlined. So dramatic are its results that the locals do not want to have to deal with a person with such power. Given the gentile dominance in the area, a Jew with such powers would be doubly dangerous. He could not be assimilated into the social or political structures of the region. Nor could he be brought under control by subordinating him to the agenda and goals of the Hellenistic world.⁴¹⁸

(c) Paralysis and the Forgiveness controversy – the scribes (9:1-7)

Having been rejected by a Gentile town, Jesus returns to “his own city.” One might expect the reception in Capernaum to be quite different. The third miracle in this set deals with the healing of the paralytic and the forgiveness of sins. Matthew’s telling of the story shortens it by omitting a few of the details found in Mark. Emphasis falls again on the astonishing authority of Jesus. Just as he has the capability to command the wind and waves, to destroy the power of many demons, so he has the power to forgive sins and heal the broken body. His words are the word of

⁴¹⁷ Carter, *Matthew* (pp. 213-14).

⁴¹⁸ Augustine offers an allegorical interpretation of this story, displaying many of the vices of such attempted readings of narratives that recite historical events: *Works Vol. I/15 & I/16* (pp. 385-386).

God.⁴¹⁹ His word brings freedom from sin.⁴²⁰

In this text there is a shocking contrast. Jesus sees the faith of those who brought the paralytic and encourages the disabled man by declaring that his sins are forgiven. The scribes perceive all this to be wrong-headed, blasphemous and evil. Jesus sees their thoughts as clearly as he sees the faith of the paralytic's companions. Jesus tells them clearly that their muttering of this opinion among themselves is rooted in an evil that is in their hearts. They are ones who need forgiveness for sins for they are harboring evil in their thoughts.

“None was more quarrelled with by men, than he that came to take up
the great quarrel between God and man.”⁴²¹

There is a man who is not confronted as a sinner but as a sufferer, who nonetheless has his sins forgiven. There are a number of other men who are confronted as sinners who nonetheless remain in their sins. Jesus can see both faith and evil. His power is used to respond to faith and to opposition. To those who oppose he demonstrates decisively his claim to have power to forgive sins. To those who come in faith seeking a healing he works the double miracle of forgiveness and healing.

There is another surprise. Jesus claims to know how things stand with God. His assertion that this man's sins are forgiven is an implicit claim to have knowledge about God that not even the scribes would assert. Jesus affirms that he mediates that knowledge as well as the very power it takes to forgive sins—even sins that may be intimately connected with our illnesses. It takes power to release us from our sins, no less than to heal real physical paralysis. Where that power is found is displayed here. Jesus has such power.

We know the power of sin in our own personality and in our relationships. How difficult it is for us to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” We find so little mercy in our inner being, so few emotions that draw us forward to say such words to those who have wronged us. We even have an inner struggle to hear such words, whether from our fellow human or from God. Not even the words, “My sins are forgiven,” are easily said. In this difficulty we discover that forgiveness is a power, not simply words.

The first problem we have is that of the scribes: we do not even realize that some of our most precious and carefully crafted theological ideas are completely wrong-headed. We who are zealous for the scriptures and spend much time in study and meditation are not so much tempted by the devil to wonder, “Hath God said?” Rather we too easily begin to believe we can say with eminent confidence, “God hath said!” (in agreement with us). We frame our understanding with a pious claim and use it to limit the reality and power of God to confront sin and sickness.

Jesus Christ stands before us as the power of God to forgive and heal. He is the one who knows even the evil in our hearts that roots itself even at times in our theological convictions. He knows how we are with God and can bring to our dilemmas the freeing word of God. This is a capability given here and now, on earth, not just as it is in heaven. We cannot place artificial limits on the power Jesus has to do the sort of thing we see happening here. If we understand him correctly, then we will see in him the ultimate power of God to remove sin as well as all its entailments

⁴¹⁹“Jesus not only speaks of the forgiveness of sins but actually forgives sins and, to show His authority for this act-word, cures the paralytic. God's act as it takes place visibly, the totality of a gracious act on man, emphasises that the word spoken is God's Word.” Barth, *CD I/1* (p. 401).

⁴²⁰ The headings for these three miracles based on suggestions by Bruner, *Christbook* (pp. 410ff).

⁴²¹ Henry, *Commentary* (p. 1654).

from us and our whole universe.

Matthew alone tells us the story of the naming of Jesus by Joseph: “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (1:21) In this incident we have one of the ways that happens. We already have seen Jesus saving us by resisting temptation and by giving us clarity on righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount. We need to be saved from our notion that sin is an essential predicate of humanity. We also need to be saved from morally deficient visions, especially those based upon the oracles of God. Even with that we need also a power released within us to live differently. It is not enough to perceive ourselves and the norms that measure us correctly. If all we have is “law,” then we remain in our sin. Only the power of God through Jesus Christ can release us.

There are two whom Jesus encourages on several days. The first is this paralyzed man. The second is a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage. Both find themselves in bodies that have betrayed them. They are unable to live full lives amid the normal range of everyday affairs.

What is striking is the marvelous power of the word of Christ. In all three of the miracles of this section, it is the word of Christ that creates new realities in the midst of hopelessness. There were no real possibilities for safety (so the experienced boatmen of Galilee thought) amid the horrendous squall that had overtaken them. The demoniacs were possessed by many demons, not just one. So ingrained and powerful were these that people gave them wide berth. What would a man confined to his bed think about his future, given his paralysis? No hope for any of these—until Jesus spoke a simple word.

We have some power over our outlook and attitudes, even in the midst of terrifically debilitating and discouraging circumstances. Jesus looked into the soul of this paralytic and saw the face of discouragement and despair. “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” That is what he said first to this man. He does not simply tell him to cheer up, to think positive thoughts, to find the silver lining in the dark cloud of his disability. This is not an early version of Positive Mental Attitude. Jesus gives him a reason for being encouraged: “Your sins are forgiven.”

This might seem a cheap religious shot. The man is paralyzed. He was brought by his friends in order to deal with a physical problem. Jesus saw into the depths of this man. Were he never to walk again, his need was more profound than the tragedy of paralysis. Yet if the story stops here, we are at the level of chattering nonsense, of whispering sweet nothings into a situation where we confront one who is hopeless with our own helplessness. How easy it is for us to say, “Be of good cheer,” and turn on our heel to visit another bedridden parishioner.

Jesus does not stop there. He forgives the sins of this man. He was brought seeking the blessing of physical healing. He gets something even better: courage and forgiveness. We are not told what his sins were or how they related to his paralysis. The story’s point makes such considerations superfluous, centered on displaying the capabilities possessed by Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew is taking us on a journey that seeks a true assessment of Jesus. We might like answers to the mysteries of this paralytic’s personal history, but we are not given them.

Jesus does not stop with encouragement and forgiveness. In the midst of this event he not only lifts the spirit but the body of this man as well. With a word no more substantial than sound waves he removes the paralysis. This visible demonstration of the power of his word tells us that his other words about sin are just as effective. All he need do is say the word: winds and waves cease; demons are ripped out of their depth control of human life; paralysis vanishes. More importantly, the dead weight of sin is lifted and the heart encouraged.

This confronts us with stark alternatives. We can be those who hear the word of Christ in

faith and take heart. Or we can think evil thoughts in our hearts, even in the face of his word and demonstrated power. We are called to come (or bring others with us) with our sins and our paralysis—and take heart. Jesus wants the best for us.

George MacDonald from his *Dairy of an Old Soul* (December, Two)⁴²² has words that capture a bit of the inner dynamic of this story:

I will what thou will'st—only keep me sure
That thou are willing; call to me now and then.
So, ceasing to enjoy, I shall endure
With perfect patience—willing beyond my ken,
Beyond my love, beyond my thinking scope;
Willing to be because thy will is pure;
Willing thy will beyond all bounds of hope.

(d) “Sinners” and the Fellowship controversy – the Pharisees (9:9-12)

This begins the second section on discipleship that intersects cycles portraying the miracles of Jesus. In this case the portrait is the calling of Matthew the tax collector.⁴²³ It also notes the association of Jesus with sinners and the discomfort of the Pharisees that he ate with them. Jesus puts an end to a self-righteous closed community. His coming brings freedom from a false separatism. Jesus clarifies his vocation by specifying the way in which his behavior conforms to the requirements of Old Testament Scripture. His “parish” is not limited to the synagogue or to those considered “upstanding” citizens who are honorable and successful.

The discordance is created by Jesus having dealings with that part of his society which was considered unclean and excluded from the ordinary religious duties of the sacrificial system. Tax collectors had to deal with Gentiles as well as tradesmen whose ritual purity was unknown. By receiving money or searching through goods, it was a known likelihood that a person would cross purity boundaries and be rendered unclean. To such a sinner Jesus utters a word, perhaps one that gave this one “heart” as well.

In this case, the calling, as was the case with other Apostles, unlike most disciples, was a calling out of their current vocation. It was a calling to leave all and follow. Most of us are called and redeemed in the lawful callings we are in and called back into them to serve there as servants of the Kingdom. In this case we do not see Matthew again at the tax table.⁴²⁴

Jesus recruits Matthew, a genuine moral untouchable in the eyes of the religious elite and

⁴²² Augsburg: Minneapolis (1994) p. 120.

⁴²³ Mark 2:14 lists the name of the tax collector as Levi. Matthew has most often been seen as another name for the same person. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “Matthew (abbreviated form of “gift of Yahweh”) may have been the Christian name taken by Levi after his conversion to indicate his new life (cf. Saul-Paul).” (p. 238). France, *Matthew* takes it to be another case of a person with two Semitic names such as Simon/Cephas, Joseph/Barnabas, Jesus/Barabbas (p. 352).

⁴²⁴ Carter points to the implications while overstating them. He reads his agenda into Matthew: “It means abandoning his invested interests (cf. 6:19–24), disrupting his life based on greed and exploitation, and forsaking the imperial structure which his occupation sustains. To not collect taxes is to undermine the empire’s way of life and control.” *Matthew* (p. 218). There is no indication Jesus called Matthew out of the tax farming system because it was inherently sinful and oppressive. Perhaps he recognized in Matthew a heart ready for new life, one already near the Kingdom of heaven. There is no indication that Zacchaeus left taxation from an even more important position within it (Lk. 19:1-10).

likely despised by the average inhabitant who resented taxation. We are not told whose taxes he was collecting. Perhaps those of Herod Antipas. Whosever's taxes, he would not have been a popular figure among the true patriots such as those among the Pharisees. When he throws a banquet for Jesus and his disciples and invites his friends, the scene is that of a house full of tax collectors and "sinners."⁴²⁵ Who these sinners might have been is less clear. This may have meant lax Jews whose life style was such that they made no pretense of attempting to keep even the large outline of Torah requirements.

The problem is that eating associated one more intimately than it does for us today. It implied a social acceptance and recognition that had ramifications for one's status or ranking in the honor system. The rule of thumb was to entertain one's social equals and to attend functions where such were found. What this did was to ensure that one was not rendered impure by the hand of some ritually unclean person taking food from the same dishes from which one ate. It also functioned within the honor system of the village to reaffirm and display the status ranking system. Patrons ate with each other just as their clients might eat with their own kind as well.

Jesus obviously does not feel that there is a problem with him or his own associating with this crowd. He does not validate the purity sensibilities of the Pharisees. This is a picture of what it means that he requires a greater righteousness than that of the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus sends them back to their scriptures to learn the meaning of Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."⁴²⁶

If one is worried about being ritually clean and ready to offer sacrifice, then the concerns and rules of the Pharisees are sensible. But if mercy is the heart of piety, then the strict rules surrounding sacrifice have to flex to the demands of mercy. The people Hosea addressed were those satisfied and pleased with their ritual but who were displeasing to God. Jesus' mission is grounded in mercy, not merit. Beneficence in caring for the poor is better than magnificence in great religious events. Ritual purity and obedience can be no excuse for not living by the moral demands of the Kingdom for concern for those in need. A healthy spirituality would rather eat with messed up people who love God than religious people who dislike messed up people.

Jesus' point was one that needed to be made. It was necessary because there are parts of the Old Testament that warn about becoming identified with the evildoers and the wicked (e.g., Psalm 26:4-5). The force of those warnings is not the literal act of sitting in a seat where a scoffer usually sits or being in the presence and conversing with the wicked. It is taking up their cause, fostering their mindset, echoing their goals and adopting their means. It is not a matter of being physically separate but being morally and spiritually centered. The problem we often have is that we are chameleon-like, adopting the dominant colors that surround us. So, we need to be warned of the danger of conformity and compromise.

Jesus indicates that his mission is to the spiritually downfallen, to those who are indeed sinners and questionable morally, to the poor in spirit and humbled. The physician does not work with the healthy but with the ill. So, his calling is not to make the "righteous" more righteous. It is to bring the mercy of God to the sinners. The Pharisees tightened up the purity boundaries in

⁴²⁵ Reclining at meals indicates a formal banquet setting. Matthew uses his normal "and behold" (καὶ ἰδοὺ) to highlight what follows: the unusual folks gathered with Jesus for this banquet.

⁴²⁶ "His recommendation that the Pharisees reflect on Hos. 6:6, 'I desire compassion, not sacrifice,' focuses attention on a prophetic critique of the mentality that prioritizes the performance of religious ritual over the maintenance of personal integrity and social justice." Turner, *Baker: Matthew* (p. 253).

part by making the company of the faithful more distinct and clear cut than even the Old Testament required. They were generous toward God and those who agreed with their theology and ritual practices, but strict and judgmental toward others. They would have agreed in principle with the centrality of mercy but seen this sort of association as compromising holiness.

Jesus was no less generous toward God (love God with all you are). But it did not lead to the harsh, mercilessness of excluding whole classes of people as unworthy. There was a righteousness that was higher, broader and deeper than that of the Pharisees.⁴²⁷ Jesus demonstrates part of that in his actions and words toward Matthew and his questionable friends.

What does it mean that sin is treated as though it were a disease? Already under our mental belts is the strange interconnection of paralysis and the sins for one man. Yet here are “healthy” sinners actively engaged in feasting and conversation. Sometimes apparently sins are so rooted in the personality that sickness is a manifestation of their powers and consequences. Sometimes sins do not seem to have any effects whatever on people’s abilities to be hale and hearty. Any theology of sin and sickness must deal with both facts.

The objections to Jesus multiply. First is the complaint that he claimed the ability to pronounce sins forgiven on earth and showed he had such authority by releasing a man from his physical confinement. Jesus overturned the assumptions of the scribes. They would have suspected that illness and sickness was connected in some way to sin. The *prima facie* evidence of a paralytic walking would suggest that his sins had been dealt with in some way.

Now we have the complaint that Jesus associates with people who make no secrets of their sinful behavior and practices. None need have spiritual eyes to see into the depths of these people’s souls. Their status was well known—as clearly as the paralytic was known to be paralyzed. These were “sinners,” and everyone knew it. The tax collectors were despised because of their profession. That was no secret either. This was not a case of a sinner being brought into the presence of Jesus. Rather, he and his disciples voluntarily and freely went into to sit and eat with these types.

“Jesus’s social interaction with notorious sinners scandalized the Pharisees of his own day, and it likewise tends to embarrass those in our day whose views about separation from worldliness stress externals rather than personal integrity.”⁴²⁸

Jesus issues a second challenge by his behavior. By sitting at table with these reprobates Jesus was refusing the boundaries of social propriety that the Pharisees had drawn so carefully. Whatever might have been the case with the paralytic, at least he did not seek him out, sit down and eat with him. If he were a sinner, Jesus sent him on his way. But here Jesus deliberately violates important, articulate, well-known rules for proper religious righteousness.

In using the picture of the physician and sickness for the role of the righteous and the reality

⁴²⁷“In regarding themselves as [righteous], and conducting their party politics as such, they obviously do not need to be called by Him, any more than the physician by those who are well. Nor has He come to strengthen them in their righteousness or to give validity and new thrust to their party politics. Nor can He use them in His discipleship for what He has in mind for those who are called by Him. They are the very last who can become and be His witnesses. As those who are already righteous, they can never be this. As His disciples, as Christians, they could only cause confusion and offence by understanding and representing His Gospel as a new and higher kind of Pharisaism.” Barth, *CD IV.3.2* (p. 587).

⁴²⁸ Turner, *Baker: Matthew* (p. 254).

of sin, Jesus provides some important perspectives for our understanding of sin. In our therapeutic culture, we have come to replace responsibility with victim language. As a result, it sometimes feels dangerous to speak of sin as sickness. Sin is also rebellion, transgression, iniquity, perversion, falling short and missing the mark. Yet it is also a sickness.

Mercy considers sin as sickness. It cannot view the devastation and distortion of sin simply with the harsh eye of justice ('They chose that life and now they're getting what they deserve!'). It sees the misery and the involuntary element. However much it might be the by-product of a designed offense, sin's effects ravage us beyond our choice. We chose the pleasure of sex and received HIV or venereal disease. We chose the excitement of joy riding in a stolen vehicle and received a jail sentence.

Under the rubric of sickness, we might say sin is hereditary. It is already in us and active without our choice before our rationality deploys itself in the first baby words we speak. How that is so is a mystery. It is also very disabling. We cannot climb the mountains of faith or traverse the delights of righteousness because sin paralyzes our best powers. We are enfeebled spiritually and confused. We hear the commands of Christ and cannot do them. We wish to speak the healing word or extend the transforming touch as Christ does and find we are withered shadows of his ability.

Sin is deep-seated, beyond our own capability to rectify it. Its mortal path leads us into the shadow of death without hope. We know we are infected, even contagious (others seem to catch our sinfulness more easily than our righteousness). But where are the anti-bodies, the medicine, the treatment, the anti-dotes for our sin? There is a pain that we sense and even a deadness to our senses. The longer we live with sin the less we possess either the powers or the vividness of perception health endows us with.

Jesus declares himself the Great Physician for the sickness of sin. That is all we need know. Jesus has come to heal the sin-sick. If we will not sit with him first as sinners, we shall not sit with him later as disciples. The only Jesus who has come to call sinners to follow him.

(e) The Fasting controversy – the disciples of John (9:14-17)

Some were disturbed about the sinners Jesus ate with. Here they are disturbed that he and his disciples eat instead of fast. The one saw holiness as the people you keep company with. The other saw holiness as a matter of the rigor of the spiritual disciplines observed. Jesus lays the foundation for freedom from scrupulosity.

Three incompatibles are highlighted: fasting and a wedding celebration; old wineskins and new wine; a torn old cloak and a new cloth patch. The point is not the doing away of the old by the new. Fasting is not ended or banished as part of an old religious practice unsuited to the new. It is re-located in terms of when it is appropriate. So long as Jesus is present, it is time to celebrate, not fast. Fasting days will come.

This saying comes on the heels of the feasting of disciples and Jesus with the tax collectors and sinners. There is much that is continuous between John and Jesus. One thing that is not is fasting. Fasting was an expression of mourning for sins, a preparation for the coming of the Lord, an expression of commitment to the change of life that repentance demands. Jesus himself repeated John's demand for repentance in the light of the Kingdom of God. Yet fasting was not a characteristic response of his first disciples.

Fasting is also a type of sacrifice, a giving up of normal food in deference to the majesty and gravity of the reality of God and the horror of the sin and evil of our lives and our world. The

miracles we have been watching are acts of mercy (on the leper, the centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, the exorcising of the demoniacs and the forgiving and healing of the paralytic). These whose social status was borderline or worse received the benefits of a pure gift of grace, being restored to vitality and active life.

It was also mercy that embraced Matthew and ate with his peers. What is it that God desires? Jesus is signaling by his words and example that mercy is the controlling core of his activity. His disciples are not unaligned with his spirit or teachings when they do not fast. They are carrying forward the very sort of priorities Jesus had given them. This re-centering of the flow of Jewish religious thought and life was such that it could not simply be tacked onto the old. To combine the two would be to bring ruin to the wineskins and the wine.

As "old" as Jesus' way is, it is also dramatically new. What is new is the dawning of the messianic age. The portrait of the bridegroom is a messianic image. However valid and valuable were the old ways, they could not simply be retained as is. The messiah and the new age mean dramatic change. What is the same between old and new is that both are about righteousness. What is new is the contrast between seeking and displaying righteousness according to strict purity boundaries or rigorous ascetic practices and a righteousness that is deeper and broader than either of those traditional practices.

The old cloak of Pharisaism was tattered and torn. Its multiplication of rules and guard rails did not prevent violations of the Torah or desecration of the Prophets. The old wineskins of John the Baptist's movement were now emptied of their wine with the coming of the Messiah he had foretold.

On the one hand the problem is a confusion of means and ends. The mandates for separation in the Old Testament were not simply for the sake of knowing the good guys from the bad. They were not designed to develop a holy huddle of perfected saints whose righteousness was superlative. The separation was motivated for the sake of becoming animated and intoxicated with the reality of the living and merciful God who was reaching out to bless all the nations. The Pharisees clothed themselves in regular Monday and Thursday fasting, in ritual cleansing and detailed observances. Yet that did not generate the mercy that would bring them into close contact with tax collectors and sinners. They had all the spiritual disciplines and none of the spirituality that God desires.

On the other hand, the challenge of the disciples of John confuses preparation with the event, the transition with the arrival. The cook who grows so comfortable in the kitchen that he or she never comes to the dining table to eat never enjoys the purpose of cooking. The hard work of planning and waiting for the wedding is lost if the wedding never happens, if the planning and discipline continues year by year. When the groom and bride are present, it is time for the preparation to end and the event to begin.

Implicit in this story is the coming absence of the groom (the first foreshadowing of the violent death of Jesus). Also implicit are the changes that will emerge—a church, not simply a new synagogue or a reformed "Judaism." Jesus has come, and nothing will ever be the same.

Lurking in this story as well as in the prior "interruption" of these miracles are some bottom lines about discipleship. In Matthew 8:18-22 Jesus stressed the rigorous demands of following him. Any would-be disciple must count on the experience of personal sacrifice and suffering. Christ-following leads to the cross, not to a condominium. Whatever we perceive to be our highest priorities, following Christ is even higher. There is no priority, no urgency, no customary imperative, no borderline situation so paramount that it supersedes the demands that come with

Christ-following.

Matthew displays this in his initial response. When called he gets up and leaves his tax tables. He invites his fellow collectors and other disreputables who associated with them for a meal with Jesus and his disciples. He celebrates his “liberation” from his means of income! What it entailed in terms of his dependency relations on patrons or what his family thought about this “career” move is not unveiled in the text. He was not hesitant to do what was demanded of him. He does it immediately without the calculation of its impact upon family, clients or patrons.

What concerned the Pharisees was the “who” with whom it is proper for religiously committed people to closely associate. For them one’s company was the key indicator of one’s character. Proper religious insight and maturity would lead to dissociation from the profane and profligate. The collaborator and oppressor alike were shunned, as were the sinner and ritually lax. The clarity of the Law led to conclusive lists of insiders and outsiders.

What concerned John’s disciples (and the Pharisees) in the second matter was how often to eat. The discipline of the Torah and of preparing for the Coming One was such as to require the asceticism of fasting. How could one be spiritually sensitive and eat well in this world?

The striking thing about both approaches to Jesus is the repetition of a key response in the Garden of Eden. When Eve is challenged by the snake as to what God had said, she adds to God’s restriction: “You shall not eat of the tree..., nor shall you touch it...” In Jesus’ day the arbiters of piety and morality had been busy adding to the requirements of the Old Testament. It was not enough to fast once a year on the day of Atonement. It was not enough to carry out the purification rituals of the Law. The hyper-religious sought an overabundant righteousness by overabundant rules and ritual practices.

There is also the danger many of us sense in the spiritual disciplines. They are too frequently self-oriented and self-centered. We are often too self-conscious in their practice, frequently taking our spiritual and emotional temperatures to see how we are doing and growing. If sacrifice is embodied in the daily routines as a way of brokenness before God, its fruit can be self-righteousness or mercy. Why are some of us who are the most religious also the most rigid and harsh? How is it that a broad and deep encounter with the Scripture can leave us shallow and short in our encounters with our neighbors?

What is striking and hopeful for us is that Jesus was thoroughly versed and saturated with the Scripture. Most of us pale by comparison with the level of mastery of the details of the Scripture he displays. It was beyond that of the Pharisees. Scripture mastery does not necessitate narrow minded prudery, constricted scruples or fragile sensibilities.

Jesus is the center of this text as he has been at the center of the miracles. Matthew is emphatically Christo-centric in his telling of these incidents. Jesus is here! The bridegroom is come. The messianic age is begun. The Kingdom of God is at hand. However, we wish to phrase it, the net effect is a revolution of piety and purity. Instead of an orientation preoccupied with one’s own purity and practice, Jesus gives his disciples an orientation to the neighbor in mercy. He also claims them so that they network with the sinner and the tax collector, not use their resources and energy in moving up the status ladders of their world. They are not commanded to fast but are given permission to do so when he is gone. Now they must seize the opportunity to celebrate, to be clothed in new material and to fill new wineskins with new wine.

(3) Three Miracle stories of restoration (9:18-34)

(a) Two Miracles: A dead girl and a sick woman – joy released (9:18-26)

In this story two miracles are tied together. Both are female. Both called “daughter.” Both are introduced with Matthew’s “behold” or “look” (ιδού). Matthew wants us to see these women and how Jesus treats them.

The extreme gravity of both situations is underlined. In the one case the daughter of a leader of the synagogue dies before Jesus comes to her aid. In the other Jesus encounters a woman whose inner hemorrhaging has been continuing for twelve years without remedy. These are more than difficult conditions to “solve.” They are humanly impossible. Who can raise the dead? The dead do not rise again, not even a dead twelve-year-old. Who can cure an incurable hemorrhaging? She whose life had been bleeding away for twelve years had already tried many remedies. Who can? Jesus can.

Matthew condenses the larger drama into a short compact narrative. The focus is on the power and authority of Jesus to command the larger framework of the physical world that defines the boundaries of our finiteness. The stories mean to underling the meaning of faith. Each miracle displays another ability that we might have thrown up as beyond the capability of any miracle-worker. Yet each finds solution.

Each is an indication of the new wine and new wineskins, of finding reason to rejoice in situations that would normally entail fasting, prayer and lament. Out of death, life; out of an isolating, incurable, interminable illness, health. Joy. Pure joy. Jesus does not mourn the dead but raises them to life. He breaks the shackles of a polluting illness. Each person brings mercy and ritual purity into confrontation. Jesus responds to their need, not their impurity.⁴²⁹

The woman with the flow of blood comes in desperation and hope: “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made whole.”⁴³⁰ How did she know that? Why did she think all that was needed was her touch of his garment, the tassels on the four corners of his cloak? What about his attitude toward her? What would he do if he found out about her?

Jesus sees her action as one of faith.⁴³¹ He does not let this miracle go unnoted. She reached out and touched the tassel on the edge of his robe. From that hour the woman was well. This faith was one that took initiative. It ventured into the crowd about Jesus and sought the contact necessary to achieve the longed-for change. Some might criticize this as selfish or superstitious faith. Jesus did not.

What sort of motivation do we expect from one who is constantly unclean and socially marginal because of her health condition?⁴³² What do we expect her to want from God? Was she to pray for healing for eleven years and eleven months and then sink into a resignation that God

⁴²⁹ Both of these people would render a person touched unclean. Unlike the Levite and the priest of the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) avoiding the pollution of a potentially dead body, Jesus displays no concern over such physical contact.

⁴³⁰ Pieter J. Lalleman, “Healing by a Mere Touch as a Christian Concept,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (1997): 355–361. This echoes Zechariah 8:23.

⁴³¹ “Your faith has made you well’ is not a statement about faith as a psychosomatic cause of healing. Rather, faith is that state of awareness, receptivity, and readiness for appropriate action which opens one to the working of the powers of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus.” Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 397).

⁴³² Keener, *Matthew* (pp. 302-303).

was saying “no” to her prayers? What about ask, seek, knock? Does not God answer quickly and reward those who seek him? Would we have counselled her after five years of difficulty to resign herself to her disability? She was asking, seeking and knocking. Not until she touched the fringe of Jesus’ garment did she find what she sought for so long.

How do we expect her to go about approaching Jesus? At this time, he is regularly mobbed. People of importance (such as the leader of the synagogue and the centurion) are bringing their needs and these were far more desperate situations than hers. How was she to confront him and connect her disability to his ability? She does it in a way that was effective.

Though we might sniff out superstition or “magic” notions in this action, we discover that it brought about the miracle (just as later people are cured in the shadow of Peter and by the handkerchiefs or aprons taken from Paul—Acts 5:15; 19:12). There is nothing mechanical or automatic about this. Jesus clarifies that it was the faith behind the hand that produced the result. But faith is not the greater because it simply sits at home and prays. She had done that. What she needed to do was to touch the hem of his garment. The power resident in Jesus was such that it responded to this faith in this form.

What counts for faith and whose faith is needed for miracles? The disciples had little faith in confronting the storm on the sea of Galilee. In both of these cases, they are given a lesson in faith and what it means. In encouraging the women who touched his garment, he looks at her and addresses her as “daughter.”⁴³³ “Take courage” are his words to her, the very attribute missing in his disciples in the storm driven ship.

When Jesus approaches the household of Jairus, the commotion of mourning is in full swing. He is simply laughed at in scorn when he says the child is not dead but sleeping. They do not know that the power of God in Jesus is such that death is no more than a sort of sleep. Dead people may not rise, but God raises the dead from their “sleep.”⁴³⁴

What Jesus does here is to demonstrate that the power of the age to come is present. It is the power released at the end of the age when the dead will be raised to new life. This is an astounding resuscitation of a corpse by the touch of Christ. Not even the ultimate power over human life for mortals can resist the authority of Jesus. It is as though she was simply asleep. All he needs to do is take her hand and the girl gets up. Another touch, another overflow of joy.

She did not and could not have exercised faith. She was dead. She did not take initiative to approach Jesus. Her father did. Yet his faith is not emphasized here. The only thing lurking in the background may be the memory of the power of Elijah (I Kings 17:21) in his resurrection power. Jesus works the same degree of miracle as Elijah with even less effort.

(b) Healing the blind – seeking faith is seeing (9:27-31)

The miracles in these two chapters display the sorts of events associated by the prophets with the messianic era. The cry of these two blind men for mercy and the title, “Son of David,” is indicative of this notion. These had probably heard of the reports of the various miracles. Maybe they were in the crowd as the rumor raced through the people that the dead daughter of Jairus

⁴³³ This is the only woman Jesus addresses as “daughter.”

⁴³⁴ “Among Christians, death is not death, but a sleep. Indeed, the burial place of Christians is called a κοιμητήριον [‘cemetery’], that is, a ‘dormitory.’ The heathen cannot give their graves that name. Only Christians say: ‘My grave is my bed, my dormitory. I am not dying, but I am falling asleep.’” Luther, *Works* Vol. 67(p. 77).

had been brought back to life.

This account notes again the touch of Jesus and the importance of the reality of faith. It is not a comment on the amount of faith (though it takes a great deal of “faith” to suppose that my blind eyes will see here and now). Just as the hemorrhaging woman believed and received the gift of healing, so too these reach out with the hands of faith and are transformed. Mercy meets misery on its own ground and vanquishes it.

The details of this story suggest some of its distinctiveness. Jesus responded immediately to the request of Jairus, getting up and following him. He validated the touch of the bleeding woman. By contrast these are two who follow after him as he departs to go to some other house. He does not turn about or stop to help them. He strides on to his destination.

How they continue to follow him we can only imagine. Perhaps someone took their arm and helped them. Maybe these were long term residents and knew the shape and slope of the various paths in this town. They kept coming and crying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” And Jesus did not stop. It is as though he were inviting persistence and earnest seeking.

And it should be noted that Christ does not heal these blind men immediately; rather, He allows them to follow Him, call out to Him, and come to Him in the house [Matt. 9:27–28], in order to show that faith should be resolute, persistent, bold, unrestrained, and insistent.⁴³⁵

These were desperate, persevering men. They find their way to the house and make their way into his immediate presence with their request. Their petition both confesses their need and their lack of any special claim. If Jesus is to help them, it will be the expression of mercy, not duty. They honor him by calling him “the Son of David.” This is an acknowledgement that we do not even have from the others in this sequence of miracles. Only these “blind” men see clearly enough to know that he is, as Matthew presents him, the messianic Son of David. When he questions them about their faith in his ability, the move a level higher, answering “Yes, Lord.” He is more than the Son of David.

Jesus pushes their inner motives with his question: “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Jesus seeks to know what they believe beyond their words.⁴³⁶ It is easy for people to say, “Lord, Lord” or to label Jesus as the Son of David. But what do these words mean within the echoing walls of their emotions and heart? Do they believe or is this simply the halo effect of all the stories they have been hearing? What do they believe after all these years of darkness? Jesus takes their simple confession of faith at face value.⁴³⁷ Because they have faith, Jesus says, this thing they believe from him will happen and he touches their eyes. Immediately their eyes are opened. The one of whom they have only heard now stands before them: The Son of David, the Lord.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ Luther, *Works Vol. 67* (p. 78).

⁴³⁶ “Note, it is a great comfort to true believers, that Jesus Christ knows their faith, and is well pleased with it. Though it be weak, though others do not discern it, though they themselves are ready to question it, it is known to him.” Henry, *Commentary* (p. 1657).

⁴³⁷ Barth, *CD IV.2*: “The distinctive feature of the New Testament faith in miracles is that it was faith in Jesus and therefore in God as the faithful and merciful God of the covenant with Israel; and that in this way and as such it was this confidence in His power.” (p. 236)

⁴³⁸ “*Their eyes*” is emphasized in the Greek (καὶ ἤνεόχθησαν αὐτῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί). Perhaps the writer implicitly means to ask: ‘and what about *your* eyes?’

His warning not to tell others about their blessing goes unheeded. They may have said, “Yes, Lord.” They came with faith and received mercy. Yet having had their eyes cured by a miracle does not also turn them into obedient disciples. Why they ignore this command is not explained. Perhaps it was the enthusiasm of the miracle itself. What else might they have done? Did they return home to family or friends seeing? Who could keep the gossip network from working when something of that sort had happened? Or was this a matter of their thinking Jesus was being modest, not wanting to have their account broadcast? They do it anyway.

The deeper issue might be the fact that they acknowledge him as the messianic figure of the end times, the son of David. What will these men now say to their friends? In fact, the hesitancy of Jesus in healing them might be related to the political danger that is associated with this title. At this point it is still not clear how his vocation as the messianic servant of Yahweh will be played out. The popular strands of contemporary thought that turned the son of David into a warrior-messiah were too close to the frustrations and hopes of other Jews. Jesus seeks not to validate this claim because of the misunderstandings that were tied to it. A falsely construed understanding of his mission and identity would hinder his actual purpose and path. This is not a messianic secret being kept.⁴³⁹ It is secrecy meant to keep a messianic misunderstanding from being spread.

(c) Casting out a demon causing a deaf-mute condition (9:32-34)

This last miracle brings this section to its climax. This story is unique to Matthew. One miracle after another is the impression left by the narrative. Jesus hardly finishes with one than another desperate person is thrust into his view. This is a demonized man whose symptom is inability to speak. The miracle is told in only a few words. He was brought. The demon was exorcised. He spoke.⁴⁴⁰

The punch line of this story appears to be the contrasting evaluations put upon the event by those who observe it (and the others). The crowds offer their conclusion: “This is beyond anything ever seen in Israel!” Already the Pharisees begin to say what will grow to a larger chorus: “This man casts out demons by the power of the prince of demons.”

The choices are sharply poised in Deuteronomy 13. Is this one who exercises the miracle powers of the prophet a dangerous misleader of the people whom we must terminate or is he someone foretold and now present in the power of God? Later in Matthew 12 the contention over this will break out in full form. Here voiced is the claim that Jesus is a dangerous misleader of the people.

⁴³⁹ Contra William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971) argued both for the priority of Mark and Mark’s intent to explain the early Christian view of Jesus as Messiah and the “non-messianic” nature of his ministry. Yet two things seem to motivate this command: (1) the desire not to become a “celebrity” but to be able to move freely about the countryside; (2) the reality that the nature of his messianic identity would not be properly understood before the event of his death and resurrection and well might lead to unfortunate actions. Matthew records the command as well: 8:4, 9:30; 12:16; 16:20; 17:9. It is not distinctive to Mark. Also, Matthew presents Jesus’ ministry as messianic.

⁴⁴⁰ Whether this person was only mute or deaf-mute is difficult to say. The Greek, κωφός, can mean one or the other or both. Nor is there indication when it occurred. That it is attributed to a demon and the man is able to speak when delivered suggests he was not always so afflicted. “κωφός is literally ‘blunt’ or ‘dull’ and is applied to people whose capacity to communicate with others is severely compromised because they are either deaf or mute or both.” Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 403).

In effect this climax to the two chapters puts the issue squarely before each of us who read or hear these stories. God is in Christ by grace and mercy freeing people as demonstration that the Kingdom of God is present. Faith that seeks and believes finds. Jesus touches lives and releases them from the binding powers of this fallen world, providing opportunity for them to hear and do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Just as the Sermon on the Mount ends with the two paths, the two trees, the two houses, so this section on the miracle power of Jesus ends with the two responses. The display of authority over the broad array of human conditions and disabilities does not by itself lead people to conclude that Jesus is a person to heed. A larger set of assumptions and conclusions within which the miracles are set are critical. The example set before us is how well formed, thoroughly thought through theological notions, can be decisively wrong.

The Pharisees included many members whose ethical and doctrinal conclusions motivated them into a clash with Jesus and the Jesus movement. Pharisees like Saul pursued Jesus' followers out of zeal for the honor of God. They viewed him and his disciples as dangerous misleaders and corruptors of the people of God. Mandated by their understanding of the instructions of the law, they acted as protectors and shepherds of the covenant people.

Miracles were proof of power, but not proof of the source of that power. In order to assess that the larger framework of the prophet's teaching was important. They considered the teaching of Jesus to be deficient. There never was any contest or struggle over whether he worked miracles. The challenge they posed was the nature of those miracles. Their conclusion was that they served to validate false prophecy.

In the modern era we tend to have a prior issue: whether miracles happen at all. In placing ourselves within the meaning world of Jesus, we can only say that such a notion was not present. In the Roman and Hellenistic world, miracles functioned to provide a variety of indications of prodigy and divine favor. Miracles were part and parcel of the ancient world.

For the apocalyptic view, miracles are an expression of the reestablishment of divine sovereignty over all created existence. They are signs of the intervention of God in an unruly world, setting the stage for the final rectification of sin and its allied demonic powers. The power of the Spirit is present in supra-human capabilities to build up a faithful remnant and display the defeat of God-opposing powers.

For the Hellenistic-Roman world view miracles in the form of visions, dreams and wonders give insight into divine purposes. They set the stage for significant transitions in history. They also act to strip the pretensions and hollowness of Magic and sorcerers. Miracles and foreknowledge demonstrate the personal character of Jesus' and the apostle's relationship to God. An encounter with the divine is life-transforming, bringing personal benefit. These are not "socio-political" as if their goal is to advance people in the struggle for status and this-worldly power. They are redemptive in that their goal is to align life with the truth and righteousness of the Kingdom of God. Miracles are signs that point to the reality and relevance of their enactors and the message they bring.

(4) Compassion on the Large Crowd: The Twelve Sent out (9:35-10:4)

This section marks the end of the first teaching-engaging section (bracketing 5-7 and 8-9) and the beginning of the second major teaching body of Jesus in Matthew. Like the first (5-7), this gives the second a narrative introduction and a formal conclusion (9:35-10:4; 11:1). The first discourse was on the nature and character of the righteousness that disciples are to manifest and

enact as those who are blessed by, belong to and serve the Kingdom of heaven. Its focus is the Christian life. This second discourse is on the mission that disciples are given as servants of the Kingdom (and followed by more of Jesus deeds in 11-12). The disciples are to replicate what Jesus has been doing: multiplying his teaching and healing by twelve. Those who are recipients of the blessings of the kingdom are to become its agents. They are to be light and salt – and to expect a hostile reception from some. What Jesus modeled after the Sermon on the mount, they are now to replicate.

(a) Response to the needs of the crowds (9:35-38)

This short introduction ushers us into the second major teaching section of Matthew. It is weighty with its summary pictures. Jesus is described as teaching, proclaiming and healing, as one feeling deeply for the crowds in their desperation and confusion, and as challenged by the enormity of the task. Without this sort of Jesus commissioning and supporting us, there is no valid Christian mission. As Christ is the center of the disciple's life, so too the mission. He is...

1. **The wandering prophet:** Jesus went about all the cities and villages. He did not stay in one place but moved with his disciples from place to place. His style of working included the widespread action of itineration and the concentrated mentoring of a few. Josephus tells us there were 204 towns and villages in Galilee when he was put in charge in 66 A.D. There were a lot of places in which to minister.

2. **The synagogue teacher:** The Sermon on the Mount is an example of his teaching. He interacted with the Torah and Prophets to give clarity to the significance of the righteousness of God and the rituals of his people. However difficult might be the issues of the day, he entered the discussion and brought the people back to Scripture as the source of wisdom and authority. He came again and again to the place where people gather who were serious about the study and understanding of the Scripture. Paul was later to follow the same pattern as he was itinerant in the Roman world. Were we a “stranger” the best place to begin might well be where we find others engaged in seeking God through study.

3. **The Kingdom evangelist:** The center of his life and ministry was the reality and dynamic of the Kingdom of God. This was good news for it meant God was active in a new way in the history of Israel. Had people ears to hear, they could discover where God was doing things that had not been seen in Israel for many a day. They could make the way of the Lord ready and receive his visitation. This was the pivot of his teaching: God is the King of the Universe and hope of the world. He is taking divine initiative to change the tragedy of our world. There is nothing more important or significant to do than enter that Kingdom.

4. **The miracle-working healer:** Jesus cured every disease and every sickness. His powers over the maladies that afflicted these people was not limited. There were no sorts of physical crises that he could not resolve, no chronically incurable conditions he could not change. His miracles were a sign that his teaching and prophetic claims needed to be taken seriously. The powers of the unearthly Kingdom manifested themselves in the signs and wonders done by Jesus of Nazareth.

5. **The compassionate shepherd:** He saw the crowds as woefully shortchanged in what they needed to have to be the vital community of God's people. They were like sheep harried and harassed by the wolves, mangled and thrown down. He felt their plight deeply for they were without a shepherd, however many religious and legal leaders they might have. He saw them travel stained, weary footed, hungry and sore from sleeping in unfamiliar places. Why were so

many coming from so far simply to see this obscure Galilean? Were they not already instructed and led well enough that their restlessness might have been ended? Where were the synagogue rulers, the scribes and teachers, the rabbis who already should be shepherding them?

6. The harvest master: What God does for the crowds is to provide them with a compassionate shepherd. What we are to do is to pray to the Lord that he sends laborers in to the harvest field. Jesus is impressed by the dramatic challenge that faces him in the size and need of the crowds. Constantly he is pressurized and pushed to the limits by the unending needs that are brought to him. He is not discouraged. Nor does he organize a committee or study group. He calls his disciples to prayer. Out of that prayer Jesus will select some and send them out.

We need to note that Jesus' response to the vast body of those not yet folded and fed by the good Shepherd is not a call for tolerance and recognition of other religions. Jarislav Pelikan calls for such "ecumenicity" in world religions in the light of how many are not Christian and will never be.⁴⁴¹ In this he is far different than Jesus' response. Jesus was a change agent of the Kingdom. He saw how religion (even law-abiding, intense piety based on the Scripture) often is oppressive, harassing people rather than healing them and leading them to the Kingdom of God. Religious kingdoms are not impressive.

Matthew educates us as we continue to read about what harasses and renders people helpless. Already we have intimations of the problems. The political interests of Herod motivated the search and slaughter of babes. The politicians worked the system to enrich themselves. They abused power to eliminate any threats to the privilege and position they had secured (including their own children). The motivation was not compassion, but power.

The theological interests of educated elite were such that they inspected any and every charismatic figure who appeared on the horizon. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to John the Baptist. He saw in them the same qualities Jesus later warned against: hypocrisy, manipulation of scriptural meanings and a death-dealing effect ("you vipers"). Already there were those among them who were developing a theological justification for putting Jesus to death ("he casts out demons by the Prince of demons"). The legalism and hypocrisy of these teachers, rule-enforcers and moral entrepreneurs, was such that people were given heavy religious burdens to carry while they were being relieved of their wealth. It's an old story.

The devil and demonic hierarchy were active. It is astonishing that so much demonic activity was present in the very midst of God's people! On every turn we find Jesus confronting people and forces that brought temptation and bondage. The people were helpless before these powers, despite having local healers and exorcists.

There were the garden-variety sins and passions of everyday living: anger and hatred, lust and adultery, covetousness and anxiety, defensiveness of honor and revenge, the struggle for status (even religious reputation), censorious judgmentalism, the love and pursuit of wealth. These also render people helpless, drawing them into the spirals of guilt, recrimination, self-justification and division of the self. People exist without forgiveness, without the enveloping sense of the acceptance of God.

Sickness and disease also afflicted the crowds. Their energies were drained, and their life spent searching for cures. They were cast out of normal social circles and labelled deviant.

⁴⁴¹ Jarislav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)

Unclean and disvalued they stumbled about, unable to contribute fully to their family or community.

There were the purity boundaries drawn up and enforced by the leadership. Certain occupations were despised and those in them made into social pariahs. The tax collectors and the “sinners” were pushed to the margins as well as those who associated with them.

Jesus saw the crowds and felt their plight deeply within himself. He sensed the matrix of pressures that were at work, knocking people off center and off the narrow way. He knew the stirrings that drove them, the longings for a different future and a better life. He saw their confusion and exhaustion. How many things they had tried. How many times they had listened and discussed. How many hopes were dashed by unforeseen powers. How many were helpless before the pressures that controlled them.

This seeing and compassion are the roots of the mission of the Christ-followers. First and foremost, Jesus looks upon us as sunk in the bondage of a world gone wrong. He sees us as lost and headed for perdition. Yet there is more. We are more than willful sinners. We are subjugated. Jesus sees people who are oppressed and suffering.⁴⁴² Our misery moves him. But not just our misery but the lack of leadership, of good shepherds. We are leaderless or worse, led by leaders who harass and subjugate.

His response is to mobilize his disciples to prayer. He does not deny what he sees. The need for the good news and the good Shepherd is not effaced by the statistics of how many are yet outside the fold of discipleship. This demand for mission prayer comes from the Jesus who teaches (Matthew 5-7) and touches (Matthew 8-9). We cannot separate the ethical, miracle-working Jesus from the missionary Jesus.

Wonderfully, the picture we are given in the face of the enormity of need and the strength of the powers that render people helpless is that of the laborer who harvests. We are not praying for paragons of expertise or charismatic powers. God needs simple workers. Their task is not the whole job (from sowing to watering and weeding). It is to join the process underway: to harvest (to make disciples).

Their first task is to pray to the Lord of the harvest to provide workers. It is not, ‘the harvest is great’ therefore ‘go.’ Go they must but that will not happen until they have prayed (as we see in Acts 2). Disciples must first learn that this is Christ’s mission, the mission of God and they are invited into what God is doing. Prayer is the hidden font of mission. But its goal is making disciples. So, prayer is not the end but only a precondition of real mission.

Disciples are to move forth not primarily to straighten out the world but to serve it by helping people who are weary, dejected, confused, down-trodden, desperate: all those barely making it in daily life, those overloaded and rendered helpless with false expectations and notions by

⁴⁴² The two Greek participles of σκόλλω (*skollō*) and ῥίπτω (*hriptō*) carry several ideas. Nolland, *Matthew*: “σκόλλειν is literally ‘flay’ or ‘skin’, but comes to be used metaphorically of harassment of any kind, and then (in the passive) of the exhausted or troubled state produced by such harassment. ῥίπτειν or ῥίπτειν means ‘throw’. It is used in a wide range of derivative senses, but not normally with overtones of violence. It is perhaps best to think of sheep lying passive on the ground, with no sense of what to do in their need: they lack the protective and guiding role of a shepherd.” (p. 407) “Harassed and helpless” or “torn and thrown down” or “bullied and beaten down.”

religious elite. The yoke of “religion” can be as heavy as that imposed by authoritarian states.⁴⁴³ At the same time, they are not precluded from action that not only relieves the heavy burdens but aims at stopping their imposition in the first place.

(b) Passing on authority to the Twelve disciples (10:1-4)

What’s in a list of names? Jesus does simply have a prayer meeting and stop at that. He acts in terms of what he has called his followers to pray about: he sends forth workers.

There are twelve listed (an echo of Numbers 1:1-16 when Moses chose 12 to assist him). Jesus sees the people of Israel shepherdless and he appoints twelve to act as shepherds. They are to extend the sorts of activities he has modeled. They are to teach, preach and heal. There are too many villages in Galilee for Jesus ever to get around to them all. So, he sends twelve to the twelve tribes of Israel. Before he does, he bestows upon them special capabilities: authority over unclean spirits and power to cure every disease and sickness.⁴⁴⁴

These are not the jewels in the crown of Israel. For most of these names we know next to nothing. They are not the great ones of the day. Even in the narrative and letters of the New Testament most appear only as names. We learn next to nothing as to what they do. Peter, James and John have more space than most. Matthew left us this book. One of them commits suicide after betraying the Lord. His replacement is chosen by casting lots!

Yet these “nobodies” are the beginning leaders of what has become the largest religious movement in the world.⁴⁴⁵ If apostolic succession were important, it is striking that we know so little of the apostles—or those they first ordained after them. They labored. They experienced the first flash of ministry after this commissioning. They healed, proclaimed and exorcised. People were benefitted. They gave their faithful witness and taught the first generation the story of Jesus and then died. They were swallowed up in oblivion, despite the many Church building might have stained glass windows and legends about them. What we know historically are only small snippets.

We have the four gospels, built on their memory and testimony. Despite what seems unpopular to much contemporary scholarship, we must remind ourselves of the grounding of these stories. They come from the apostolic testimony. Luke tells us that. The overlap and similarities between the stories are significant, with the details and vocabulary being varied as they are passed on within the goals and intentions of the Gospel writers.

⁴⁴³ “The harassment of a flock, whether of sheep or of crowds, is the fault of the shepherds and the sin of the teachers.” Jerome (2008). *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 117, *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (p. 114.)

⁴⁴⁴ “And yet He does not give them weaponry, but miracles, so that they might recognize that His kingdom was spiritual and not corporeal. And so He gives them spiritual weapons against spiritual wickedness, that is, against the devil, sin, death, disease, and against everything that belongs to the devil, etc.” Luther, *Works Vol. 67* (p. 87).

⁴⁴⁵ There is diversity (most notably in “political” views) and also in their professions before this calling. “Of the roughly half his disciples whose occupations we know, all were drawn from middle-income professions in which less than 10 percent of Jewish Palestine’s population engaged (fishermen and tax gatherers), perhaps to give emphasis to more socially prominent individuals who were nevertheless unassociated with any religious or social elite, hence who would be respected by most people. The Gospels may also report only those more noteworthy professions (a tax gatherer and fishers).” Keener, *Matthew* (p. 311).

The trustworthiness of the accounts is because there were twelve serving as eye-witnesses of the events that became the normative teaching of the early Church. Their mutual testimony and witness were given as they taught in the earliest years of the Church in Jerusalem. If we seek for Q or Mark's roots as well as the roots of Matthew and Luke, it is in their testimony and witness that we find the hammering into shape of the narrative story.

They are first called the twelve disciples. Their first qualification is that they have been with and learned of and from Jesus. These are those who will be commissioned (as all subsequent disciples) to make disciples of all the nations. They belong to Jesus. He is the Lord of the harvest into which he will send them. Their identity is rooted in discipleship, not miracle-ship. It is to disciples that Jesus gives the gifts of ministry for healing and exorcism. They do not become something more or else when they have these charismata. The powers of ministry do not shift a person from being a dependent learner to a lord of the Church.

Yet these twelve are also called apostles (the only time they are so designated in Matthew). They are not only summoned to be with Jesus, but they are sent out to be with the shepherdless crowds. There is a task for them to do. In some ways it is unique for the simple reason that they were with Jesus from the beginning to his crucifixion and resurrection. Theirs is a particularly qualified testimony because of their proximity and relationship to Jesus. What we know of the historical Jesus comes from them. They saw and touched and heard him as he ministered. But they are qualified also because they were chosen for the task of replicating and dispersing his authority in teaching and healing to others.

"Pray" was the first command. "Go" was the second. Before they went, he selected twelve who were ready, gifted them and instructed them in the nature of their mission. This mission teaching is described in 10:5 as directions or instructions (*paraggellō*, παραγγέλλω) and summarized as commands or orders in 11:1 (*diastassō*, διατάσσω). Whatever we may think of these instructions, they are difficult to keep out of "all things I have commanded you" (28:20 *entellomai*, ἐντέλλομαι) that these same disciples are commanded to teach others. These commands are present for more than historical curiosity. There is something in them as well that instructs those of us who follow in the train (even if not as successors) of the disciples who became twelve Apostles.

Of the twelve we know the calls of only five. The other seven are present without any story as to how they were brought into the movement or this inner circle. Mystery surrounds even the presence of those whose story we have of Jesus' calling. Were they invited because they did not come without such prodding? Were these without a calling story among those who tramped after Jesus without the confrontation Jesus found necessary to mobilize the five? Or were they all prodded in the manner of the five?

Simon is mentioned first (as he is in all the lists). Peter plays a leadership role different than the others.⁴⁴⁶ The stories we have picture him as the first to voice the thinking of the twelve and foremost in denying the Lord. He is the one chosen to strengthen the other ten after the betrayal, denial and crucifixion. The risen Jesus appeared first among the Apostles to Peter. Peter graces

⁴⁴⁶ Bruner, *Christbook*, "Peter was not a pope in the medieval or even modern sense. His primacy in Matthew, too, is a primacy of representation: he represents better than any other disciple the heights of faith and the depths of denial that are possible for all disciples. Peter is first—in faith and in failure; he is named, within a few verses of one chapter, both Rock and Satan (16:18–23), a foundation of the church and a troubling shaker of foundations." (p. 455).

the New Testament with two letters and with his witness gathered and repeated by John Mark's Gospel. Matthew places him as the one to whom Jesus says the foundational words: "You are Peter and, on this rock (petra), I will build my church" (16:18). Peter has a primacy that Protestants should not avoid, and Catholics should not exalt. This is not the making of the first Pope, but the acknowledgement of the role Peter played in the task of mission. In any case, it is not "you are Peter and on you and your successors...."⁴⁴⁷ Nor is the authority given to them authority for the government of the church but for mission activity.

The disciples are paired as they are listed. Thomas the doubter is yoked with Matthew the tax collector. This is the one gospel that notes this distinctive for Matthew. It stands out as though the writer wished us not to miss the fact that this is the same Matthew whose friends were other tax collectors and sinners. He is one of the new wineskins into which Jesus is pouring the new wine. The impossible is possible for Jesus. Not only does he heal diseases and defeat demons. He weaves together a new garment with tax collectors and zealots. These are ordinary people whose fathers are known, some of whom come with their brothers.

There is even one who will become castoff. He is a wineskin that will burst with this new wine and spill betrayal all over the inner circle. He is the one who finally could not take Jesus as he is. There were problems for all these ordinary people. We should not think only those comfortable in the heights of their knowledge and religious status came into conflict with Jesus. Even one of the inner circle who saw and heard things not privileged to the religious elite was troubled to the point of betrayal.⁴⁴⁸

Given the lack of further significant reference to most of the twelve, we may puzzle over why they are mentioned and named at all. On the one side, this naming functions to indicate Jesus' intention to renew Israel. We will find further references to their role within the founding and spread of the Jesus' movement. So, this designates those who stand at the originating source of the movement. On the other hand, they give the normative witness to the events and words of Jesus himself. They provide the legitimating authorization for the dramatic shifts that will occur as the Church grows up and incorporates into its mission Gentiles in a way that was not indicative of the mission of Jesus. That normative witness secured the early oral and written

⁴⁴⁷ See comments on Matthew 16:18. Jesus will say more about the sort of leadership that the Church will need: a servant leadership that does not "lord it over" the body of Christ. "[Peter] was, however, first *among* the apostles, not placed *over* the apostles: *in* the apostolate, not *above* it." Johann Albrecht Bengel (1860). *Gnomon of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. (p. 236).

⁴⁴⁸ His inclusion and active participation in this mission are taken as an indication that even among Christian leaders, there is a mixed body of people and leaders (both good grain and weeds). The early Donatist dispute raised the issue acutely as to whether the actions of "bad" clergy were valid (e.g., ordinations of others, baptisms). The Donatist, though holding the same theology, viewed the early Catholic Church as illegitimate since it had bishops who had "sinned" by turning over copies of sacred scripture to the Romans during persecution. Augustine argued that the sacraments were valid and not contingent upon the holiness of the priest. Luther agrees: "...if the power of the sacrament depended upon the worthiness of the minister, then everything would be uncertain, since no one's worthiness can be certain. But as it is, everything surely depends on the ordination and call of God, who works all in all [Eph. 1:23], through the worthy and the unworthy. Therefore, Christ works the same things through Judas as He does through St. Peter." *Works Vol. 67* (p. 88). See Augustine, *Works Vol. I/21* (p. 42). Henry, *Commentary*: "...Christ took him among the apostles, that it might not be a surprise and discouragement to his church, if, at any time, the vilest scandals should break out in the best societies." (p. 1659).

testimony, ensuring that we have a reliable account of the historical Jesus. Much contemporary speculation ignores this large fact.

Further, the variety of tasks and outcomes in this mission discourse will apply to these who are nearest and dearest to Jesus. They will not be exempt from persecution. They are not set as lords of the Jesus movement. Their commissioning is not to privilege and security. The issues that they will face are lined out in graphic portraiture. They will not have large endowments and resources. They will be challenged by the powerful. Even their families might consider their actions in such dim light that they may have to forsake parents and children.

In all of this they are to acknowledge Jesus Christ in the public presence of others. Their immediate context will be the villages and towns of Galilee—the Jewish ones. They are not to go to the Gentiles or cross over into the Samaritan areas. Their task is to carry the good news and the healing powers of the Kingdom to the house of Israel. That is their first task. One might suppose that these twelve appointed Jews, Galileans among Galileans, would find welcome and acclaim. What Jesus tells them is that welcome will only be spotty and selective.

B. Discourse 2: Mission and Suffering (10:5-11:1)

The sending out of the twelve comes on the heels of two realities:

(1) Jesus' perception of the immense need to reach out to all the hamlets and villages of Israel. More workers were essential for the "harvest" that was to be gathered in for the coming Kingdom of God. Knowing that his own days were limited, the solution was a small inner group of disciples who, having seen and heard the Kingdom realities modeled in what Jesus was doing, could be sent out to do the same. But even with this multiplied presence, not every part of Israel would be engaged before Jesus' own presence would be gone.

(2) The signs of rising opposition from the religious leaders, especially the Pharisees, were an alarm bell that very real trouble was on the horizon. The message of the Kingdom of heaven as articulated in the Sermon on the Mount would bring conflict and division.

This sending of the twelve is rooted in the action of the Trinity:

"Moreover, the missionary work of those sent by Jesus necessarily possesses a Trinitarian character. The Son's sending of the Twelve is the answer to the prayer that the Father would send workers (9:38), and the presence of the Son and the Father attends all the labors of those whom Jesus sends (10:40). In addition, in the times of deepest persecution and boldest witness, the missionaries will speak because they are empowered by the Spirit of the Father who is speaking in them (10:20)."⁴⁴⁹

The instructions given for this task are principled but

"...the specific instructions are to be understood not as permanent commands but as an indication of the style of ministry (e.g., urgency, economy, single-mindedness) and the legitimacy of receiving support."⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 499.)

⁴⁵⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 270). Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: "For here Christ is mainly seeking to train His ministers for integrity, desiring that they should be devoid of any avidity and desire for wealth, glory, and power, and that they should be content to make use of what is at hand, even if they somehow possess

(3) Structure: Several proposals have been put forward to see how this discourse is arranged.⁴⁵¹ None are completely persuasive. Turner notes the symmetry after the initial instructions on where, what and how to do mission (10:5-10):

Reception: Blessings for worthy homes and villages (10:11–13)

Rejection: General warning—unworthy homes and villages (10:14–15)

Rejection: Specific warnings—synagogues, governors, kings, family (10:16–39)

Reception: Rewards for receiving Jesus's followers (10:40–42)⁴⁵²

Another noted repetition is found in the three emphatic “Amen, I say to you...” (10:15, 23, 42), breaking the discourse into three sections. The first underlines the serious nature of rejection of the message and messengers; the second encourages the messengers of the kingdom with the coming of the Son of Man so as not to cease the task in the face of opposition; and the last promises a reward to any and all who show kindness in a small way to even one of the least significant disciple.

(1) The itinerant ministry task (10:5-15)⁴⁵³

Jesus sends the twelve forth to replicate his own ministry. They are sent out to do good and proclaim good news (not fetch fire from heaven). The main restriction is that their focus is to be on Israel—the towns of Israel (in practice the villages of Galilee).

His compassion saw the crowds running after him as sheep without a shepherd. He designates them as “the lost sheep” of the house of Israel.⁴⁵⁴ If any house should not have lost sheep, it is Israel. This is the one nation with a tradition and revelation that made the ways of God explicit. Israel is the priest to the nations. Its scriptures are available for reading and interpretation. Jesus characterizes Israel as gravely troubled, despite all its privileges and rich history. In none of its diversity was there an adequate response to the purposes of God.

One might also have thought that salvation was already present. This commission recognizes that even among “God’s people” there are those who are lost. Jesus’ understanding of mission does not encompass the notion that those to whom he sends his apostles, even among the self-identified people of Israel, are already “found.” He does not give them the cheap viewpoint of modern relativism and universalism. All ways are **not** equivalent. All persons are **not** already within the Kingdom. All truths are **not** equally valid perspectives. Jesus comes as the Messiah of Israel, to the people of Israel. Only as the one with that identity does he come as Savior of the world.

only a staff (that is, sustenance or nourishment) and shoes (that is, protection).” (p. 91). Calvin, *Harmony, Vol. 1*: “It is of great importance to observe this, that we may not suppose it to be a certain and fixed rule laid down for all ministers of the word, when our Lord gives instructions to the preachers of his doctrine as to what he wishes them to do for a short time.” (p. 438).

⁴⁵¹ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* (p. 162) offers a complex chiasmic arrangement that places vs. 26-31 with its words of encouragement at the center.

⁴⁵² Turner, *Matthew* (p. 266).

⁴⁵³ The division of this discourse seems to rest upon the repeated “truly I say to you” as a concluding element to three divisions (5:15, 23, 42). In addition, vs. 16 is marked by “behold I” (Ἴδοὺ ἐγὼ). Others group the first two divisions by their thematic focus on Israel as opposed to the more general last section.

⁴⁵⁴ The perfect participle of ἀπόλλυμι can be translated more direly as “perishing,” so Chrysostom, Bruner, *Christbook* (p. 460), and Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: “the sheep that have perished” (p. 88).

We should note that this is the only time Matthew designates the twelve as “apostles.” It comes in a context where what is stressed is their being “sent out” to do ministry, not to oversee and rule Israel or the Church. They are to represent Jesus, his message about the nearness of the Kingdom of heaven and his miracle powers. Their task is not to rule the nations but to invite them into the blessings of God’s kingdom.

A great divide will mark the response given to the preaching as well as the signs and wonders of these disciple-apostles. Some of Israel will welcome them; others reject them. This will happen first among Israel. They are the divine “experiment” among whom we see the mirror of all human history. God is in the process of bringing the blessings of his peace, the fullness of his salvation to all peoples. But he does so first by his covenant with Israel.

The coming of Jesus to Israel and the restriction (at this limited time) of the mission to its lost sheep is a sign of the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. God’s horizon and goal is the whole earth. God’s means and channel for declaring his glory among the nations is Israel. Jesus shows that the purpose and meaning of his coming is not the casting aside of Israel. It is the seeking and saving of the lost sheep of Israel. That is the first agenda. It is not the only agenda.

In the context, it appears Jesus is expecting opposition to grow and to affect the disciples he is sending out. The message of the kingdom and its demonstration in miraculous deeds would create enough uproar just among the Jews. By not going to the Gentiles or Samaritans at this point in time, additional hostility is avoided.

The temporary restriction in this sending of the twelve will be removed in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew. But this first commissioning is a clear sign that God is not abandoning his chosen people. They are to be integral to the larger promise given to Abraham to bless all the nations. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, will go first to the Jews where he arrives to plant churches in the Roman empire.

It may seem rather foolish to include a passage whose applicability has seemingly so little to do with a Church that increasingly became Gentile in membership. By that inclusion Matthew betrays the historical texture of his account. Stories are not present simply or only because they address some contemporary need of the Church. They are present also because they are accounts of the events and words of Jesus. We can conjecture about the sorts of later needs that might be addressed by such stories, but that does not mean they were made up so as to address those needs. Such stories as this indicate a different time line than late in the first century when Christian Jew and traditional Jew pulled apart with strong feelings on both sides.

Matthew shows that there is continuity in what God did in the Old Testament and what he is doing in Jesus Christ. God’s chosen people will become reconstituted under the twelve apostles. No longer will the operative definitions of identity be those of the twelve tribes or conversion to Judaism. They will be that of entrance through the narrow gate into the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom near at hand. The message given is that of John the Baptist and Jesus: the good news of the Kingdom of God. The reception or rejection of that message is determinative not only for one’s inclusion in the present moment in the people of God but for the sort of destiny that awaits in the final judgment. So critical and decisive is this response that those in Israel who reject this good news will be judged more severely than Sodom and Gomorrah.

The task is proclamation accompanied by miracles of healing and exorcism. The target group is the lost sheep of Israel. The economics are those of simplicity and dependency. They are not to make their ministry into a money-making machine. There is to be no payment for their preaching and healing. They got both from Jesus without charge. They are not to set up a fee

structure for performing the tasks of their mission.

Nor are they to bring with them the sorts of resources that would allow them to travel and live well regardless of the response of the people and villages they enter. Their dependence is to be upon receptive homes and towns. The criterion for worthiness was not purity or moral standards but openness to the message and messengers of the gospel of the kingdom. They are to seek out those who will provide for their needs in each village and to stay there.⁴⁵⁵ Towns without such reception are to be treated symbolically as if they were unclean pagans.

Some of the specifics in the instruction vary in the Gospel accounts. Reconciling them is difficult. Perhaps the important element is highlighted by Nolland:

“The conduct of the mission in utter dependence on God is a much more likely rationale for the prohibitions; visibly staged in this way, it becomes in its own way a prophetic sign of the coming of the kingdom. The significant variation in the lists between the various Gospels suggests that at least in relation to ongoing mission they were taken to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, and therefore open to flexible application.”⁴⁵⁶

Even more, they had received the gifts and blessings of the Kingdom freely. They were to use that as a paradigm for how they operate in their tasks:

“Jesus reminds them that they received the kingdom and the gifts of the kingdom without charge. Moreover, they have received the authority to heal, raise the dead, and cast out demons as a free gift from God. Therefore, Jesus expects them to give these things to others without charge (the aorist tenses are global: this is to characterize their life as a whole). The disciples were not to profit from their ministry but use it the same way Jesus did—to help others.”⁴⁵⁷

What is a specific application for a specific context and what might be more general and universal in its applications? On the one hand limitation to the house of Israel is not permanent and universal is clear from the larger story. On the other a priority is given to Israel even in the mission of Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles. So too we might see similar continuities and discontinuities among other parts of this instruction.

1. Mission always needs focus. The targeting of the effort on Israel was rooted in the

⁴⁵⁵ Some see in this an early indication that those specially called to be servant-leaders and pastors of disciples should be supported by those disciples whom they serve (I Tim. 5:17-18). But this arrangement seems to be more related to the limited scope and time of this mission: only spend time on the receptive and, where tangible support is not extended, leave. Cf. Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. I* (p. 513).

⁴⁵⁶ Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 418). Morris, *Matthew* on the instruction about shoes/sandals in the texts in all the Gospels: “Alternatively, if the difference between shoes and sandals is not in mind, the meaning may be that they should not take an extra pair along with them (get seems to mean ‘get in addition to the pair you are now wearing’). That they were to use some form of footwear seems implied in the instruction to shake the dust off their feet (v. 14).” (p. 248). Carson, *Matthew*: “The imperative *mē ktēsēsthe* (‘Do not take along’) more likely means ‘Do not procure’ (as in Ac 1:18; 8:20; 22:28). Even then, the longer expression *mē ktēsēsthe ... eis* (‘Do not procure ... with a view to [filling your belts]’) could mean either ‘Do not accept money [i.e., fill your money belt] for your ministry’ or ‘Do not provide your belt with money when you start out.’ The parallel in Mark 6:8 obviously means the latter.” (p. 285).

⁴⁵⁷ Osborne, *Matthew* (p. 378).

theological grounding of the nature of messianic mission. It is also tactically wise. We cannot suppose that a given evangelistic process has the potential to reach all indiscriminately. Communication of a message and demonstration of the powers of the Kingdom can only be done in a context. The gestures, language, signs and symbols used will be given very different meanings by differing cultural groups. What we see in the four Gospels as well as in the rest of the New Testament are contextualized expressions of the one Jesus Christ for diverse groups.

2. Mission is at the initiative and by the command of the Lord of the harvest. Jesus does the selecting and the sending. He bestows the authority and the gifts essential for such mission. Mission is not a “voluntary” association activity. It is contingent upon the drawing, discipling, and dispatching activity of the Lord Jesus. We are at his behest and cannot commission ourselves if we are to engage in this mission.

3. Mission involves the sharing of the Word of God in word and deed. The message we are to take is centered in the Kingdom of God (not the civilization of the West or the superiority of a given culture). It is not about self-improvement or this-worldly political ideology or racial solidarity as such. It has to do with the invitation to people to enter God’s Kingdom and live by its laws and policies (a Kingdom that is about improvement, politics and ideology). It is also a matter of bringing that Kingdom in miracle power and not simply in word. This is more than “medical missions” though such activity comports well with the compassionate vision of Jesus of the lost sheep. Mission involves heralding and healing.

4. Mission needs to be careful about money and comfort. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the context of these travel instructions is Israel. They are given to Jews who were travelling and seeking accommodation with fellow Jews. Their food habits and disease matrix were such that any of these twelve would not encounter anything radically new. They could expect a welcome as well as a familiar set of conventions and arrangements. They did not need to learn languages and culture nor to overcome the stigma of being foreigners and outsiders. They were not to seek compensation for the use of their powers nor to turn down the food and lodging offered them. They have a right to enough sustenance, so they would be free to preach and heal, but not so much that they are enriched. The point of the restrictions on what to take with them was to not do ministry for profit and to put their real dependence on God rather than themselves. Ministry is to be done simply, not grandly.

5. Mission seeks the “worthy.” There are receptive and rejecting persons in every context. The sent ones are not to be unwise nor profligate in their ministry. Wisdom deploys discernment (and does not cast pearls before pigs). This receptivity/hostility polarity is given in a cultural context where they are insiders. They can have confidence that, where there is rejection, it is not a matter of cultural offensiveness, ethnic discrimination, communicative confusion or social clumsiness. As cultural insiders they are able to communicate their message clearly and to make socially appropriate requests for response and hospitality. Where rejection comes, they are well justified in treating a village as if it were Gentile and move on to the next.

6. Mission that is initiated in prayer, rooted in the compassion of Christ, engaged by those who have been disciplined and dispatched by the Lord is serious business. Eternal matters are in the balance. Mission needs to take itself seriously and not trivialize or diminish its importance. It comes from the hand of God and serves the highest agenda on earth. Its word is the very word of God. Receiving it produces the outcome of entrance to the very halls of heaven. This assurance

is grounded only in the sending authority and grace of its Lord. Mission that comes from the overheated environment of colonialism, post-colonialism, racialism, cultural parochialism or any other “ism” is a travesty and distortion. Arrogant mission is such a contradiction of the compassion of Christ that it requires that we shake the dust off our shoes in recognition of the judgment it merits.

7. Mission is to be carried out by those whose characters have been well-formed. Because of the importance of the mission and the challenges of the recipients, they must display the good fruits of the kingdom. In the next set of instructions they will be urged to exercise a prudent wisdom given the dangers that they will encounter.

❖ Discipleship: Money and Ministry

Contemporary examples of very well-known “evangelists” and mega-church pastors living lives of luxury seems incongruous with these words of Jesus. The first “woe” in Luke’s Sermon is: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” (6:24). The pattern of life in the Apostolic church was a sharing of possessions (Acts 2:41-45, 4:32-37). The instruction given to these early itinerant disciples distinguished them from the common practice of itinerant philosophers who expected room, board and fees. Paul himself made it his practice not to charge fees but to support himself by his tent-making.

If piety is not to be done as public performance, ministry is not to be subverted into an avenue for fame, wealth, or power. Former Bishop-princes of Europe, living in the splendor of gold-bedecked rooms in huge palaces, were a stain on the garment of the Church. The combining of political power, immense wealth and Church authority in the hands of Priests and Bishops subverted the very meaning of ministry.

To be sure, a minister is worthy of his “hire” and should be given a fair compensation. But how they (and the church) think about it is crucial:

“The church should not pay its clergy for services rendered, as if somehow ministers and others live by earning their keep. Pushed to the limit, this might also suggest that a servant of the Lord is paid so much per prayer, so much per sermon, so much per hour of preparation, so much per counseling session with a distraught widow who has just lost her son, and so on. No, the church does not pay its ministers; rather, it provides them with resources so that they are able to serve freely. The church recognizes that those who serve in this way must be ‘kept,’ and are worthy of it. In practice, this means that the ideal situation occurs when the church is as generous as possible, the ministers do not concern themselves with material matters and are above selfish material interest. The worst situation occurs when the ministers are grasping and covetous, constantly comparing themselves with other ‘professionals,’ while the church adopts the attitude, ‘You keep him humble, Lord, and we’ll keep him poor.’⁴⁵⁸

This is a delicate issue. Yet denominations wrestle with the modern “professionalism” of ministry and what is enough for the purposes of ministry. At times denominations have

⁴⁵⁸Carson, *Sermon*, p. 253.

“minimum” salaries that must be met for a congregation to have a minister. At the same time there is often no “maximum” with the result that small, poor congregations in rural or inner-city experience gaps and large, wealthy suburban congregations pay their ministers as though they must meet upper middle class status and offer 10 times the salary paid inner city pastors who may have to be bi-vocational.

(2) Hardship and opposition (10:16-23)

Jesus sends the apostles into a situation he understands well. Their habitat is to be trouble and persecution. Their habit is to be trust and testimony. On the horizon are the powerful of both the Jewish world and the Gentiles. This is not a bit of New Testament anti-Semitism, as though the Old Testament prophets themselves did not pierce the pretensions of the corrupted priesthood and nobility and face opposition. This is realistic to what happened to Jesus and to his immediate followers. We cannot read the list of troubles of the ex-Pharisee Paul without seeing among them afflictions laid on him by some of the Jewish leadership. In any case, this is not about the Jews in general, much less modern contemporary Jews.

This is a mission first and foremost to Jews. Therefore, one can expect Jesus to focus on the troubles that might happen with the “wolves” dragging them before councils and flogging them in synagogues. It is no more anti-Semitic to note these possibilities (and later realities) than it is for a person to articulate the actual treatment of Palestinians today by the Jewish state of Israel (nor anti-Islamic to highlight the conduct and aims of the Palestinians toward the Jews).

That the negative sides of the behavior of Jewish leaders can provide fodder for anti-Semitism is abundantly clear. Yet we must not lose sight of the document we are reading, nor the actual actors being described in this account. These are Jews with a Jewish message in conflict with other Jews who have a very different notion of what is within the boundaries of good Jewish behavior. Is it anti-Semitic for a Jewish layperson to warn about the rapacity of Jewish leaders and synagogues? Or is it anti-Semitic for Jewish leaders and synagogues to draw a boundary and persecute a Jew they consider heretical? The term “anti-Semitism” does not work unless we have an ulterior motive to read it into the text.

One might argue (without evidence we must note) that Matthew or the church made up these conflict passages while dealing with the growing separation and trouble between Christian assembly and Jewish synagogue. This argument claims: it was they, not Jesus, that were anti-Semitic, painting the Jewish leadership and synagogue with a dark palette. Matthew is propaganda that smears. It is a polemical strategy against traditional Jews. Its account reflects the heat of the debate and discord between Jew and Christian in the late first century, not the foresight of Christ into the trouble that would occur with his messengers in the mission to Israel.

Even granting such a hypothesis (it is only a hypothesis made plausible by one possible set of assumptions), we may ask: what is anti-Semitic about Jewish Christians noting actual experiences of persecution at the hands of Jewish leadership? Do we suppose that anything negative about Jews is anti-Semitic, no matter the spokesperson or the actual events being analyzed, no matter the historical context where such reports have a very different tone and function than they have in our post-holocaust day?

The point of this passage is that the disciples are to count on this: trouble will accompany their ministry of miracle and proclamation. It will come from the powerful. It led to the death of Jesus. Serving the servant of Yahweh and teaching the Kingdom’s nearness does not exempt them from the opposition and hatred of those who might be expected to welcome this turn in

salvation history. This opposition will be very strong, to the point of the shedding of blood.

The animal proverb used underlines this graphically. They are defenseless sheep sent out among wolves. When they experience this, they need to have ringing in their ears, “I send you out as sheep...” Jesus sent them, knowing full well that this would turn out to be a bloody business. But he sent them out as sheep.

There is no legitimation or change in this passage from the nonviolence of the Sermon on the Mount. They are not to take up the claws and teeth of the wolves to survive. There are no grounds in Jesus’ mission discourses for the military Crusade or even the violent response of Christians who find themselves persecuted for Jesus’ and righteousness’ sake. This does not settle the issue of civic violence in response to oppression that has little to do with Christian identity. That conversation is not preempted by this one.

Nonetheless, they are not to be sheep only, but snakes and doves. They are to have the wisdom and canniness of snakes amid these sorts of pressures. This forecast of trouble is not an invitation to create the conditions for that trouble. They are not commanded by these words to seek martyrdom. They are cautioned about coming trouble. Jesus tells them to exercise perceptive discernment⁴⁵⁹ and stand before accusers and prosecutors as innocent people of integrity (be dove-like) in the midst of such difficulties.

The keenness here recommended as a human quality involves insight into the nature of one’s surroundings, both personal and material, circumspection, sanctified common sense, wisdom to do the right thing at the right time and place and in the right manner, a serious attempt always to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal, an earnest and honest search for an answer to such questions as: ‘How will this word or this action of mine look ‘in the end?’ ‘How will it affect my own future, that of my neighbor, God’s glory?’ ‘Is this the best way to handle the problem or is there a better way?’”⁴⁶⁰

This picture of disciples as sheep amid wolves shows the dual nature of human beings. Earlier the crowds were considered harried and mangled sheep, victimized by powers that ravaged their vulnerabilities. It was a picture calling for compassion. This second portrait is of the rapacious wolves who savage the weak. These are the powerful.

These two metaphors underline the passive and active sides of sin’s effects. Our weak stupidity, allowing us to be taken as easily as a sheep by the evil powers of our world, reflects the devastating results of sin. We are confused, weak, frightened, uncertain, defenseless. We allow ourselves to be taken over or taken in. Simply because we are sheep does not mean we are

⁴⁵⁹ φρόνιμος, ον (cp. Φρόνις) ‘prudence.’ It is understanding associated with insight and wisdom, sensible, thoughtful, prudent, wise. Various translations as “sensible” “wary” “cunning” “shrewd.”

⁴⁶⁰ William Hendriksen (1953/2001). *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. (p. 461). Contra Barth’s dialectical reading of this proverb: “In other words, we are given an interpretation which has to be understood dialectically. In contrast to the normal pattern, your serpent wisdom, your way of escaping from difficult situations, your diplomacy, can consist only in the most undiplomatic harmlessness of doves. Your serpent wisdom is to have no illusions about the evil world into which I send you, and yet to go into it without fear, encountering it in spite of the consequences simply as what you are, as what you have to be as my disciples and witnesses, because I have made you such.” *CD IV.3.2* (pp. 631-32). The two pictures are complementary, not contrastive.

excused. We were made lords within creation, stewards and guardians of the abundance and beauty of this world. Yet we have been bitten by the serpent of Eden, one and all, and the poison has turned us into foolish and unperceptive creatures.

We are also wolves, ravenous packs hungry to devour. We rip and tear others. We descend to slander, to bug-eyed stampedes to see the humiliation and death of some poor soul. We create “entertainment” that cheers bloody gladiators, glories in one dog tearing another apart. Our thirst for blood and war adventure leads us to sell our services as mercenaries to kill people who never were our enemies. Torture, rape, pillaging, lying, using fraud, scapegoating, bullying—there are more than a dozen exquisite ways to damage and desecrate our neighbor.

There is the wolf in each of us. At one level we might admit that we are dually aligned: with both sheep and wolves. Like Hitler we are sheep in our harmless charm and warmth with friends and intimates and at the same time ruthless dealers of death toward others. Our benign weakness can easily transform itself into a raging inferno armed with rapier sharp daggers for wounding others.

Yet this picture has a different focus and point. Rather, the crowds of ordinary folk crushing Jesus are seen as the leaderless, unprotected sheep. The disciples are to identify themselves with these sheep. They too are to consider themselves at home among the weak. The wolves are those who exercise power to arrest, torture and kill. These influential gate-keepers turn the weapons of the community against the welfare of the innocent and righteous. They turn their property and status into leverage to capture larger shares in the world of limited resources. Not all those who remain outside the Christian community are wolves.

This self-definition as sheep is qualified. The disciples are not to be confused or shepherdless. They follow the good Shepherd Jesus and are provided the good news of the Kingdom and powers to heal and exorcise demons. They are like sheep in their weakness before the worldly powers they face but not without resources of the Spirit and the word.

Their nonviolent vulnerability is to be joined with two other qualities. Being as wise as serpents means they are not to be foolish. Wolves are wolves and disciples are not to get confused about them. Jesus says: “Beware of people” (10:17). As “nice,” civilized and benevolent as some human wolves appear, they remain wolves. The apostles are not to expose their weaknesses foolishly or turn against each other. They do not seek trouble and do not respond to it with the techniques and savagery of wolves. They are to cultivate wisdom about people and the sorts of things that motivate them to cross the line into treachery and worse.

Being like doves means they are to be innocent, single-hearted, pure in their intentions. Their cunning is not to be a shrewdly calculating guardian of self-advancement. By itself prudence can serve the ego and one’s career in conventional terms. Integrity and innocence anchor prudence onto Kingdom values. Yet by itself innocence can be simple-minded folly. Jesus asks that we not be guilty and foolish as we live in an environment of wolves. It is a strange combination of wily prudence and innocent purity of motive that is to coexist in our lives.⁴⁶¹

Those who will be wolf-like include our parents, our siblings—even our children. Kings and

⁴⁶¹ “...we ought to be cautious toward those who are evil, that is, giving no offense or cause for reproach, so that they may have nothing against us by any just law. Thus we should be able to say with a clear conscience: ‘I was not the cause of these tumults and scandals.’ Next, we ought to do good to all so that we can boast: ‘The wicked have nothing to lay to our charge by any right, but the good, and everyone else, have something for which they should by right give [us] thanks.’” Luther, *Works*, Vol. 67(p. 96).

Magistrates who are devoted to “justice” will serve unjustly to persecute Jesus’ disciples. The “religious” will haul these Kingdom proclaimers before ecclesiastical courts. The wolves (potentially) are everywhere. Beware of people! All of them. Add to prudence and purity the virtue of endurance: a constancy and consistency strong enough to last to the end.

We are not to ask the “wolves” to run interference for us. The disastrous wedding of colonialism and mission has a dismal history. Instead of going out as sheep, too often in the modern missionary movement, missionaries came in on the coattails of merchants and political masters who were imposing order by the sword and gun. Sheltering under the power of the Western colonial powers, missionaries asserted their “rights” to the protection of the West.

The Spirit of the Father will be present with the apostles when the wolves succeed in their opposition. When disciples have to stand before those who have the power of life and death over them, they are not to be filled with anxiety about their words. Their destiny does not hang on their own eloquence or wisdom. They might be overly concerned with finding the correct words to say. Or their preoccupation might be to finesse the delicate issues that might turn the event toward life or death. In the midst of trial, they might forget they stand before these individuals as a testimony. They should not be there because of guilt or folly. So, they should not be engaged in an exercise of white-washing or rationalization. Defensiveness is out. Witness is in. Even in this dire circumstance, they are to have faith in the good God they serve.

The promise given here to the apostles applies most clearly to them. Their words are the normative witness to the originating events of the Christian story. They are not to be shut down or shut up by the official mechanisms brought to bear against them. The first of the twelve (as we know) will be executed by a petty King (Acts 12:2). This warning of Jesus to “beware” is prudent. They are to take wise precautions (and we see Paul leaving places of persecution to preserve the ministry to which he was commissioned). They are not to run into clear danger.⁴⁶²

But these are words for us all. They do not justify the notion that we need not prepare and study as we teach and preach. This is an unusual situation where the powerful rhetoric of professionally trained prosecutors has the potential to shame the less eloquent and reveal the uneducated ordinariness of the apostles. They could begin to second-guess their commission or what chance they might stand in the courtroom of the educated and professional speech-makers. Jesus assures them that the Spirit will give them what they need to do their job of testimony in a way that is pleasing to God.

We too are often intimidated by the powerful and the influential of our day. We do not suppose what we have to offer is worthy of acceptance or even a hearing. For those of us who are academics it is often being intimidated by our disciplines and their reigning paradigms and reward structures. Our problem is often that we have not yet been well trained as disciples (Matthew 13:52). We don’t know the testimony to Jesus well enough to have access to the sorts of things that need to be said.

The Spirit does not override our ignorance. We cannot testify to that which we do not know and have not experienced. The Spirit does not give us new revelations on a par with Scripture, does not ensure comprehensive understandings or make clear the ambiguous and obscure parts

⁴⁶² Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*. Cyril of Alexander: “Jesus commands his disciples to flee from one town to the next, and from that one to another. In saying this he is not telling his disciples to be cowardly. He is telling them not to cast themselves into dangers and die at once, for that would be a loss to those who otherwise will benefit from the teaching.” (p. 203).

of the Bible. The Spirit is not an excuse for our laziness or lack of thoughtfulness. These disciples sacrificed family and occupation and spent some years in a wandering existence that depended upon the hospitality of others. This was their intense schooling before they were called upon to face persecution and interrogation.

We too must be in the school of Christ if we are to act as spokespersons for him and his notions. While maturity for us is never finished and will not fully match the stature of Christ, maturity is an essential matter when it comes to the discernment required in the difficult and delicate settings in which we shall find ourselves. In our Spirit-filled service to God we need to offer wise, informed, pure and gentle maturity to God and our neighbors. We cannot suppose being unprepared, ignorant, foolish, unthoughtful is what makes us ready for the Spirit.

Yet the Spirit will take what we have to offer and make it sufficient. Our own wisdom and information, our own understandings and mastery of the Scripture's witness, our own purity of heart and generosity, our own prudence and maturity are not sufficient in and of themselves. The Spirit uses us as and where we are. Jesus asks that we acknowledge that after he tells us we are to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. First wisdom and innocence. Then readiness for speaking in the Spirit before Kings and rulers.

In this passage there is nothing more important or higher in value than the testimony that is connected to the name of Jesus Christ. We are to endure even to the tragic end of death, even if it is our closest family who condemn us. Neither kin nor country, neither politics nor religious authority are to be valued above his name and testimony. Nor is our own life of greater value.

Jesus does not give us direct guidance here. He sets some clear buoys in the harbor of our lives. We are not to be passive and imprudent. We can claim the power of the Spirit as we live and speak in the name of Jesus. Jesus will shepherd his sheep. If we become wolves amid this trouble, we can be sure (as Chrysostom said) that we will no longer be fed by Christ. He feeds sheep, not wolves.⁴⁶³

It is the one who endures to the end who will be saved. We go through the narrow gate into the Kingdom with our whole life. We cannot appeal to certain spiritual fireworks at one point only to live the rest of our lives in the same manner as we did before them. The seriousness of repudiating Jesus Christ in the face of family, ecclesiastical and political pressure is emphasized. We can be sure that this does not mean the sort of "slip" that Peter made in his denials, joined as it was with the promise and restoration of Christ in response to his repentance. It is not the fact of denial in view but the reality of leaving the fold.

This seems to make clear that the Spirit's inspiration in the moment before the tribunal will not be duplicity. To be and remain innocent as doves is to stay aligned with the commitment to Christ made and lived before this extraordinary pressure. The Spirit gives us words of testimony (not foolish or inflammatory words unless those be commanded in the situation—cf. Stephen). We are not given deceptive or lying words by the Spirit of truth. Sometimes that means we endure to the end.

We endure because this part of discipleship is not meant to be enjoyed. We may have the joy of the Spirit during such persecution (and sing in the dungeons as did Paul and Silas at Philippi—Acts 16:25). Yet such family conflict or court trials inflict great pain. We may be misunderstood,

⁴⁶³ Homily #XXXIII. John Chrysostom. (1843–1844). *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Parts 1 & 2*. (Vol. 2, p. 480). Oxford; London: John Henry Parker; J. G. F. and J. Rivington.

tortured, maligned, ostracized and slandered. None of this is a cause for rejoicing, unless we perceive in the Spirit that this is a sign of our identification with Jesus' own sufferings. Endurance is not simply a matter of our pain-threshold or courage quotient. It is being so embedded in Jesus Christ and his righteousness that we connect every event, even difficult ones such as this, to his shepherding compassion.

In the immediate context Jesus tells them not to stay and "take it." If persecution arises in one town, they are to flee to the next. Because their mission is limited to disseminating the message and power of the Kingdom, they are not at this time to stand and endure to the end. That will happen later. In this present moment they are to concentrate on finding the receptive, the hospitable, the "worthy."

There are no clear criteria for when the persecution is serious enough to cause them to decide to leave. That is a matter of the snake-like prudence and discernment (though some strong and severe cases don't require fine distinctions at all). Jesus' word on endurance is matched with the word flee. If the Spirit is needed for giving testimony before tribunals (and to family members), the Spirit is likewise needed to balance endurance and flight. If our hearts are unmixed, then we will not confuse foolish fear and wise caution.

The work is enormous. Even in Galilee, limited to Jewish towns and villages among the 204 (Josephus' number),⁴⁶⁴ they will not finish the task "before the Son of man comes." Or perhaps it is they will not exhaust the towns that will provide refuge (get into all the receptive places) before the Son of man comes and ends this phase of the messianic ministry.

There are numerous interpretations of this phrase (the parousia, the judgment of Israel and destruction of Jerusalem, the completion of the time set for the twelve preparing villages for the coming of Jesus to them in this phase of the earthly ministry).⁴⁶⁵ This is not the place to listen to Schweitzer's claim that it can only mean Jesus mistakenly viewed the end of history to be weeks or months away.⁴⁶⁶ There are those who seek to blunt this "mistake" by appealing to the humanity of Jesus and his self-confessed lack of knowledge of the time of the parousia (claiming Jesus gained experience that showed him his earlier mistake). In this context, such an interpretation is not clearly required). The commands are for the twelve and their immediate mission. However, we must ask the meaning the coming of the Son of man in this context.

Nor will it do even to appeal to source criticism or some hypothetical "original" setting from which it has been wrenched for topical reasons for this teaching section of Matthew. Unless we have a wooden notion of Jesus saying something only once and the editors multiplying them into a variety of contexts, it is better to begin by viewing the texts as wholes and take them as various

⁴⁶⁴ Josephus, *The Life, Against Apion*, vol. I (1966), The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (p. 89).

⁴⁶⁵ The major options are (1) The second coming (parousia) of Jesus at the end of the age. This is taken either as Jesus was mistaken about timing or that this is a way of saying the mission to the Jews would not be ended before the second coming, continuing after his resurrection. See Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 428); Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* (p. 190); (2) The judgment on Jerusalem and its destruction. See Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. 1* (p. 522); Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 289); (3) The resurrection and exaltation. See Mounce, *Matthew* (p. 96); France, *Matthew* (pp. 396-98). It is a difficult passage.

⁴⁶⁶ Morris, *Matthew*: "The extreme form of this view is that of A. Schweitzer, who held that Jesus thought that the consummation would take place in his own lifetime. But Matthew was writing quite some time after the words were spoken, and he knew that the Lord had not returned; he cannot have meant that he would." (p. 258).

summarizing accounts that include or exclude details found in the others available to us (or not even known to us).

(3) What to fear and what to expect (10:24-42)

(a) Disciples and their Master (10:24-31): no fear in the face of opposition

This begins the section setting expectations for mission. The first grounds the outlook of the disciples in all these matters. To norm their own experience as they preach and heal, they need to look at the treatment received by Jesus himself. Persecution and mistreatment are not surprising since that is what came to him. God does not love us the less when we are struggling with the pain of opposition. Such events and passages in life are not the proof that we are being punished for some sin. They can be an expression of our identification with Jesus Christ.

It may seem to our world-adjusted eyes and our success-oriented emotions that it just is not fair that Christian workers should have such difficulty in service of “the King.” One of the keys points in the Sermon on the Mount is that our notions of righteousness are fundamentally flawed. If we are to understand the life God blesses, we must turn most of our ideas about civic and religious life upside down. This contains a similar dynamic. The close followers of Jesus Christ from the Apostles down to the most insignificant cup bearer are bound up with the spiritual struggles marking the coming of the Kingdom. If we are to gauge the meaning of filling positions of service in preaching and healing, we must first acknowledge them as cruciform. They are not pathways to status and privilege, but portals into suffering and persecution.

This is not the only word to be said about the service of mission. It is a necessary one. It is focused on the reality that, as we so serve, we may well be hated because of the name of Jesus Christ. We are not greater than he. We cannot exalt our name above his. Today, holding up of Jesus as the only way to God, is maligned. Such contempt comes because we refuse the contemporary pluralistic relativism. We proclaim Jesus as God’s saving presence in history. Exclusive claims are seen as intolerance, the main root of contemporary religious violence.

Still, we dare not say God’s definitive saving presence is found in revolutionary movements, liberation initiatives, the uplifting enlightenment of education, the dawning of an age of medical prowess, a spirituality rooted in every human being, though we see his hand in many of these. Jesus Christ is the one we declare to be the definitive revelation of God’s power and redemption.

What also embroils Christians is their refusal of the unequal yoke (God and country; Jesus and the white race; Christianity and the pursuit of wealth). The living of the greater righteousness means loving in places where culture, custom and convention says we are to hate. It means the unpopular and “unpastoral” tough love when thinking about adultery and divorce. The greater righteousness also creates tensions when we confront the status and reward hierarchy of the Christian denominations.

Then there is the strange separation of the social and the spiritual that is joined in Jesus Christ. The social-liberation Christians who say, “Justice, justice,” are frequently not Christ-centered or evangelistic. The spiritual-liberation Christians who say, “Faith, faith,” are not frequently human-focused or politically moral. To confront the social injustices of our day (as snakes and doves) initiates consternation and false accusations. We need the commitment both to the righteousness that comes by grace through faith in the sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ and the righteousness of a civic life ordered by fairness, equity and mercy. We need the peace makers (who see the social roots of so much crime and unrest) and the pure in heart (whose cleansing in

the suffering of Christ is personal). How do we end the folly of justice advocates who reject the offense of Christ as the only way and the folly of justification by faith proclaimers who reject the offense of Christ as the one who demands social justice?

Jesus informs his apostles that they too will be labelled as the spiritually and theologically misguided, as those whose powers are in fact simply a display of evil and a demonstration of the prince of demons. They will be identified with the worst evil of their society, the off-scouring of all the disreputable and dangerous.

They are sent out to love. The thanks they get is torture, slander, and prosecution before the courts. They are considered dangerous rather than those whose words and deeds bring spiritual healing and health. In this they will be “under” not above their Master. They are told to keep their eyes on him. When we do, there will be no complaining about suffering because our words and service are intrinsically rooted in the name of Jesus Christ.

The words of Jesus might strike fear into the hearts of his disciples. He promises opposition as the necessary accompaniment of mission. Jesus tells them not to fear persecutors, actual or potential, and gives them several reasons for this instruction.

1. Their commitment to the truth and the validity of that truth will not remain hidden. It is not only futile but foolish to keep the claims and teachings of Christ hidden. What he is teaching them in quiet whispers in private is to be publicly and loudly declared. His movement is not to be a secret society with the initiates distinguished from the masses. What he teaches is to be shared as broadly and unashamedly as possible.

All members of the movement are invited into discipleship. One day the validity of what they are taught will be demonstrated by the eschatological resolution of all human history. The “quiet” phase of the Kingdom will end. That will be the definitive demonstration. Those who have confessed Jesus before their peers and taught his instructions will be vindicated.

2. God is the more to be feared because God’s control of our destiny is the most far reaching. Humans can do very grave things to us. They are able to kill our bodies. Jesus teaches us that fear is appropriate toward God who is able not only to touch the body but to destroy both body and soul in hell. The fear we are to have toward God is not of the morbid sort, as though God were a cosmic bully just hoping for another victim to toss into a dantesque palace of tortures. Jesus’ comment is another reality check. We are prone to be so terribly impressed by our physical senses, by what is visible, tangible and immediate. We forget that God is even more real, tangible and imminent in all our lives. But we do not see him. Only the eyes of faith can see God and know that his approval and action are conclusive and eternal.

3. God’s providential care attends even to tiny details: how much more to the details of our lives? Even the least expensive animal used for food is noticed by God. Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God’s will being involved. Even the hairs on our heads are numbered. These seem trivial and petty, yet they are vivid reminders of the breadth and depth of the knowledge and will of God. Since our lives are of far more value than our hairs or than the brief life of a sparrow, can we not count on God’s benevolent providence, even in situations of grave danger and hostility? Do we believe God will triumph, even over the petty tyrants who take our lives or the perverse torturer who inflicts pain? Jesus’ words are not meant as a guarantee against conflict or pain. They are a reassurance that God remains Lord even when everything seems spiraling out of control toward our death and we are under the power of humans who are doing us serious and painful ill.

4. **The Lord's promise is acknowledgement before the Father in heaven for all who acknowledge him before humans.** What more could we want? This is a way of talking about entrance into the Kingdom of God. Here are those who have said, "Jesus is my Lord," before others. Jesus will not say to such: "Depart from me. I never knew you." This is the promise of the Great patron that his clients, doing his will, need not fear they will be disowned in heavenly courts, even though their family and various rulers might disown them in earthly courts.

This is two-sided. Disowning of Jesus means his disowning of them in heaven. Peter's denial and restoration is clear proof that there is more involved than the simple act of verbalizing a repudiation in the public forums where the pressure is brought. However, this does indicate how serious and consequential confessing or denying Christ is. How we align ourselves in the courts of the earth is how Jesus will align himself with us in the courts of heaven.

So why should we not fear? Because our Master triumphed after he suffered from more than the things we will be asked to suffer! We place ourselves in the hands of a sovereign Lord whose care for even trivial matters far exceeds our comprehension. He knows the number of hairs on our head and will see to it that our words and actions befit his purpose and redemption. We should always have God as our chief reference, for he is able not only to destroy our mortal bodies but our immortal souls as well. We are precious to him. So, we need to own our allegiance to Jesus Christ and give our testimony. What we must look forward to is Jesus giving his testimony about us before our heavenly Father.

(b) Disciples and their family (10:32-39): conflict and "saving" one's life

There is a valid distinction between a willful rejection of Jesus and a moment of fleshly weakness. We may not be able to draw the fine line between the two. All we know is that crossing the line into a repudiation of Jesus in the face of threat and hostility is entering dangerous territory.⁴⁶⁷ If we think Jesus came to spare us from the tragic and troubling necessity of such pressures, we will be sadly shocked.

A strange saying opens this last section of the instructions. It brings us face to face with the toughness of Jesus. He may be the Prince of Peace and commend peace making. But he also characterizes the meaning of his mission as not bringing peace but a sword to the earth. This is not the ideology of a Zealot. The context has nothing to do with the ethnic or religious nationalism of his day. This has to do with the effects his demanding requirements have on those who are to be his disciples.

Expectations for the messianic era were for a time when the vindication of Israel would remove it from the humiliation of subjection to the Gentiles. Peace would reign over the earth as the glory of God was acknowledged by the nations. Jesus is saying that such a time is not the

⁴⁶⁷ Barth, *CD Vol. IV.3*: "But this means that, just as Jesus has bound Himself to speak and still speaks for men, so without doubt they on their side are bound to speak of Him. If they fail to do the latter, they risk the loss of the former: "But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Mt. 10:33). And if it is asked how what is impossible for man and is yet demanded can become an absolute necessity for him, the answer must be that he who gives man this commandment and imposes on him this obligation puts him also in the position to do what is demanded; indeed, that by His power He causes man to achieve what is demanded. "But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you" (Mt. 10:19f.)." (p. 76)

meaning of his present coming. The Kingdom of God is present and yet the course of evil and rejection of God's ways continues. The messiah is here. Yet peace does not prevail. Wars and conflict continue to mar the reality of human relationships.

In this context the meaning of the sword is to be interpreted by the illustrative applications given in the following words.⁴⁶⁸ The sword here is metaphorical for the interpersonal conflict that occurs because of the extraordinarily strong reaction of intimate family members to the Christ-follower. The relationships are spelled out specifically. Jesus demands that we not end family conflict by ending our relationship with him. If we do not love him more than we love father, mother, son or daughter, then we are not worthy of him. There can be no human tie that has higher value to us than the connection we are to have with Jesus. The commitment of following Jesus means an inevitable collision with traditional and ordinary expectations.

The bottom line transcends kinship. Jesus claims his disciple's lives in a world that is passing away, a world already consigned to death. Their calculation and commitment are to be measured by the value of their very life. If they do not lay it down, giving up their own ambitions and agenda, seeking to further the honor of the name of Jesus and his claims, then they will lose their lives eternally. If we seek to arrange matters so as to preserve and save our physical lives, we will allow the life of Christ in us slip away. The dramatic metaphor for this is the picture of a condemned Roman criminal, carrying the cross piece to his own crucifixion. That, unbelievably, is the prospect to have in mind as a disciple!⁴⁶⁹

On the other hand, Jesus says if we will lay our lives down in favor of seeking first the Kingdom of God, then we will find life abundant. We will preserve the true and authentic life that cannot be taken from us. If we fear those who can end our historical existence, if we value our kinship connections more than our Christ-connection, if we hide or repudiate our faith in Jesus Christ, then we are not worthy of Christ. Jesus' appearance brings a sword, not peace. We must be ready for conflict and ready for that conflict to affect our inner fears and hopes. We shall be ready for the rejection and hostility only if we have died to self inwardly.

The promise is that we will find life when and where we fear God rather than humans; where we allow the Spirit to speak through us in grave situations of threat; where we do not seek an existence different from that of our Master but willingly accept the same hostility and misunderstanding he absorbed. What is the life we find?

It is the life of the narrow gate and the difficult path, of the beatitudes, of becoming salt and light. It is the life of unostentatious piety, of love of enemy and longing for the righteousness of God. In this context it is the life that is never without the Father. No sparrow falls to the ground "without the Father." Jesus does not offer us an easy life or protection from martyrdom even at

⁴⁶⁸ Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: "'Sword' in this passage is also understood in another way: figuratively or metaphorically, so that 'sword' means 'division.' For in what follows [Matt. 10:35], Christ by His Word divides father from son, mother from daughter. Just as a sword divides literally, so Christ's Word divides in spirit...For once hearts have been divided, next comes 'the sword,' that is, persecution, just as He said above: that children hand over their parents to death [Matt. 10:21]. Therefore, the figurative sword is the reason for the physical sword, which it stirs up against the Gospel by the division it brings ..." (p. 113).

⁴⁶⁹ Morris, *Matthew*: "They knew that when this happened and the man went off with a little knot of Roman soldiers, he was on a one-way journey. He would not be back. Thus, for them, taking up the cross stood for the utmost in renunciation of the claims of self. The person who took up a cross had died to a whole way of life...a death to self." (p. 268).

the hands of our own family. What he is promising is that we will not suffer any of this “without the Father.” This is the new age of fulfillment but not yet the age of consummation: great hope mixed with great suffering. Endurance is essential when nonconformance to the passing age seeks to press us into its image.⁴⁷⁰

How then do we enter into this promise? Jesus tells his disciples that they must stand up for him in tough situations. If we speak up for the right ways of God, God will speak up for us. If we will die to our fears and desires, Jesus will secure our life before the Father. If we will be like our teacher and master, he will draw us into the resurrection life he entered after the cross.

In our modern day of tolerance and relativism, we likely see too much family peace in those who profess Christian faith. In our time, the decision that spells division in Jesus’ day becomes an option that makes no waves within the family. People live peacefully and “civilly” as though one path is pretty much the same as any other. People fear becoming “fanatics” and so do not find the narrow way between family idolatry and family neglect.

The thrust of this passage is not instruction that we all become monks, selling our property, divorcing our spouses, disowning our children. The opposition is not from our side. It comes because we refuse to be “quiet” about this Jesus thing. We must be sure that we are not fleshly fanatics, obnoxious and offensive, harsh and self-righteous. Nonetheless, we who are Christ-followers cannot be silent about the Kingdom of God and cannot be lax in living Kingdom-values. To do so will, at times, raise the hackles of family members.

(c) Hospitality rewards (10:40-42): little welcoming and the big welcome

The “presumption” of Christ is astounding in all this. Not only does he claim the key to being right before the Father, but he also comes crashing into our lives and demands that we put family and our own being beneath our commitment to him. Far from denigrating or degrading our value, Jesus says we become so identified with him that those who welcome us welcome him! If he claims to stand at the pinnacle of the universe, he places us there with him.⁴⁷¹

“Here is the beginning of the NT teaching concerning the mediatorship of Jesus, bridging between humanity and God (1 Tim 2:5; cf. Heb 9:15; 12:24). Thus the reception accorded the messengers of the kingdom is nothing short of the reception accorded God himself! If the messengers are

⁴⁷⁰ Barth, *CD, Vol. IV.3*. “The meaning and purpose of His mission and message, the work of His right hand, is not the maintenance and improvement of the world. In spite of all that He has to give and say in this direction, it is its renovation. The fulfilment of this He has secured through His death on the cross and revealed in His resurrection from the dead as a firstfruits and pledge for all who recognise Him and believe on Him. But in relation to the existing world and its arrangements and ordinances this means: “I came not to send peace, but a sword,” i.e., the notification of its ultimate dissolution and disintegration, of the cleavage between yesterday and to-morrow, old and new, this world and that which is to come. And this can mean that certain men in certain situations must in their being and behaviour bear witness, not to that peace, but to the kingdom which limits and qualifies it.” (p. 263).

⁴⁷¹ This is also the first time in Matthew that Jesus refers to himself as being sent by God (“he who receives me receives the one who sent me.” Vs. 40). The thematic word in these three verses is “welcome” (δέχομαι) or “receive.” Note Bruner, *Christbook*: “Original apostolic succession, then, *begins* with the Father, *enters* history classically in the Son, is *established* then canonically by the apostles and their witness, and then *continues* ecclesiastically through all disciples who are churchmen and churchwomen faithful to the apostolic christocentric canon and creeds.” (p. 496).

that important, then the hospitality accorded the representatives of the kingdom will not go unrewarded.”⁴⁷²

Until this point the instructions sounded as though he were inviting his followers to accept a kind of masochistic vision of discipleship: suffering, slander, conflict, persecution, hostility, family division, torture. He has told us to identify with him in his downward movement to the bottom of society and the depths of misunderstanding and false accusation. For all the more general “social insecurity,” Jesus identifies himself with us. He catches us up in the upward movement to the throne of God. Now he encourages and comforts the disciples with the promise that there will be small “welcomes” and a great “welcome” in this task, despite conflict and opposition. This is “spiritual security.”

To this point the instructions sound as though they are laying out the difficult road by which discipleship will be given its toughness and edge. We are to run a course with extraordinary obstacles and high hurdles. But what if we are not among the heroic, the highly gifted, the well trained or become a disciple late and with few resources? What if we have hardly heard anything in secret to proclaim loudly in public? What then?

Jesus says that even the most resourceless, ordinary, undistinguished Christ-follower becomes a participant in the greater rewards of the Kingdom. God’s means of redemption and reaching the lost of the world is through word-keeping, word-proclaiming disciples. Those who recognize the ministry of his prophets and welcome them as such will receive the equivalent reward. The prophet and the one who welcomes the prophet will be given the same reward.

Even those who cannot lay out hearth and home for the “great ones” of the Christian movement are not excluded. A person whose resources extend only to the welcoming offer of a cup of cold water to the least important Christ-followers will not lose their reward. There is no excuse that I cannot extend this welcome because of my poverty or worldly insignificance. The smallest help by the seemingly least among us will be rewarded.

This is not about being hospitable and generous in general (however valued that is). This refers to people extending themselves to Christ-followers because they have the spiritual discernment to receive the message and manner of these people as rooted in the true God. They receive the prophet as a prophet of God. They receive the righteous as righteous in God. This is the essence of apostolic succession. We acknowledge and support those who speak a given message as from God and who live according to a given ethos as from God. The word and ways of God join in a united world view and provide for us the narrow gate and difficult path.

A modern schizophrenia is rejected by this passage. We cannot sacrifice the theology of the Bible in favor of some modern rationality tradition that declares the notions of Scripture erroneous, implausible or even dangerous. Nor can we butcher the ethics of the Bible in service of new models of human well-being or advanced claims about biology, psychology or the changed social situation. Neither ecology nor physics renders the Bible obsolete. Jesus offers us an integrally harmonious message and ethics and asks that we welcome it into our modern minds and models. Contextualization there must be. Domestication there must never be. The good news of the Kingdom is a sword. We are to welcome all those who carry that sword.

⁴⁷² Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 297).

(4) Summary (11:1)

This summary verse binds the sermon on the Mission together (echoing back to 10:5). The message as a whole is instruction in mission just as the Sermon on the Mount placed emphasis on the messenger; this is how salt and light act just as the Sermon on the Mount defined what saltiness and light is. The qualities of being a disciple are not in the service of simply producing character and strong personality. What they provide is the integrity of mature humanity necessary for the integrity of Christian mission. The “virtues” are not just values that are worthy to pursue but “powers” that enable us to do things in carrying out the mission of Jesus.

Still, having such qualities of character are not in and of themselves all that is needed to do the will of the Father. Instruction does not end with the renovation of our inner being, aligning it with the character and calling of God and empowering us with responses essential to godly living. It continues with the characterization of what we are to do and say, and how that will play out in a world not aligned with God.

It is also of interest that the twelve are again labelled “disciples.” The first and most significant designation of the Apostles for Matthew is disciple. They are in the school of Christ, learners of and from him. In this passage they are not called prophets or righteous persons. They are learners. Their calling and selection as “the twelve” do not lift them above the ordinary Christ-follower. Together with all the rest of those who heard his message, the twelve continue to learn. They will have a special place in the inauguration of the Christian movement in terms of witness and leadership. But first of all, they are disciples.

Nor does this end the ministry of Christ. He goes on teaching and proclaiming his message in the cities to which they have gone and experienced the sort of hostility and/or welcome foretold. The twelve do not substitute for Christ, however much they might stand in for him as they stand up for him in the volatile Jewish context of Galilean towns. Where they have been (“their cities”) Jesus comes in person. Having received the word and ministry of these twelve, these villages experience the very presence of the messianic prophet. Whatever might be the deficiencies of the disciples in word or deed, they now find the source of their wisdom and wonder-working power immediately before them.

There is both a glory and a modesty in these words. The glory is that disciples commissioned and taught by Christ can stand in for him. He sends us out even today and still identifies with us so that the welcome we are given is the welcome he is given. The modesty is that, despite our standing in for Christ, we cannot substitute for his actual and real presence. He must come to “our” cities and share his message. We do not finally connect people to us, to our giftedness, to our insight or personality. We prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, just as John the Baptist did. If Christ does not come, then our mission and ministry will end in failure and futility.

The practicality of this happens by the ministry of the unseen Spirit. That does not render it less important, less compelling or less real. It does mean that our faith is on the line again: do we believe small acts such as the cup of cold water are valued by God (just as prophesying the word of the Lord is valued) or whether the Father is with us in suffering for the sake of our testimony to Christ?

How and when does Christ come to our cities in this day? If his presence was mediated by the commissioned disciples (did he get to all the villages of Galilee?), then his presence is so mediated today. To be sure we are at one layer of remove. The “prophets” and “righteous” persons we welcome are the twelve and their immediate disciples in the form of the New

Testament. Welcoming them means we take their words and message so seriously that we treat it as a word from Jesus himself. We shape our message and character by the words of the apostolic testimony. Christ comes to us in the words of Scripture and by means of people who have been made-over by the powerful Spirit rooting that message deeply in them.

Nonetheless, through that message and witness, we come to Christ himself to be instructed. In and through, behind and beyond (but not contrary to) the words of the New Testament we encounter Christ. By faith through the Spirit we ourselves are drawn into a larger world of reality than our desks, schools, churches and homes. The tangible is touched by the intangible, the visible is filled with the invisible. The glory of this is that God reveals himself to us. The modesty of it is that God does it by the modest means of word and human personality. There is the simultaneous unveiling and veiling, the showing and hiding. Christ comes to teach and proclaim his message. Thereby Matthew's testimony is rooted in us in a way that simply mastery of the syntax and meanings of his words could never do.



IV. Growing opposition to the kingdom (11:2-13:52)

A. Narrative 3: Three cycles of unbelief and belief (11:2-12:50)

If the Sermon on Mission (Matt. 10) is somber in sounding the notes of division and opposition that will face his disciples, chapters 11-12 display that reality. Their tone is negative, their examples show nonacceptance of the good news and its agents. In this they prepare the way for the parables of judgment and division that come in chapter 13.

(1) This generation: invitation and response (11:2-30)

(a) John the Baptist's Question (11:2-6)

Jesus is confronted by one who considers him the Messiah: John the Baptist. Imprisoned at this point, he sends his disciples⁴⁷³ to probe the validity of his conclusion that Jesus is that Messiah. He has doubts because he does not yet properly put Jesus' words and deeds together. Understanding Jesus' actions and effects are tied closely together with his teaching.

Jesus has sent the twelve on the mission to Israel with instructions that repeatedly indicate opposition as an integral part of their experience. John the Baptist demonstrates that sort of fate. He has been jailed. He had hoped that Jesus was the one who is to come. So, he sends his disciples for answers. They had puzzled earlier over Jesus' disciples not regularly engaging in fasting as an expression of their preparation for the coming One. Again, the issue is a seeming incongruity between what John expected and what reality turned out to be.

The strange mystery unfolding (to be explained more fully in Matthew 13) is the presence of the Kingdom alongside effective and powerful opposition. How is it that the Messiah could be here and still the opposition to God flourishes? How is it that the one who sets captives free and works the miracles foretold in the prophets is active in Israel and John languishes in prison? Something seems dramatically wrong with such a state of affairs.

John seems not to be expressing doubts about his own identity or vocation. His query is whether Jesus is the one foretold by John's prophecies.⁴⁷⁴ John is convinced that One is coming.

⁴⁷³ Rather than the majority text reading of the King James ("two" δύο), διὰ τῶν μαθητῶν is given an almost certain rating, widely supported by ancient witnesses of different types of text {B}.

⁴⁷⁴ Note the emphatic "you" in the question: εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· σὺ εἶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν; The fronting of "you" (σὺ) seems to indicate no doubt about "one coming" but whether Jesus is that one. Cf. Morris, *Matthew* (pp. 274-75) for five ways of taking the question. Turner, *Baker: Matthew*: "John's doubts should not be downplayed but given full force. John had ample reason to believe in Jesus (3:13-17), but the delay of judgment of sin (3:10-12), John's imprisonment (4:12), and the increasing opposition to Jesus would inevitably shake his confidence." (p. 290). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: "Did the Baptist ask this question for his own sake or merely to assist his disciples in their understanding and faith? With the apparent exception of Tertullian, the church fathers and early commentators held that the Baptist could not possibly have entertained doubts about the identity of Jesus. Yet in terms of grammar, near context, and even the wider sweep of Scripture's story, there is no compelling reason to reject the obvious sense of the text." (p. 555)

What he supposed he was preparing for was the eschatological judgment, the powerful arrival of a forceful Kingdom that would sweep away the evil doers and restore God's people to their proper status as the covenant people of Yahweh. That is not happening in Jesus' ministry—yet.

Jesus' answer combines the two elements of the deeds he is doing (very dramatic in any case—healings, raising the dead, etc. found in Matthew 8-9) and his message (the poor have the good news proclaimed to them found in Matthew 5-7). It is that combination that renders a correct answer to John's question. Jesus' message is essential for understanding his deeds. One must listen carefully and deeply to the good news to discover the significance and role of the miracles. A forceful Kingdom has arrived and Jesus is the One bringing that kingdom. However else might these miracles like those of Moses and Elijah happen in such abundance in such a short span of time at the hand of this man and his disciples?

The miracles Jesus recites as happening are those narrated in Matthew 8-9. The good news that he proclaims to the poor has been told us and spelled out in his teaching sections. The specifics that are conveyed to John are rooted in the passages of Isaiah (29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). Each of these Isaiah passages is closely associated with judgment themes. Yet Jesus does not point to his role either now or in the future as the judge or messianic victor. What he picks up are the signs that indicate the presence of the salvation of the new age. What John must struggle with is the "half-fulfillment" of the prophecies of Isaiah. Jesus is apparently aware that this is not as simple or straight forward as it might seem. No matter the earlier ringing endorsement of Jesus by John. The crisis in jail (and that of his followers) must be dealt with.

Jesus offers another beatitude: "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." This beatitude ties the favorable condition of God's benefits with not stumbling over Jesus. The potential offense for John is Jesus' unexpected and unusual pattern as Messiah. The conflict is over what Messiah will do and mean. The models John has of Jesus do not fit the actuality of his activity and effects. Jesus offers John those effects that fit the prophecies of Isaiah. There are clear indications of the presence of the eschatological salvation to be brought by the Messiah. Yet they are not accompanied by the expected overturning of this-worldly evil.

The key to John not taking offense is to hold together all the various pieces of Jesus. His deeds and his words hold the essential clues as to Jesus' identity. For the reader of Matthew, John's question is also their own: who is this One? Is there another we should look for or is he the One John and the Old Testament tells us to expect?

In all the teaching and ministry of Jesus we find indications of the unexpected. What Jesus said and did startled people. Even from the beginning, John the Baptist was not completely aligned with Jesus. His rejoinder at that point was: "I need to be baptized by you...." (Matt. 3:14). How was it that this one should come to him for baptism—the very one he considered the identifiable agent his word foretold? Where's the ax to cut down unfruitful trees, the winnowing shovel to separate the chaff, the fire to burn it all up (Matt. 3:7-12)? At present it appears to John in prison, the ax being wielded is in the hands of those opposed to his message and the One he singled out as the bringer of the end of evil.

Immediately following his baptism by John, Jesus confronts the Evil One and rejects the very sorts of signs and actions that might be thought most appropriate for the messianic Lord. Success, spectacular miracles, claiming God's protection from danger and death, claiming the booty of all

nations—none of these will mark this Son of God. His ministry becomes that of healing and exorcising in the small villages of Galilee (rather than the great structures of Jerusalem). If Jesus is Israel's Liberator, he goes at it very strangely. His piety does not seem proper. His effects do not seem dramatic enough: an era of fulfillment is underway without the consummation and triumph happening as well.

John's difficulties suggest our great temptation regarding Jesus is to consider his methods and approach as well as certain parts of his teaching to be inadequate, unwise or wrong-headed. With Peter we will find ourselves not simply asking questions but remonstrating with the Lord: "Not so!" John's puzzling becomes the Pharisees persecution. They too look at the unique mixture of word and deed in Jesus and at the "strange" half-fulfillment of his life. They think he is a danger to the people of Israel and to the arrangements with the Romans. He is an offense to many because of the very nature of what he says and does.

In the modern world we see the same sort of dynamic. The left-wing views Jesus' operational principles as counter-revolutionary (unless they reshape him by wresting the Scripture out of its context and culture). He works with individuals in small villages. He seeks the "little ones" and proclaims good news to the poor. He does not attack the oppressive structures. He allows taxes to be paid while demanding that people pay what they owe to God as diligently and decisively. His message is about an unearthly Kingdom of God that asks for love of enemy and turning the other cheek. By all means, this Messiah must either be rejected or reinterpreted. This-worldly liberation of socio-political and socio-economic struggle is the chief agenda. If Jesus is not leader of such movements, he is irrelevant.

The right-wing views Jesus' actual message and manner just as irrelevant. They cordon him off into the realm of the "spiritual." His relevance is to the private and the other-worldly. He has no relevance to socio-structural issues, which ought to be allowed to run "free" (free market, minimal government, localism). The poor are to pull themselves out of the muck of their own making. Jesus' good news for the poor is consistently denied as having relevance or reference to the economically poor or the socially marginal. This Messiah must either be rejected or trimmed down to a right-wing Republican/Libertarian.

The recent quest for the historical Jesus does the task most vigorously. There is the Jesus of Richard Horsley: a reconstructed social revolutionary egalitarian prophet who rejects Temple and Empire. There is the Jesus of John Crossan: the wandering Cynic-like sage who utters marvelous sayings and advocates social equality. There is the gay Magician of Morton Smith or even the vanishing Jesus of Bultmann (of whom we can say almost nothing historically).⁴⁷⁵ We also have more traditional portraits: the thoroughly eschatological Jesus whose expectation of an imminent other-worldly Kingdom was as mistaken as was John's).⁴⁷⁶

Matthew invites us to break our dream-world models, our socially-driven portraits, our ideologically passionate heroic images on the rock that is Jesus, the only true Messiah. We have no other in human history than this one. He was born, baptized, and tempted. He proclaimed the Kingdom of heaven and worked deeds of compassion and miracle on earth. His teachings broke

⁴⁷⁵ John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Barnes and Nobel, 1978); Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958)

⁴⁷⁶For a quick overview of recent attempts to understand Jesus: Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997)

the mold even in his day. We are invited to break the molds we bring with us and discover the Jesus of history rather than the Jesus of the historians. Our task is to listen, not to recreate; to open ourselves to the reality, not operate surgically on reality until it fits us and our agendas. Jesus is the promised Messiah and bringer of the Kingdom of God.

❖ Discipleship: Faith and Doubts

The questions that life presses upon our consciousness cannot be easily dismissed. Yet there is significant discomfort among the faithful when people are in the crisis of doubt, as John seemed to be in this case. Saints, not least John the Baptist, should be so well formed that doubt has no room in their consciousness. But it does. Life is often more complex and messier than we suppose from our understanding of the ways and workings of God. John had designated Jesus as “the one coming” but what “came” was not precisely what John expected.

Life throws a lot at us: we experience confusion, anger, grief, incomprehension, pain – and wonder where God is in it all. The universe seems not to be well managed – not even the part dealing with its redemption. Experiences similar to Job and Naomi raises the same issues in our emotions and thinking as it did in theirs.

The Psalms lead us into those very experiences as the psalmist cries out in lament and complaint. Ecclesiastes protests against taking the positive guarantees of the Proverbs as invariant laws of nature: the world with God in it is fully of mystery and our rules of thumb that work for the most part, don’t always pan out as we expect. Even Jesus on the cross doesn’t celebrate his return to the Father but quotes Psalm 22: “My God: why have you forsaken me?” At times in life we find in our hearts the cry of despair and lament:

Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.
(Ps. 88:16-18)

The great prophet, John the Baptist, finds himself boxed in a prison cell of Herod. Is it a surprise he wonders whether Jesus is the One he prophesied? Where is the deliverance, the redemption, the release of prisoners? Where is the judgment on evil?

Even the “greats” express real bouts of doubt: Calvin⁴⁷⁷ and C. S. Lewis among them. In *A Grief Observed*, after the intense suffering his wife and death from cancer, Lewis writes:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms.
When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so

⁴⁷⁷ “Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God’s mercy.” John Calvin (2011), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2, ed. vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press). (p. 562).

happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows.... Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”⁴⁷⁸

Mother Teresa lived with a torment of gloom within, with a faith that had a patchwork of doubt woven into it. Flanner O’Conner writes: “no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe,” but for her, these torments were “the process by which faith is deepened.”⁴⁷⁹

Faith seeking understanding cannot but walk the path of doubt at times to find its way. Doubt, when rooted in faith, can deepen, clarify, and motivate further exploration. In many cases, God does not offer us explanations, only promises. So long as we know the One who walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, we can finally say: “into your hands I commend my spirit.” When we find we cannot trace the hand of God in our lives and the circumstances that surround us, we can trust the heart of God (as Job and Naomi did). But we do not stop seeking explanations or lose faith that the God who is in charge of history, even our history, will one day make all things clear.

(b) Jesus’ witness about John the Baptist 11:7-19

This next section relates the person and mission of John to that of Jesus. If John had doubts about Jesus, Jesus had none about John. This section might be titled: “Blessed are those who take no offense in John.”

He too was sent from God. The fate he suffered under Herod Antipas provides a microcosm of what is happening to the Kingdom of God since its arrival to the present. Jesus’ description of the division and dissension accompanying the ministry of the twelve is intimately related to their doing the deeds and proclaiming the reality of the Kingdom of God.

No matter how much we might see Jesus as cutting across the preferred biases of present day left or right, we must admit that Jesus (and John) was perceived as a threat to the power structures of his day. The pertinence of Jesus’ assessment of John is rooted in the contrast he implicitly

⁴⁷⁸ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996) (pp. 5–6). Madelein L’Engle writes in the forward to Lewis’ book: “I am grateful, too, to Lewis for having the courage to yell, to doubt, to kick at God with angry violence. This is a part of healthy grief not often encouraged. It is helpful indeed that C. S. Lewis, who has been such a successful apologist for Christianity, should have the courage to admit doubt about what he has so superbly proclaimed. It gives us permission to admit our own doubts, our own angers and anguishes, and to know that they are part of the soul’s growth.” (p. xvi)

⁴⁷⁹ *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979) pp. 353-54.

draws between John and Herod Antipas.⁴⁸⁰ That contrast is made the plainer by the historical circumstances that resonate with his words.

The shaken reed and the soft robes were both emblematic of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. At the foundation of Tiberias as his capital, Antipas minted a coin with a reed (*Canna communis*) on the one side. After that he minted two other coins with the palm branch rather than the reed. The reed was a plant that grew in the meadows and on the borders of Lake Gennesaret (sea of Galilee). It was something that would bend without breaking as the winds rushed through them. Thus, the shaken reed was a pictorial way of speaking of someone wily enough to bend with the political winds and not be broken.

Antipas was just such a person in his history. He faced a dangerous and changing world. His clever adaptations meant that he survived. He shifted from here to there in judicious accommodations. His downfall came when he was persuaded by Herodias to ask to become a King by Roman designation. He “wavered” between two capitals (Sepphoris and Tiberias) and two women (his first and second wives). Long after his brother Archelaus’ fell and in the face of local opposition, Antipas managed to stay in power. He was a shaken reed yet held his palaces and soft robes for longer than one might predict.

Jesus compares John with this killer of the Baptizer. He asks the people if they went out into the wilderness to find someone like Antipas. Did they think they might find someone who bends with the winds of advantage? Or whose life is marked by seeking the best food and the finest garments? For that you would need to go in search of the Herods. They came out to see John—and what a sight! He was a prophet, actually more than just another in the line of prophets. This prophet, Jesus says, is unique. He did not and would not change his message to survive the rapacity and ruthlessness of the power elite. He did not model the life-style of the rich and the famous. He is a prophet and more. Four items indicate his “moreness”:

1. He is the predicted messenger who prepares the way for the coming Messiah.⁴⁸¹ This is the guise under which we first met him. This is how he is most clearly known in the gospels. He plays the role of preparation. He articulates the message Jesus and the early Church continue to proclaim and teach.

2. He is the greatest of those born of women. This assessment is to place John as higher in status than all those great heroes who have come before—greater than Abraham, than Moses, than David, than Isaiah or the Maccabees. Evaluating his status dignity locates him on a scale that includes more than prophets.

3. He is the turning point of salvation history. The meaning of his ministry is far more than simply that of another prophet, calling Israel to accountability or declaring God’s love for his covenanted people. Things change with him because he marks the shift from the Older to the New covenant. The Kingdom is now present in a way it wasn’t prior to his preaching and baptizing.

4. He is the predicted Elijah. The Jewish expectation saw the coming of Elijah as the sign of the ushering in of the messianic era. That prophecy is fulfilled in John. Not everyone

⁴⁸⁰ Morten H. Jensen (2010). *Herod Antipas in Galilee: The Literary and Archaeological Sources on the Reign of Herod Antipas and Its Socio-Economic Impact on Galilee*. 2nd. Rev. edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

⁴⁸¹ Combining Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1.

is able to accept this notion (even John the Baptist did not see himself as Elijah). Nonetheless, Jesus claims this is the proper way to think of him. By placing him in that role, we are able then to see the significance of Jesus.

Implicit in this description is the hidden question: then who is Jesus? If John is the turning point, the preparer of the way of the Lord, Elijah, then who is Jesus? Two conundrums face us in the midst of Jesus' teaching about John:

(1) How is it that John is the greatest born to women and yet the least in the Kingdom is greater than he? This is a paradoxical statement. In its context it seems to mean something like this: John's status is so high because of the privileged role he plays. He is the Elijah-to-come. He is not only a prophet, but the prophet prophesied about in the Old Testament. He is the one who is the voice preparing the way for the decisive coming of the Lord. He is the hinge on which the door of salvation swings wide open to all the nations. How much higher a role can one have than that? He is the servant of the Most High. No one else can say, 'I administered baptism to the Holy One of Israel.'

Yet the coming of the Kingdom brings its own marvels. Even the least significant participant in the Kingdom experiences more than John the Baptist. Like Moses seeing but not entering the promised land, John points to Jesus the Messiah and the Kingdom. Yet his own history ushers him off before the unfolding events transform Israel into the New Israel and the nation into the Church. It is not a matter of merit or gifts. Nor will John be excluded from the final messianic banquet. In this word Jesus encourages all of his disciples. Only one could perform the role of John. Any of us can become children of the Kingdom and experience the privileges John only foreshadowed. How great was his privilege as the forerunner! How much greater is the privilege of entering into what he foretold!

(2) What is this business about violence: by whom, to whom and for what? It appears that the saying refers to the Kingdom of heaven being assaulted by people who are violent.⁴⁸² Sensing its presence, they go after its agents. The vivid words in the Sermon on mission are caught up in a single graphic picture. Persecution and hostility by the powerful, even by the violence of one's family, expresses resistance to the Kingdom of heaven. If they can, they will rid the earth of the "scourge" of this petty Galilean peasant and his followers.

The unbelief and rejection that were on the margins of the story to this point now come to be front and center. The mystery of Jesus' "failure" in his mission to Israel leaps out from the shadows. Later the Apostles and other disciples will have to grapple with the problem of the "failure" of their mission to Israel (Romans 11:11-12, 25).⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: "...it seems most likely that the verb βιάζεται in 11:12a should be understood as passive voice, 'is being violently attacked,' and that the parallelism between the two clauses is synonymous rather than antithetical." (p. 562). But the Greek is not clear as to its voice. As middle, it would mean "presses forward violently" forcing itself into the lives of people. The "violent ones" on this account are those with strong determination "forcing their way in" (cf. Luke 16:16). But the immediate context and the seemingly negative meanings of the terms seems to point to violence inflicted on the Kingdom (the most pertinent "violent one" in the immediate context is Herod). John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 159.

⁴⁸³ To be sure this is only a relative "failure" in that the twelve Apostles were all Israelites and there was a large number of Jewish believers, even from among some of the leadership ranks. Yet the majority of first-century Jews did not follow Jesus but chose different responses.

This violence is first found in the history of Jesus. His birth was accompanied not only by the worship of Magi and shepherd but by the murders of Herod the Great. It was repeated in the murder of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas. It will be echoed in the death of Jesus on the cross. Acts will chronicle some of the harassment and martyrdom of the Apostles. The “sword” Jesus brings in bringing the Kingdom will be swung by many disturbed “mighty” ones against those who enter and proclaim the Kingdom.

The opposition Jesus promised his twelve Apostles is gathered up in this saying. It is not simply hostility toward them. This is part of the dramatic struggle that begins with John’s preaching and continues in the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom is so great and wondrous that it exalts its least significant participant into privileges greater than those known by John. Yet it is so vulnerable that it is assaulted by violence on the left and on the right.

It is this mystery that sets up the parables of Matthew 13. How is it that the promised Kingdom is present, yet can still be rejected? Is this not a Kingdom very different in quality than Israel prayed for or was promised? How can the Kingdom of God be subject to the violence of petty humans? Somehow the whole picture seems out of kilter. Jesus is the messianic servant of Yahweh, the son of David and Abraham. Yet he will be violently abused and killed. John is the messianic forerunner of the Messiah, the promised Elijah, yet he too is arrested and killed. Some Kingdom!

No wonder the average person of the day was fickle. They looked at John’s austerity and asceticism, his screed against sin and demand for radical repentance and said, “No thanks.” They listened to Jesus’ good news and watched him live in full solidarity with ordinary villagers, accepting hospitality and attending celebrations. He taught across the full range of human affairs and daily living. His miracles released many from debilitating difficulties. They listened and said, “No thanks.” They had two chances: John and Jesus. What is wise is known in the outcomes of the choices and actions taken. Wisdom does what is right and will eventually be vindicated in the deeds that are done. Jesus (and John) both embody wisdom.

(c) Woes on the cities of Galilee: the condemned (11:20-24)

Jesus issues a cry of compassionate regret and warning. There are great sufferings for cities (and people) who have seen his deeds, heard his words and remained unchanged. Wisdom can be recognized by the sort of actions undertaken. Here are cities who, along with the fickle of Jesus’ day, are acting unwisely. His miracles were signs of something tremendous in their midst. They flocked to him, bringing their sick and possessed. The pressures were so enormous that he went into the wilderness to escape them—or across the sea. Jesus was not an unknown “little one” in these cities. Yet the response did not denote wisdom on their part.

The “twin” towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida are compared with the yoked gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. These heathen towns were condemned for their wickedness in Isaiah 23, Amos 1:9-10 and Ezekiel 26-28. For centuries the “foreign” policy of Tyre was expansion southward, gobbling up land and villages to incorporate into its region. Tyre was a wealthy, Hellenized Phoenician city that could buy up the short grain in days of famine and solve their crises while deepening that of the Jews about them. The hostility between the Jews and Tyre is represented in writings of the day.

The scandalous comparison was sure to astonish those who heard it. This follows hard on the disturbing comments about John and the Kingdom of heaven suffering violence. It would not sound at all like “wisdom” to pronounce a woe upon two Jewish centers, concluding that

wickedly oppressive and hostile gentile cities would be treated with less severity in the judgment. Chorazin and Bethsaida are invited by this powerful warning to reframe their own sense of relationship with God by thinking of themselves as worse off than their traditional enemies to the north.

Capernaum was scorched with an even more dramatic comparison. God found Sodom so repulsive that he wiped it off the face of the earth. It is true not all perished with it (Lot and his daughters were saved). Capernaum is the place Jesus made the base of his operations. We know several of the Apostles were from this city. It seems to have many reasons for civic pride (beyond its own Jewish conservatism). Apparently, it harbored the inner sense that it would be exalted to the heavens. Perhaps some pointed to Jesus and his miracles as proof that God was favoring them with the appearance of this powerful preacher and miracle-worker.

Jesus reverses their conclusion. Rather than being exalted to the heavenlies, they will be thrown down to the depths (as was the proud King of Babylon). If they want a proper interpretive clue as to their status, they may begin with thinking of themselves as actually worse off than Sodom in the eyes of God. Their religious and spiritual illusions placed them in grave danger as history rushes forward to the judgment of God.

They could not claim the proximity to Jesus, his residence there, his miracles or his preaching as providing them with any basis for satisfaction. At this point they are not among the violent ones who assault the Kingdom of heaven. They are a lowly town on the side of a small lake (just as Sodom and Gomorrah lay by a larger lake). There is nothing particularly distinctive about them. They have not plunged into Hellenism or given up their Jewish identity. They are not part and parcel of a giant economic sponge, soaking up the resources for the enrichment of the elite as the Temple-State in Jerusalem had become. They were not Roman overlords, humiliating, taxing and exploiting their defeated enemies.

They also were not among those prostrate before God in sackcloth and ashes. Willingly they took in the mighty deeds of Jesus. Willingly they ignored his message of the Kingdom and repentance. Life went on as usual. In that ordinariness and unresponsiveness Jesus sees the danger of hell itself. The central principle of this lament is the greater the knowledge, the greater the accountability. The warning is deadly serious since the end result is serious.

We wish for more clarity in this tantalizing passage. The warning issued is clear. What is not clear is how Jesus counts on the hypothetical responses of gentile cities to deeds never seen and words never heard. Is this a slender clue as to God's mysterious dealing with the unreached?⁴⁸⁴ Entering the Kingdom is an act that requires knowledge and effort, response and repentance. But what of those who do not see or hear Jesus—or his sent representatives? This seems to say God will judge fairly, even where ignorance is present. We who see and hear Jesus are first and foremost to be concerned with our own real responses and accountability to that knowledge.

One thread present in this passage that modern individualism tends not to notice is the social fabric that is woven tightly in city life. The elite influentials who dominate most civic decision making often set the tone for a city's ethos or cultural themes. Jesus' warnings encompass cities,

⁴⁸⁴ "This global teaching is *encouraging* for those concerned about the unreached; it is *sobering* for the reached. Will Jesus judge the world on the last day not only on the basis of what they *have* believed or done but on the basis of what they *would have* believed or done if they had been given a chance? Is it on such a basis that Jesus can later say, 'many who are first shall be last, and many who are last shall be first' (19:30; 20:16)?" Bruner, *Christbook* (p. 525).

not just individuals. Cities have their own distinctive networks and normative practices that produce a unique civic profile, their own life, spirit and mind. Throughout Scripture the two great symbols of cities are Babylon and the New Jerusalem. Whether a city is closer to the one than the other sets the trajectory of its fate.

(d) The Father revealed in the Son: the accepted (11:25-30)⁴⁸⁵

During the ministry of the twelve (and in Luke of the seventy), in the midst of realizing how inadequate and blockheaded is the response to the preaching and miracles, in the midst of the positive and negative, Jesus is thankful. John the Baptist and his disciples represented the vanguard of readiness for God's coming. Nonetheless, even they were puzzled. Even those with the most advanced knowledge of what God was doing were stumbling about.

Then there were the villages of Galilee where the most intense spiritual fireworks had occurred. The mighty deeds of the arriving power of the age to come were displayed in them. The response was so wrong-spirited that terrible judgment loomed. The careless assumptions about religious privilege and spiritual insight were such that these "wise and learned" were unable to assimilate the meaning of Jesus as Messiah.

What Matthew suggests from the beginning is the strange pattern by which God's work happens. From the disreputable in the genealogy to the disinherited of the beatitudes and the devalued of the miracles, the deeds of God reached out to touch the little ones. Gentiles were ancestors of the Messiah. Miracles happened to nobodies and social cast-offs. The disciples who surrounded Jesus were a motley group as were the twelve. They were not the best students of the Torah, the most intelligent and best educated of Palestine, the scriptural experts or the pillars of righteousness of the community. Nevertheless, they heard and saw and followed. They were ready and hungry to learn. They saw something in Jesus others missed.

Jesus' response⁴⁸⁶ might have been one of discouragement, given John the Baptizer's questions and given the larger confusion of the crowds. Confronted with resistance and unbelief, he might have concluded God wasn't with him. The "business-as-usual" after the wonderment of Jesus' miracles by Jewish towns was astonishing in itself. In this moment this one who is pure in heart sees his Father at work in the very details of his own experience: it is part of God's plan, not some road block unexpectedly erected. God is at work! Unbelief will not triumph. It is not by accident that the pattern matches one already in the Old Testament. God's pattern is hiding from those whose pride marks them as unteachable and displaying himself to the meek and humble, those who know they are like children in the things of God.

"The plan, then, is this: Those who feel their sin, are sorry for it, and come asking for help—these find in Jesus' Father open arms. Those who feel their spiritual brilliance, and are sorry for those who fall so far beneath them, who bask in self-importance and feel God is lucky to have them—these find in

⁴⁸⁵ Harrington, *Matthew*: "It is possible also to find something of a chiasmic structure in Matt 11:25–30 as a whole: A—recipients of revelation (11:25–26), B—revelation itself (11:27), and A¹—recipients of revelation (11:28–30)." (p. 169).

⁴⁸⁶ Literally, "at that time [Jesus] answered." Ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ ἀποκριθεὶς. Jesus is giving a response to the lack of appropriate reception and repentance just noted. The participle (answered) seems to be pleonastic, a rhetorical formula without "answering" anything. See Wallace, *Grammar* (p. 649-50).

Jesus' Father a back."⁴⁸⁷

Jesus gave us a beatitude along with John and the villages of his day: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me" (11:6). We need it when we begin to look at the sayings that come at the end of this chapter. We are not heirs of the miracle-deeds seen by these Galileans. We read about some of them. Yet they are stories to us, not living flesh and blood. They have been done "among us" insofar as we are privileged to hear testimony to them across the centuries. What disturbs us moderns more than these miracles (because we have sophisticated ways of insulating ourselves from them) are the claims Jesus makes in this paragraph.

This is the Gospel of John's Jesus in nutshell. This Christology has not snuck into Matthew by mistake. Though it is short, it shows continuity between the Synoptics and John.⁴⁸⁸ The vision of Jesus has a very different focus in John, but it is not another, different Jesus. The heights of John's Christology are already present in Matthew. Jesus is uniquely related to the Father. It is the Father's work being done in heaven and on earth. The stumbling over Jesus we see in John the Baptizer, in the crowds and cities of ministry is part of that work. The knowledge of God is both veiled and unveiled, hidden and revealed. God's choice in this pattern is simple: to the little ones in their meekness, humility and poverty of spirit, God gives knowledge. From those who see themselves as "wise and intelligent," it is hidden.

The knowledge of God belongs uniquely to Jesus, just as the knowledge of the Son belongs uniquely to the Father. Proper knowledge of either is thus tied to the person of Jesus as Messiah.⁴⁸⁹ This is an astonishing claim of exclusivity and revelation. Proper knowledge (and thus faith) is rooted in the activity of God and the attitude of the respondent. Those who must fit the knowledge of God into their wisdom and models will misfit the knowledge of God. Those who know they are "infants" in what they understand and are open to God's models of the Messiah as well as Jesus' teaching about God will receive the knowledge of God. This is not something "generally" available. It is offered only to those who take up the yoke of Christ-following and thus do not take offense at who Jesus is or what he teaches.

Adolf Schlatter writes: "No one is so great that God needs him; none so little that God cannot reach him."⁴⁹⁰ This is a truth we find throughout the Bible. Jesus gives us variations on that theme in the surrounding context. The crowds are harried and mangled like sheep without a shepherd. Yet there are false shepherds, the wise and intelligent and the leadership of cities who remain unresponsive to the miracles of Jesus and the twelve. Their problem is not simply that they are shepherdless, but that the shepherds they have do not know God because they do not

⁴⁸⁷ Bruner, *Christbook* (pp. 529–530.).

⁴⁸⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: "It may be, therefore, that this Synoptic passage shows that here, at least, the Johannine material relies on historical tradition paralleling the Synoptic tradition and that this may in turn enhance to a degree the historical character of the Johannine passages. Be that as it may, the present passage constitutes without question one of the highest points of Synoptic Christology. Yet it is not out of keeping with the christological emphasis of the Synoptic tradition generally or of Matthew particularly." (pp. 317-18). We may even say, this is one of the seeds from which John's theology grew.

⁴⁸⁹ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: "It calls the reader to understand that one cannot comprehend God apart from Jesus. Matthew is concerned that Jesus is 'Immanuel,' that is, God with us. When one does not direct to Jesus the question about God, one misses both him and the experience of God that the text intends for people." (p. 170).

⁴⁹⁰ Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (1929, p. 371) Quoted in Bruner, *Christbook*. (p. 529).

put themselves in the position where God chooses to reveal himself.

There are people who will never be great prophets (like John), whose service to the Kingdom is summed up in the minimal hospitality of giving a cup of cold water to one of the little ones of the Christ-followers. They do virtually nothing for the Kingdom, not even facilitate the ministry of the powerhouses. All they can do is encourage and refresh “a disciple.” Even to these, reward is promised.

This generation is likened unto a pack of children who are unhappy so long as they are not in charge. They did not like John because he did not follow their flute music of celebration. They did not like Jesus because he did not follow them when they cried in mourning. The one was too serious with his notes of repentance and doom. The other was too unspiritual in his non-fasting and celebrating the good foods with the unreligious. These will not put themselves in the place of acknowledging those who are gifted to prophesy for Jesus’ sake. Nor will they acknowledge the righteousness of Jesus and his followers, much less extend even minimal hospitality on the basis that someone is a disciple of him. If Jesus and his followers will not join their party, they will have nothing to do with them.

We are invited to join Jesus on the basis that he uniquely shows us who God is, leading us into the knowledge of the Father in heaven. We cannot come and take our place as “great ones.” We cannot bring our education and twentieth century “knowledge” banks. We cannot insist that we will come so long as we are placed as high as John the Baptist or made a prophet of God or even a righteous person. We cannot come other than as a “disciple,” one who is ready and eager to learn. We must repent of our prior accomplishments and knowledge. What we know of God is pitiful and easily turns us into the very “wise and intelligent” from whom God hides.

It is baffling that God should hide the things of the Kingdom of God and the good news of Jesus from such. The paradoxes in this chapter multiply as we begin to think about them. Jesus is the one preeminently to whom the things of God are revealed. Would we say of him that he was an “infant” or “wise and intelligent”? Is he poor in spirit or one of the little ones? How do we take his words that he is gentle and humble in heart on the heels of claiming unique knowledge of God? Or claiming the knowledge of the judgment that faces these three cities of Galilee because they did not respond to his message? What about his claim that John the Baptist is the turning point of history and now the Kingdom of God is present in way that sums up all the prophets’ messages? There are clear implications that Jesus is the channel and broker of the knowledge of God.

Jesus also claims not only to know God the Father in heaven, but to possess such completeness of relationship that “all things have been handed over to me by my Father.”⁴⁹¹ At

⁴⁹¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “To begin with, ‘the Son’ (ὁ υἱός) is used absolutely (i.e., without qualification), as it is in only one other place in the Synoptics (24:36 [= Mark 13:32]) and frequently in the Fourth Gospel. This can hardly have originally meant ‘a son’ in relation to ‘a father’ (as Jeremias contends, *New Testament Theology*, 57–58), nor is it a piece of Son of Man Christology (contra Légasse, ‘Le logion’). ‘The Son’ is to be equated with Matthew’s Son of God Christology (cf. esp. 3:17; 14:33; 16:16; 17:5; 27:54). It is the ‘Son of God’ who is uniquely related to his Father. ... A similar statement is made in 28:18 in connection with the giving of the great commission (πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς, ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’; cf. Dan 7:14; John 3:35). Here, however, what has been granted to Jesus is further defined in the final clause of the passage, i.e., knowledge of and hence the ability to reveal the Father.

one level we would all say anyone claiming such absolute knowledge and relationship is as mad as a person claiming to be a poached egg. Humility is not what we would say is true of this one (or gentleness, given his roasting hot judgments about Chorazin, Bethsaida or Capernaum).

At another level, if we grant the claim, we must say there is something astonishing in all this. The one who holds “all things” in his hands is present as an obscure Palestinian religious actor. He reasons with John the Baptist and his followers. He teaches and persuades by living an itinerant life on the edge of economic insecurity. He depends upon the hospitality in a context of division and dissension. When people challenge and repudiate him, he does not strike them with lightning. His words and will are rejected as from the very devil himself. He fills out his leadership with rough Galileans. There is a gentle lowliness in all this.

The knowledge that Jesus brings of God is heart to heart. Moses knew God face to face (and most of us only know God by human words). The claim in the Greek is that Jesus really knows God.⁴⁹² There is a level, accuracy and authenticity in him that we cannot find elsewhere. There is a spirituality outside of Jesus Christ. He was surrounded by it. The wise and intelligent, even in the knowledge of God in Hebrew scriptures “knew God.” We may look at the Buddhists, Confucianists, Muslims and Hindus of our world in all their rainbow of understandings and find a general knowledge of God. There are continuities and overlaps with the knowledge of God brought in Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, we are followers of one who claimed unique, definitive knowledge of God. This means that there is a great deal of obscurity and misunderstanding in human religious movements (including Christian). The claim for unique knowledge adheres to the person of Christ, not the partners of Christ. Only so far as and only when we remain gentle and meek are we heirs of that revelation. We too can obscure the knowledge of God with our wisdom and intelligence (reading the commentaries on Matthew will demonstrate that). We can obscure it also with our folly and ignorance. Jesus is not exalting religious experience or spirituality over against knowledge. Knowledge of God and of the Son is what brings the salvation we seek. That means we deal with more than knowledge about, but not with less than that.

We can obscure the knowledge of God by pride and pretention. It is obscured when we tone down the claims of particularity and exclusivity. However, much beauty and brilliance are found elsewhere as reflections of the work of Christ beyond Christianity, we cannot be faithless and divorce Christ from his deeds. It won't do to accept the works of Christ apart from his words any more than we can accept his words apart from his works. If we take offense at the Jesus who is presented to us, we take ourselves away from the knowledge of God and toward the judgment that will humble our exalted self-importance.

The object of ἀποκαλύπτει must be ‘the Father,’ and by implication this is analogous to a knowledge of ‘these things’ (v 25). The point is that Jesus thus has a unique role as the mediator of the knowledge of God to humankind.” (pp. 319-20).

⁴⁹² Luther, *Works Vol. 26*: “Therefore begin where Christ began—in the Virgin’s womb, in the manger, and at His mother’s breasts. For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Himself and thus to prevent us from clambering into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty.” (p. 29). In this context ἐπιγινώσκω has the connotation of “really” or “truly” (giving force to ἐπι). Gibbs notes: “In this context, however, which highlights divine revelation versus human blindness, a rendering such as ‘truly know’ seems appropriate.” *Matthew Vol. II* (p. 583).

Jesus is the revealer of God the Father. Having said this, we must also say with Augustine that “There are many sheep outside the flock, and many wolves within.”⁴⁹³ That reality should sober our triumphalism and chasten our arrogance. We are not revealers of God (though we can be the repealers). We are not the guardians of that revelation (it has been handed over to the Son). The choice comes from the divine side. We cannot guarantee the revelation for ourselves.

The only invitation we have is to marvel at and believe in Jesus as the source and center of the revelation of God. We do so by accepting Jesus’ invitation to take up the yoke of his teachings, to learn of him and receive his comforting rest. We are not going to “get it right” as a simple by-product of hard labor. He gives this knowledge to whomsoever he chooses. We have no other God than the God who is known in Jesus Christ. We come to him and learn of him because that is how he chooses to reveal himself. The secrets of God remain secret to us. What we do have is God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. To that we come. Of that we learn. That we proclaim.

The problem for us is how to honor the true and living God who, at great sacrifice and love, revealed himself in Jesus Christ without dishonoring other religious figures or human lights. There will always be an offense to this claim about Christ. But we cannot back away from it without backing away from the God of Jesus Christ. How we articulate this part of the good news so it is not bad news for some is the dilemma.

Sometimes the arrogance is in the pronouns (my God, our Jesus). Sometimes it is in the locus of the claims (Christianity teaches us). Sometimes it is simply where it needs to be. God can be known and is known in Jesus Christ. Those unwilling to test this claim and submit their models of God and spirituality to him will never know the living God. We come to Jesus because that is the way Jesus tells us is the path to the knowledge of God. All our so-called knowledge is tested by this one thing: does it correspond to what we learn of God from Jesus Christ. There is no other criterion, no other center to the knowledge of God. If we “re-center” our notions of God by “decentering” Jesus Christ, we “off-center” our perceptions and marginalize who God authentically is. Then we can no longer see God at all.

The reality and necessity of revelation is expressed in this saying. Knowing God (or Jesus) is not quite like the knowledge of anything else. Anything to be known subjects us to given conditions apart from which there is no knowledge of it. We have to have receptors in order to perceive any given wave length of light. Without the proper equipment oriented to the object and our attention to it, we simply cannot take in a reality that is there apart from our own consciousness or desires. That is as true of the marigold as it is of the molecule.

Revelation does not come to all. It is not a predicate of human spirituality or of the natural world. It is a predicate of God. Revelation comes only to those who prepare themselves for it, i.e., the pure in heart, the poor in spirit. God resists the proud and the “wise” and stoops to the humble and broken hearted. Knowledge of God is moral, not simply informational. Unless we hunger and thirst for the source of all righteousness, unless we believe God is and seek him with our hearts, unless we are spiritual, we cannot receive spiritual things.

In the New Testament, revelation is tied to the work of God’s Spirit, not the human spirit. Only those to whom Jesus chooses to reveal himself receive this knowledge. It is spiritually discerned. It is given to those who love God. It is offered to all who are heavy-laden, but only “infants” perceive and respond, not the wise and intelligent.

⁴⁹³ Augustine of Hippo. (1993). *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28–54*. Tractate 45.12.2 (T. P. Halton, Ed., J. W. Rettig, Trans.) Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press. (p. 198).

Given the distortions of anti-intellectualism in North America this message of Jesus can be misunderstood. This does not extol stupidity and folly or foster ignorance and obscurantism. The critique aims at the proud and the arrogant. Those unwilling to submit their intellectual models to the knowledge of God and those unable to bend their behavior to the demands of the knowledge of God exclude themselves from it. No one can say what the IQ of Jesus was. He was not lacking in knowledge, wisdom or intelligence. Yet he acknowledged his knowledge as coming from the work of God's revealing Spirit. He shaped his consciousness and world view in alignment with the knowledge of God.

Frequently, the problem we face in the modern world is the opposite. We have brilliant minds, enormous amounts of information, extraordinarily sophisticated models and we demand that God fit into them. We cannot imagine a rationality that might cut clean across our science, philosophies and theologies. We think, if there is such a thing as knowledge of God (as opposed to religious values or opinions), we can recognize it only if it comports well with our own highest intellectual products. So, we create theologies in the image of our major rationality centers just as we create "gods" in our own image. Theology becomes anthropology. Revelation becomes revealing discoveries about the "depths" of the human and the world. We domesticate revelation into a humanly controlled and historically relative achievement.

The grave fear that drives contemporary intellectuals comes from several corners. There is the distant memory of religious wars, where claimants to the "absolute" truth about God fought each other tooth and nail. No longer gentle and humble (as Jesus is), they yoked themselves to armies and cannon and ripped the texture of civilization apart. The fear is that a return to revelation in this sense will mean religiously-influenced ethnic and national struggles.

The obscurantists and fideists (in the classical sense) denigrate reason altogether. They misuse this text and others like it to denigrate loving God with the mind. This results in the spectacle of dogmatic ignorance based on misinformation and a few Bible texts trumpeting its emaciated theology as the final truth. Their instincts may have a proper orientation (recognition of the religious nature of the secularity and atheism of the world view of reductionistic naturalism). Their response, however, is completely inadequate and misguided.

Revelation does not get us out of reasoning thoroughly and laboriously. It gets us into it in a different way. Jesus is not helping us avoid a lot of tiresome and exhausting intellectual work. He is telling us the conditions for the possibility of the knowledge of God. Such knowledge is not a substitute for other sorts of knowledge. But we must be sure of this: one intellectual approach will not suffice to secure all the sorts of knowledge we need. Only God can tell us about God. Unless God shows himself to us, we shall not see the Lord. Jesus tells us God is glad to do that for the lowly and humble through Jesus the Son.

Is this a reason why the least in the Kingdom is greater than John the Baptist? Jesus already suggested his own and John's ministry are a transition in salvation history. The coming of the Kingdom in an unexpected fashion meant it was subjected to violence rather than subduing violence. The Kingdom is present. Most were oblivious to that reality. They kept playing their games and acting petulant when Jesus and John would not join in them.

Jesus claims that a new level of the knowledge of God has come into human experience with him. This does not change the fact that knowing God occurred in other ways before his appearance in history (or after). What comes with Jesus is a qualitatively different level and clarity of knowledge. The prophets of old as well as John the Baptist were given the words of the Lord. They proclaimed the ways and wisdom of God. But their stewardship of the oracle of God was

partial.

With Jesus Christ “all things have been handed over.” There is a definitiveness, a finality, a consummation, a fullness in him that we do not find elsewhere. No one stands as high or sees as clearly, either before him or after him. This does not bring us to a Christo-monism in our attitude about the Scripture (as though only Jesus got it right and we must correct the Old Testament and the Apostles by the authentic words of Jesus). What was handed to Jesus was then given to his Apostles and his Church. The all in “all things” is an absolute for the relative. But all that we need for faith and practice in living the greater righteousness is available to us in Jesus Christ.

So, he invites us all to accept the yoke of his instructions. He asks us to learn “from me.” The first who did that were the apostles and early disciples. We have their witness in the New Testament. We cannot suppose they learned all there was to know. What Jesus invited them to learn was that he was gentle and humble in heart.⁴⁹⁴ But it is arrogant on our part to suppose they did not learn from him well enough and botched the job of passing on his words and ethos. In learning from Jesus, we do so by learning from the witness to him in the Gospels, in the Epistles and Revelation – even in the Old Testament. Jesus opened the minds of the disciples on the Emmaus road to understand all the things there that testified to him.

We do what the Jew of Jesus’ day did. We apply ourselves to the tasks of the study of the written Word of God. In another sense we do what no Jew did in Jesus’ day: we live with those texts in the knowledge that Jesus is their fulfillment. We come to God through Jesus Christ and so we also come to Scripture. We can come in no other way for the fundamental reason that this is what Jesus claims from us as his followers: “Come unto me.” Not come to a religious system or spiritual exercises in general. But come to the One to whom Scripture points and reveals. He will put us into his school and lead us into the practices we need to become gentle and humble.

This chapter raises questions about the proper response to Jesus Christ. John the Baptist was puzzled. The general public and their leaders were fickle, responding inadequately to both John and Jesus. Even the cities where Jesus had done wondrous works continued life as though nothing earth-shaking was underway. How is it that such words and deeds could have been done and such a confused response be given? Matthew gives us several answers.

The theological answer is given here: revelation is a prerogative of God. Jesus is entrusted with the knowledge of God. Only he mediates authentic knowledge in this matter. The lack of perception and unresponsiveness of people and cities is because they do not meet the conditions for the possibility of the knowledge of God. They do not come to Jesus and learn from him. In their “wisdom and intelligence” they refuse the very knowledge Jesus teaches and proclaims. Their prized theological and spiritual achievements are the precise things that keep them from a true knowledge of God. They consider themselves “exalted to heaven” when their fate is destined to be castaways into the darkness of death. They are not humble.

In Matthew 13 another part of the theological answer will be given. The Kingdom is present in weakness and lowliness. If one cannot accept it in that form, then the Kingdom can be rejected and lost. Its “strange” appearance does not mean it is not present or real. It means it can be entered only by those also willing to share its qualities of lowliness and gentleness.

⁴⁹⁴ The ὅτι ‘for’ clause can have the meaning either of “*because* I am gentle and humble” (reason) or “*that* I am gentle and humble” (content). Most translations see it as “because.”

(2) Sabbath Controversies (12:1-21)

In three events, Jesus touches the nerve center of Pharisaic sensibilities: the Sabbath day, the Temple, and the Law. As fundamental and symbolic each of these might be, a “greater than these” is here. The dawning of the Kingdom of God in the person and the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, taken as their destruction, is in fact their fulfillment. In addressing the Pharisees, who prided themselves on the precision and comprehensiveness of their Scriptural knowledge, Jesus shows that they know much less than they think. He appeals to the law, the prophets and the writings in showing from each major section, reasons why they are wrong.

The problem was not their rigor and zeal for the law, but the wrong idea of the nature and meaning of the law. As Keener notes: “Jesus challenges not merely their interpretation of the Sabbath but their entire method of legal interpretation.”⁴⁹⁵ Jesus agrees that the “yoke” of the law is worth bearing (Matt. 5:17-20) but his implementation of that “yoke” brings real rest.

(a) The intent of the Sabbath law (12:1-8)

Controversy stories dominate Matthew 12. The opposition to those who serve the Master and exhibit Kingdom powers is illustrated by the experience of Jesus. In this first instance, some of the Pharisees object to the practice of Jesus’ disciples: they are harvesting wheat on the Sabbath in order to eat (Deut. 5:14; Exodus 20:10, 34:21).⁴⁹⁶ Such an attack would be experienced as a negative honor challenge of their leader. Jesus is the one who responds to this complaint. He would be the one who should have taught them better or restrained them when they made this “mistake” in behavior.

The authority of the law is not at stake. The issue is not the validity of the Sabbath law but rather what constitutes a genuine exception, transcending the provisions of the law, though it is true that much of the elaboration of the Sabbath law was due to lack of definition in the law itself.⁴⁹⁷ The question is what degrees of freedom are allowed within the law itself. The lines of argument are not entirely clear, though they seem to run along several tracks.

(1) The first example is of David’s crew eating the shewbread of the tabernacle (1 Sam. 21:1-6). That they are not held guilty is scriptural proof that the weightier matters of the law can override the lighter. The inference from the story of David comes from the violation being noted without censure. The explicit law said only the priests could eat the shewbread (Lev. 24:5-9). Contemporary interpretation (by inference) must not have condemned David for this action (or Jesus’ point would have been immediately challenged). This argument is not fully to the issue other than to demonstrate by narrative a point the Pharisees would concede: that the law is not an exceptionless absolute. One can violate the law by the way one “protects” it.

They might have responded to this by saying that David’s case was a matter of urgent hunger. It was crucial to preserving Israel’s future anointed King. Jesus’ disciples are not on the edge of starvation (so far as we know from the story). They are not in flight from imminent

⁴⁹⁵ *Matthew*, (p. 355).

⁴⁹⁶ Unlike modern property notions, the plucking and eating of grain of another was allowed, so long as it was done by hand, not using a sickle (Deut. 23:25). This is not a minor case of stealing.

⁴⁹⁷ Morris, *Matthew*: “Even the Mishnah laments that ‘the rules about the Sabbath ... are as mountains hanging by a hair, for [teaching of] Scripture [thereon] is scanty and the rules many’ (*Hag. 1:8*).” (p. 299).

danger. Jesus' teaching, however, is that the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than the greatest of the period ending with John the Baptist. These twelve are the foundations of the renewed people of God. There is a sense in which not only Jesus but these twelve are also greater than David. Yet this is not a point pursued this early in Matthew.

(2) In the logic of the day the laws dealing with priestly service in the Temple and Sabbath observance would be a more powerful and pertinent argument. The Torah mandated an exception to the Sabbath law. The priest whose work was even increased on the Sabbath in the Temple was not guilty of violating the Sabbath law by the Temple work. The greater (the service of Yahweh in the Temple) overrides the lesser (the Sabbath rest provision). This offers a hermeneutical principle that helps us keep the letter of the law within the boundaries of the spirit of the law, the weightier matter superior to the lighter.⁴⁹⁸

Jesus applies this one directly: "Something greater than even the temple is here." By implication the Sabbath law must bow to whatever is that greater matter. The problem with the Pharisaic objection is not its intention. It seeks to take the law and word of God seriously. The problem is that it does not see what is right before them because their "wisdom and intelligence" hides it from them. God reveals the meaning and significance of Jesus and his ministry to those who are "babes." These religious leaders will not take the yoke of Jesus upon them and learn from him. If they acknowledged who Jesus is (and thus the honor due him and his disciples), they would withdraw such objection. Only then could they fathom the meaning of his last statement: "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

It is also clearer why Jesus starts with the example of David appropriating the bread of the Temple. He did not think himself greater than the Temple yet acted with freedom to consume the dedicated bread. Yet now a greater than the Temple is here.

(3) Jesus also appeals to the prophets in his rejoinder (Hosea 6:6).⁴⁹⁹ The Pharisees' problem is not simply that they do not recognize what is happening in their very midst. It goes back even to their understanding and use of Hebrew Scripture. The prophets understood what the force and significance of the law was. Through them God said, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." The focus of law-observance should lead to merciful people and institutional customs.

The Pharisees were more preoccupied with sacrifice, with rituals and self-disciplines, with ceremonial purity than with justice and mercy. The weightier things of the law were dwarfed by the lighter things. Jesus only implies such a point here. Later he will make it very explicit that this disagreement has to do with law-interpretation and application, not with the authority of that law. The disciples are guiltless in their behavior, as are numbers of other people the Pharisees condemn.

(b) Keeping Sabbath by healing on the Sabbath (12:9-14)

This second dispute over Sabbath observance continues the same issue of boundaries and exceptions to the law. In this case the matter is a more public and direct confrontation. It is in

⁴⁹⁸ In this way he is not violating his own comments in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:18-19). He is not setting aside even the "least" of the commandments or teaching others to do so.

⁴⁹⁹ Carter, *Matthew*: "Doing practical mercy, acquiring basic resources for life, meeting human need is the divine will for the sabbath. Mercy is not pity but doing God's justice, which challenges the restrictive practices and structures of the status quo and seeks to establish a life-giving community of shared resources and sustaining relationships. If piety hinders the doing of God's merciful justice and loving kindness, the piety is set aside (see 9:15)." (p. 266).

the synagogue on the Sabbath. This is not about eating food on the Sabbath, for which harvesting and threshing grain with the bare hands is involved. The scriptures (as Jesus argued) left maneuvering room on that item. This controversy is over healing. There are no examples from the Old Testament for this matter. Healing the man with the withered hand does not have clear stories or legal texts to settle this debate. It boils down to the issue of principles and their legitimate application.

From the beginning this event is a set-up. It is an honor challenge. The Pharisees pose the question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus' response is built upon the last argument he made over his disciples' Sabbath snack. Mercy is the central goal and spirit of the law. Indeed, when we read the Sabbath commands, they seem aimed as much at the health of laboring people and animals (Deut. 5:12-15) as freeing up time for attending to God. The Pharisees see this as an opening to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people:

If He has mercy upon this helpless man, He is breaking the Sabbath in the sight of the people. If He does not have mercy, He is contradicting Himself by not showing mercy on account of the Sabbath. This is the place where we shall surely get Him, and He will be unable to escape, because He will not evade this horned syllogism⁵⁰⁰

This conflict with the Pharisees is hardly "artificial" (as E.P. Sanders labels it).⁵⁰¹ In the gospels the theme of this argument is so pervasive that it hardly could simply be a matter of the Church needing a Jesus who could help them out in the "parting of the ways" between Jews and Christians later in the first century. We must keep our eyes closely on what needs to be explained (the death of Jesus and the appearance of a movement of Jewish and Gentile believers). How did Jesus come to be crucified? If there was so much agreement between the Pharisees and Jesus, why were they not more active as defenders of him against their rivals the Sadducees? By what criteria, we may ask, do we judge these texts "artificial"? Is there evidence outside the Gospels for pre-seventy Pharisee agreement with these arguments of Jesus? Where do we get contemporary evidence of the "natural" behavior and mind-set of Jesus' contemporaries?

This conflict story ends with these Pharisees joining in more serious and formal strategies to destroy Jesus. This encounter (and others like it) produces the public shaming of the Pharisees. Their influence and authority depend in good measure on the informal respect extended to them by the populace in general. Jesus' response to their challenge shows that they confront someone who is more capable than they are. Their trap is turned back upon them. The loss of honor ("face") in such interchanges is the loss of a highly prized good.

Jesus appeals to the humanitarian (and material) necessity of helping a helpless sheep that falls into a pit on a Sabbath. The peasants in that synagogue would have recognized the practicality (and probably the actual practice) of this behavior. Jesus sharpens the case study by making the sheep in the pit the only one the peasant possesses. This is not one in ninety-nine, that one might easily lose and still have plenty for wool, sacrifice or food. If this were the common

⁵⁰⁰ Luther, *Works Vol. 67* (p. 153). Turner, *Baker: Matthew*: "The Pharisees' question about whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath does not stem from a sincere desire to discuss halakah but from their wish to have something with which to accuse Jesus, probably in formal court proceedings (Matt. 12:10; cf. Luke 13:14; John 5:7-9). The penalty for profaning the Sabbath was death (Exod. 31:14; cf. Sipre on Num. 15:33), and so their question may be linked to the plot in Matt. 12:14." (p. 312).

⁵⁰¹ *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) Minneapolis: Fortress Press. (pp. 265-266).

practice, despite the way the Pharisees applied the law, it would have made a strong point with the synagogue audience.

Jesus' logic is that a human is of even greater value than an only sheep in danger. He could have waited another day to help this man. His life was not in danger. One might throw food into the pit for the sheep and help it that way too. A sheep might not be in danger in a pit either. Jesus acts in character as a gadfly. Rather than take the easy way out and wait until the end of the Sabbath, he acts in a provocative way. Knowing the Pharisees who challenged him would find his action a strong counter-challenge, he heals the man in front of the synagogue. The spiritual logic is simple: it is always lawful "to do good" on the Sabbath. The criterion for evaluating action is simple: what does love demand?⁵⁰²

His healing demonstrates a real power at work. Later disputes will center not on a denial of miracle power but an impugning of its source. His justification is that doing good is permitted on the Sabbath, doing what is right is always right on the Sabbath. As "lord of the Sabbath," Jesus defines its permissions as well as its obligations. We are to serve God on the Sabbath. "Loving" God does not exclude or remove the necessity to love the neighbor.⁵⁰³

The details are significant. Jesus does no "work" in this event. He does not take the man's hand and lift him up. He does not touch him. He simply speaks a word (the sort of "work" Yahweh did in creating the universe). That simple "word" has the power of God, for the man stretches his shriveled hand forward and it is restored to wholeness. It cannot be said either that the man did "work." He did not pick up anything or produce something by labor. He simply stretched his hand out. Technically, neither could be accused of "working" on the Sabbath.

❖ Discipleship: The Sabbath and the Lord's Day⁵⁰⁴

The New Testament nowhere equates the Lord's day (Sunday) with the Sabbath (Saturday), or observance of the Lord's day with Sabbath-keeping. Still, among Christian denominations,

⁵⁰² Blomberg, *Matthew*: "But Jesus is not contrasting some 'good' with religious duty. He does not encourage the Jews to stop worshipping. He is contrasting activity with inactivity. There is always some good to do on the Sabbath which makes total cessation of labor no longer appropriate. Of course, human beings need physical rest and need it on a regular basis, but this is different from prescribing one day in seven on which particular activities are banned as morally improper." (p. 198).

⁵⁰³ Barth, *CD Vol. I.2*: "Meditation, contemplation, even theological activity and the like, cannot be advanced as an excuse for failure towards our neighbour, or as a mitigation or evasion of the embarrassment which he causes us. This is impossible because we cannot do anything meaningful or serious in these other spheres without at once being reminded of what we are trying to escape. If we really can find refuge in a safe sphere of religiosity, devotional edification and theology, quite apart from the plight and task created by our neighbour, then this is only a sign that we cannot do anything serious or meaningful in this sphere, that it has already become for us a heathen temple which can only be destroyed. We come under the saying in Hos. 6:6: 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice,' as expounded in Mt. 9:13, 12:7. Not that we are called away from true sacrifice, from a genuine religiosity, devotional edification and theology—as is often rashly concluded—but we are called back from that heathen temple to a real obedience to the twofold commandment in its unity and therefore to true sacrifice. There may, of course, be an equally arbitrary and impossible flight from love to God to a wrongly understood love to the neighbour." (p. 434)

⁵⁰⁴ See essays in D. A. Carson, ed. (1999) *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock).

especially in the last three centuries, such an equation has often been made. For Christ-followers, the question of the meaning and observance of the “Sabbath” has been given many accounts and divided sincere Christians.

This is an important discussion since it involves understanding salvation history, the nature of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the patterns of continuity and discontinuity between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. It raises the question as to whether Sabbath keeping is a norm from the time of creation on. The outpouring of commentary on this issue is astonishing, nearly putting to shame the casuistry of Jesus’ contemporaries.

It is clear that there are Christ followers at both ends of this debate: those who are strict Sabbatarians and others who see the day as not governed by a set of norms or rules other than the great commands to love God and neighbor and continue the Kingdom works of salvation.

The significance of the Sabbath is related both to God’s creational pattern in and purpose as well as the covenant with Moses. The division of the week into six days of work and one of rest seems to have its origins in Israel’s own history. Those who take it as a creation ordinance see it as a mandate for all time and all humanity before its institution in the Mosaic covenant. For them it is a binding moral law for all time, for some even the day of observance on Saturday.

Those who see it as a part of the Mosaic covenant, given in the Ten Commandments and pointing to the permanent salvation rest God offers his people from slavery and the curse, take it often as paradigmatic. They also note that this is the only one of the Ten Commandments not explicitly repeated in the New Testament. Its purpose is more important than its letter.

What Jesus shows us in the Sabbath controversies is that lifting people out of their entanglements with the results of the curse or captivity to Satan is not restricted to six days. Humans weren’t made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath for the benefit of human beings. Tying them up with a thicket of “don’ts” is putting a heavy yoke on them that subverts the purpose of the day of rest. One should also note that the original legislation is aimed at releasing humans (and animals) from their ordinary daily labor, not sink them into inactivity of all sorts.

The New Testament displays a range of observance: Jewish Christians (following Jesus) practiced the Sabbath observances as was their custom. Gentile Christians were not required to follow Jewish legal requirements (such as circumcision, blood sacrifice). Paul even criticizes the attempts to conform Gentile Christians to Jewish observances (“You observe special days and months, and seasons, and years” Gal. 4:10). When dealing with such matters Paul neither prohibited Jewish Christians from such observance nor commanded Gentiles to do so. In the end, he advocated freedom and mutual respect and love:

“Some consider one day more sacred than another; others consider every day alike. Everyone should be fully convinced in their own mind. Those who regard one day as special do so to the Lord. Those who eat meat do so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and those who abstain do so to the Lord and give thanks to God. (Rom. 14:5-6)

The central issue is not some set of rules for observing “the Lord’s day” by not reading the newspaper or shopping or going to a baseball game. The central issue is reverencing the Lord in every day. Every day is “the Lord’s day” not just Saturday or Sunday. But giving time and energy to nurturing one’s relationship with the Lord, gathering with fellow believers, loving God and neighbor – these are essentials beyond the six days of work. So, it is not a question of one pattern,

one set of rules, one practice that will fit all people and all times. It is a question of being centered on Christ and learning from him. As Paul says:

“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col. 2:16-17)

The purpose, goal and intent of the Mosaic law, including the Sabbath, finds its fulfillment in Christ. In that fulfillment there is a “higher righteousness” than is found in the detailed rules and regulations that had been set forth by the Pharisees in their zeal for the law. There is freedom here.⁵⁰⁵ The hymn writer, Joseph Hart, captures the sentiment well:

Holy Days⁵⁰⁶

Some Christians to the Lord regard a day,
And others to the Lord regard it not;
Now, though these seem to choose a different way,
Yet both, at last, to one same point are brought.

....

Let not th’ observer, therefore, entertain
Against his brother any secret grudge;
Nor let the non-observer call him vain;
But use his freedom, and forbear to judge.
Thus both may bring their motives to the test;
Our condescending Lord will both approve.
Let each pursue the way that likes him best;
He cannot walk amiss, that walks in love.

(3) Jesus as the Servant of the Lord (12:15-21)

Jesus is portrayed as aware of the intentions of the Pharisees who plot against him. His response to the escalating situation is telling. He who has power to unshrive the hand of an afflicted man, who later will curse and wither a fig tree, might have whispered judgment at these evil men and seen them shrivel. But that is not the meaning of his appearance. He does not come as the powerful judge but as the humble servant. Though he has miracle working powers that command nature and demon, he does not use them to overwhelm or punish his enemy. He who commands love of enemy withdraws from this confrontational and dangerous situation. He does not put out eyes that do not see.

⁵⁰⁵ “...Matthew’s attitude to the law is not best explicated in terms of the distinction between moral and ceremonial aspects, nor in terms of the perpetuity of the Decalogue as eternal moral law, but rather by seeing that the *whole* law pointed forward to Jesus’ teaching and ministry, ultimately culminating in His death and Resurrection, and lives on only in so far as it has been transformed through its fulfillment by Jesus.” A. T. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 374.

⁵⁰⁶ Hart, Joseph, *Hymns Composed on Various Subjects*, New Edition (London: Eedes Clarke and Huntington: 1823) p. 49-50.

Matthew ties this strange and unexpected behavior to the fulfillment of Scripture (Isaiah 42:1-4). The first of the servant songs in Isaiah is lifted up as the paradigm by which to understand the behavior of Jesus as God's Messiah. He continues to heal and demonstrate the astounding powers of the age to come. At the same time, he instructs people "not to tell who he is."⁵⁰⁷ He does not wish to generate even more uproar than his miracles are already creating. It is apparent (from the following paragraph) that the leadership is seeking to paint Jesus as a false prophet (Deuteronomy 13) whose power comes from the Evil One and thereby terminate his threat to their influence and power.

Already Jesus displays a positive submission to the will of the Father, accepting slander and opposition though he had the capability of calling down legions of angels to his defense. He does not fight back against his enemies by means of violent counter-coercion. He continues to work miracles and teach his disciples. When opposed, he deals with it directly but does not stay around cajoling or arguing with those who reject him. He follows the sort of instructions given to his disciples: he goes elsewhere to seek those who are receptive. The quotation from Isaiah teaches a few fundamental things about the nature of this one who is lord of the Sabbath:

1. His identity: He is the specially selected servant of Yahweh, the one who is beloved of God and who is well pleasing. The Pharisees may have reasons to find grave faults in him, but God does not. In fact, the Spirit of God rest upon this Jesus. So, he is uniquely qualified for the role Matthew shows us Jesus playing. His calling and gifts are from Yahweh in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. In contrast, the Pharisees will label him a colluder with Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Who is he? He is the Lord.

2. His vocation: What is his mission? The goal of his service is the eschatological drama within which even the Gentiles will have the justice and judgment of God proclaimed to them. In his name even the nations will hope. This is the servant who fulfills the mission of Israel to be a light to the nations.⁵⁰⁸ He will bring justice to triumph.

The meaning of Jesus is not restricted to the Jewish people of God but reaches far beyond its boundaries. The way in which he interprets Hebrew Scripture in the Sermon on the Mount suggests that he is realigning issues of boundaries and relationships in unexpected ways. Gentiles will have a door opened to them by Jesus that will surprise the Jewish people. The mystery that suddenly springs out of this messianic servant is God's decision to make disciples among all peoples, to make "one new body" out of Jew and Gentile, to abolish the hostility and create something new.

The metaphors of a battered reed and a smoking wick points to items that no longer are valuable. The reed no longer has the strength of its structure but is crushed and useless. The wick, by smoking, is no longer any good and needs to be removed and replaced with a new one. In this we hear echoes of the Beatitudes. Those whom Jesus values are the poor and meek, those receptive to the Kingdom message and miracles. The disvalued poor, the marginal sinners, the pushed down and crushed by their fate in the world, the sick and suffering – these are the ones to whom he has come with good news.

⁵⁰⁷ The 'messianic secret' motif, more strongly found in Mark, has already been encountered in Matt. 8:4 and 9:30. The open 'secret' of his identity is unveiled in the lengthy quote from Isaiah.

⁵⁰⁸ In this last phrase, "nations/Gentiles" (ἔθνη) is in an emphatic position. In English we might translate it as "even the Gentiles!"

3. His manner: How does he carry out his mission? He is the servant. With Israel he follows the path of humility, meekness and gentleness. He embodies the virtues of the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. He reveals the truth of his mission and message in private and quietly. Where opposition appears in Israel, Jesus turns to other people and different villages. His is not a deliberately confrontational, triumphalistic, in-your-face provocation. He is not strident or disputatious, aggressive or self-assertive. He does not seek to generate a large-scale movement. He is not a rabble-rouser, engaging in demagoguery. His strategy is to invite the heavy laden, the helpless, the downtrodden, the broken spirited, the demon possessed and the sick to the rest of God. He demonstrates the reality of the Kingdom, quietly bringing justice to victory.

“The strong language (ἐπετίμησεν; lit. ‘he rebuked’) suggests that the crowds are to be viewed as already intent on creating publicity; Jesus is concerned to deflect them from this path. He is not after a power base in public opinion to protect him from the hostility of the Pharisees.”⁵⁰⁹

This quotation is the longest from the Old Testament in Matthew. It is a sort of summary overview of what he has been doing and will be doing. He is opposed and rejected inadequately due to misperception and misinterpretation both of his meaning and the meaning of the Hebrew prophets. The line of division between himself and key Jewish leadership runs deep because it runs to the very core values and symbols of identity of the people of God. Jesus healed all who were sick and did it as an expression of a messianic mission. It is that claim and that exercise of power that is contested.

(4) Three stories: Beelzebub, Jonah and Jesus’ Family (12:22-49)

(a) Jesus and the Prince of Demons (12:22-37)

Chapters 11 and 12 display reasons for the opposition to and rejection of Jesus. In response to the questions of John from prison, Jesus called attention to his deeds, the mighty miracles that liberated people from debilitating conditions. John and others puzzled over Jesus because they did not properly put his message and deeds together. Expecting other dramatic effects (judgment on Roman oppressors), they did not decode his deeds correctly. Jesus points them to the reality of his miracle powers and then to the message he proclaims. His claim is that the Kingdom of heaven is already present but in a surprising way. Those who are wise in God, those who are as open as infants to being taught, who can accept a messiah who is humble and gentle, will not stumble at what they see and hear in Jesus.

The Pharisaic opposition is precisely the sort of behavior Jesus says keeps people from receiving and benefitting from the revelation of God. Their own sense of being the “wise and intelligent” meant they were not open to the dramatic revisions in perspective a gentle and humble messiah requires. What drove their interaction with Jesus was concern over the purity boundaries and identity symbols of true Israelites. The Sabbath controversies were indicative of their passionate commitment to a strict reading of the Torah supplemented with applications meant to extend the law into the practicalities of life. The dispute is over the spirit and sense of the law and prophets.

Jesus is rejected because he sees the prophets’ center as abundant mercy rather than ritual

⁵⁰⁹ John Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 491).

precision. Mercy is the heart of his own account. The problem with the Pharisees is that they are not fully consistent in their use and application of Hebrew Scripture. Furthermore, they center life improperly. Even more damaging is that they do not and cannot recognize that a greater than the Temple is present in their midst.

In this passage we encounter more than a disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture. Jesus is challenged as a sorcerer, an ally of the Evil One. There is no denial of his powers.⁵¹⁰ The deeds are too public to deny. What they resort to is the attribution of this Jewish prophet's powers to Beelzebub. So blind and dumb are they that they cannot see the work of the Spirit and cannot speak the praise of God.

Instead, they use words that bring them to the brink of slandering the Holy Spirit. By attributing the works of God to the devil, they place themselves in the one position from which there is no recovery. Those who are so spiritually blind they cannot distinguish the work of God and the work of the Evil One will not seek the intervention of God to deliver them from the Evil one. They become like Capernaum and the other cities, thinking themselves to be so favored by God that they will be exalted instead of plunged into hell.

The Pharisaical stance against Jesus is manifest at this point. They accuse him of working his miracles by the power of the prince of demons, Beelzebul. This is a way to say that the pattern he fits in the Old Testament is not that of the servant of Yahweh, but the false prophet of Deuteronomy 13. As a misleader of the people and exerciser of evil power, a false prophet is subject to capital punishment. This may be behind their plots to kill him.

The challenge and response are framed by an actual miracle.⁵¹¹ A mute and blind demoniac confront Jesus. Some from the many who were following brought him. Jesus releases him. The response of the crowds indicates their complete astonishment and doubtful puzzling over the possibility that this one is the "Son of David."⁵¹² This is an instance of faith struggling with doubt. David was the only one we know of in the Old Testament whose actions were able to banish an evil spirit (I Sam. 16:23) as he played and soothed King Saul. Jesus is one who seems to have the equivalent power. At his word the evil spirits are scattered. "Son of David" was also a designation of the coming King whose powers would restore the glory to Israel. The crowds are not sure that this designation is correct, but they voice it nonetheless.

Hearing this designation being repeated, the Pharisees are quick to seek a re-labelling. Jesus is not the Son of David, but a dangerous worker of power. His miracles do not demonstrate the appearance of an eschatological figure to rectify the humiliation of Israel. They demonstrate the power of the prince of demons. The argument must have meant that the Pharisees saw Satan as acting tactically, temporarily allowing occasional defeats in order to lure people to a false message. In the end many would be entangled in the kingdom of darkness at the cost of only a few seeming deliverances.

⁵¹⁰ Unlike modern day skepticism. For a defense of the credibility of such miracles, see Craig S. Keener (2011) *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* 2 Volumes. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

⁵¹¹ In Matthew 9:32-34 the demon is "cast out"; here the man is "healed."

⁵¹² This is the only instance of ἐξίστημι (astonished) in Matthew. It is a stronger reaction than "marveled" (θαυμάζω) as in 9:33. Also the grammar indicates a repeated wondering about Jesus that is doubtful 12:23): "μήτι [is] a marker that invites a negative response to the question that it introduces. This marker is somewhat more emphatic than the simple μή." Arndt, *Lexicon* (p. 649).

This argument plunges us into real difficulties as indicated by the history of Church thought. How do we acknowledge the power and miracles of one actor and deny those of another as coming from God? By what criteria do we say this miracle is done by the power of God and this other is sorcery, quackery or a demonstration of a power other than God? In this issue we are at the edge of having to draw boundaries where we would like to be vague. Besides, there is clear indication that not all healing or miracles are from God (e.g., lying wonders worked by the devil to mislead, if possible, even the elect: the devil could work “lying wonders” to lead astray, if possible, even the elect (cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9–10; Rev. 13:13–14).

Jesus helps us with the task but not with definitive answers. The passage before us comes immediately after the quotation from Isaiah. Jesus stands in a tradition that provides for a figure who delivers from sin. Such a one is folded into a pattern of meaning and teaching that gives very particular shape to the role and mission of such a figure. The claim Matthew makes is that Jesus fits such a saving model. His is not the fulfillment of some general script for a first-century “Magician” or “divine man.”⁵¹³ No matter how much we may appeal to the general social roles of wonder-workers, Jesus breaks the mold. He cannot be understood simply by the continuities between his actions and those expected for Mediterranean charismatic figures.

Jesus himself deals with the logic of the argument of Jewish intellectuals. They push a case making him just such an “evil doer” (placing him in league with the apostate or pagan power brokers whose effects are worked by the power of evil). There are problems with their logic as Jesus points out. There are problems in coming to terms with him that cannot be solved simply by attributing his power to Beelzebul:

1. How is it that the kingdom of Satan would be so divided as to destroy itself? If Satan is divided against Satan, then his kingdom will fall. Jesus probes their assumptions about the world of evil agents. Is not such a view self-contradictory? The household of evil is no more a divided domain than is God’s. How can Jesus be removing evil by using evil?

2. How do the Pharisees explain the exorcisms of their own followers?⁵¹⁴ If exorcisms and healings happen by the power of Satan, what is to prevent their logic from explaining the same effects produced by their own exorcists? There is a self-contradiction in this case that sets them up to be condemned from within their own circle of reasoning.

3. Jesus suggests a different ground for the logic: assume the Holy Spirit is at work in all these sorts of miracles. This reverses the argument, suggesting that, wherever there is authentic deliverance regardless of the agent, the Spirit of God is somehow present. There is a realm of Satan that binds and hinders. There is exorcism and release. God is in a process of removing the grip of the Evil one on this world. Both Jesus and the pharisaic exorcists acknowledge the power of Yahweh present in this world. This is not an inter-religious dialogue. It is a debate between fellow Jews over the proper understanding of real events.

⁵¹³ Smith, M. (1978). *Jesus the Magician*. New York: Barnes & Noble; Twelftree, G. H. (1993). *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus*. Peabody: Hendrickson; Twelftree, G. H. (1999). *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Craffert, P. F. (2008). *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

⁵¹⁴ Nolland, *Matthew*: “Matthew’s emphatic ‘I’ (ἐγώ) may be christological, but it probably marks only the contrast with ‘your sons’.” (p. 500)

4. If the Spirit is at work in Jesus' miracles, then the Kingdom of God has overtaken the Pharisees. Already we have seen Jesus working miracles of a sort and difficulty that is astounding. His is not another run-or-the-mill, average market-place healer and exorcist. He does not use ordinary formula or Magic frenzy and altered consciousness. He speaks the word or touches a person and the event occurs. If the Pharisees accept the world view of unified houses of darkness and light, then they must come to terms with Jesus working the sorts of astounding deeds with which he presents them.

5. Here is the problem: if the fortified house of a strong man is being plundered, one must conclude the strong man is vanquished, tied up. Satan may bind the capabilities of people by possession. If someone is untying them, is not the reasonable conclusion that the strong man is himself bound?

In the end we are back to the issue of identification and coherence. Miracles per se are not definitive proof of identity. They always are part of a larger integrated whole of character, teaching and action. In this matter there are only two sides of the street. Either the Pharisees need to reach clear conclusions about Jesus based on the whole about his person including his miracles in the light of the world view of Hebrew Scripture or they need to reject him on the same basis. None of this strategic logic that is self-contradictory. Either they need to say, 'The Kingdom of God is here,' or 'this is devilish' for good reasons. Jesus does not allow neutrality, and neutrality is not what they will get.

Behind the logic is a pattern that rejects labelling Jesus as a "Magician" or "sorcerer" in league with the devil. It may be that one of the purposes of charging Jesus as an "evil doer" was meant to place him in this very category. This incident rejects the charge (Jesus is the enemy of Beelzebul and the devil, not an ally). It denies injury for the man who was without speech and blind can now see and speak. So, who is harmed? It denies the notion that there is any victim. The only one harmed in this set of events is the "Strong man" of the household of Evil. The devil himself is plundered by this and similar actions, undermining his strength and threatening his house with downfall. It appeals to the higher authority of the work of the Spirit of God and condemns the Pharisaic labelling as bordering on the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The implicit warning is that the Kingdom of God is present. What confronts people in the life and ministry of Jesus is the reality and power of God's person and purpose. Whoever is not aligned with Jesus is against him. There is no such thing as a neutral stance. One might speak against Jesus but to speak against the Spirit of God in Jesus raises the stakes infinitely. The powerful warning given at the end of this incident underlines the enormous stakes. Sins and blasphemies of every sort are forgivable. We may take sins in this context to mean offenses against fellow human beings while blasphemies are against God. God is merciful, so merciful that forgiveness can cover every one of our transgressions. Yet there is one sin that pushes beyond the boundaries of God's mercy: the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

There are numerous interpretations of this, most of which seem unrelated to the immediate context. Augustine made this the life-long impenitence of a person to the death.⁵¹⁵ To be sure, those who resist the wooing of God to repentance, who reject Jesus Christ and live without reference to God's right to rule his creation, who do unrighteousness will be judged and

⁵¹⁵ Augustine, *Works III/3*. (p. 258). Sermon 71 elaborates on this in detail (pp. 246-275)

condemned at the last. This word seems to be more than concerned with such stiff-necked resistance. It arises in the debate between the self-proclaimed guardians of Hebrew Scripture and Jesus. It is over the nature of the power resident in his miraculous deeds.

J. A. Broadus' interpretation has some things to commend itself for that very reason. He limits it to the immediate people involved in the age of miracles.⁵¹⁶ When people were faced directly with the earthly Jesus and his powerful miracles, they were confronted with visible demonstrations of the reality of the Spirit's working and coming of the Kingdom. Those who face such direct proof and reject it are taking a definitive step that places them in eternal danger.

Yet in this case we have a restriction of this word too tightly to its first century context. There is no evidence or indication that miracles ceased with the first century. Nor is there indication that the possibility of unforgivable sins ended with the Apostolic era. I John 5:16-18 indicates that such sin is possible decades after the earthly Jesus is ascended.

Nonetheless Broadus is going in the right direction. What is involved in unforgivable blasphemy is the resistance that flies high-handedly in the face of clear demonstrations of the work of God. Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31 show that persons can traverse a long way down the road of salvation with God: grasping the truth of the revelation of God in Scripture and tasting of the power of the age to come. Yet they can turn back in such a way that there is no remediation, no possibility of a repentance that restores.⁵¹⁷ These Pharisees were not outsiders to the covenant of God. They knew the oracles of God and claimed a special devotion to God's ways. The danger comes when such people conclude that the work of God is instead the work of Beelzebul. The danger intensifies when they seek to deflect people from a faith-filled response to the work of God in Jesus.⁵¹⁸

This is a self-conscious, carefully considered, studied contesting of the incontestable. It flies in the face of *prima facie* evidence and disputes the indisputable. The people who do this are like the Israelites worshipping the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai's great revelation. They are among God's privileged people whose experience places them close to the realities of God's Spirit and gives them interpretive tools for understanding what is going on. Nevertheless, they turn away from that work. They misperceive the central agent of God's revelation. Their "wisdom and intelligence" blinds them.

There is no one less inclined to deny the possibility and availability of forgiveness and deliverance than Jesus. He did not come to make it easier to get into hell. Yet he warns us: there are limits to the longsuffering of God. There are places and positions of finality that are not recoverable. There is a place we can put ourselves that lies on the other side of God's mercy. God

⁵¹⁶ John Albert Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886) pp. 272-3.

⁵¹⁷ This may also be the point of the warning about re-possession by evil spirits (Matt. 12:43-45).

⁵¹⁸ Bruner, *Christbook*: "Wherever there is the effort to deflect people's confidence from Jesus as God's saving manifestation ('Son of David'), the sin against the Holy Spirit is committed." (p. 561); Morris, *Matthew*: "It is not that God refuses to forgive; it is that the person who sees good as evil and evil as good is quite unable to repent and thus to come humbly to God for forgiveness. And there is no way to forgiveness other than by the path of repentance and faith." (p. 318-19); Blomberg, *Matthew*: "If one rejects the Spirit of God in Jesus, there is no one else in all the cosmos who can provide salvation." (p. 204).

will not suffer some things.⁵¹⁹

Jesus says to us: **watch your words** – and watch the words of those miracle workers who claim authority. Words are signs and parables of the inner self.⁵²⁰ Even the “careless” word will be in the scales on the day of final judgment. What we say about the Son of Man or the Spirit (just as our “careless” words calling a fellow human a fool or an idiot) will be a basis for decision. Pardon is not an automatic reflex of the character of God. God is lord of forgiveness as he remains lord of damnation. We come to a person who overflows in mercy and compassion. But we come to a person who is Lord of the Universe, whose glory will not be given to another and who will not be maligned by self-professed followers.

These careful students of the Scripture were careless in saying Jesus works by the power of Satan. They were seeking to strengthen their own honor and influence among the people by labelling Jesus as a dangerous deviant. They were dissuading people from correctly perceiving his identity and trusting in him (and thus concluding the Kingdom of God is present). Their words expressed their inner set against Jesus in the face of his marvelously beneficial deeds. On the one hand, they had to admit and say that he worked mighty deeds. On the other, they said it was only due to his partnership with the powers of Evil.

Jesus demands that they face the implications of their speech. Implicitly they were showing their own hypocrisy. They could not deny the miracle. What they did deny was not this fruit of Jesus’ power but the tree, the source of this result. Jesus was a bad person, even though his works had good effects. They need to think coherently and consistently.

Jesus’ assumption is that words are a register of the inner center of a person as are deeds. The deeds Jesus has been doing are the “fruit” of his very being. How can he do good, yet be an evil person? Just as a tree is known by its fruits, so a person is known by his or her deeds. How can they say he is evil at his source, working powerful deeds because of authority derived from demonic sources, when what he does is patently good?

Their words are self-refuting. Such evil words indicate that they are corrupt at the very center of their being. If the fruit of a tree is bad, then the tree is bad. If the words of the Pharisees are bad, the center of their being is also bad. It is out of the overflow of our inner heart that we express our inner selves. Our words no less than our deeds are a mirror to the inner person. We are responsible for what we treasure up in our inner life—and for what we bring out in our words and deeds. Jesus offers an ethic of responsibility. Our identity is measured not by the group to which we belong but by our actual words and deeds.

⁵¹⁹ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: “It is a complete mistake, then, to suppose that blasphemy against the Spirit is anything more or anything less than ongoing rejection of Jesus. As the story of Peter in Matthew’s Gospel shows full well, a person can be a disciple, fall away into apostasy, and then be restored to faith and discipleship again. Through it all and also here in Matthew 12, the crux is Jesus and how one responds to him.” (p. 645).

⁵²⁰ Barth, *CD Vol. III.2*: “What a man is, or confesses, or does ‘from the heart’ counts before God as done responsibly before him. What a man takes ‘to heart’ he takes to himself. The mouth speaks out of the fulness of the heart (Mt. 12:34). When a man hardens his heart, he is rejected by God; and on the other hand, those who are pure, i.e., open, in heart, will see God (Mt. 5:8). That there should be a circumcision of the heart (Ez. 36:26, Rom. 2:29) is the positive content of the proclamation of the coming day of God. Thus the heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body.” (p. 436)

Which words will we have to account for on judgment day?⁵²¹ They are the “careless” (Gk. *argos*) words. These are idle, inactive or ineffective words. The Sermon on the Mount illustrates such. There are those who say, “Lord, Lord,” but do not do the will of the Lord. There are bad words (Raca, Idiot), blasphemous words, foolish words, words of curse and blessing. The words Jesus has in mind here are the “throw away” words that are deedless such as a promise unkept or a vow broken. They are words that swear allegiance to God and reject God’s Kingdom. They claim the power of the Spirit but do not possess such power. They claim biblical authorization while undermining the Bible. They vow lifelong fidelity only to divorce and remarry. They have the form of prayer but none of its seeking first the Kingdom of God.

Wisdom is justified by its deeds and by the sort of words we articulate. Jesus’ words to this point have not been deedless or ineffective. They display the authority and power of the Spirit of God. Our own words will be measured by his. Our words also weigh the sort of person we are. They are an expression of our inner being. The issue finally is not our words or deeds as such. It comes back to the nature of our being. These Pharisees label Jesus a sorcerer and he labels them a “brood of vipers.” Both speak words. One word is true and the other false. Matthew asks us to consider them.

In fact, the test of words and deeds is found in verse 30: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” This is twofold: allegiance and commitment issuing in gathering. As Bruner indicates, this is the death knell of neutralism toward Jesus:

“Those who hedge about devotion to Jesus (as ‘pietism’) or about the importance of a clear decision for him (as ‘fundamentalism’), who question Jesus’ exclusivity (as ‘fanaticism’) and who disdain his gathering work of evangelism (as ‘proselytism’)—they are in trouble. They are not merely neutral or middle-of-the-road or broad-minded; they are ‘against me,’ they ‘scatter.’”⁵²²

❖ Discipleship: Anti-Semitism I

This is one of several texts that, disastrously, have been misused to justify (and stimulate) historic anti-Semitism.⁵²³ These strong words of Jesus (12:34 “brood of vipers”) in response to the religious leadership’s resistance and opposition has been taken theologically to legitimate all

⁵²¹ Even with all this said, this saying remains a “hard saying” of Jesus. Those tender-hearted, afflicted with self-doubt, scouring over every word said can find this a text of terror, wondering whether they have committed the unforgiveable sin. This is so potent, even such a scholar as Luz (*Matthew 8-20*) says: “In my judgment, with this saying the negative consequences outweigh its positive potential. I personally would not choose it as a sermon text except for a sermon against the text in the service of an examination of its consequences.” (p. 210).

⁵²² Bruner, *Christbook* (p. 565). Note Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “The threefold occurrence of the pronoun ἐμοῦ, ‘me,’ in relation to which the true character of a person’s work is finally evaluated, points again clearly in the direction of Christology. Of the highest importance is the person of Jesus and one’s relationship to him. This verse is therefore in effect a ‘call to decision.’” (p. 344).

⁵²³ Luther’s “On the Jews and Their Lies” from 1543 is a classic example. *Works Vol. 47* (pp. 121-306). Roland H. Bainton remarked: “One could wish that Luther had died before ever this tract was written.” *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), p. 379.

sorts of malicious rumors and negative stereotypes, leading to violence and abuse of Jews by Christians. What was addressed to the Pharisees has been generalized to all Jews.

Matthew's portrayal of the conflict between Jesus and religious leaders is neither a reflection of the hostility between Jewish and Christian synagogues or an anti-Semitic agenda on the part of Matthew:

There can be no doubt that Christian anti-Semites have used Matthew to promote their agenda. But this was certainly not Matthew's purpose. Most likely Matthew was a Jew and was writing to Jews who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.⁵²⁴

As John's Gospel puts it: "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). These early Christians did not consider being Jewish as alien to being Christian. For them Jesus was the culmination of the hope of Israel. The genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel roots the Christian movement and Jesus in particular deeply in the history of the Jewish people. The twelve disciples are even one day to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). Christian discipleship and anti-Semitism are incompatibles.

What we have in Matthew is not anti-Semitism, nor even anti-Judaism. The polemic is not against Judaism but against a way of living out the faith of Israel that subverted its central message and hope. The blistering rhetoric is similar to that of the Old Testament prophets, none of whom would be considered anti-Semitic. As in the Old Testament, when the people of God subvert the purposes and plan of God, a Prophet is sent who reminds them of the covenant and to pronounce judgment on the false "shepherds" who have mislead Israel into unfaithful injustice and idolatry.⁵²⁵

(b) The Sign of Jonah (12:38-45)

The request for a sign by these same figures indicates their spiritual blindness. In effect they are saying that the fruit from the tree they are observing (Jesus) is ambiguous. The problem in this chapter is that his deeds are powerful demonstrations, yet he breaks with the traditions of the elders. His refusal to stay within the boundaries of Sabbath observance rules as given by the Pharisees disturbed them. How could he be from God if his teaching and example broke the norms of God? The miracles by themselves did not definitively indicate his legitimate authorization by God.

What they want is something that would be seen soon in the near future, a prophecy of something so unambiguously from God that their doubts and debates about him would be stilled.

⁵²⁴ Turner, *Baker Matthew* (p. 45).

⁵²⁵ What we have here has been characterized by the view that argues, if we decide: "(1) that Matthew understands the Church to be the messianic remnant of Israel; (2) that the Gospel was written in and for a Jewish sect or renewal group still existing within the world of Judaism and participating in its structures and institutions, even if standing in critical opposition to the current Jewish leadership; and (3) that the polemic was directed solely against the Jewish leaders with the aim of encouraging the rest of the Jewish people to choose Jesus as their teacher and leader instead—then the Gospel is neither antisemitic nor anti-Judaic and may not even be supersessionistic." Donaldson, Terence L. (2010) *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press (p. 54).

They wanted something more than they had already been given. They wanted a sign beyond the signs that were all about them. It may be that they wanted something more than a miracle. Some argue that a sign is a direct, unmediated event from heaven whereas a miracle is a demonstration of power mediated through a human agent. Miracles would be done by many people whereas a sign would be given only to those who are divinely authorized.

We must remember these were the premier scholars of Scripture, avid students of its words. They had the written word of God and the traditions of interpretation to aid them in making sense of what was going on. These are not pagans or the uninstructed and inexperienced who are requesting more light. These are the most highly trained and knowledgeable of the Jews.

Jesus' answer is no answer. It rejects the question as legitimate. Only an evil and adulterous generation wants a sign. Why is there any need for such a compelling and unambiguous demonstration for those who profess to be savants and servants of the living God? Only people who are so dulled in conscience and distracted in evil that they are oblivious to the obvious work of God need a sign. These scribes and Pharisees should not need them unless they are evil (and so are a brood of deadly vipers). What these scholars and devotees of Scripture want will not be given. (Mark recognizes this in his paraphrase of Jesus' response).

What will be given is not the sort of sign they request but will be an even better "sign." Jesus indicates obliquely that his weakness in death for three days would be a "sign" that would have to suffice. It is a parallel with Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the great fish. They wanted power at their request. Jesus offers them his voluntary death instead. His passion-resurrection would be the only "sign" they would have.

This "sign" is then tied to the more urgent thing that confronts these Pharisees and scribes: repentance. Jonah's generation in Nineveh did not even have miracles, much less a sign. Jonah himself was the sign.⁵²⁶ They had a reluctant Israelite prophet who came, and preached repentance and they responded from the greatest to the least. Solomon's generation likewise had no miracles or signs. The gentile Queen Sheba with all her power and wealth travelled a great distance because of the rumors of Solomon's wisdom and she responded.

Jesus' claim is that someone greater than Jonah is here. If Nineveh repented, how much more this generation when confronted by their own Messiah, the unique Son of God, the miracle working Son of Man? If the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba listened to wise Solomon, how much more should these not listen to Wisdom incarnate?

With these last "more thans" we have Jesus compared favorably with the three sections of Hebrew Scripture. He is more than the Temple (whose regulations and processes are given in the Torah). He is greater than Jonah (of the Prophets) and greater than Solomon (the writings and wisdom literature). Together all the Hebrew Scriptures testify to this one. These Jewish professional scholars should have the insight to see the connection between the texts they love

⁵²⁶ Carson, *Matthew*: "In 'the sign of Jonah,' then, 'of Jonah' must be construed as an epexegetic genitive. ... It is the sign that Jonah himself was, not the sign given him or presented by him. This interpretation commonly accepts the view that the Ninevites learned what had happened to Jonah and how he got to their city. Jonah himself thus served as a 'sign' to the Ninevites, for he appeared to them as one who had been delivered from certain death." (p. 341). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: "Jesus' resurrection, then, is the sign of Jonah. What can—and will—validate the claims that Jesus is making about himself and his ministry? It will be the great overwhelming fact that his death will not endure; on the third day he will rise to resurrection life." (p. 651).

and interpret and the activity and identity of Jesus. Jesus is God's final Priest, Prophet and wise King, the true fulfillment of law, prophets and wisdom. We need not look further to find the center and norm of God's revelation.

The "center of the center" is the death of Jesus, the "sign" of Jonah. The Gospels alike make this the dominant point of their collective stories. Understand that and we have the key to understanding Jesus.

In addressing "this evil generation" Jesus warns not only against the final judgment but the near-term future. The picture he draws is that of the unclean spirit cast out of a person. It wanders searching for a better "home" and finds none. So, it invites seven more evil than itself to join it and they return and take up residence in the former place. The last state of the person is worse than the first.

This discussion picks up the beginning incident that stimulated this conversation: the speechless and blind man who was demon possessed but now liberated. It is not enough to experience deliverance. There is something that comes after the bondage of the power of evil is broken. The controlling power of the devil must be replaced by the controlling reality of the Kingdom of God. The mere event of exorcism is not the end of the matter. That release from one authority must be replaced by coming under another authority.

Implicit in this is the demand to submit to the authority of Jesus. The controversy with the Pharisees and scribes is over the content of what Jesus was teaching. They were more than willing to admit the beneficial effects of his miracle-working. Who could deny an event where a man who was bound by demons yet now was free, seeing and speaking, was 'Wonderful'? What then did not happen was a public acknowledgement or validation of the person or words of Jesus. He was accused of working by the power of the devil. He is charged as a Magician, a sorcerer who works great powers because he has control over a demon himself. His practices on the Sabbath and other matters conflicted with their received paradigm. Because his teachings (in their eyes) could not be from God, neither could his miracles.

Jesus who is the sign from God and the Wisdom of God is present, offering deliverance from the evil powers of his generation. His death will be a definitive exposure of the weakness of demonic agents. His death and resurrection will provide the basis for the ultimate liberation of creation from the bondage and futility to which it was subject due to the sin of human beings. Signs of that larger redemptive work can be found in the incidents that occur in the villages and open spaces of Galilee. The deliverance of the demoniac is an indication of the sort of work God offers through his servant.

The grave danger engaged in by these leaders is the labelling of Jesus as a deceitful Magician, a sorcerer or witch who works in collaboration with the demonic world. Using various spells and tricks, his opponents claim, he provides illusory and transitory effects, leading people into his heretical and blasphemous notions. His deliverance of this demoniac is "real" in that the person sees and speaks. It is "unreal" in that it is simply one demonic power mastering another. It is (as Paul later put it) the devil disguised as an "angel of light."

Jesus turns this situation on its head. Deliverance can be only temporary. There can be release from the power of a controlling force. The house can then be empty, swept and put in order. This might be true of the larger "house of Israel." Freed for a time under the Hasmoneans, the foreign rulers were thrown out and Israel went through a phase of reordering in its life. Then it was "repossessed" by the Romans and their client Kings. Israel was divided into various "tetrarchies" and subjected to the order of the Roman Empire. Their practice was to allow

indigenous cults and religious sensibilities free reign, so long as tax and tribute were continued. In the Temple itself sacrifices were offered for Caesar. But what of its ultimate allegiance? What fills the space opened for freedom? Whose agenda and life-way is lived now that there is more room for Israel to be self-determining?

The Pharisaic movement came into being during the Seleucid crisis and in conjunction with the rise of the Hasmoneans. Yet what did they make of that freedom? What will they make of the freedom they are being offered in the ministry of Jesus? What spirit moves through their mindset and motives? If the Holy Spirit is the “spirit” by which Jesus does his mighty works, by what “spirit” do they do theirs? If they claim to be freed from the unclean spirits that march through their land and history, what spirit now dwells in them? Jesus warns that the Pharisees (and Israel) will wind up worse off than they were in their beginnings. The story that is told in Matthew and in the larger history of the first century confirms this.

(c) Jesus’ Mother and Brothers (12:46-50)⁵²⁷

Nothing is more important than doing the will of the Father in heaven. Nothing. Nor is there anything that will get us closer to Jesus than doing that will. Not anything. It is not of advantage to be the mother of Jesus or his brother. What brings advantage is following what Jesus’ Father in heaven wants.

For all the scorching rhetoric used to challenge the falsehood of the Pharisees, the door remains open. All that need be done is for them to repent and start doing the will of God. That is exactly what they pride themselves on already doing. It is exactly the opposite of what’s going on. They are so blind they cannot see the signs of God’s new thing in their midst. They consider the work of the Spirit of God to be the work of the prince of the demons.

They started with the high goals of restoring Israel to its holiness and loyalty to Yahweh, to stem the pressures toward idolatry. They helped cast out the pig-sacrifice of Antioches Epiphanes. They struggled to ensure the clarity and comprehensiveness of the Torah for living in their contemporary world. They swept the house of Israel clean and put it in order with a variety of rituals that dramatized the sacredness of God. Their religious devotions and disciplines were pervasive and passionate.

What swept back in was seven times worse. Judas Maccabeus was no Messiah. Nor were the Hasmoneans. Nor was the Idumean, Herod the Great. The Kings who ruled afterward increasingly took upon themselves the model of the Hellenistic Kings. Herod set up a separate capital for the non-Jews. The gentile patterns of life penetrated the land of Palestine as the wealthy nobility increasingly adopted Greek pretensions. The Romans came with their legions and idolatrous standards.

The Pharisees were the front phalanx of “the righteous.” They sought to rally the devout against the desecrations and threats that flowed in with the rising tide of Gentile encroachment. The boundaries and definitions of true religion were strengthened. If God commanded one fast,

⁵²⁷ Vs. 47 is not found in all translations (e.g., ESV). It is given a {C} rating in the Greek New Testament and put in brackets to indicate the Committee establishing the text had difficulty determining which variant was original. It appears to have been omitted in some manuscripts due to homoeoteleuton (λαλῆσαι ... λalῆσαι). But it seems necessary for the flow of thought.

the Pharisees added dozens and dozens. If God commanded stringent purity rules for priests, the Pharisees asked every Jew to follow them. They were going to create a super-people of God with a spirituality greater than that of the Torah.

Instead, when God's Messiah came, most Pharisees could not recognize him. He was also seen as a threat to the family of God. They demanded a Messiah on their own terms. If Jesus did not fit their categories, then he must provide a super-miracle, a sign from the heavens sufficient to overturn their convictions and give them indisputable evidence. In this they are not distant from the Enlightenment demands of Hume and his followers. If miracles are to be believed, they must conform to our evaluation in such a way as to overturn everything we know and are convinced of. There is literally no chance that such conditions will be met. It is a closed-mindedness of a different sort but locked just as tightly against the Jesus of history.

This text comes at the end of a variety of incidents that could be very disturbing in this kin-based society. Following Jesus seems to entail the breaking of family ties. James and John leave their father. In response to one disciples' desire to honor his father with a proper funeral, Jesus gives the strange saying: "Let the dead bury their own dead." He does not allow any human obligation to supersede the duty of discipleship. The Kingdom demands all that one is and has. There are no ways to "balance" various imperatives here. God may not call all to the itinerant wandering ministry of the twelve and the seventy-two. Nonetheless, what comes first in consideration and life-planning is the agenda and priority of the Kingdom of God and the righteousness it demands.

This does not mean one will be without the network of people who can serve the functions of family. Even for the twelve and others, the new fictive-kinship web created by submission to God as Father through Jesus Christ means mothers, brothers and sisters. It is not scriptural knowledge as such nor the experience of deliverance from demonic powers that are sufficient for salvation. Only the doing of the will of Jesus' Father enables one to enter the Kingdom of God. The power of God for salvation is present in Jesus and is shared with those who place him not simply in prominence but preeminence.

This text suggests Jesus saw himself in a distinctive relationship to God. It provides an indirect witness to the virgin birth. Jesus calls God "my Father in heaven." Combined with the earlier narrative of the conception and birth of Jesus, this phraseology is indication of a self-understanding that is fully developed in John's Gospel.

This passage at least demonstrates that Jesus lives his own demands. In effect, since his demands for discipleship meant breaking family ties, he is willing to do some breaking of his own. Even the ties to his siblings and mother are not such that he will interrupt his ministry to respond to their presence. He is not asking things from us he did not do himself. We do not know what sorts of conflict or tension might have taken place with his baptism by John and taking up of John's message in preaching.

When he spoke in Nazareth's synagogue, the response of his neighbors and friends was to seek to kill him. We are told that these people knew Jesus' family (and some may have been present). We know from other Gospels that his immediate family did not think his claims credible. In this instance parallels tell us that they were seeking to take Jesus into custody, having concluded he was unbalanced and insane. Matthew does not record that side of the story. He takes it (with Mark) as an indication of the overwhelming priority of the inbreaking presence of the Kingdom.

Chapter 13 gives explicit teaching on the nature of the Kingdom of God. It does not come

with the powerful coerciveness the Pharisees wanted. There would be no “sign” so irresistible that all objections, all hesitations, all opposition would be swept away. The Kingdom must be submitted to voluntarily. It is not like natural kinship in which there is no choice. One is not simply born into the Kingdom by means of biology. Those who are the “children” of Abraham ethnically are not thereby the children of heaven.

The Pharisees knew that much. Their own ethic and theology provided for voluntary exercise of habit patterns that demonstrated commitment to the Torah. Being a Jew and being a good Jew were very different matters. Their call to Israel was for righteousness and holiness based upon a normative order that was intense and strict. They wanted people who had swept away all loose living and adopted an orderly life of devout exercises. The problem was that those very exercises became more than an expression of allegiance to the living God. They became a zeal for a righteousness that manipulated both the permissions and commandments of the law. What was encouraged too frequently was an externalism as a substitute for an internal integrity that shaped law-obedience in terms of the inner intention and spirit of Torah. Thus, there was both legalism and license in an intensely religious package.

What is most critical is one’s relationship to the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ. The rules and regulations of the Torah are part of the ordering of a relationship, not the creation of a definitive cultural order. The observance of any and all of the normative elements of the covenant has meaning only as they are constitutive of an ongoing relationship. That relationship involves the love of God and fellow humans. Apart from that context and effect, law-observance loses its significance. The law may define the shape of love and regulate the disorderly fallen nature of human beings. But it does not supply an independent world within which one can live a life that is definitional of social and spiritual superiority.

This passage also both honors and dishonors Mary. Jesus does not denigrate his family. He relativizes them. Mary’s role has been overextended in Mariology.⁵²⁸ That she is the “mother of God” is not to be denied. That is the implication of Matthew’s whole treatment of the conception and birth of Jesus. However, this passage puts an insuperable barrier around every statue of Mary surrounded by candles and prayer directed to her. To those who feel Mary is closer to Jesus and God than all others, Jesus provides this invitation and comfort: none are closer to him than those who do the will of his Father in heaven. None. Not even Mary comes closer to Jesus or God than

⁵²⁸ Barth, *CD Vol. I.2*. “The New Testament, like the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, takes a christological and only a christological interest in the person of Mary. This is particularly true even of the Christmas story and its pre-history.... As Luther understood it in his perfectly correct exegesis of the Magnificat, the greatness of the New Testament figure of Mary consists in the fact that all the interest is directed away from herself to the Lord. It is her ‘low estate’ (ταπεινότης, Lk. 1:48), and the glory of God which encounters her, not her own person, which can properly be made the object of a special consideration, doctrine and veneration.” (pp. 139-140) What Barth objects to is Roman Catholic dogma articulated as follows: “For what binds us to God and leads us heavenwards is, along with Christ and in subordination to Him, the most blessed Virgin. It therefore involves an upsetting of the ordinance made by God and a dissolution of true Christianity, if Mary is separated from Christ in worship, and it is therefore a mark of the true Church of Christ that she venerates Mary; where Mary is not venerated, there the Church of Christ is not” (Diekamp, op. cit. [*Kath. Dogma* Vol. 2, 1930] p. 395).” Barth responds: “We can only confront Diekamp’s declaration with the equally definite Evangelical declaration that where Mary is ‘venerated,’ where this whole doctrine with its corresponding devotions is current, there the Church of Christ is not.” (pp. 142-143). For Luther’s “Commentary on the Magnificat”: *Works, Vol. 21* (pp. 297-358).

the humblest most sin-weary disciple who does what God wills.

Those who pray to Mary are likely to find themselves standing outside the inner circle of those who are seated and listening to Jesus. The instinct to undercut the cult of Mary is grounded in the very example and words of Jesus. She is not and never has been the “Queen” of heaven or the special intercessor between us and Jesus. She played a special role in salvation history, for which she is honored. But that role is never designated in Scripture as mediatrix. None of the Apostles ask us to venerate Mary. None. Nor does Jesus.

B. Discourse 3: Parables of the kingdom of heaven (13:1-52)

(1) Introduction to the Parables

Jesus has been teaching the crowds and working miracles of healing and exorcism. But many are “not getting it.” Jesus switches his mode of teaching to an indirect method of teaching that both conceals and reveals. The opposition and lack of comprehension show that the true identity of Jesus has not been recognized and many are not among his true “family.”⁵²⁹

If his audiences struggle with direct, propositional instruction, parables are a “sneak attack,” meant to reach around the walls of resistance and stimulate reflection and understanding. They are meant to subvert the quick rejection that turns people away from giving due consideration to what he is proclaiming. They are meant to open up space in the mindset of his hearers to consider what the meaning of his presence is. The function of the use of parable, metaphor, and allegory is to “provoke” hearing and obedience.⁵³⁰

“In a situation where some are open to truth and some are not, parables, as imaginative challenge rather than simple proposition, are an appropriate way to communicate new ideas. For some they will break through the barriers to understanding, and to such people (like the disciples) the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven” will be “given.” But others will remain impenetrable, and the seed will be lost, scorched, or choked.”⁵³¹

⁵²⁹ Matthew frames these parables between a story of his family being outside (12:46-50) and a story of his family and hometown being offended at him (13:53-58). Rejection is the context.

⁵³⁰ The notion that parables were meant to prevent understanding seems to miss the point. As Chrysostom indicates: “He spoke in this way to signify how he would wish to have been reconciled. He implied that both their conversion was possible and that upon their repentance they might be saved. It was not for his own glory alone, but for their salvation, that he was doing all things. For if it had not been his will that they should hear and be saved, he would have remained silent and would not have spoken in parables. But now in this very manner he stirs them up, even by speaking under a veil.” in Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13* (pp. 271-272); Snodgrass, *Intent*. “The parable chapter reflects this unwillingness to hear but also seeks to persuade people to hear by both positive statements about the value of the kingdom and negative statements about judgment.” (p. 173).

⁵³¹ France, *Matthew* (pp. 509–510).

The literature on Jesus' parables is immense, with a range of interpretive approaches, despite Jesus having given his own interpretation of several of his parables. The approach taken here echoes many of the conclusions of Snodgrass, Blomberg and Gibbs.⁵³²

(a) Structure

By count there are either seven or eight parables (depending upon how one defines the last comment about disciple "scribes" in vs. 51-52). In any case, there are clearly noted patterns, with one common division being the shift from the crowd to the disciples (vs. 36). On this turning point we have four parables articulated to the crowd and then four to the disciples (counting the disciple scribe saying as a parable).

1. Parable (the sower), 13:3-9 Purpose of speaking in parables Explanation of the first parable, 13:10-23	Content: varying response to the word	Audience: Crowd
2. Parable (the wheat and the tares), 13:24-30	} Equally structured short parables	
3. Parable (the mustard seed), 13:31-32		
4. Parable (the leaven), 13:33 Parables as fulfillment of scriptures 13:34-35 Explanation of the wheat and tares, 13:36-43		
5. Parable (the hidden treasure), 13:44	} Equally structured short parables	Audience: Disciples
6. Parable (the pearl of great price), 13:45-46		
7. Parable (the Gospel dragnet), 13:47-48 Explanation of the last parable 13:49-50	Content: varying fate at the last judgment	
8. Analogy (the householder and treasure) 13:51-52.	Concluding word: the disciplined Scribe	

This is not without its problems since the disciples come for an explanation in 13:10 and seem to be addressed aside from the crowd. Davies and Allison propose a tripartite structure, based partly on noting how frequently Matthew organizes things in threes:

13:1-9	Parable of the sower
13:10-17	Discussion of parables (+ scriptural allusion)
13:18-23	Interpretation of the sower
13:24-30	Parable of the tares
13:31-2	Parable of the mustard seed
13:33	Parable of the leaven
13:34-5	Discussion of parables (+ scriptural citation)
13:36-43	Interpretation of the tares
13:44	Parable of the treasure
13:45-6	Parable of the pearl

⁵³² Part of the question has gotten entangled with the quest for the historical Jesus and modern skepticism about whether the Gospels give Jesus' words or the interpretation of the Gospel writers and the early Church. For those who wish to explore the history of parable interpretation and the current debate, I refer them to Snodgrass, *Intent*; Blomberg, *Parables*; Longenecker, *Parables*; Scott, *Hear*; Hultgren, *Parables*; Donahue, *Parable*; and to Commentaries on Matthew 13.

- 13:47–8 Parable of the net
 13:49–50 Interpretation of the net
 13:51–2 Discussion of parables (saying on treasure)⁵³³

One justification for this tripartite structure is noticing the important difference between the parable of the sower (soils) and the other parables:

The parable of the Sower and its surrounding context have a foundational role in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is the first substantive parable in all three and, other than Matthew's parables of the Wheat and the Weeds and of the Net, is the only parable given a detailed interpretation.⁵³⁴

It serves as an introduction to all his parables, models an interpretive methodology and is framed within an explanation of the purpose of using parables to communicate. Then the other triads have some commonalities that tie them together. For example, the parables of the weed (tares), the mustard seed and the leaven all underscore the "not yet" aspect of the presence of the Kingdom. The "now happening" side of the Kingdom does not mean the full triumph of the Kingdom. That will happen in the future. What appears now may seem unspectacular, unsatisfying, unexpected.

The arrangement of the parables serves the primary subject matter of the chapter: the nature of the Kingdom of heaven and its fate in the world. It moves from the more descriptive (13:1-43) to the more instructive (13:44-50). The parable of the sower (and soils) describes the initial announcement of the kingdom and its mixed reception. The wheat and the tares emphasizes one reason for that mixed reception and the mystery of the role of the Evil One. The mustard seed and leaven clarify that the kingdom's ultimate victory will happen and has already begun in the small beginning of Jesus' ministry.

The parables of the treasure and pearl portray the urgent, decisive action needed: find, sell, buy, seek. In the light of the certain triumph of the kingdom one must overcome every obstacle and give all one has to obtain the kingdom. The parable of the net underlines the seriousness of this response: final, disastrous judgment will come to all who reject the kingdom. The parable of the householder (the disciplined scribe) assures the disciples that, understanding the mysteries of the kingdom, they have a treasure trove of wisdom and truth that will enable them to deal with both the old and the new.

(b) Message

The subject matter of the parables is the Kingdom of heaven (precisely "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" vs. 11). Single day faith is what we are asked to exercise as we live before God. If we do so, then the sum of our days will be positive. Yet some days are difficult to our sense of proportion and justice. How is it that we can be perfectly in tune with what God wants, engaged in the task God has specially designed for us and yet face hostile, rejecting people? How

⁵³³ Davies, *Matthew*, Vol. 2 (p. 371). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II* closely parallels this seeing the core of the section in a triad of parables (13:24-35) addressed to the crowd and disciples followed by a second triad (13:36-50) focused on the disciples. The first section (13:1-23) on the parable of the sower gives insight into why Jesus teaches in parables and why people react in different ways. The last bit (13:51-52) questions the disciples' understanding and stands as a sort of conclusion to the discourse. (pp. 672-673). Cf. Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 174) agrees with this threefold division though each has somewhat differing interpretations of the triads.

⁵³⁴ Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 145).

is it that the Kingdom of heaven is present, yet evil is still active and strong?

Jesus sat beside the sea and began to speak a series of parables. This happened after a series of days where the resistance to Jesus' messianic ministry expanded, coming even from among those one would think most likely to understand. In chapter 11 John the Baptist expressed doubts about Jesus being the Messiah. Here was the very one who was the forerunner and prophet heralding the advent of the Messiah—now puzzled and confused!

In addition, Jesus expressed grief and regret over three cities in which he had done his most public ministry and miracles: Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. They had seen and heard him, but not responded other than marginally. If Nineveh repented from the top of society to the bottom, these cities would not repent. The revelation Jesus brought was hidden from the wise and intelligent. Only those who considered themselves children, infants, heavily laden and troubled people could receive this message.

In chapter 12 there are a series of controversies with the religious elite: over Sabbath observance, the works of the Spirit, and signs of the Son of Man. These encounters are described as happening with "this generation." Its inability to assimilate the significance of who Jesus is the characteristic noted. The invitation at the end of the chapter is to be an authentic kinsman of Jesus. Those who are the mothers, brothers and sisters are those who do the will of the Father. Instead, so many just didn't get it.

On a day when Jesus was misunderstood and in a stage of his ministry where opposition was building, Jesus concentrated his teachings in parables. It all begins with the ending story in chapter 12. There we find a group of people, sitting inside with Jesus, hanging on his words of teaching, probing to discover what they might have encountered in this one. By the very fact that they were opening themselves up to him, taking the time and energy to understand and learn from him, they had made themselves his disciples (learners). This is not the end of the matter. One must do more than listen. But listening is the start.⁵³⁵

If they listened properly, then they were more than disciples. They were part of the household of God, and thus Jesus' brother, sister and mother. God's household is his kingdom. To hear the words of Jesus with faith and understanding is to be brought into such an intimate relationship with him that we become members of his extended family.

What it means to be good kin of Jesus, what it takes to belong to the household known as the kingdom of God, is something we are told in part in Matthew 13. It lays out the basics of the kingdom so that we might understand its secrets and embrace its disciplines. What we must first

⁵³⁵ "The first thing to be said is that the parables followed well-known Jewish lines. Several of them are taken from Old Testament models: the vine or vineyard is a regular image for Israel, the sheep and shepherd speaks of Israel and her king, and so on. Several have analogies with other more contemporary Jewish sources: a steward and a master, or a son and a father, speaks at once of Israel and her god.... They are not totally new; their message sounds in some ways familiar; yet they tend to have new twists within the uncomfortable familiarity. They seem designed, within the worldview of the Jewish village population of the time, as tools to break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point. Jesus was not saying 'throw away your Jewish aspirations, and think about music, or philosophy, or pie in the sky when you die'. Nor was he simply declaring a plague on all houses except those of radical-minded peasants, as one might think from reading some contemporary scholars. Jesus was articulating *a new way of understanding the fulfilment of Israel's hope*." Wright, N. T. (1996) *Jesus and the Victory of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (pp.175–176).

do with the parables is listen to them in their context:

“The question is not, ‘What does this story mean to me?’ and it is not, ‘To what does each element of the story correspond?’ The question is, ‘What was Jesus doing with this story?’ Parables are chisels to create space and enable people to see and understand the in-breaking of the kingdom in a first-century world. If that was Jesus’ intent, that needs to be our focus in interpreting.”⁵³⁶

When we listen carefully, Jesus enters our consciousness and households and takes over. No other conversation or agenda is as important as what he will do and say when he is present within our four walls and behind our closed doors. His agenda is to introduce us to the kingdom within which he is the Lord. Only as we embrace that rulership and accept that commanding presence will our households come to order. The disorderliness within them that distorts and destroys the humanness and joy finds its remedy only when we accept the disciplines of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

It is not immediately obvious that Jesus is setting out to teach about the kingdom of God. Yet we learn that this is what is happening very quickly as this first parable is interpreted and followed by several others.⁵³⁷

“The proclamation is an assertion about reality that is to be believed and allowed to have defining force. Matthew would also say that the kingdom’s coming does not now obliterate evil but one day will involve separation of the just and the unjust, that the kingdom appears as discouragingly small and unseen but will have overwhelming impact, and that the kingdom is valuable beyond all else and incorporates both the new and what is good from the old.”⁵³⁸

The striking thing about the setting is its connection with what has just come before: the developing opposition and questioning of Jesus portrayed in Matthew 11-12 (“that same day”). One issue in focus is how such opposition is compatible with the reality that Jesus is God’s Messiah bringing God’s kingdom. Also, this is the only one of the five teaching sections in Matthew that appears initially addressed to the crowds, and not simply to the disciples.

We must also acknowledge that the larger setting for the parables as we encounter them is the Gospel stories of Jesus. Each small parable story is a cameo of the larger good news story about Jesus. Each brings into focus one aspect of the nature and meaning of the gospel.

“Jesus proclaimed the parables in the context of the kingdom: God’s entry into history with an offer of forgiveness to the ‘sick’ and the marginal. And the church proclaimed the parables in the context of ‘gospel’: the narrative of Jesus’ life as a testimony to this gift and a sign of its power.”⁵³⁹

(c) Interpretation

There has been an extended debate in the last century about the interpretations of the

⁵³⁶ Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. xi).

⁵³⁷ This parable is also found in Mark 4:1-9 and Luke 8:4-8.

⁵³⁸ Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 174).

⁵³⁹ Donahue, *Parable* (p. 17).

parables found along with the parables (e.g., the Sower; the Weeds and the Tares; the Net). The main question is whether those applications accompanying some of the parables come from Jesus or are the result of the early Church addressing their contemporary situation.⁵⁴⁰ A number of interpreters dismiss the interpretations (as well as introductions and conclusions of parables) as not sourced from Jesus. Joachim Jeremias even articulated “ten principles of transformation” by which the Jesus tradition was transformed by the early Church.⁵⁴¹

Much of this is highly speculative and subjective. One cannot determine from stylistic criteria a story’s origin or validity. Evidence of a writer’s style does not tell us whether the story told is a faithful telling of what Jesus said or did. Nor is it reasonable to assume parables were articulated only once and the variations in wording and setting is evidence of the Gospel writer’s or early Church reimagining of a single original that can be reconstructed behind what we find in the current text. Snodgrass’s comment is pertinent:

“That the parables mirror the situation of the Evangelists’ communities is a gratuitous assumption. I find it unlikely that any of the Gospels was written for a specific local community or serves primarily to address the problems of such a community. The Gospels are not veiled histories of Christian churches or indirect communication addressing the problems of a local community. They are direct communication written for a broad audience to convey material about the teaching and life of Jesus in order to create followers of Jesus.”⁵⁴²

It is fair to note the emphasis Matthew gives with the parables he chooses to include in his narrative. The theme of judgment is sounded (as it is in the Sermon on the Mount and later Olivet Discourse).⁵⁴³ Matthew emphasizes discipleship as obedient hearing of the word of the Kingdom, entering by the narrow gate, building a foundation of life on the solid rock, persevering to the end – all with the accompanying note of the potential of disastrous loss for those who neglect or oppose the Kingdom of God.

It is worth noting that the point of encountering the parables is not to engage in an endless

⁵⁴⁰ Scott, *Hear* asserts “What applications do occur are the result of the early church and not Jesus. Jülicher’s enduring legacy is his rejection of the application as representing the *Sitz im Leben* of the church.” (p. 17). He excludes several Gospel parables on a similar basis: “... a major criterion for excluding parables from the Jesus corpus: they are to be excluded when they reflect exclusively the concerns of the early Christian community. Yet even this requires caution, for surely the concerns of Jesus and those of the early communities overlap. But where the parables seem more concerned with community maintenance, we will be safe in locating their own creation. Two parables, The Wheat and Tares and Ten Virgins, appear to be excluded on the basis of this criterion.” (p. 68).

⁵⁴¹ Jeremias, *Parables* (pp. 23-114) “The Return to Jesus from the Early Church.”

⁵⁴² Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 33).

⁵⁴³ Scott, *Hear*: “...a primary concern of [Matthew’s] understanding of the kingdom is the theme of Jesus as Lord of the kingdom, he situates many of the parables in the context of judgment (e.g., Matthew 25).” (p. 55). Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “Thus in Matthew, eschatology is important not only to theology but also to discipleship. The promise of future judgment and deliverance makes perseverance in the present both a possibility and a necessity.” (p. lxiv); Nolland, *Matthew*: “Of all the Gospels Matthew paints the prospect of eschatological answerability in the most graphic of colours. In the Matthean telling Jesus is associated with the eschatological separation of people to final salvation or condemnation from as early as John the Baptist’s words about the one who was to come after him.” (p. 43).

debate over their interpretation but to be accountable to the demands they make on our lives. One of Søren Kierkegaard's parables is about the king who issued a command for all in his realm.⁵⁴⁴ Rather than seeking to obey it, the subjects engaged in round after round of interpretation, with rival versions vigorously argued. Everything became interpretation and no one obeyed the King. Kierkegaard's parable raises the question: "What is the difference between criticism of a text and radical accountability to it?"⁵⁴⁵ In discipleship faith seeks understanding but the goal is obedience.

(2) The Parable of the Sower and the Soils (13:1-9)

What does it mean to pray, "Your kingdom come"? We learn a bit about that here. This parable suggests it comes when God speaks the word of the Kingdom and it finds a welcoming reception on the part of some. The word comes first as an adversary, not fully welcome or expected, an adversary to break down our resistance to the reality and truth of the Kingdom.

The culmination of this parable are the words, "Let anyone with ears, listen!" The dominant idea in this parable is about hearing. These last words are not simply window dressing, a kind of ethical guilt trip at the end to jar us out of whatever else we might be doing. The point is: how we listen to the word of God is determinative of our destiny. The key attitude in our lifetime is that of receptive, attentive, repeated listening to what God is saying in the word of the kingdom: hearing the word in such a way that it makes changes in us.⁵⁴⁶

Before all else we must first be passive recipients of a gift we cannot produce ourselves, cannot merit, and cannot coerce. We wait for God to speak to us. Only at God's good pleasure, at his disposal and convenience, in a way and time left up to him, God speaks and keeps on speaking. We are to welcome and receive and keep on receiving, however strange or alien that word may initially seem. The verb for "bearing" fruit is imperfect ("kept on bringing forth grain"). The soil that regularly receives good seed will regularly be productive of fruitful harvest. In this we have the hint of a promise God makes: to the one who has, even more will be given. But to the one who rejects, even what he has will be taken away.

This parable indicates several reasons why the kingdom of God, now being made present through the medium of the spoken word, is not producing the drama and decisive change in history people expected it might when it finally showed up with God's Messiah:

1. Some people simply do not understand it. They are contacted by the spoken word of the kingdom. Physically they hear the words, but inwardly they cannot make sense of it.
2. Some people understand the word but give it only temporary welcome. For some it is a joyful reception that becomes bitter and troublesome because of difficulties that arise. For others the word comes into a highly competitive situation, where there are other words and ways that

⁵⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren (1990) *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. XXI, *Kierkegaard's Writings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (pp. 33–34).

⁵⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. (1989). *Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (pp. 12).

⁵⁴⁶ Snodgrass, *Intent*: "By adapting Isaiah 6 the parable points to the fact that God's seed is being sown in the proclamation of the kingdom. Involvement in the kingdom depends on the reception the proclaimed seed receives in human ears and hearts. Some people close off hearing just as in Isaiah's day and place themselves outside what God is doing." (p. 161).

are so deeply rooted already that it cannot find enough nourishment to flourish permanently and regularly.

So, this word-form of the kingdom is not coercive or persuasive for many who hear it, even for some whom one would expect to be among the most receptive and ready. In Matthew 11-12 we encountered doubts from John, unresponsiveness in the towns where Jesus did most of his initial teaching and miracles, and strong rejection and debate by the religious elite of Israel.

This parable prepares us for this whole teaching section. This first parable is given to the disciples in an open forum. It is given also to the crowds of others present as well. It teaches the crowds as well as the disciples about how important it is to be the kind of person who can receive the words of God in a way that they accomplish what God intends them to. If those who do the will of Jesus' Father in heaven are the true kin of Jesus, then one must ask: how do I become such a person?

The first answer has already been given in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' answer is not a negating of the force of the Law or the Prophets. To hear the Word of God aright is not to sift it as if it were filled with chaff as well as good seed. To hear the Word of God aright takes more than following the well-established traditions of the elders or the example of the most highly respected religious zealots of the day. The righteousness God demands is far deeper (inward), broader (including the enemy) and higher (perfection is defined by God, not by contrast with the Gentiles or lax Jews) than that modelled by the Pharisees.

The second answer is given in the teaching on Mission. Jesus' answer is that God's Word is found in the proclamation and demonstration of the Kingdom in his preaching and that of his apostles whom he sent. We are to receive the Apostles as apostles. Even the smallest gestures of hospitality to that word and the bearers of that word will be rewarded. That Word is accompanied by trouble, even persecution. It is not a coercive Word that will sweep all obstacles away. It does require that we stand by Jesus and that Word, accepting even death in our solidarity to the Kingdom-word as it comes from Jesus. To listen aright is to accept even the hostility of one's own family by remaining loyal to the new family of God.

(3) Parables: Veiling and Unveiling the truth (13:10-17)

The puzzling thing about parables is noticed immediately by the disciples: parables not only have the ability to convey truth but to cover it up. This sort of indirect communication is an invitation for further thought and conversation. Parables strike many as riddles to be solved rather than as revelation to savor. Are the parables a means to penetrate or to punish incomprehension? Did Jesus make it more difficult to find the kingdom ("Seek first the kingdom of heaven...") or was he handing people a key to the door of the kingdom? This first parable is a parable about parables.

"In a situation where some are open to truth and some are not, parables, as imaginative challenge rather than simple proposition, are an appropriate way to communicate new ideas. For some they will break through the barriers to understanding, and to such people (like the disciples) the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven' will be 'given.' But others will remain impenetrable, and the seed will be lost, scorched, or choked."⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁷ R. T. France, *Matthew* (pp. 509–510).

The words in this section are troublesome for those assuming human freedom as the primary factor involved in response to the Kingdom. This parable stresses the importance of having ears to hear, of being receptive, welcoming soil (i.e., a listener attentive to and teachable by the word of the kingdom). What Jesus emphasizes in these words gives the reason he speaks in parables: divine freedom. One of the mysteries is why some are good, productive listeners and others are bad, unproductive recipients of the word of the kingdom. Jesus gives us insight.

One way of taking Jesus' words is to enclose God's responsibility within human responsibility. Jesus speaks in a veiled way in response to what is already true: the crowds have shown themselves spiritually blind and deaf, without understanding. He substantiates their listening with hardened hearts by speaking with patterns that require effort for understanding, an effort they are not willing to make. Yet the intent is on provoking them not to repeat the pattern Isaiah 6 indicates: where Israel hardened its heart and stopped its ears.

On this interpretation what the parable reveals is the hardness of their hearts, not the openness of the kingdom. Those who are not already receiving and being productive with the word of God have what little understanding they have taken from them. Previously Jesus spoke to them in more direct ways. His miracles were signs of his divine authority amid Israel. So, crowds have come out to learn more, but encounter words that are enigmatic riddles. By not pursuing them, by not being invited to pursue them as a called disciple, they are confused and frustrated and lose even what they might have already figured out.

An alternative way of taking this is to enclose human freedom within divine responsibility. This approach sees Jesus saying that, even having ears to hear the word of the kingdom is a gift of God, as much a gift as the word of the kingdom. It comes not from human willing. John puts it: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God." (1:12-13). Paul conveys this same idea by following Romans 1-8 on the gospel with Romans 9-11 on God's electing power. Faith saves but coming to faith is "not of the person who wills nor of the person who runs, but of the compassionate God" (Rom 9:16).

Salvation comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10), but the capability to understand the word of the kingdom in a saving way is itself a gift of God. So, parable communication functions as judgment when people harden themselves against God and as a gift to those who understand its meaning and embrace its implications. This theology of evangelism creates an ethic of modest believers. There is a prior prompting and enabling work of the Spirit of God where salvation occurs.⁵⁴⁸

Why is this so? For one thing, our "freedom" is powerfully limited by the Evil One's activity. Our free will is so strongly held captive by sin and the Evil One that, unless first energized and empowered by the work of God, it cannot choose to do the will of God. We are blind and deaf. Unless we are first healed, we cannot utilize our organs of reception, however clear the sight or loud and plain the voice. The presupposition of the Godspell is the Badspell. If we find ourselves

⁵⁴⁸ Donald Hagner in Longenecker, *Parables*: "Belief and receptivity, on the one hand, are attributed to the grace of God. For the words of verse 11, "to know the mysteries of the kingdom has been given to you"—which occur in the form of a divine passive—indicate that God is the source of the disciples' knowledge, as well as their receptivity to that knowledge (cf. 11:25–27). Unbelief and unreceptivity, on the other hand, are attributed to the hardheartedness of those who do not respond (hence the full quotation of Isa 6:9–10)." (p. 105).

hearing the Word and seeing the kingdom, we can only credit God's healing. The division here is not between the especially good and especially bad. In this case, none of the hardness or evil is of God, but all of the receptiveness and good is from God.

Jesus puts it starkly (with emphasis on you): "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (13:11) The passives are "divine passives"—the common way of speaking of God's action without having to use God's name. Amazingly, God gives to this ordinary set of humans the ability to know the things of the kingdom but those who are rejecting and wrangling about its reality and demands do not have that gift given to them by God.

The normal state of humans after the fall is ignorance of the kingdom of God. The losses in the rebellion against God were epistemological (involving our ability to know) as well as moral. A veil fell over our connections with the real world. Our perceptions of God as well as our perception of our true identity and destiny became muddled. Whenever anyone has knowledge of God's ruling activity in history, we can be sure it is the result of an active gifting by God—and an active reception of that gifting.

If we ask how is it that God can justly keep this knowledge secret from some while gifting others, we say that the purpose of Jesus' coming was to make that knowledge an "open secret." The disciples were commissioned to share what Jesus taught with all the world. Yet there is throughout the New Testament an indication that "pearls" are not to be cast before swine; that people will find only when they seek; that the "wise" and self-righteous cannot encounter a revelation of God that counters and challenges their wisdom. There are ways of existing that render the knowledge of God impossible. This is the case for the knowledge of almost anything. Every sort of object of knowledge has its conditions of knowing, without which it remains an unknown quantity (a microbe requires a microscope; the furthest stars a telescope and then we need training to know what to look for).

Spiritual blindness is the effect of wickedness, not the result of some arbitrary prior action of a petty God who restricts some people while privileging others. Unbelief is not rooted in the fact that Jesus speaks in an indirect manner in parables making belief difficult or impossible but is rooted in the hardened hearts of unbelievers. Some see an act of mercy in this way of treating the unrepentant. By not exposing those already set against God to more clarity, Jesus minimizes their responsibility. They are not led further into greater culpability but are "left alone," as their responses already indicate they want to be. They want God out of their life. This is one way God gets out.

In the end we must say two things together: spiritual perception and openness is a good gift of God; spiritual blindness and resistance is the bad result of wickedness. In the first case, the credit is God's. In the second case, the credit goes to the one who embraces the evil. In a word, we must be "compatibilists" on this matter. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are not like water and oil. They are two sides of one truth. What is happening in Jesus' ministry is the result of God's divine initiative, Old Testament prophecy and the expression of a horrendous spiritual dullness brought about by human sin and the cunning activity of the divine enemy called Satan or the Devil. The devastating results of evil fall squarely on the shoulders of those who embrace it, yet this world and its fate never slip out of the control of its divine King. Even when the situation is dire, judgment imminent, still God seeks repentance.

Whatever we might say about parables in the light of this passage, we cannot say their only purpose is to make it more difficult to get to God. If Jesus wished simply to hide the truth from

hardened sinners, he would not have spoken to them at all. Not speaking at all would be an even more effective dodge than a difficult puzzle to solve if his ultimate goal was to make God's revelation inaccessible.⁵⁴⁹ His mission is to lost sinners but only some of those sinners are, like the prodigal son, sick of their sin. Others are self-righteously unaware of their sin (like the elder brother). Jesus will not cast pearls before swine, so he speaks in such a way that the door is unlocked from the divine side but must still be opened from the human side.

The parable of the sower opens the possibility of a conversation between a person and God. The parable invites listeners to ask who the sower and seed are and what sort of soil they might be. God's own revelation in Jesus Christ is the door of enlightenment through which the disciple enters only to find even more knowledge and understanding. It is the door that remains shut to those who find Jesus Christ an impossible person in whom to believe.

Jesus comes to reveal the Father and disclose the inauguration of the messianic era in which the kingdom is active in a new way on earth. Those who do not wish this enlightenment react with hostility and resentment. The light that melts the butter hardens the clay. Jesus is commissioned as the divine visitation, the messianic prophet and priest. He is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel. Because of the stance people already take toward God, this greater and more vivid unveiling of the Lord only intensifies what is already lurking in their hearts.

Jesus indicates that his experience is the same as Isaiah. Prophets in the Old Testament also proclaimed the Word of the Lord, only to have it be unfruitful in the lives of most hearers. Yet in the midst of this rejection there is joy: the astounding grace of God that transforms some. The disciples stand with Jesus at the inauguration of the era of the Messiah. The words and works of the Messiah are what they witness. These were foreshadowed and foretold by the prophets and responded to even in their day by "the righteous." They knew there was more, but they were not privileged to receive that more.

So, the disciples are favored not only because of the turning point in time when they live, but because of the quality of the revelation they receive. They see what others only foresaw; they hear what others only imagined would be said. What is given in the Old Testament is a shadow by comparison with the bright light in which they stand. What is a reflected image seen dimly in a burnished metal mirror in the Old Testament, is face-to-face encounter in Jesus Christ. Even we who follow after these early disciples live and move and have our being in the reflected glory as expressed in those disciples' words.

They are also privileged because of what they are promised: they will be given even more than they have received so far, until what they have is an abundance. That is partially fulfilled now. Jesus will give them more parables and direct instruction, enhancing their understanding. After Easter their minds will be opened even more broadly to see the thoroughly saturated way the Old Testament witnesses throughout to the living Christ.

Most fully, however, this promise refers to their participation in the coming kingdom at the end of history. They will experience nothing less than the direct and unveiled, unopposed kingdom of God itself. They will know full fellowship with God.

⁵⁴⁹ Snodgrass, *Intent*: "Four things are obvious: (1) the harsh language of Isa 6:9–10 is a prophetic instrument for warning and challenge; (2) it expresses the certainty of God's coming judgment for a people who are past hearing; (3) the words of Isa 6:9 became the classic expression to speak of the people's hardness of heart; and (4) the proclamation still expects and seeks some to hear and follow." (p. 160). Just as in Isaiah's day, some people close themselves off from hearing God's message for them.

By implication (and later parabolic teaching) those who do not or cannot grasp the reality of the kingdom of heaven as presented in the teaching of Jesus will have even what they already understand taken away from them. Those who enter the aloneness of godlessness end up in complete ignorance of God and his kingdom. Not that they have no religious ideas. They simply will not know God, the God who lovingly and persistently sought to bring them into his kingdom only to be faced with their more persistent rejection.⁵⁵⁰

The most frightening thing about this prospect is that it was a word spoken first of all over Israel, over God's own chosen people. They had been given the kingdom and promised participation in its final victorious triumph over evil. Yet here they are warned that their unbelief and incomprehension mean the loss of all the prerogatives given to them in the promises of God. God is not faithless here. It is that Israel has become faithless and thus ultimately godless.

Some thinkers experience confusion about the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, thinking them to refer simply to ordinary ethical qualities in all human beings. There is no such confusion here. Here blessings are extended not to people with good moral or personal qualities (humility, gentleness, zeal for justice, ability to bring reconciliation, etc.). They are extended to those who find Jesus to be the definitive way to know God. If the Sermon on the Mount can be subjected to an ethical-moralizing maneuver that cuts Christ out, the same cannot be said here. What is blessed by God is seeing Jesus as the messianic Son of Man engaged in inaugurating the kingdom of heaven. What is blessed by God is hearing the words of Jesus as the Word of God, calling people to change the way they think and live, invest all they have and are in order to obtain the priceless treasure of God's kingdom offered through Jesus Christ.

Jesus does not invite us to a vague spirituality or religious experience, much of which hardens us against the reality of the kingdom of heaven. He invites us into a discipleship whose instructor is the Word of the Kingdom given by Jesus himself. If we do not have the eyes to see Jesus as the sovereign Lord stepping into history to show us the kingdom of God, we show ourselves to be spiritually blind, however religious and ethical we may be. If we do not have ears to hear the divine footsteps in the sandals of Jesus, then we likely to be deaf to the voice of God in history.

Matthew 13:16 is another beatitude: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear."⁵⁵¹ In the context it might seem this is hardly a special favoring of God. The contrast is with the prophets and the righteous of old. The only difference between these disciples and those of old is one of timing. The prophets came too soon. They lived before Christ.

Even though timing is a critical matter, it is not the most important. Others stood about Jesus, seeing and hearing without perceiving or understanding. Their hearts are "dull." What is blessed for the disciples is that they are not among those whose knowledge and understanding is unfruitful. They are being trained to be scribes of the Kingdom (not simply scribes of the Pharisees or the Sadducees).

⁵⁵⁰ France, *Matthew*: "So the theme of division runs through these parables: unproductive and productive soil, good grain and weeds, good fish and bad. Those who find the treasure and the pearl stand out from other people in the extravagance of their response, and the householder of v. 52 is distinguished from others by his ability to produce the new as well as the old." (p. 500).

⁵⁵¹ "Your" is strongly emphasized, standing at first in the clause: ὑμῶν δὲ μακάριοι οἱ ὀφθαλμοί

John the Baptist saw and heard and wondered. His questions were valid in their own right. He was asking and seeking. Jesus pointed him to the deeds (the miracles of 8-9). He was blunt with Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum. They heard and saw and did not respond. The Pharisees also saw and heard and set about to destroy Jesus. His biological family were those with the longest and most intense history with Jesus. Even for them the issue is not physical proximity but doing the will of the Father in heaven.

These disciples are commissioned to replicate the ministry of Jesus. They were initially sent out in Matthew 10 with a variety of instructions about the manner and mode of their mission. Gifted and sent, they were to proclaim the Kingdom of God as they also healed and drove demons from the afflicted. What we readers have yet to learn is what that proclaiming of the Kingdom looks like? What are they to say or teach about the Kingdom? We are still somewhat in a position of knowing very little about the Kingdom. This bouquet of parables fills that lack. This is what the Kingdom is like and these are examples of the way in which the Kingdom is preached to those who are outsiders.

In the case of the deeds, Jesus said the person is blessed who finds nothing offensive in him. In the case of the words of the Kingdom, God's blessing comes with fruitful insight and understanding. In either case the appropriate response is the confession of the presence of the Kingdom in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This in turn leads to submitting to the discipline of learning from him and accepting his authority.

What prepares these disciples and disqualifies these others from understanding and entering into the blessing of God? It is a matter of their heart, as Isaiah's suggests. There are those whose heart longs to see and hear. The prophets who preached repentance (Jonah) and the righteous who sought wisdom (Solomon) were among those ready but unable because of their place in history. Those who take no offense in Jesus, who are "infants" to whom God can reveal hidden things, who recognize the Kingdom of God has overtaken them—these are able.

By contrast those who attribute Jesus' power to Beelzebul, who consider themselves "wise and intelligent" in the things of God—these manifest a dull heart. They are unteachable, unreachable, unapproachable by the surprising and "gentle" entrance of the Kingdom's power. There is nothing gentle in the violence being done to the Strong One whom Jesus binds to plunder his house. There is nothing hidden in the astounding miracles that release people from their disabilities and bondage. The Kingdom is visible and verbal directly in the face of those who are geographically and historically near Jesus and his twelve.

To see and hear aright means to hear the call of Jesus to the discipleship. It is to acknowledge that preaching the word of the Kingdom (even doing its powerful miracles) will mean trouble and persecution. It entails rejecting the anxieties of the world and the allurements of wealth. It leads to repudiating scandalous and lawless behavior. It means repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God who reveals the secrets of the Kingdom.

The poor in spirit and the persecuted are blessed because "theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." Jesus teaches us that such participation in the Kingdom is not automatic nor effortless. Disciples are greatly favored by hearing with understanding and seeing with insight. To them is the gift given of knowing the secrets of that Kingdom.

(4) The interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (13:18-23)

This is the “official” interpretation of the parable of the sower. There is no reason to believe Jesus did not give this account. Those who rule it out by claiming this to be Matthew’s own creation do so without evidence. They do so due to a pre-commitment that parables originally were purely eschatological and not ethical. In addition, these scholars also claim that parables originally had only one point and were without allegorical features. Both ideas have been shown to be untenable.⁵⁵²

The interpretation begins with an emphatic “You—hear then the parable of the sower.” The first who need to hear this carefully are those who consider themselves to be disciples. The push in this passage forces us all to ask what sort of soil we are—what sort of reception do we give to the Word of the kingdom?⁵⁵³ There are two major sorts: fruit-bearing soil and soils that do not bear fruit.

The **trodden pathway** is the first soil depicted. It is the entry point for us all. We all are exposed to the power and influence of the Evil one and his agents. The world we live in is not neutral. Satan is vigorously at work in opposition to the dispersal and effective reception of the word of God. The “birds” are the various deceptions afoot. Having embraced lies, the hearer of the truth of God cannot comprehend it. Such truth makes little sense and appears absurd, impossible, unreasonable, even anti-god.

It is as though we are built in such a way that we can know many things but cannot give ourselves to but one thing. We can see, perceive and even penetrate the rationality of various world views and religious visions. But we can only worship consistently one way. Those who do not make Jesus’ message of the kingdom their own become the prey of the Evil One. We are vulnerable when we do not want to know or do God’s will. The Devil’s activity is fully acknowledged, yet the responsibility is placed upon the hearer.

It is possible to live fully in a world where God’s great enemy is active and yet escape his designs. That is what the rest of the “soils” tell us. To be sure this part of the parable is a warning. Even those who expose themselves to the words of Jesus can miss the door into the kingdom of God. Entrance to the kingdom is not a matter simply of being part of the people of God, of standing in a great historic heritage, of being descendants of great heroes of the faith. It is a matter of hearing and becoming loyal to the message brought by the historical Jesus.

The **rocky soil** represents the person who does more than hear the word: this one receives it immediately with joy. There is no inner allegiance to the Evil One or entanglement with devilish lies that make receiving impossible. What destroys the potential in the Word from being realized are external pressures from the world, afflictions or persecution come and the potential disciple falls away from faith.

The stress here is on the possibility of joyful conversion followed by a tragic backing away

⁵⁵² Blomberg, *Parables* (pp. 20-22). Cf. Snodgrass, *Intent* (pp. 164-166): “The sayings of Jesus were shaped both in the oral tradition and by the Evangelists, but the interpretation fits the parable and has every claim to be in some form the explanation Jesus gave his disciples.” (p. 166).

⁵⁵³ Gibbs: *Matthew Vol. II*: “Jesus is answering the question of *why*, despite his ongoing ministry of words and deeds, so many people in Israel are not responding in faith and discipleship.” (p. 680).

from the kingdom.⁵⁵⁴ There are those for whom the benefits of salvation are initially very attractive....until it becomes clear that keeping the commands of salvation brings “friendly” fire from one’s compatriots. It is a shock to them to discover they are not exempt from the usual human fare of pain and affliction. One is not given a guarantee against the terrible tragedies of human life when entering the kingdom of God.

If the Evil One’s snatching at the Words of the kingdom are subtle, the opposition of one’s fellow humans are hardly that. It is difficult to face the gauntlet of friends, family and public, all of whom may well take strong measures to reverse a commitment to become a life-long disciple of Christ. In this case it succeeds. We may ask why?

The problem resides in the lack of inner depth of commitment. This is a person of the moment, a “weather vane-ish” person. The Jesus of joy is acceptable, but not the suffering Jesus. These are unwilling to risk life and limb for the Word of the kingdom. Theirs is a religion of advantage and self-interest, of conformity to the popular and the convenient. The costliness of discipleship is not endured.

So, these appear to become Christians and certainly exhibit the experiences of the Christian. Yet they do not last. Their commitment is to something else. They are attached to the message of Jesus only superficially. This one enthusiastically starts the journey of faith, only to return to the old path.

The **weed-laden soil** is characterized as having two great competitors to the word of the kingdom: the anxiety of the age and the lie of wealth. In this case the word is choked out. This is not the person who falls away after seemingly entering the kingdom enthusiastically. This is the one who is neutralized, still around but unfruitful. These remain in the church but are overwhelmed by their entanglements with other matters. The thorns are the seductions of the flesh in the form either of what frightens us or what captivates us. Our imagination and life-focus are drawn by the bright flame of danger or of promise.

(1) The anxieties of the age (cares of the world) weigh in on us all, pushing and shaping us, demanding nervous energy and attention. They become a constant and heavy weight, so preoccupying our time and activity that we wind up spending our lives on them rather than on the priorities of the kingdom. We “understand” the word of the kingdom.

We may well be willing to buck opposition and to endure afflictions for Christ’s sake. But we find ourselves so deeply encased in the everyday affairs that our expenditure of life is metered out caring for this or that trivial affair. We seek to bring under our control many of the factors and forces we cannot in the end master. We need to be informed and intelligent, yet we cannot give equal weight to the newspaper as we give to the Bible. If we do, we will be depressed and hopeless in a world that continues to generate larger and more complex problems as the

⁵⁵⁴ “They may be reformed for a while, and may be very obedient; but when difficulties arise, there is an end to their obedience. And commonly it puts an end to their religious affections, their seeming love and zeal. They can be friends to Christ as long as he does well by them as to their temporal interest and natural inclinations, and spares them; but when he comes to require them to part with them, they are out with him and forsake him. They don’t feel such affections towards him as they used to do. And the manner of their religious failing is fitly called ‘withering away’ in the text. For as the plants that wither by the scorching heat of the sun don’t dry at once, but decay by degrees till they are quite dead, so it commonly is with the religion of the stony-ground hearers when they meet with difficulties: their religion don’t cease at once, but by degrees.” Edwards, *Parables Vol. II* (p. 85).

generations move on.

(2) The lie of wealth (lure of wealth) is the promise offered to those who have decided the flow of history is too swift and massive to master. So, they turn to the private pursuit of wealth. If we turn from the fears, we have about the world to the promises the world makes, then we can be trapped in the golden cage of our ambitions. Wealth possesses the capability of seducing, bewitching and corrupting our imagination.

The **good soil** is known by its continuing productiveness. All that is required is welcoming the word of the kingdom, understanding it and doing it. The conditions of fruitfulness and the effects of welcoming the word of the kingdom mirror each other. To be fruitful involves breaking with the evil one, refusing the anxieties of the age, resisting the lure of wealth, acquiring willingness to endure persecution and affliction. All of these are signs of the transforming power of kingdom grace. While the fruitfulness varies from person to person, all good soil is equally receptive to the word of the kingdom.

The point is that opportunity does not guarantee success, nor does the proclamation of the word insure its success. Sin is not eradicated simply by the increased presence of the sheer knowledge of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is present in such a way that it allows room for the free response of individuals. The kingdom is present in gentleness. For the time being it can be encountered without understanding, received and then rejected, or received without it ever producing the effects inherent in its nature. Privilege and potential do not automatically translate into actual benefit.⁵⁵⁵

This parable prepares us for the other parables. The secrets of the kingdom are known only where the word of the kingdom is embraced—not simply heard superficially but understood and acted upon. Christian faith is neither a matter of salvation by knowledge nor salvation by good works. It is a salvation of grace involving both knowledge and action, both divine initiative and human response.

The presence of the kingdom comes amidst several other realities: The Evil One, the world and its pressures, the flesh and its clamoring desires. It does not set these aside at this time. Only later will the kingdom appear in victorious form. Now it is in the fragile form of the spoken word of Jesus Christ. That is why we must bend every effort to ensure that we are listening properly. We can miss the voice speaking or we can hear it and not grasp its titanic significance for our destiny. We can even understand the word without being able to actualize its meanings in our lives. Jesus again is repeating in another form the danger of saying, ‘Lord, Lord,’ without building our lives on his words. This parable tells us how that happens.

Parable points:

Jesus focuses his interpretation on the effect hearing the word of God has on people. The key lies in how people receive the knowledge of the Kingdom based on hearing the word (vs. 9, 19). The section standing between the parable and its interpretation also focuses on hearing and understanding the “mysteries” or “secrets” of the Kingdom of God. So, this parable has to do with gaining knowledge of the “mysteries” of the Kingdom of God through productive in-depth hearing of the word of the Kingdom. The key focus is on the soil (not

⁵⁵⁵ Snodgrass, *Intent*: “The sowing of seed in Jesus’ proclamation is restoring Israel and establishing God’s kingdom, but the parable is also a warning for hearers not to fail as Israel failed with Isaiah. One greater than Isaiah is here.” (p. 175).

the sower or seed). The only valid hearing is that sort that results in productive fruitfulness (echoes of the Sermon on the Mount). Craig Blomberg sees this parable as a “three point” parable, though clearly the greatest emphasis falls on the activity of human hearing in response to the divine activity of sowing the seed:⁵⁵⁶

1. God is like a sower, scattering living words of the Kingdom to all.
2. Some people are like unfruitful soil, responding with less than saving faith because of several powerful forces that block the seed from bearing fruit. Could these be the three great enemies of the Kingdom?
 - a) Some fall victim to the enticements to sin by the evil one and do not respond (The devil)
 - b) Some receive it temporarily with joyful enthusiasm only to lose courage when fellow worldlings oppose the changes and create trouble (The world)
 - c) Some show genuine interest and conviction only to allow the desires for and entanglements with pursuing wealth or anxiety over being successful in the world to choke out their focus on the Kingdom (The flesh)
3. Some people are like fruitful, productive soil, responding by perceiving its true meaning and importance. They obey it and, through discipleship, realize Kingdom-results in their lives and in the world they live in.⁵⁵⁷

Kingdom Teachings: Knowledge of the Kingdom of God is available through the “word of the Kingdom.” It is up to those who hear the message of the Kingdom to let that word become fruitful. Contrary to much expectation, the Kingdom is not present as a coercive, powerful, visible Kingdom, sweeping away all resistance and all opposition. It is present in a way that can be resisted and rejected. The Kingdom of God has come into the world to be received by some but rejected by others. In the present day the Kingdom will only have partial success. That success is dependent on the response of humans. So, the Kingdom is working quietly, secretly among humans. It does not force itself. Where this word of the Kingdom is received, it brings forth much fruit.

(5) The Parable of the Weeds of the Field (13:24-30)

The **parable of the weeds** (tares or darnel)⁵⁵⁸ sets up a contrast between the time when the good wheat grain and the darnel ryegrass grow together and the time of harvest when the wheat grain and the darnel will be separated from each other.

This story confronts us again with the great enemy of God. In the parable of the sower his

⁵⁵⁶ Blomberg, *Parables* (p. 228). This does not rule out a secondary emphasis on God sowing his people: “Isaiah 6 is the one text that brings together the concern for hearing the word of God and the idea of the remnant as a holy seed. If we are correct that Isaiah 6 is the frame on which the parable was formed, then there is no need to drive a wedge between God sowing his people and God sowing his word. It is by sowing the word that the end-time people is planted.” Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 169).

⁵⁵⁷ Keener, *Matthew IVP*: “The only conversions that count in the kingdom are those confirmed by a life of discipleship. Jesus sowed the Word widely, but not all his hearers persevered in discipleship.” (on Matthew 13:18).

⁵⁵⁸ Darnel ryegrass (*lolium temulentum*) usually grows in the same fields as wheat. It was a serious weed until modern sorting machinery enabled darnel seeds to be separated efficiently from seed wheat. In early growth the two look very similar until the ear appears. Wheat turns golden and the darnel black.

activity was to keep the message of the kingdom from securing root in the hearts of hearers. In this parable the enemy is engaged in a different endeavor. The good seed has been sown in the soil. That cannot be undone. Instead, what the Evil One does is to sow bad seed in the midst of the good. The seed in this case is not the contrasting words of the Kingdom of light and darkness. Rather the image has changed. The seed are the children of light and the children of darkness. These are people who are fruitful for either Kingdom.

If we see God as the sower of good in our world, then we face a sharp question. If God created all things good, if God is actively sowing good seed, then why is there so much evil in our world, if the kingdom is now present whence the remaining evil that surrounds us, even evil coming from the very center of the Church of God? Jesus' answer is that evil, wherever it appears, is the child of God's enemy. God is not the author of evil [period!].

The accompanying question is: if the kingdom is present, where is judgment on evil? Doesn't the kingdom bring justice and righteousness? Why isn't judgment happening, now!?

Then the major question can be raised: What is to be done? If the evil does not come from God and it spoils the good sowing God does, then ought we not root it out? Is not coexistence with evil and evil persons a sort of participation and legitimation of evil? Should we not enroll in open combat against these evils and evil doers? Do we not have permission, even instruction, to root out evil people from the community of faith? Or out of the larger civic community?

Luther sees this as referring to the visible Church (as have most interpreters). He put it this way, "those fanatics who insist that there be no tares among them accomplish only that there is no wheat among them."⁵⁵⁹ This is what the master of the parable tells his servants—let the two grow together, side by side until the harvest. Only then will it be clear what is the darnel ryegrass and what is the good wheat. Then the two will be separated and face very different fates. Judgment will happen but not prematurely and not hastily. It is not always clear within the Church who are rocky or thorny soils and who are good soil.

There is a distressing history that suggests the wisdom of this patience. The witch hunts and the inquisition within the Church are great dark and shameful stains. Too focused a concern with evil creates new opportunities for evil. Too rigorous an attempt to purify the Church destroys the Church. This is sort of like the saturation bombing of a city to rid it of enemies: we wind up destroying what we were seeking to save. What this means in actual practice is much messier than the principle articulated in this parable.

We cannot take this passage in isolation, as though this is the only word or the final word spoken on the problem of dealing with the Evil One in human affairs. Afterall, Matthew 18 suggests a pattern for Church discipline. This is not a counsel for passivity in the face of evil or evil doers within the community of faith. There are balancing passages that suggest confrontation and even expulsion from the community is possible (and required).⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁹ Luther, *Works Vol. 67* (p. 200). *Works Vol. 58*: "Therefore, we, too, must let Judas remain among the apostles and tolerate wicked scoundrels in the true Church. In short, it will always be the case that wherever God establishes a fine, pure church, the devil immediately builds a chapel next door." (p. 444).

⁵⁶⁰ Snodgrass, *Intent*: "While Matthew's Gospel prohibits judging, it also creates tension because other texts insist that the differences between good and evil plants/people can be recognized and that false prophets—deceptive as they may be—can be recognized (7:15–20; 12:33–37; 15:13–14; cf. 3:7–12). That Matthew would suggest passivity toward evil is difficult to conceive. Twice he reports Jesus' radical

There is a libertinism that can find refuge in this parable, a do-nothingism that allows the mold of evil to corrupt all the good. There are those who are positively, persistently (even publicly) evil in their deeds and false in their teaching. These are persons who must be removed from the Christian fellowship lest their vivid challenge to the clear commands of the Lord be given credence and lead weaker and less mature astray. Those who sin with impunity are to be confronted and even excommunicated if they will not repent.

The reality of Jesus' ministry confronts Israel with the presence of the kingdom in word and deed. Its effect is a division between the true Israel (who hear and welcome the kingdom-message) and the false Israel, who turn out to be agents of the Evil One.⁵⁶¹ Unfortunately, that division is not crystal clear. It is ambiguous. The implicit challenge is whether we are under the rule of God or the rule of Satan. This is an either/or that stands at the root of present reality and future destiny. But we cannot always discern where people stand.

This parable also gives another way of addressing the observation that there are many in the land of Palestine, good Bible-quoting members of the covenant people of God, who dismiss Jesus in indifference or active hostility. Not only do these show themselves unresponsive to the presence of the kingdom, but they will also face inevitable judgment at the end of this age. They place themselves outside the promises of the covenant and will be cast into the fires of destruction rather than enter God's visibly established kingdom. But at present who is who in the Kingdom is a very fuzzy issue indeed.

Yet there is an issue since Jesus says, "the field is the world" (3:38). Does this not suggest a wider viewpoint?⁵⁶² In the interpretation of the parable below, it appears the issue is the mysteriousness of God's Kingdom as present, a new world order arriving, yet opposition to it continues. The "sons and daughters of light" have to continue to live with the "sons and daughters of darkness." The current world order is not abolished but we continue to live in a world that has both good and bad folks. That also means in a Christian fellowship that also is infected with evil as well. What disciples need to do is stay strong, stay patient, stay hopeful: in the end the anticipated judgment of the world and the separation will happen.

(6) The Twin Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (13:31-33)

Jesus offers two parables of "growth": **the mustard seed and the leaven**. The contrast is between the smallness of the beginnings and the greatness of the end result. If the kingdom centers in Jesus Christ, its appearance during his earthly lifetime is absurdly tiny and negligible. Yet God has chosen this seemingly infinitesimal means to produce an infinitely significant end: a sheltering tree and a nourishing loaf. The focus is on the unimpressive and unexpected nature

teaching that the part of the body causing sin should be cut off (5:29-30; 18:8-9). Also, Matthew records directions for dealing with sin in the community which include both confrontation and excommunication (18:15-17). If one notices as well Matthew's warnings of judgment for all (including Christians), he is anything but passive in confronting evil." (p. 203).

⁵⁶¹ Barth, *CD Vol. IV.2*: "The antithesis here is absolute. To hear and do His words, or not to hear or do them, is like building a house either on the rock or on the sand, with all that the one or the other course involves (Mt. 7:24f.). According to Mt. 7:13f. we have to choose between the narrow gate and way which leads to life and the broad way which leads to destruction. According to Mt. 13:24f, 36f. we are to be wholesome salt or salt that has lost its savour. According to Mt. 13:47f. we are to be good fish or bad fish—and it is only a matter of time before it will appear openly which is the case." (p. 159).

⁵⁶² Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* (pp. 408-409); France, *Matthew* (p. 533)

Matthew 13:24-30 Parable of the weeds in the field

of the kingdom present in Jesus in contrast with its enormous outcome and impact.

If we seek to measure the preaching of Jesus against the various philosophers of history or the mighty ideologies of our day, Jesus appears weak and foolish. Even today most moderns choose not to put their bets on Jesus. Science has become the great prophet of truth (with Jesus lumped in with the dust heap of religious superstitions). Or we are offered the broad mindedness of tolerance—religious “truth” being not so much a matter of cognitive claims as an emotive sensibility about life. Jesus offers us an aesthetic, not an answer to our quest for meaning. Or we are swept into the psychologizing of all of life. What is crucial are the words of Freud, Jung, family-systems or some modern self-help wisdom.

There are so many messages, so many scenarios for the “good life,” so many philosophies and religious gurus, so many advocates. We may well ask how we can find the “needle in the hay stack” among so many possibilities? Surely, God’s message will come with the fanfare necessary for us to know it when we see it. Yet here it is: only a modest, humble message, tucked away in a funny corner of human history, offered by a relatively unimpressive, uneducated, unemployed wandering teacher. How are we supposed to discern that this is where God’s kingdom is making itself known?

The strikingly modest appearance of the kingdom in human affairs means it is possible to neglect or overlook it. It is not an advertiser’s dream. Human perception and judgment may make a fundamental mistake, seeing the smallness and seeming insignificance of Jesus’ small movement. Yet there is power inherent in the kingdom as it is now humbly present to become the world-tree and bread-for-the-world. That is the astounding thing. It is not what we expected or what we can easily sell in our world where the “big deal” is so important.

What such “humility” does is to provide space for human freedom.⁵⁶³ What God seeks is not a coercion of our will, nor even a type of persuasion where we look back and say, “I couldn’t help myself.” The humility of the kingdom, present in the word of the kingdom, offered by children of the kingdom (some of whom appear to be inauthentic) is what we confronted with. If we are those whose heart longs for God, seeks after the true and living God (and not one who will simply echo our own preferences and projections), then this word will find sufficient roots to spring up to fruitfulness.

Having said that we must admit that Jesus uses here what might be somewhat “shocking” elements. They are designed to sting enough to motivate people into puzzling over the point of the parables. Jesus wants them eventually to reach the correct insight. In the case of the mustard seed, there may be an allusion to Ezekiel 17:23 (and 31:6; Dan. 4:12; Psa. 104:12) in which birds come to rest in the branches of a mighty cedar of Lebanon. The birds are taken to be all the peoples of the earth. Yet a mustard seed, for all its smallness, only becomes the largest bush-tree of the ordinary garden, about 10-12 feet in height.

⁵⁶³ This is the complaint of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky, *The Brother’s Karamozov*: Jesus misjudged human nature in refusing the Devil’s temptations. The majority of humans cannot bear the burden of freedom Jesus brought. The multitude need the domination of the Church to guide them. Compulsion provides the means for humanity to live and die happily. “There are three powers, only three powers on earth, capable of conquering and holding captive forever the conscience of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness –these powers are miracle, mystery and authority. You rejected [them]....” (p. 246) Trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (North Point Press: San Francisco, 1990).

What is also surprising is the large amount of dough that is leavened in this parable.⁵⁶⁴ Furthermore, leaven is frequently a symbol for evil in the Old Testament. Jesus turns the symbol around and uses it for the very heart of righteousness: the dynamic effects of the presence of the kingdom. The strangeness of this image for the kingdom is another element meant to jar attention. Jesus uses other strange images to do the same, for example in the picture of the kingdom arriving like a thief in the night [24:43].

Donald Carson notes that there might be some difference in stress in terms of the dynamic at work, moving from the smallness of the beginning to the largeness of the effects.⁵⁶⁵ The mustard seed stresses the extensiveness of the consequences. The leaven may stress the intensiveness of the transformation brought by the kingdom. In both cases there is an intrinsic relationship between the small beginning and the large result.⁵⁶⁶

Parable Points:

The points of the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven are virtually the same. The Kingdom, now in appearance small and seemingly insignificant or inconsequential, will in time attain significant proportions. The end is already present in the beginning. From a small beginning, a large end result!⁵⁶⁷ Its hidden power to change life and history is already at work, if people only have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Kingdom Teaching: The Kingdom is present in what appears to be its actual contradiction. It is concentrated in its expression in the less than impressive person of Jesus of Nazareth. His firm disciples who understand the difficult message of the Kingdom of God are few and still rather shallow. It would be easy to underestimate the reality and power of this sort of Kingdom. What begins in this small way will have world-shaking, world-shaping effects. One day it will give shelter and bread to the nations. One should not be confused about the reality and nature of the kingdom present in Jesus: God's longed-for kingdom is already here and its fulfillment in all its power and glory will grow out of that unexpected beginning.

(7) The intent of speaking in Parables (13:34-35)

This is a second statement giving reasons for speaking in parables. In this case the stress is on the fulfillment of prophecy. This paragraph also serves as a transition in audience, highlighting the difference between the crowds who remain outside and those within the circle of discipleship. The boundary between the two groups has to do with understanding. This saying does not mean Jesus spoke solely in parables to the crowds. Rather the point is that when he spoke to the more general public, parables were part of what he used in communicating his message. So, the issue of hiding the truth arises here as well.

Always there seem to be things that are not obvious, things true and operative right before our eyes, but not yet seen in such a way that we can articulate and use them. These words of prophecy originally appear in a Psalm. The Psalmist compares various facets of the history of the

⁵⁶⁴ If measurements are properly understood, most take this to be about a bushel of dough (or thirteen liters by dry measurement). It would produce enough bread for about 100 or more people.

⁵⁶⁵ Carson, *Matthew*, (p. 366).

⁵⁶⁶ Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 2*: "The point is this: despite all appearances, between the minute beginning and the grand culmination there is an organic unity." (p. 416).

⁵⁶⁷ Blomberg, *Parables* (pp. 284-287).

Israelites with each other. Out of that comparison, new insights into the righteous acts of God in redemption are put forward for contemplation. Such meditation is meant to bring about the transformation of mindset of those hearing or using the Psalm.

In this case Jesus is doing the same thing. He is producing stories in which the comparison throws up insight into the righteous acts of God in redemption. In public and amid the crowds, Jesus teaches and works miracles. Yet the general public does not grasp the significance of what is occurring. The parables point to the proper interpretation, inviting the sort of probing and mental rumination that will lead the hearer to the conclusion that the kingdom of heaven is present and active.

In effect, Jesus is underlining a point he made over against the Pharisees and scribes. They ask for a sign in the teeth of the dramatic miracles of Jesus. No sign of the sort they seek will be given them. Deciphering the truth of Jesus' claims does not need and will not be given any more "proof." There is more than enough for those who seek the truth and hunger and thirst after righteousness. For those who are "wise and intelligent," already settled in mind and habit, no amount of revelation of any sort will suffice.

The problem with history, even divine history, is its ambiguity and amorphousness. It does not come with flags, trumpets and a written text to designate its precise meaning. If there is no prophet to whom God tells that meaning, we are left with other means to map the significance of what is going on. The parables of the kingdom are Jesus' map to the new era that comes into being with him. The kingdom is being inaugurated in a new way. The times are hastening toward a dramatic culmination at which time judgment and the ending of opposition will occur.

With the scenario he gives in the parables in hand, the properly instructed student of the things of God will be able to set all events of personal and corporate history into proper perspective. Those who are fleeing God's presence or are entangled in the anxieties of this age or lures of wealth will not be able to decipher the meaning of the times properly.

There are several things hidden from before the foundation of the world that are now made clear in Jesus' comparisons. The preeminent secret disclosed is that the kingdom is already present in their midst in a quiet, modest way. All one needs at this point in time to be a part of its dynamic is a quiet, persistent welcoming of the word of the kingdom into one's life, allowing it to be the dominant influence determining one's priorities and principles.

The current presence of the kingdom does not produce a purified community where the good and the evil are clearly distinct and can be separated. The surprising thing is that the kingdom is so inauspicious, so seemingly insignificant and minuscule a current reality that we can overlook it. Yet its dynamic is such that the smallness of the origins will be followed by extensive and intensive consequences.

Jesus demands response based on what is already available. He undercuts the legitimacy of the complaint that "it wasn't clear enough" or "it's not fair that some have more light than others." God's revelation is sufficiently available that people can seek and find the way into the Kingdom.

(8) The Parable of the Weeds interpreted (13:36-43)

The interpretation of the parable of the weeds by Jesus provides a second such interpretation in this teaching session. What we learn from it supplements the interpretation of the parable of the sower. There the presence of the kingdom is made known by the word. Here the presence of the kingdom is made known by the children of the kingdom who are scattered into the world.

Matthew 13:36-43 Parable of the weeds interpreted

It is the Son of Man himself (Jesus) who “sows” these hearers and doers of the word into the world. The kingdom is his. He stands as the final judge of human affairs. At the coming of the end of ordinary history, he will separate evil and all doers of evil from the righteous and consummate the kingdom he inaugurates with his first coming.

For some interpreters the fact that the field is the world is a surprise. They had expected the parable’s focus to be on the present reality of evil within the Church. In such a case the parable would ban inner-churchly violence against people thought to be disruptive because they are the children of the Evil One, not of the children of God. The point then would be that we are not to use violence in purging the Church of those who come to be seen as defective or dangerous. Some who find this meaning in the parable see it as standing in tension with Matthew 18’s counsel for excommunicating openly unrepentant, sinning Christians.

But that interpretation does not survive the explanation given to the disciples. It is tragic that the inquisition and other distortions of Matthew 18 did not remain in the center of biblical balance.⁵⁶⁸ What this says is that there are two planters in world history: The Son of Man and the Evil One. Both are placing their agents into the world. Both are active. The children of the kingdom experience the agents of the Devil in their midst wherever they are planted in the world. This “mystery of iniquity” is also part of the secrets of the kingdom Jesus portrays.

We have come through an era where we have made too little of the Devil just as there have been other times in Church history where too much has been made of him. We never will understand the true power or activity of evil in ourselves or human history if we remove the devil from our calculations of what is going on. To be sure the central actor here is the Son of Man, who not only seeds the world with his agents, but who separates the good from the evil at the end of this age. The devil and all his allies will be cast into eternal punishment.

What is in view mainly is not the Church but the kingdom. The Church may be the chief

⁵⁶⁸ Luther, *Works Vol. 58*: “Based on this example, now you can also understand how one should stand in relation to the weeds, which are false doctrine or sects and false Christians (of which this Gospel speaks). For this is just how it happens in the Church. We cannot avoid having wicked scoundrels among us, such as heretics, sects, and schisms. For as soon as one is rooted out, the evil spirit stirs up yet another. How, then, do I treat them? I should root them out, and yet not strike them dead. ... Accordingly, you must counter them by resisting them with the Word and faith. Do not let your pure faith, confession, and Christian life be taken from you or hindered. Admonish and rebuke them as much as you can. If that does not help, then excommunicate them publicly, so that everyone knows to regard them as noxious weeds and to shun them.” (pp. 454-455). Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIa Q10 Art. 8 sees a difference between unbelievers (who are not to be compelled) and heretics/apostates who once believed and are: “Among unbelievers there are some who have never received the faith, such as the heathens and the Jews, and these are by no means to be compelled to the faith, in order that they may believe, because to believe depends on the will. Nevertheless they should be compelled by the faithful, if it be possible to do so, so that they do not hinder the faith, by their blasphemies, or by their evil persuasions, or even by their open persecutions. It is for this reason that Christ’s faithful often wage war with unbelievers, not indeed for the purpose of forcing them to believe, because even if they were to conquer them, and take them prisoners, they should still leave them free to believe, if they will, but in order to prevent them from hindering the faith of Christ. On the other hand, there are unbelievers who at some time have accepted the faith, and professed it, such as heretics and all apostates. Such should be submitted even to bodily compulsion, that they may fulfil what they have promised, and hold what they at one time received.” This is one of the unfortunate roots of the inquisition.

agent and sign of the presence of the kingdom. But it cannot produce a Who's Who of the kingdom. It may well do so for the visible Church. But they are not identical. We have no humanly infallible way of validating the identity cards of professing Christians to say they are authentic children of the kingdom (nor to say some folks that now appear to be outsiders are in fact eternal outsiders) even though Matthew underscores the mixed nature of the Church.⁵⁶⁹ The nature of the Church means it is to be a gathering of the children of the King. Nonetheless, it is impossible now infallibly to separate productively fruitful hearers of the word from those who will fall away or have that word's effects choked out in their lives—or whose current resistance will be changed into repentant obedience. There are two sorts picked out that will be plucked from the midst of the kingdom at the judgment:

(1) The scandals—these do not teach all the things Jesus has commanded and so damage the faith and love of others. They are destructive to the kingdom because they actively prevent others from becoming disciples or because they lead those who are disciples away from keeping the law of God in Christ. They are stumbling blocks, causing others to sin.

(2) The lawless—these are those who do more than teach wrong things or are the occasion that leads others to sin. These live lawless lives and by that very reason become scandals, obstacles and stumbling-blocks to the faith and love of others. Their immorality is worn as a badge of advanced spirituality. So highly disparaging of legalism are these that they come to disparage God's commands as well.

What is needed, says Jesus, is careful listening. If there a message we need to be sure to get, it is this one. The destinies are eternal fire or eternal glory. The lords to be served are the divine Son of Man or the Devil. The lives to be lived are those of fruitful discipleship or scandalous and lawless evil. Sometimes we cannot tell the one from the other. Sometimes the lawless claim Christ and exercise lordship in the Church! Sometimes the lawless claim Christ in the end, recognizing and embracing him, repentant and rescued from darkness.

The major point of the parable is the fact that final judgment is not now but will come certainly in the future. At that point, all will be revealed: the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their father. In the meantime, there are no infallible ways of separating those who are children of the Kingdom from those who are children of evil.

There has not been, nor will there be, a dramatic separation of the lawless from the righteous until the harvest at the end of the age. The present age is thus one in which human society (and thus even the Church) is a mixture of those of the evil one and those of the kingdom.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁹ France, *Matthew*: "...the idea of the disciple community as a mixed body within which true and spurious disciples coexist is one that recurs several times in Matthew's gospel. See for instance the recruitment of 'bad as well as good' guests to the wedding feast in 22:10, with the result that one of the new invitees had subsequently to be thrown out (22:11–13). The wicked will be picked out 'from among the righteous' (13:49). There are false prophets who are wolves dressed up as sheep (7:15–20); there are those who call Jesus 'Lord, Lord' with apparent sincerity, but who do not belong to him (7:21–23); there are foolish as well as wise bridesmaids, waiting and sleeping together until the bridegroom arrives (25:1–12); there is a son who sounds more loyal than his brother, but who ultimately fails to deliver (21:28–32). All these passages are peculiar to Matthew, and more could be added." (p. 532).

⁵⁷⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (p. 395).

What is essential is underlined again: “those who have ears, let them hear.” Hearing the word of the Kingdom and allowing it to bear fruit in one’s life and community is the task now, not separating people into two categories of insiders and outsiders.

Parable Points:⁵⁷¹

1. God permits the righteous and the wicked to coexist in the world and church, sometimes in ways that are indistinguishable until the end of This Age.
2. The wicked will eventually be separated from the righteous, judged and placed under eternal condemnation.
3. The righteous will be gathered together, rewarded and brought into God’s final Kingdom glory.

Kingdom Teaching: The Kingdom is present in such a way that it does not bring about the dramatic and clear-cut separation of the righteous and the wicked. As Snodgrass puts it: “the kingdom is present despite the presence of evil and that evil will be dealt with at the judgment. The focus is the nature of the kingdom, and implications for human conduct are secondary.”⁵⁷² In the present Age the uncertainty about who’s who in the Kingdom of God remains ambiguous. Action against the wicked must be temperate and within the bounds of discipline laid down in the New Testament. God is sowing his Kingdom-seeking, Kingdom-productive children throughout the world to live and proclaim his rule until the end of This Age. Their task is to be active hearers and doers of the word of the Kingdom wherever they are, remaining aware that the Evil One remains active to the end of This Age.

(9) Twin Parables: treasure in the field and a priceless pearl (13:44-46)

These are a pair of parables that mirror one another’s major points: **the treasure in the field** and **the priceless pearl in the market-place**. The kingdom is something of inestimable value. It is a gift from God. Nothing we do can produce or merit it. The complete transformation of our lives comes not as a condition of finding this great treasure. It comes as a consequence. If we understand the true nature of the presence of the kingdom, we will joyfully give all we currently possess to embrace this one thing. Finding leads to radical and wholesale expending all we have on gaining what we have found in order to secure it.

The value of the kingdom surpasses the value of all we may claim to own. Nothing is so precious, so dear that its sacrifice would not be wise, if that is what is required to possess the kingdom. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity. For some the literal meaning of this is required. Jesus asks the rich young ruler literally to sell all he has and give it to the poor. His entanglement and investment in riches were such that only the decisive action of selling and giving would bring him into the Kingdom. This specific form of giving all our material goods is not required for all. Yet these parables are indicative of the total claiming action of the Kingdom upon us. For every one of us it means following Jesus, becoming disciples of this one’s word and way.

The single issue that lies at the heart of kingship is the relationship of submission to the

⁵⁷¹ Blomberg, *Parables* (pp. 197-200).

⁵⁷² Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 212). “More precisely, in this parable the question is ‘How can this be the kingdom if evil is still present?’ Contained in this question are several others: Why have many in Israel rejected Jesus’ message (which the Sower also addressed)? Why are the Romans still here? Why is separation of the righteous from the unrighteous not happening? Why is judgment not occurring?” (p. 206).

authority of the king. All word pictures in the Bible lead invariably to one point: there can be no divided loyalty within the kingdom of God. No one can serve two masters. God repudiates those who are double-minded. The soil that is filled with thorns cannot produce the fruit of the kingdom; works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit are very different and incompatible matters.

This is why the announcement of the arrival and inauguration of the kingdom is prefaced by the call for repentance. We are not in a neutral world. There are more active agents than simply God and the human being. Satan and his hosts are alive and well. They are hell-bent on sustaining their struggle to the bitter end, even though losing the struggle. As long as the Son of Man is sowing his children in the world, so long will the Evil One be sowing his children.

When a person finds something priceless, all rationality would seem to dictate purchasing it. Yet people disagree on the value of things, especially the value of “religion.” What is rational in my mind (having discovered the incredible value of the Kingdom) might seem to others an improvident and wasteful sacrifice of all for an illusory so-called “treasure.” We live in a world where values are askew, and appearances deceive, even as we all are seeking after something of value. What these parables tell us is to reorient our sense of value, to aim much higher.

The kingdom is present in a quiet and hidden form. The person who moves decisively to give all for that reality may be seen by others as “fanatical,” foolish, imprudent, unreasonable, thoughtless. Only the light and glory of the coming kingdom will make sense of the “sacrifices” now made. Too many of us want to hedge our “bets” – we have been stung too often by false promises of “value.” A little of the kingdom would be just right in case it all turns out to be fool’s gold rather than the real deal.

Yet the actual calculation shows that selling one’s entire possessions to enjoy this great treasure is no sacrifice at all. The long-term view demonstrates it to be the most thoughtful, reasonable, prudent and wise thing any human being can do. Both the individual who is apathetic and the one busily searching after spiritual riches are called to give up whatever stands between them and possessing those riches in Jesus Christ. It might be possessions, but it might be reputation or family – or any number of other things.

It might seem unfair and deceitful that the man who stumbles upon the buried treasure will gain it simply by reburying the treasure and buying the field. The reason the treasure is there is probably because someone has buried it in time of war or at the beginning of a long trip. It may have been there for centuries with no contemporary “rightful” owner. Dying or never returning meant the treasure was lost to the original family. Whose it is would be a mystery. Perhaps this discovery would redeem this family from its poverty if restored to them.

But the parable is not concerned with the ethics of the matter.⁵⁷³ It is not making an ethical

⁵⁷³ Snodgrass, *Intent*: “If the man’s actions are immoral, this is irrelevant to the point of the parable. If illegality had anything to do with the point of the parable, it would have received some attention. Once again the principle can be invoked: any attempt to interpret a parable by what is not there is almost certainly wrong. The absence of any thought of illegality in the parallel parable of the Pearl strengthens the case that it is not a concern here either.” (p. 244). Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* notes what is *not* there: “The story does not inform us on certain key points. What is the status of the finder? What is he doing in the field? How is the treasure discovered? How did it come to be where it is? What kind of treasure is it? Who owns the field? How did the owner come to own the field? Without knowing such details one is hesitant to evaluate the legal or moral situation and even uncertain as to the value of discussing such. Certainly Jesus’ failure to remark on them makes one wonder how important they can be.” (p. 436).

point. It provides a picture that resonates with the actual experience of the day. Its stress is upon the decisive and dramatic action necessary to securing ownership of the land and thus the great treasure. The presence of the Kingdom in Jesus—so quiet, so hidden, so unimpressive in many ways—is that treasure. Only those who realize its value will undertake the great disruption that is required to grasp it. All other pursuits, by comparison, are trivial.

Parable Point:

The main point of both of these parables is that the Kingdom of God is so valuable it is worth sacrificing everything to gain it.⁵⁷⁴

Kingdom teaching: The Kingdom of God is present in such a way that it can already be possessed. Whether one comes upon it accidentally or finds it after searching long and hard for it, confronting it puts a person into crisis. They must act decisively, risking all they are or have in order to possess it. The complete transformation of life that happens to those who enter the Kingdom of God is not a condition for entrance but a consequence of entrance.

(10) The Parable of the Net (13:47-50)

The parable of the net is the final warning in this set of parables. All of the discourses in Matthew end with a word focused on judgment. This warning comes, not by suggesting some action on the part of the diligent disciple but focuses on the action of judgment leading to the final separation. What is needed to be “good fish” has already been suggested before:

- a welcoming and fruit-bearing reception of the word of the kingdom;
- a waiting upon the king to sort out the agents of the evil one;
- a penetrating beyond the appearance of the smallness and hiddenness of the presence of the kingdom to have confidence in its ultimate widespread effects;
- and a utilizing of all it takes to possess the richness of the kingdom.

The activity and actuality of the King and his Kingdom needs to be understood, trusted in, lived out and bought up.

This next to last parable focuses on the state of affairs at the end of this age. Just because a person is “in the net” (in the world, or in Israel, the Church or the Christian movement) does not guarantee a final result. In many ways, this parable parallels that of the wheat and the weeds.

In this case the picture does not deal with the supernatural Actors who stand behind the righteous and the evil. The emphasis is on the action of the dragnet. God is coming to judge and his action is decisive. Those whom God declares righteous are separated, safeguarded, kept for the consummated kingdom. Those who are declared wicked will be separated away from the righteous and be cast out from the presence of God. These are the two fates of human beings at the end of this age.

What does not need to be retaught is how it is one is a good or a bad fish. That lesson was taught at the very beginning of this teaching session. It is rooted in the sort of response given to the word of the kingdom as delivered by Jesus Christ (and later by his sent ones). To be a good fish is to be a fruitful disciple who observes the practices taught by the Lord. To be a good fish is to be one who uses every resource necessary to buy up the kingdom, having realized its true worth. To be a good fish is to have confidence in God’s ultimate victory and ability to sort out the affairs and effects of the activity of the Devil.

⁵⁷⁴ Blomberg, *Parables* (pp. 279-281).

The problem many of us feel in facing parables of judgment is the sinking question, “Who is sufficient?” We who are disciplined in things concerning the kingdom are aware of how far short we fall of truly adequate understanding, repenting, obeying, trusting. We may be in the net, having been “caught” in this time of fishing. Yet it is not always clear to us (or those around us) that we are the good soil that is repeatedly fruitful for the kingdom, or that the leaven of the kingdom continues to transform us intensively, or that we are in the midst of a movement that grows more and more extensive so that people of all nations are finding rest. We give ourselves partially for the treasure and the pearl and have partial assurance.

The parable of the net faces us squarely again with the danger of complacency. We are never done with repenting, with being transformed and renewed, with receiving again and again the living word of God’s truth. We are never done with giving all we have and are for the sake of the kingdom of God. The difference between those who are the good fish and those who are the bad is not developed here. Only the fate of the two. It helps us balance the gift and task sides of the kingdom. It is a gift and yet it requires the most difficult sacrifices and the most intense concentration. It is given freely at great cost to God and it is received freely by us at great cost as well.

We must take seriously and responsibly the supreme task of entering the kingdom ourselves. We must allow Jesus to sow the word of the kingdom through us and to sow us as children of the kingdom where he will. We do not have any infallible means of separating the good from the bad at present. All we can do is live faithfully within the norms of the kingdom, exercising the sorts of Church discipline necessary to keep the community of faith healthy and vital. We do not have a commission to determine the eternal fate of others—only to invite them to faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ. In throwing the net far and wide there will be success: a great ingathering of people. In that net will be the righteous and the unrighteous. Only when we are on shore with the angels of God will the separation be made between those two.

The king is coming. May it be soon. May we be ready and be found among those invited to live with God for eternity.

Parable points: The points of this parable correspond to three main characters:

1. The action of the dragnet stands for God who will come to judge his people on the last day. Currently we are in the era of “fishing” (with the church as the agent and sign of God gathering people of all sorts into his “net”).
2. The good fish are those God declares righteous, who are gathered together for further safekeeping and service.
3. The bad fish stand for the unredeemed who are discarded into eternal judgment.⁵⁷⁵

Kingdom teaching: The Kingdom will culminate in the decisive action of God, separating the righteous and the wicked. We need to be warned about the seriousness of hearing with understanding, becoming children of the Kingdom, exercising confidence in the gentle and humble form of the Kingdom now present, giving all we are or have to possess the riches of the Kingdom. The King is coming. Judgment will be decisive and swift. Yet at present the good and the bad coexist together until that final action of God.

⁵⁷⁵ Blomberg, *Parables* (pp.201-203).

(11) The Parable of the householder (13:51-52)

The destination of this passage is the question posed to the inner circle of disciples: “Have you understood all this?” Of what purpose is there in teaching if understanding is not generated in the minds and hearts of those who listen? This is the goal. Yet what is understanding?

It is more than mastery of knowledge about some things, though it is not less than that. Jesus spends time in this encounter with the disciples presenting them with word pictures and direct statements necessary for their understanding. Yet what he says cannot be mastered simply by the hearing of the words. There is more involved than being able accurately to paraphrase what they have heard. The goal is not simply registering the sense of what is being communicated but a “standing under” [under-standing] the truth conveyed by those words. It is coming into compliance with the demands of the reality of the kingdom of God. We place ourselves “under” the meanings and intentions of the truth of Christ and “stand” there with him in the face of the opposition and mis-understanding of the world.

To understand is to have one’s mindset changed in fundamental ways. We have been programmed to accept a certain way of taking our world. Our culture gives us certain premises and perspectives, so we can be pressured into sacrifices and expenditures of self and resources that will sustain the sort of privileged order put in place prior to our birth. The frenzies that are necessary to induce people to behave and feel certain ways are rooted in a life commitment. We “stand under” a given life-scenario, a world view justifying life as it is.

Most of the time we live as though what is given to us has come from a cosmic “accident.” We call that accident by the cipher “mother nature.” Having discovered many of the mechanisms and history of the workings of the world we live in, we suppose we can begin to fill in the colors and textures of what our lives are about. One major conclusion is that it is the struggle to survive in ruthless nature. Our lives are about carving out a sanctuary of resources and allies, staving off attacks and challenges from others, securing the entree to privilege and prestige, maximizing a life of high adventure filled with intense pleasures of varied sorts. We have but one life and, when it is done, it is completely swallowed up in a void of nothingness.

So, we accept the social script handed to us by our culture’s meaning-mongers: advertising, journalists, news-tellers, song merchants and educators. Psychologists help us adjust. Politicians manage the rules for the whole game. What we “stand under” is the prevailing dominant social scripts for measuring success and achievement. These turn out to be variations of the survival of the fittest, the achievement of victory in a competitive struggle for achievement in loosely cooperative teams (companies). The competitors are handicapped from the beginning by race, ethnicity, language and prior “victories.” The white, Euro-American male is given the front-line starting position in this game that is increasingly globalized.

Jesus tells his disciples about a radically different life-script. In it the primary actor is not mute and mechanical “mother nature” but an articulate and personal God. We are here, not due to the achievements of our ancestral and accidental millions-of-years of tiny adjustments to nature’s pressures, but due to a purposeful God. We are set within nature to be the imagers to this world of his character and being. Alone of all species we are endowed with the capabilities that allow us to surmount the dictates of biology and respond in ways that are rooted in meaningful choices. We can distance ourselves from the drives and dynamics of our physical nature and act in ways incredibly cruel or awesomely compassionate.

To understand all the things carried in these short parables is to adopt the view Jesus offered

of this universe and its past and future. This world, Jesus says, is the field within which God is sowing his word—and we are responding to it. This is also the field within which an extraordinarily powerful evil actor is active, sowing his wares and ways. We can be the children of God's kingdom or the children of the Evil One. At present the kingdom of God is available in a way easily mistaken for insignificance and impotence, even worthlessness. But we should not be fooled by appearances. The victory will be God's in the end and the Evil One and all his minions will be cast into eternal punishment. The righteous will shine in God's kingdom eternally. To understand is to live, rooted in this world-picture.

The disciples said they understood all these things Jesus was teaching them in these parables. But how could they? The very fact that this occasion's teaching was retained is indication that they pondered its meanings. At one level they were right. Jesus explained two of the seven parables to them. The meanings given were not beyond their grasp. The picture portrayed was not outside the circle of truth into which they were inducted in the Old Testament. They were ready and willing to credit Jesus' point of view as compelling and worthy of allegiance. They probably could recite these parables as well as the basics of his explanations.

On another level, there were things about the reality portrayed in these stories that went far beyond their understanding (and ours). When we think of the process of learning, we are not surprised at the mixture of knowledge and ignorance we have in any subject matter. In almost all areas of knowledge we have some limited comprehension (at times even precise and deep perception or insight). Yet we are also keenly aware that there is always a boundary beyond which we have not penetrated and may not be able to proceed.

The same is true in terms of the salience and applicability of what we know. I can understand the technique by which a top spin is put on a tennis ball through a two-handed backhand stroke but be able to do it only sporadically or poorly. To see the way something is or works is not the same as the ability to do it easily, well and with pleasure. Understanding involves more than the cognitive grasp or verbal ability to say the correct answers to questions about the subject matter. To understand goes to emotional as well as behavioral dimensions that come only with experience and practice.

Jesus does not rebuke their answer.⁵⁷⁶ We who struggle with the meanings and implications of these parables may see the disciples as glib and impossibly naive. There are reasons to do so, especially as we follow the rest of the story and see their continuing difficulties with Jesus' own actions and words. We know they are a long way from the fullness of understanding. We might want to yell at them (as we do at ourselves) to get real. They overestimate their grasp. Peter himself will not be willing to challenge the probing of a servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest and will deny knowing Jesus. How can he, how dare he say he understands the parables of the treasure or the priceless pearl and fail so quickly to pay the price for them?

These disciples do not yet have the fullness of understanding they will develop. They do already show a responsiveness that indicates they are good soil (maybe only producing two-fold at this point in their discipleship). Having responded to his call to follow him, these disciples already show that they have not allowed the Evil One to remove the good seed of the kingdom before it is understood. They have left their livelihood and families to follow him. So, they are not threatened with the choking effects of wealth-lust or worldly care anxieties. They have

⁵⁷⁶ France, *Matthew*: "Matthew's disciples are far from perfect, but they are now firmly on the road to understanding, and Jesus' response apparently accepts their claim without irony." (p. 544).

joyfully received the word and surmounted some of the initial skirmishes with opposition and persecution. There are good reasons to suppose they are on the right road to that understanding.

So, we might be as charitable with them as Jesus was. They are moving along the path of discipleship in a way that many in the crowd and the religious leadership were not. We need not hold our praise and recognition only for the most advanced and superior achievements of understanding (who produce one hundred-fold). Jesus does not. Yet he gives them a parable that suggests this matter of being instructed in the things concerning the kingdom of God is not over. He does not take their answer and confirm them in some sort of glib shallowness: “We understand—unlike these other poor slob. We’ve finished the work and shown our powers in our mission, working miracles and preaching the Kingdom. We’ve arrived.”

On the contrary. Jesus told them their righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. His human point of comparison is those who were most intensely devoted to understanding the Law of God thoroughly. They devoted time and resources to explore and penetrate even the smallest matters of the will of God. These were not the slackers or the sloppy. They were religious giants with detailed, hard-won knowledge. Nonetheless, that zeal was not sufficient. Nor is the understanding of the disciples. They may claim understanding. Jesus tells them their understanding must exceed the understanding of the scribes.

The role they are to play is that of scribe. This term refers to the authorized teacher in the Jewish context who knew the Old Testament well enough to teach it with some facility. Scribes were formally trained and literate in a society where the majority were not.

In Judaism the scribe was a secondary figure, like a copyist or a secretary, but not like a master of a household, who in the parable of the Weeds among the Wheat and in later parables is usually thought to represent God or Jesus. The disciple is such a scribe who is trained not merely for the traditions of the fathers, but also for the kingdom of heaven. The scribe will preserve, or copy, all that is eternal in the law and the righteousness of God, and in so doing will find the greatest treasure of all.⁵⁷⁷

The “scribes” of the kingdom of heaven are not those similarly trained in the schools of the rabbis. They are trained in the school of Jesus in the matter of the “secrets” of the kingdom of heaven. Those instructed (Greek, “discipled”) have a task to do themselves. The point of the parable is to portray the nature of that task. In the excitement over the new revelation of the kingdom, they are not to neglect the old. The “treasure” and “pearl of great price” do not empty the treasure room of the “old” already there. The “old” is not abolished but is to be integrated into the “new.” Nor is understanding for its own sake but to benefit others.⁵⁷⁸

This parable also helps us balance matters. For all the emphasis on the activity of God in kingly rule in these parables, the activity of his children is not denied or removed. We are disciples, in training and under instruction and we work hard at learning what is new and old in the treasure house of what Jesus teaches us about the kingdom. We continue to learn how to tap those resources to meet the challenging needs that face us—to develop new strategies and

⁵⁷⁷ Lischer, *Parables* (p. 81).

⁵⁷⁸ Nolland, *Matthew*: “What does the scribe do with the treasure? ἐκβάλλει is literally ‘throws out’ but is translated ‘brings out’ as in the related image in 12:35.... The imagery is of disposal, not of display. This scribe is a discipling disciple: the treasure he has gained is a treasure he passes out to others.” (p. 571).

applications for the demands of life.

The grammar of the phrase following “instructed” can be taken in two ways.⁵⁷⁹ It appears most naturally to take it as instructed concerning the kingdom. This is what we see happening throughout this chapter. The object presented to them under which they are to stand is the kingdom. They are “discipled” into the truths and secrets of that kingdom. This appears to be the main thrust here. Only as those who have been well discipled can we disciple others.

Yet the Greek can as easily be translated as trained for the kingdom of heaven. In this sense it means the goal of the instruction is for them to possess that kingdom, to be advantaged by the reality of that kingdom (entering the shining splendor of God’s favor rather than facing the eternal condemnation). Jesus declares his disciples “blessed” for what they see and hear and understand.

Proper understanding involves both these notions. Because they understand what they have been receiving in the instruction of Jesus, they possess knowledge (the word and secrets of the kingdom) that can be passed on. Because they perceive its truth and the actuality of the reality to which Jesus refers, they sacrifice all they are and must possess this pearl of great price, this immense treasure, thereby showing themselves to be children of the kingdom. Their own instruction is to have the same effects. That is what Jesus sends them forth to do at the end of this Gospel: “Go into all the world and make disciples.”

“While the first moment of Christian scholarship is the submission of a perpetual discipleship, its second moment, and it is stressed in this paragraph, is the ministering of treasures: the Christian scholar ‘is like the master of a house who can draw out of his treasure chest both new things and old things.’ We are not just discipled for our own sakes; we are discipled for others.”⁵⁸⁰

In this way their understanding (and righteousness) will exceed that of the Pharisees and the scribes. These scripture scholars were highly competent, deeply studied, broadly knowledgeable people. They combed the scriptures so as not to lose a single nuance. They debated its meanings and struggled to propagate its viewpoint. Nevertheless, they obscured its thrust and undercut its authority. The tradition of the elders came to stand over the Word of God and eliminate critical elements of its message. Their confrontations with Jesus expressed the dramatic differences of understanding between them.

What Jesus does not allow us to say in this matter is that all conclusions and perspectives about God or the Kingdom are equally valid. We are not offered religious mush or vague symbolical posturing. Jesus does not proffer a pious sensibility or human universal. There is something to be understood and it has very concrete shape. We are asked to bring our cognitive and emotional baggage with us and place it under the discipline of the teachings of Christ. Understanding is fundamental. That is where this section began: words being sown into hearts. We must listen to hear, to perceive and thus understand. The proof of understanding is whether the words produce their intended effects.

The one well instructed (or discipled) in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household. He has a storeroom containing provisions of all sorts essential to meet the assorted needs of a well-run household. From it he distributes things new and old for that purpose. This

⁵⁷⁹ Διὰ τοῦτο πᾶς γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν ...

⁵⁸⁰ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 54).

is the comparison. Those who are to teach the things of God are provisioned by the instruction Jesus gives. This provisioning comes only when the teaching of Jesus is understood (and so the repeated imperative, “Let anyone with ears, listen”). “To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance....” (13:12). God is speaking the word of the kingdom. That can lodge in receptive hearts and bring forth its intended results. When it does, Jesus portrays it as a storehouse filled with an abundance of things (concerning the kingdom of heaven).

In one sense the word of the kingdom is old (“I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world” 13:35). Jesus came in complete solidarity and continuity with the Old Testament, reiterating the message of the law, prophets and writings. He did not bring something new in the sense of the utterly novel. What he had to say built on and derives from the message of God to Israel and the world. Prophets had given it to Israel in the past. Now it is given most definitively and clearly in God’s Son.

In another sense the word of the kingdom is new (“hidden from the foundation of the world”). The secrets or mysteries of the kingdom are being disclosed. That is what is new. Some of the meanings of the old had not been clarified prior to the coming and teaching of Jesus Christ. His way of entering the old revelation and laying its intentions and rhythms bare was unique. Those who became his disciples found themselves entering a strange new world. It was there all the time, but it took the brightness of Jesus’ own revelation to cause it to flash into sight. Fresh meanings and applications suddenly appeared and continue to appear as the church (the agent of the kingdom) moves through time and across cultures.

The scribe who is well instructed in the truths concerning the kingdom will find, as he or she teaches, that things new and old will be required to meet the needs of their situations.⁵⁸¹ All they require will be found in the storehouse of the household of God. The word of the kingdom contains things new and old. As they go back to the storehouse again and again, they will find in God’s revelation all things necessary to be good, faithful scribes of the kingdom.

Jesus and the Father are portrayed in this section as sowers. The Father sows the word of the kingdom. Jesus sows the children of the kingdom. Those who have allowed the word to be productive in their own lives, who are scattered into the world by Jesus Christ, are asked to become like Jesus Christ, to sow the word and new disciples. In the end of this gospel Jesus sends them to make disciples, teaching them all the things Jesus commanded. Already we have here an anticipation of that commissioning. As scribes we will be sowing that same word.

If we are well enough instructed by Jesus, we will understand the significance of the secrets of the kingdom. Our perspective will be shaped, and our lives lived in the light of the activity of the Father and the Son as well as in the confident awareness of the coming triumph of the glory of God over the Evil One and his allies. We will have entered into the blessings of the kingdom and responded to the ethics of the kingdom. We will be engaged in the task, wherever Jesus has scattered us, in bringing things new and old out of the treasure we joyfully possess at the cost of all we have and are. Such will supply the deepest needs of our household and of those we bring into the hospitality of the household of God. Each of the parables opens a window onto one of the aspects of Christian discipleship. As Bruner puts it:

⁵⁸¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*: “The Christian scribe, trained in the kingdom and prepared to teach others, must be able to use old and new together to bring clarity and understanding to the message of the kingdom in its application to the present.” (p. 402).

“The five sets of kingdom parables have taught us that we mean at least this: ‘Your Word come’ (the Sower, with understanding faith), ‘your Way come’ (the Wheat in the Weeds, with nonviolent love), ‘your Work come’ (the Seeds, with confident hope that Jesus’ ‘little’ work will one day prove immense), ‘your Wonder come’ (the Gems, with the joy of grace and the abandon of obedience), and ‘your Warning come’ (the Net, with the seriousness of true repentance). To pray ‘Thy kingdom come,’ then, is to pray that the gospel may be understood, lived out, hoped for, ‘bought up,’ and taken seriously.”⁵⁸²

Now even these parables are among the old things. They are nearly 2,000 years old. Yet as we faithfully preserve these truths and apply them to ourselves and our world, we find sparkling in them new resources and truth for meeting new challenges and situations. They are not limited. We are the ones who seem to put limits on them and do not approach them with the full creativity that produces things new and old.

“But the parables of Matthew 13 are not just to be understood as teachings pertinent for disciples of that day, for all of the issues treated remain current today. The first parable is concerned with receptivity and non-receptivity; the second and seventh parables with the problem of the delay of the expected judgment; the third and fourth parables with the present apparent insignificance of the kingdom; and the fifth and sixth with the incalculable value of the kingdom, unknown to those who do not possess it. In an increasingly secular day, when the success of the gospel seems questionable, the kingdom a doubtful reality, and final judgment an idea of the past, these parables retain their significance.”⁵⁸³

“Lord, we understand. Help our misunderstanding.”

Parable point:

The point of this parable is that the mark of one who is well instructed (discipled) in the things concerning the Kingdom of God will have the ability constantly to produce new and old things for the challenges of providing the needs of the household of God. Like a scribe well trained, the fully equipped disciple will know the secrets of the Kingdom and act upon them decisively. Continually receiving the words of the Kingdom into his or her life, the fruits of the Kingdom will be born repeatedly.

Kingdom teaching: The Kingdom is present in a dynamic yet intelligible way. The Kingdom is not a mystical, unknowable, inaccessible reality. It can be known, and its principles and purposes learned. God’s intention is to sow well-trained children of the Kingdom into all nations of the earth. From the treasure house of Kingdom-teachings these “scribes” of Jesus will bring forth old truths and new applications, sufficient to equip and provision the community of the King in every culture, language, tongue and tribe until the end of the age.

⁵⁸² Bruner, *Churchbook*: (p. 56).

⁵⁸³ Hagner in Longenecker, *Parables* (p. 122).



V. Opposition to the kingdom continues (13:53-19:2)

A. Narrative 4: Various responses to the Son of God (13:53-17:27)

If the parables of Chapter 13 are about how the kingdom of God has come to the world, these following chapters display how the world responds to that kingdom. What Jesus taught in the parable of the Sower (and soils) will now be on full display. Some have seen the first section as made up of three cycles made up of a provocation, a withdrawal and then continuing ministry of mercy that elicits faith from some followed by a focus on the disciples and predictions of the passion that is ordered in a chiasm or concentric pattern:⁵⁸⁴

Matthew 13:54–16:20 in the Narrative Flow	Matthew 16:21–17:23 in the Narrative Flow
Narrative: Jesus's disciples understand more (13:54–16:20) First cycle (13:54–14:36) Provocation (13:54–14:12) Withdrawal (14:13a) Continuing ministry (14:13b–36) Second cycle (15:1–39) Provocation (15:1–20) Withdrawal (15:21) Continuing ministry (15:22–39) Third cycle (16:1–20) Provocation (16:1–4a) Withdrawal (16:4b) Continuing ministry (16:5–20)	Narrative: Jesus's disciples understand even more (16:21–17:23) (A) Predicting the passion (16:21) (B) Critiquing Peter, instructing disciples (16:22–28) (C) Up the mountain with three disciples (17:1–8) (C') Down the mountain with three disciples (17:9–13) (B') Critiquing and instructing disciples (17:14–21) (A') Predicting the passion (17:22–23)

The division and opposition to Jesus, resulting in a coming separation of disciples from non-disciples (Matthew 11-13) is now focused more clearly on the new community of disciples, Jewish and gentile who recognize Jesus as son of God, son of David and Messiah. Peter is given a unique role in salvation history: the Rock foundation of the Church. The prediction of the passion is repeated before and after the account of the transfiguration.

(1) Unbelief in Nazareth: Mother and Brothers (13:53-58)

This opens a section that focuses on response to the teaching and miracles of Jesus. It begins with the double rejection of Jesus and John the Baptizer. It continues with the struggle of the disciples to understand and believe in very concrete settings. It ends with his recognition in the land of Gennesaret where he does many miracles. Faith is the issue, the little faith of the disciples

⁵⁸⁴ Talbert, *Matthew* (p. 179, 201).

and the unbelief of Nazareth and Herod.

In this example we have the response of Jesus' own hometown. They listen to the word he is sowing and are unable to absorb it. His status as "one of us" is such that his wisdom and deeds seem far beyond what such a "lowly" person should be able to do. They find it impossible to credit him with the honor suitable to his actual performance. He is too far off the normal social scale of the usual to be assimilated into their categories. He is only "the son of the carpenter."⁵⁸⁵ So, they reject him. In this they show themselves hardened soil, unable to understand. Their "rationalism" is the problem. They cannot get beyond what they "know."

Jesus exemplifies his own guarantee that those who walk in his path will suffer rejection. He comes to bring a sword, not peace. A person's own enemies will be those who are in his or her own household. This short passage bristles with several issues.

1. Contrary to older dispensationalism, Matthew 13 does not mark the rejection of Israel by the Messiah. There may be a shift in emphasis from the outsiders to the insiders. But there is no stopping the sowing of the good seed widely. Jesus continues to preach and teach the people "in their synagogue." His custom was not interrupted. There continued to be the spectrum of understanding and misunderstanding, reception and rejection that the parable of the sower portrays.

2. Astonishment and offense are not incompatibles. These people were taken completely off guard. They wandered into the synagogue on this Sabbath. It was like any other Sabbath. Even the invited teacher of the day was one they knew well—a homeboy whose reputation preceded him. How many times he had read Scripture and taught before, we do not know. It may be that the event at the beginning of Luke is this event or an earlier one. He may well have stirred things up before. But this day he was off their scales of expectation.

They had heard of his deeds and some may have been done before this Sabbath. Now they hear his wisdom. What they cannot reconcile is how this ordinary, well-known person might be an outstanding miracle worker and even Messiah, especially one not trained as a Scribe or known among the shining host of the exceptionally devout. What differed from the past may have been his own claims to status within salvation history. They took offense at him. They could not get beyond their familiarity to a different paradigm. All their doubts are rooted in what were factual truths. Coming after the parables as this event does, it shows that not understanding his words of the kingdom leads not to indifference but to hostility.

3. Surrounding him that day were his own family. Jesus is described in terms of being a carpenter's son. Nazareth's mistake is not that it thinks Jesus is human, the boy and young man they have known for so long. Their mistake is in thinking one so human and ordinary could not be the Messiah. He is the brother of specifically named brothers and unnamed sisters. His mother's name is known. He should be whole cloth with these others. There was nothing astonishing about them.⁵⁸⁶ How do we come to the place of seeing the hand of God in special

⁵⁸⁵ Τέκτων can mean "builder" as well. Only here in the Gospels do we learn the occupation of Joseph. In the parallel in Mark 6:3 we learn Jesus too was a carpenter.

⁵⁸⁶ The natural way to take this is that these were Mary's natural children. There is no evidence or basis in Scripture to hold the Hieronymian view that these were nephews and nieces or the Epiphanian view that they were children of Joseph by an earlier marriage. All of the pointers here (and in Matt. 1:25) to their being "blood brothers and sisters" could have been easily avoided had the Gospel writers already

ways upon those who are so common with us we touch them and hear their words every day?

4. Jesus' response is a proverb: "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." This is the rule of thumb, the human tendency. The proverb does not justify it nor circumscribe an inevitability. Later we will discover Mary as a believer as well as his brothers James and Jude. Other indications demonstrate that descendants of Mary are Christians at the end of the first century. The unbelief on this occasion is not permanent. It is not the final condition of all those in this synagogue.

5. The surrounding unbelief conditions Jesus' own actions.⁵⁸⁷ He does not do many miracles. They would be pointless in the economy of salvation. Their purpose is more than benefitting a few. They are also markers of the works of God. They serve to stimulate and open people up to the reality of the presence of the Kingdom. They turn the soil so that the good seed might take deep root. Where unbelief is found, miracles cannot do this larger work. It matters not whether we phrase it as did Mark ("he could do...") or as Matthew does ("he did not do..."), the point is the same. It does not have to do with the ability of Jesus but the conditioning of faith and unfaith. If people do not believe, they will not come or bring their diseases and distresses to Jesus. They will even oppose his miracle powers and vilify his teachings. Whether one considers that "could" not or "did" not depends upon what nuance one wishes to stress. The result and meaning circumscribe the same reality.

The danger present in this story is contemporary. Now the "house" of Jesus is made up of the various Churches, the mustard seed that has grown up and has many branches, the leaven that has penetrated the whole lump of human history. Jesus comes into our contemporary "synagogues" to encounter us and work his redemptive miracles. Insofar as we have become allies of the money-changers of the Temple (church life and politics has descended into fights over property and money or clerical life is a means to "the good life") or the companions of those offended by the wisdom of his teachings (about sexuality and power), he will not do for us what he is capable of doing.

John puts it dramatically: "He came to his own and his own received him not" (1:11). In this case in the very place where the Scriptures were read, prayers were said, exhortations to faith were articulated.⁵⁸⁸ The parables of Matthew 13 act as an explanation for this dramatic reversal of the proper function of the house of God. Jesus is rejected not simply in the big city but the small town, in the workplace and the worship place, in the home town as well as the capital city. There is no geographical, social, ethnic or religious "safe space" where Jesus can't be despised and rejected.

thought Mary to be a perpetual virgin (ἀειπαρθενος). Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: "The problem stemming from the perpetual virginity of Mary is not a problem of exegesis but of Catholic dogmatics." (p. 304).

⁵⁸⁷ This is the only occurrence of ἀπιστίαν (lack of faith) in Matthew.

⁵⁸⁸ Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: "And we see these horrifying signs in all the histories: that the Word of God is never so despised as where it is richly taught. Those who do not have it want it; those who have it despise it. Indeed, what is worse, heresies do not arise except amid the churches and from the churches. And this does not occur for any other reason except that they despise and disdain the Word, and then soon become judges over it. For if they did not disdain it, they would hear it in reverence and not stir up heresies." (p. 218).

Matthew 13:53-58 Unbelief in Nazareth=Mother and Brothers

(2) Misunderstanding in the Court: the end of John the Baptist (14:1-12)

The more definitive rejection of Jesus is foreshadowed by the death of John the Baptist. The political powers do the deed. Herod Antipas wanted to do away with John but feared the crowd because of their regard for him as a prophet. The evil is accomplished by manipulation that engages the honor-shame possibilities at play in his social world.⁵⁸⁹ It is the world of a client king of Rome, a powerful yet petty player in the larger theater of the Roman Empire.

There are problems in this story, partly because the account of Josephus has enough differences as to lead to questions of what the case was, partly because of differences in emphasis and statement between the Gospels.⁵⁹⁰

1. Antipas was a tetrarch who ruled over Galilee and Perea. John's ministry seems to have taken place in several spots in the Judean rift valley, part of the time in Perea. There he was probably arrested and put in the dungeon at Machaerus. The "danger" he represented was that of a holy, charismatic prophet whose message, however austere and threatening, was widely respected. His popularity created the platform for the threat to Herod Antipas' status. John's application of his repentance message to the marriage misbehavior of Herod was the trigger that landed him in Herod's dungeon.

2. Herod was himself a very political actor, having managed with Philip to depose their brother Archelaus.⁵⁹¹ The marriage to his half-brother Herod Philip's wife led to significant political difficulty. The permission to marry her was probably arranged with Sejanus. His alliance marriage with the daughter of King Aretas was to be set aside (at Herodias' insistence?). Aretas' daughter got wind of it and fled to her father's safety. Some six or so years later King Aretas inflicted a costly defeat on Herod, whose future was saved only by the intervention of Roman troops. His own calculations over John seem to center on the political capital that might be involved. We are told elsewhere that he not only protected John from Herodias' schemes but spent some time

⁵⁸⁹ Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: "Here in passing one should take note of the two kinds of hypocrites. The one pretends to keep the Second Table [of the Ten Commandments] in order to break the First, like the people in the Gospel [Luke 14:16–24], who say, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen' [Luke 14:19]; and again: 'I have bought an estate' [Luke 14:18]; and again: 'I have married a wife' [Luke 14:20]—that is, so that they may not have to abandon their necessary duties. ... The other kind pretends to keep the First Table in order to be able to violate the Second. That is the kind you have here—Herod and his ilk. ... The latter sort are diabolical, since they are stirred up by none other than the devil to destroy things and persons. The former make a show of charity in order that they may disregard faith with an appearance of goodness; the latter make a show of faith in order to persecute charity with an appearance of holiness. To be sure, both of them destroy everything—[both] faith and charity. But the latter foxes are worse than the former pigs and are beyond correction and without hope of the glory of God." (p. 226).

⁵⁹⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*: "There is some uncertainty about this Philip, since the Philip we know as Herod's brother from the Gospels (i.e., the tetrarch of Luke 3:1) was apparently married not to Herodias but to Salome her daughter (cf. Jos., Ant. 18.5.4 §136). The Philip mentioned in our pericope was probably a half brother of Antipas and is referred to as Herod by Josephus; the mother of this Herod-Philip was Mariamne II." (p. 412).

⁵⁹¹ See Hoehner, Harry W. (1972, 1980). *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. (pp. 131-136). Safrai, S., Stern, M., Flusser, D., & van Unnik, W. (1974). *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, Vol. I. Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. B.V. (pp. 282-288).

listening to John.

3. Jesus also preached a message of repentance but was never sought by Herod. It appears that the issue with John was his “family values” preaching. The danger in such preaching lay in mobilizing the Jewish population against Herod as a “good” Jewish leader. His pose as a leader of the Jews was compromised by a marriage that took a brother’s wife who was still living (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). That she was Herod’s niece was not the problem. Jesus’ own strict views about divorce and remarriage did not seem to concern Herod.

4. The celebration of birthdays was a Hellenistic custom. The family seems to have been in the relatively cooler palace at Machaerus. Down from Galilee came his friends and bureaucratic servants to honor him. Herodias’ young daughter (age 12 or above) danced and pleased the crowd. Herod himself spoke a proverbial oath: “Half my kingdom I will give.” As with an ancient full King (Ahashuerus) it meant willingness to do a favor (Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2). Herodias sprang the trap, asking for John’s head. This left Herod in the difficult situation of face-saving. His own calculations told him killing John was not a good idea. But he could not show weakness by backing out of his oath. The role of women in all this is unusual. We have no women who are reported to have denied Jesus—yet here they are instigators of this evil.⁵⁹²

5. The head of a dead person was proof that the deed had been done. John’s disciples retrieved the body and buried it. They then went and told Jesus of the death of John. Why they should do is not told us (could it be to warn him?). The close connection between the two in message and spirit makes it not remarkable. Jesus might well be seen as the successor to John once he was locked up. There were tensions. John also taught prayers and fasting along with the moral code that he took as indications of the fruits of righteousness. These were different enough from what Jesus taught that people took notice.

This story indicates Herod Antipas’ inability to recognize either John or Jesus. He displays the same problem as his father before him. Power and influence distort his ability to grasp the Word of God. Engrossed as he is in the politics of family relations, he pays more attention to the drama of court life than the destiny of the Kingdom of God. He kills John in response to marriage dynamics and court honor. He ponders Jesus from a distance, wondering if he might not work miracles as John back from the dead (or as having control over the spirit of John). If Nazareth misconstrued Jesus, we have another false understanding in the corridors of power.

At Nazareth we watch the incapacity of those closest to Jesus in his local community and family to assimilate his startling words and deeds. He is too well known. Their rejection was mild by comparison, but no less profound. In Herod Antipas we see the dynamic of rejection when it is wedded to political power.⁵⁹³ Jesus is a “ghostly” rumor, too little direct experience with him.

⁵⁹² Bruner, *Churchbook*: “The women in this story are unique. No woman is reported to have denied Jesus in the Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels it is women, not men, who wait at the crucifixion, who watch at the burial, and who visit on Easter. The closest women get to being bad in the Gospels is here at the beheading of John. Herodias’s love of pleasure is so twisted that she can order—on a plate!—the head of another human being. The cadaverous mentality of this new Jezebel gives us a vivid picture of immorality, sensuality gone to seed, and the excess often present with power and wealth. Hollywood loves this story for the wrong reasons.” (p. 64).

⁵⁹³ Henry, *Matthew*: “Note, (1.) Faithful reproofs, if they do not profit, usually provoke; if they do not do good, they are resented as affronts, and they that will not bow to the reproof, will fly in the face of the reprover and hate him ... *Veritas odium parit—Truth produces hatred*. (2.) It is no new thing for God’s ministers to suffer ill for doing well.” (p. 1683)

Deathly consequences are afoot in the response to the kingdom of God in Jesus (and those who also proclaim the word of God). Mild or murderous, misunderstanding and unbelief are consequential. We believe in the “up” side of the gospel—that Jesus saves—but we do not easily believe in the gospel’s necessarily “down” side—that people badly need saving. A consistent exposure to Scripture will teach the truth: we human beings are in a bad way and are a profoundly endangered species; we humans desperately need the new birth, the message of Jesus that is the agent of the new birth, and the church that is the bearer of that message.⁵⁹⁴

(3) The first feeding: five thousand men and more (14:13-21)

Jesus sought solitude in response to the report (14:13a). It appears the report is of Herod’s curiosity about him as possibly John raised from the dead (a flashback in Matthew’s gospel). He wasn’t left alone in the deserted place to which he had withdrawn. When people heard where he was they came from the towns about. His compassion moved him to heal their sick.⁵⁹⁵ When it got to be evening his disciples simply wished to send the people away, back to the villages where they might find food. Instead, Jesus told the disciples to feed them. This was the setting for the feeding of five thousand men plus women and children.⁵⁹⁶

Herod Antipas was asking about Jesus because of the various reports of miracles. His prior seizing of John and executing him would give any “look alike” pause. Jesus was certainly in the mold of John. Though only the Gospel of John tells us, Jesus continued the baptism of repentance originated by John. He did so through his own disciples. He also proclaimed John’s message about the Kingdom—only aggressively spreading the good news by an itinerant ministry in the towns and villages of Herod’s domain of Galilee. Herod’s capital and palace were on the sea of Galilee in the city of Tiberias. What was being said in his court might hit the rumor mill quickly (or even be passed on by those among Jesus’ disciples who had connections).

In seeking solitude, we do not know what he wanted. Was it time to pray and gather his own thoughts about how to prevent any premature shortening of his mission? Was it simply distancing himself from hostility and the pressures of ministry? Might he have crossed over into territory belonging to Philip or that given to Syria in order to avoid Herod? Did he want the miracles to “cool off” so that his prominence might fade a bit and Herod become a little less curious? How did the disciples react to this withdrawal? Did they fear Herod Antipas might come after them?

The presence of the green grass suggests spring time, Passover season as John’s Gospel indicates. The feeding of this large crowd is not tied to the Eucharist (even though there are clear

⁵⁹⁴ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 58).

⁵⁹⁵ In most cases the character of the biography is revealed in deeds. Here we have a window into the inner emotion and motivation. Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: “It may seem odd that Matthew offers no account of a response from the disciples or from the crowds. There is no mention of astonishment or faith or praise. Matthew’s hearers/readers are left to marvel on their own at the Christ, who acts the way that God acts and miraculously feeds the people. The primary message of the miracle is about the compassionate power of Jesus.” (p. 751).

⁵⁹⁶ Harrington, *Matthew*: “The attentive reader of Matthew’s Gospel might be impressed by two peculiar features in Matt 14:13–21: the narrative link with Herod’s banquet, and the effort to improve the image of Jesus’ disciples. By contrasting it to Herod Antipas’ banquet with its immoral actions leading up to the death of John the Baptist, the banquet over which Jesus presides in the wilderness emerges all the more splendidly.” (p. 222).

overlaps in terminology). We are not wrong in seeing this as the reality when we gather at table. Jesus asks us to bring what we have as his disciples. When we count eight and not seven (the little we have and Jesus), we are able to experience God's gracious benefits to us.

Nor is this a "social" miracle for the starving and hungry masses of the earth. We may draw such connections. Yet these crowds are not starving. They have come for this miracle worker to heal and to be taught. They are missing only one meal. So many are coming because, like Herod, they wonder who Jesus might be. The lesson in the miracle is directed mainly at the disciples. This "non-therapeutic" (helping) miracle is not initiated by the hurting coming to Jesus.⁵⁹⁷ Its beginning is in the insistent instruction the disciples give to Jesus.

Those disciples know exactly what Jesus should do. They lecture him in the time, place and circumstances and tell him what such "realism" demands be done. Instead, he tells them what they must do: "You give them something to eat." He puts them to the test in this matter. He does not upbraid their little faith. He only pushes them to the limit of their spiritual imagination. Constantly he is transgressing the boundaries they seem content to sustain in their living assumptions.

What we see is Jesus starting with what they already have.⁵⁹⁸ The disciples have five loaves and two fish – one loaf for each thousand men, clearly not enough. Jesus only gives thanks for what they have. We are not told how the multiplication of the food happened. He was not intimidated by the great size of the crowd and the small resources of the disciples.

The meal is completed and there are twelve full baskets left over (a miracle greater than that of manna which lasted only one day). This would mean one basket carried by each of the twelve disciples. They would have in their hands visible proof of the dramatic powers of this prophet whom they followed.⁵⁹⁹ He was not one who told his followers to fast. He fed them with more than enough left over. What they were to learn from this miracle other than the astonishing abilities of their Master Matthew does not tell us. This experience comes in the face of the ambiguous threat of Antipas' curiosity and past rapacity.

Jesus did dismiss the crowds but only after this incident. He fed them when they could easily have returned to various villages in the region and found food. In that sense this miracle, the only one found in all four Gospels, was gratuitous. It was a free act of unnecessitated grace. He used natural means to meet a natural need supernaturally. He did not need to do this. But he did. In some ways this story functions to set the context for the stormy passage on the sea that came that night and the challenge in that setting to their faith.

⁵⁹⁷ Cf. Gerhardsson, Birger (1979/2016) *Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew*. Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock. Gerhardsson argues that the non-therapeutic (helping) miracles are all worked in the presence of and for the benefit of the faith of the disciples. (p. 62).

⁵⁹⁸ Keener, *Matthew IVP*: "When Moses insisted that he needed a sign to take with him, God asked him what was already in his hand and then transformed it (Ex 4:1–3), using what had been merely a shepherd's rod even to part the sea (Ex 14:16). When a widow needed financial help, Elisha asked what she had in her house; she responded that she had only a small amount of oil, so he commanded her to borrow jars into which to pour the oil and then multiplied it until all the jars were full (2 Kings 4:1–7)." (on Mt 14:13).

⁵⁹⁹ This miracle echoes that of Elisha: 2 Kings 4:42–44 where a hundred people are fed on twenty loaves and there are leftovers. A greater than Elisha is here.

(4) Walking on Water (14:22-33)

This story confronts us with its astounding claims. Commentators since the nineteenth century have cooked up an equally astounding brew of interpretations to dodge any crediting of the story as report.⁶⁰⁰ It also presents us with the challenge found in other miracles: to explain this one as authentic while dismissing the number of other stories of holy figures walking on water. The one thing we should not do is become so fixated by the ruminations of miracle doubters that we never treat this story within its own world view and narrative location.

John's Gospel explains the strong and quick action of Jesus. There were those in this crowd who began taking action to acknowledge Jesus as King. Jesus compels the disciples to board a boat and leave. Then he strongly dismisses the crowd, sending them packing home. Then he ascends the mountain nearby and prays alone. After "successful" ministry, he prays. After. That example is one we need follow.

Again, John helps us contextualize this further. He has come into this deserted place after hearing of the "curiosity" of Herod (knowing well his ability to kill prophets as he did John). He was nonetheless overcome with an immense crowd. Teaching and healing them extended through the day into the early evening. Having fed them, they begin to make noises about crowning him (how would Herod Antipas take that?)! His praying might reflect the dangerous narrow way he walked, for who could tell what the large crowd might decide on its own?

His miracles attracted more and more. They even led the enthusiastic to interpret his talk of the Kingdom of God in such a manner that they are ready to crown him and get on with the decisive intervention of God. The dangerous misunderstanding of the significance of his deeds and words bring him to a precipice. It is the same temptation Satan already suggested: to take up the persona of a King. Jesus will not settle the affairs of this disobedient world by his own disobedience. He seeks God in prayer.

Out of that prayer comes this miracle of walking on the water. Matthew makes it clear that the disciples are not near the land. They have come some distance with trouble because of a head wind driving waves into them.⁶⁰¹ Jesus is seen sometime between 3 and 6 in the morning. We are not told the details (was it light enough by the moon to see?). The disciples who had witnessed the stilling of the storm when Jesus was in the boat with them, now face a difficult sea without his physical presence. Is this meant to test their faith when Jesus is not present?

The story of Peter indicates they were in water deep enough to put a person underwater (no simple mistaking shallow water walking for an actual miracle). This is an astounding miracle. It is not present as a therapeutic (healing) or a helping miracle. There is no real danger for the

⁶⁰⁰ This is not surprising. Approaching even miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand (attested in all four Gospels) is doubted. E.g. Luz, *Matthew 8-20* p. 312 "...the feeding story does not have such a historical kernel but is a symbolic story shaped from reminiscences, needs, experiences, and traditions..."; Cf. John P. Meier (1994) *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Two, Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. New Haven: Yale University Press. "...a number of considerations make it likely that the story of the walking on the water is a creation of the early church and does not go back to an incident in Jesus' public ministry." (p. 923).

⁶⁰¹ The Greek is σταδίου πολλοῦς, "many stadia" (a stadia is about 1/8th of a mile). The Sea of Galilee is about 8 miles wide at its widest and 13 miles long. Genesserat is on the NW shore at a point where the lake is about 4.5 miles wide. It is located just south of Capernaum.

disciples to be rescued from. There is no utilitarian need for this. Like the feeding of the five thousand, it is a display of pure grace and power.

The parables of Matthew 13 teach the presence of the Kingdom in humble and gentle form. That Kingdom could be mistaken as insignificant and insubstantial and its prophet as foolishly misguided. Jesus' hometown misses his significance as does his family for the present. Herod Antipas is also sadly mistaken. He executes the most important prophet in Israel's history as a by-product of court intrigue. He also misconstrues the identity of Jesus. All of this is indication of the fragility and rejectability of the Kingdom as it comes in the person of Jesus Christ. He appears a "loser" by worldly standards.

Nonetheless, these miracles penetrate the surface appearance of weakness. Beneath the exterior ordinarieness of this exorcist, healer and preacher is a uniqueness unparalleled. The claim for this miracle is no different than the larger claim about his status as the divine Savior, the virgin born Son of God. At the heart of this miracle is a theophany, a not-so-veiled claim that he displays the very powers of the "I am" of the Old Testament.⁶⁰² He walks on water. He responds to a request for identification with "ego eimi." John's Gospel will mine these particular words for all their worth, connecting them to the claims of equality with God.

For some moderns this sort of miracle is an embarrassment. At least the others can be traced to their benefit for specific humans in the day. This one feels to modern pragmatists and materialists to be self-enhancing trickery. Because it focuses so strongly on elements that seem to demonstrate the divine status of Jesus, they suspect it is a bit of theological creativity of the later Church, wanting reasons to confess Jesus as God. Such discomfort is hardly persuasive. In explaining the conclusions about Jesus that adamantly monotheistic Jews reached on his divine status, we must have causes within Jesus' teachings and deeds. This is one of those causes.

The confession of the Church that Jesus is Lord ('Yahweh'), God with us, is an astounding conclusion. One might well suppose that the Gentile world with its many gods would have little trouble mouthing these words. The real problem is that the movement does not root itself there first. Nor does the early Jewish movement accept its theology on this matter from the Gentile wing of the movement later. It carries the message of the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus to the Gentile world.

In asking how a Jewish population with its radical monotheistic convictions could come to such a conclusion, we must look for adequate causes. The supposition that this is the product of the "grab bag" of the early chaotic church movement is gratuitous. There are no evidences of such a chaotic state. The very choosing and training of the twelve had, in part, the function of giving such a body of witness that some stability of story was present from the beginning. There were eleven (and then twelve again according to Acts—and even more beyond the one chosen

⁶⁰² In the Old Testament, the only one who is said to walk on water is God (Job 9:8). This echoes the LXX text of God's name: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωϋσῆν ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν καὶ εἶπεν οὕτως ἐρεῖς τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς (Exod. 3:14). Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*: "Jesus here exhibits an authority which the Jewish Scriptures associate exclusively with the deity. The fact speaks volumes. In addition, Jesus is bold enough to refer to himself with the loaded and numinous 'I am'. In view of all this, it does not quite suffice to say that, for our author, God has acted through Jesus the Messiah. It seems more accurate to assert that, in Matthew's gospel, God actively shares attributes characteristic of himself with another, his Son. The step towards the later ecumenical creeds, which affirm Christ's deity, appears undeniable." (p. 512).

to fill Judas' sandals) who were with Jesus from the beginnings of his ministry. Some were present even at the Baptism by John and in the dim period of time Jesus supervised baptisms by his disciples that replicated the baptism of John.

It is possible that this story of walking on the water and the feeding of the five thousand are theological midrash. Conceivably such events could be made up under some sort of pressures of the early Church to find convincing propaganda to feed to its own members as well as outsiders. But one wonders why this would be done. Were there not enough stories already? Were the stories of miracle working without these two stories adequate to make the point? Why add this specific event? Could not the high Christological confession and identification be made without it? If we subtract this story from the stories, do we not have more than enough to reach the same conclusion?

The problem is that both stories are linked. The feeding of the five thousand is in all four Gospels (and may well have been in the hypothetical Q document). The walking on water is in three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, John) in substantially the same form (with Matthew adding the story of Peter's short walk as well). They are stories from the so-called "early tradition." These are not matters that appear in what is considered by some as the latest stratum of the Gospel traditions.

To reject them as unhistorical because they are continuous with the confession of the later Church is not to notice that all the stories are continuous with the later Church confession or they would not have been preserved. What we see as "embarrassing" to the early Church's high Christology is what we see. It does not necessarily match that of the early Church. One might well suppose the high Christology itself was even more embarrassing than indications of the humanity of Jesus.

One suspects the overshadowing of Enlightenment world view sensibilities on this discussion, however "neutral" the author seeks to be. Why is this story so suspect? The problem can be highlighted by taking a hypothetical position on the matter.

Let's begin with the assumption that the event actually happened in space and time. The witness to the event is what we have given in our gospels. How would or could the modern historian validate this event, coming to the correct conclusion that matches the actuality of what happened? Or has this specific matter been given away before the game has even begun? Are the working assumptions built in such a way that we cannot under any circumstances get back to the historical Jesus, only to the historically verifiable Jesus according to a set of presumptions, working procedures, self-imposed hesitations and paradigm parameters? Are reality and what can be verified by the historical quest the same things? Might it be that the so-called "naive" approach to these witnesses is closer to what happened than the thousands upon thousands of pages of labored reasoning in the historical quest?

This reaches deeply into our philosophy of science and history. On the one hand, we wish to protect ourselves from the well-known, pervasive habits of bad thinking and prejudice that corrupt our grasp of reality. It is important to have sensible, carefully thought through methodologies. On the other hand, we are members of guilds and professions that enforce a precision as well as a world view loyalty that is more than can be justified by those methodologies or the reality we seek to understand. Sometimes what we have is not even the historically verifiable Jesus, but another form of pledging allegiance to a profession's enforcement of a world view in the very way Jesus is reconstructed. Laid on the procrustean bed of given modern assumptions and commitments, the witnesses are sliced and diced to fit the contemporary

dominant mode of historicism. Albert Schweitzer taught us that at the start of the 20th century (in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*).

There is little doubt that the climax of this story in Matthew is the confession: “Truly you are the Son of God.” Worship is the appropriate response. Even these of “little faith” find themselves on their knees in the presence of the one who walks on water. Peter himself will have an indelible experience that would never leave his consciousness, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

The three-fold response of the disciples is countered by a three-fold comment of Jesus:

They were: (1) deeply troubled; (2) thought they saw a ghost; and (3) cried out in fear. Jesus responds: (1) take courage; (2) ‘It is I’ (not some ghost); and (3) stop being afraid. They have been subjected to an experience that had the potential to strengthen their faith.

Peter, as is often the case, speaks first in response to the “apparition’s” assurance and commands with the request to participate in the same ability to walk on water:

“In this uniquely Matthean section, Peter asks for the power to imitate Jesus’ miracle. ‘If it is you’ (v. 28) is a potentially misleading translation for a first-class condition. The logic more closely resembles that of 10:1, 8, when Jesus passes his miracle-working authority on to his disciples. Since it is you, please enable me to do the same thing you are doing better captures the intent of Peter’s request.⁶⁰³

This story is read very differently by Mark, who stresses the degree to which the disciples were dense and still without the faith needed. Matthew puts the most positive spin on it possible. This confession of faith speaks the truth already stated at the beginning of the story. Satan and the demons have confessed Jesus as the Son already. This is the first time the disciples do it in Matthew’s gospel.

It is clear they do not yet understand what they are saying. The story is redolent with echoes and allusions to the deeds of Yahweh. Even Jesus’ response to their fears was a small window onto the divine status hidden within his flesh. The focus on Peter begins the march to the confession of Jesus as the Messiah in Matthew 16:16. In that conversation the “Son of the living God” and “the Messiah” are equated. Peter may not be the one who says these words in the boat. It is not yet clear that the other disciples are fully invested in the words they blurt out in response to the great miracles they have witnessed.

What is not clear: is the story meant to teach us something beyond the revelation of the unique powers of this miracle-worker? Students of this word have certainly brought out many new (and probably invalid) things. Taking it as symbolic turns it into a parable: the absent Jesus and the toiling disciples in the ship of the Church. Or the courageous faith of Peter lost when he takes his eyes off Jesus. In this last it is a forecast of Peter’s loss of commitment and denial of the Lord only to be restored.

On another note, some have noted that Jesus responds to Peter’s request for a command (“command me to come to you....”). Christ’s commands are enablements, not legalism. What we need so often in our experience is the command that brings us to the fearsome and ghostly apparition that is Christ approaching us. Our fears frequently get the better of us, until Christ

⁶⁰³ Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 235). Cf. Carson, *Matthew*: “Peter’s protasis (‘if it’s you’) is a real condition, almost ‘since it’s you.’” (p. 393); Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 424). Gibbs to the contrary, *Matthew Vol. II* (p. 762 n.21)

commands our courage and enables our walking to him.

In addition, Jesus did not do many miracles in Nazareth because of unbelief. Yet he does these astonishing miracles of excess in the presence of little faith. This little boat load of frail and often confused disciples is the good seed of the Kingdom. The King, having prayed to his Father in private, comes walking in the darkness of early morning. This faltering, faulty, even foolish faith is enough. It is not deep. It is not sophisticated. It is not studied and reasoned out. It is faith in a veiled and humble King.

The thousands whom he fed wished to crown him King he dismissed. Instead, he ascended the mount of prayer. The twelve whose exhausting day was followed by an exhausting evening saw only a ghost coming by their laboring boat. Nonetheless, there was the makings of an earth-shaking movement in the boat, not on the land. The very waves that delayed and hindered their swift passage were the pavement for Jesus' feet. On the waves he walked to them. On those same waves Peter walked to Jesus.

Some feel these miracles are unseemly, doing what Christ refused to do when tempted in the wilderness. However, it must be noted that the comparison is not apt. In the temptation narrative, the request was to prove Sonship by violating the sense and intent of Scripture. There is no such intent or temptation present here. Nor is this a "public" miracle in the way the leap from the pinnacle of the Temple would have been. This is not spectacular signs for the unconvinced or difficult to convince. This is a miracle happening for the few, the inner circle to whom the parables are explained. It is a demonstration moving from faith to faith.

We might also say that the strong sentiment against a docetic Christ (a supernatural divine being who hardly seems human) must not propel us into an Ebionitic Christ (a human being so limited that nothing divine can be done or be displayed). Our culture's world view leans us strongly toward Ebionitism. This miracle is a fence against such folly. For a few Jesus displays a power that cannot be rationalized or explained away under any naturalistic model. It shatters the gentile domestication of Jesus' deeds as really as his words against the Pharisees undermine his bourgeoisification. He breaks the molds we build to pretty him up for our tastes.

(5) Summary: Healing of the sick (14:34-36)

On several occasions, we are not told the specific stories of people who experienced the healing effects of the power of Jesus. We have no more than a summary. This is one of them. Jesus is remembered as an exorcist and healer with no equals and few parallels in the first century. If this was an age of credulity, it was not an age that created many traditions of healers with detailed stories of their effectiveness.

This story lends itself to a "magical" appearance in our eyes. The four tassels on his robe (indicating the very Jewishness and orthodoxy of Jesus) became the avenue for healing. Just as the women with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment, so these peasants came with the desire to simply touch the tassels. All who did were healed. However, "magical" this might seem, it does speak of the extraordinary power that emanated from him. He did not have to speak a word, pray or recite some formula for the healing to occur.

There is a narrative contrast in this story with the preceding event. The disciples did not recognize Jesus, walking by them on the water in the early morning. These people in Gennesaret "recognized him" and sent word throughout the region. The sick from all about come and all who touch his garment are healed! This is the way a "son of God" should "work." It is not the usual way we see Jesus healing when we have concrete stories dealing with specific individuals.

Matthew 14:34-36 Summary: healing of the sick

But we have to say that we know only a small part of the events that led to healings. The impression in this passage is that the number of healings was substantial. The inclusion of this summary highlights the positive response by many Israelites, however superficial might have been their understanding or motivation.

If Herod had been wondering what was going on, this day's events would have stirred the rumor mill even more. Gennesaret was only about eight miles north of Tiberias on the western side of the lake. These healings by this unusual means provided many more families with stories of what happened.

This also provides another indication of the way in which Jesus disregarded some of the key elements of Pharisaic (and Essene) purity boundaries. To simply allow anyone to touch his garment was to risk contamination. Who knew who these sick and unclean people were, pressing in to reach out and touch his garment? Yet Jesus allowed even this. In that way this summary prepares for the controversies with the Pharisees about to break out in chapter 15.

This story may carry resonances about the nature of faith and the approach to the power in Jesus. Those who touched the bread broken by Jesus alongside the sea were fed to the fill with plenty left over. Peter had only to touch the hand of Jesus to be caught back up and find himself enabled to walk on the water again. Earlier (in chapter 9) the woman had only to touch the fringe of Jesus' outer cloak and the twelve-year flow of blood ceased. Jesus went into the dead daughter of the leader of the synagogue. Touching her hand, he lifted her up to vital life again. This paragraph is not about magic as such. It is about believing in the person and authority of Jesus enough to reach out in hope of healing. Faith is making contact and through that contact the power of God comes to change life and limb.

“Matthew also wants his readers to notice the five excited absolutes in the story, all of which illustrate what good faith is: people recognize Jesus, summon the whole area, bring all the sick with the entreaty that they might only touch the hem of his garment, and all who do are thoroughly healed!”⁶⁰⁴

The verb for healing here (διασώζω diasozo) implies the restoration to full health: they were “completely healed.” It is stronger than the simple “save me” (σώζω sozo) of Peter when he begins to sink. The deliverance of Jesus is openly available and does not require that we have complete or clear notions of faith and theology. That there is a bit of “superstition” in the method of approach in these healings can be acknowledged. Yet the inadequacy of the approach does not demean the adequacy of help found. The startling thing is that the means of deliverance are so varied. There is not a single, stereotypical pattern in the healings of Jesus.

What is common is the uncommon ability in the face of very diverse and hopeless cases that are confronted. Jesus is not like modern day faith-healers for whom every failure is credited to the lack of faith of the client. There are no failures. Where help is sought, it is received. Nor do the disciples “screen” the clients to set aside any typical sorts of disabilities or diseases that normally do not respond to the healer's routine. This is a come-one, come-all. Just as all had eaten in the feeding of the five thousand, so all who came and touched were healed.

⁶⁰⁴ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 79).

(6) Scripture and tradition: the Pharisee approach to the law (15:1-11)

This dispute about purity illustrates the center of difference between Jesus and many other religious influentials of his day. The Pharisees and scribes who came to him on this occasion were among those whose heightened sensitivity to the boundaries of authentic Israel generated vigilance. They wanted to ensure that the purity and loyalty of Israelites to the ways of God were guarded. In a day, when the powerful influence of Hellenism continued to erode the core commitments of the people of God, they built a dam against such flood waters. These leaders had traveled all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee, so important did they think this issue of ritual purity was. In effect, they were taking norms meant for priests and applying those same rules in some form to the everyday practices of ordinary Jews.⁶⁰⁵

Jesus' practice and teaching cut across some of their most basic operative principles. Purity observances were a visible way of demonstrating (and monitoring) group loyalty. They also provided concrete proof that a person was devout, serious about the requirements of the Torah and desirous of being on the best of relationships with God. In this sense they were a positive ethic. They gave persons practical things to do at hearth and home to witness to a love of God and to commitment to his people.

Jesus did not teach his disciples to observe those very customs. They ate without the required piety practices. The challenge to Jesus comes indirectly through the accusation about his disciples. As their leader it would be perceived as an attack on his honor and so he replies. We need to be careful here. His attack on the "tradition of the elders" is not an objection to the dead hand of tradition, as though the problem is with conservatism per se. Jesus' complaint isn't that this line of thinking wasn't innovative or tracking with the changing times. It is that these particular traditions were part and parcel of an undermining of the commandments of God. These self-appointed Bible defenders were in fact Bible breakers. They wash their hands but then abuse their parents.⁶⁰⁶

Jesus is not an early-day Luther, complaining that legal norms invariably lead to legalism. The problem in this case is not a rigid, judgmental, externalizing legalism. At their best the Pharisees and scribes did not seek salvation by some meritorious calculus of rule keeping. As members already of the covenant people, they wanted to design a life style that was suitable and complementary to the relationship they had with the God of the Hebrew scriptures. If that was his word, then they needed to believe and practice it. This was not about getting in but about what we are to do when already in. The purity rules were a way of applying and contextualizing

⁶⁰⁵ Others also rejected these "traditions": "The tradition of the Pharisees had a controversial status before A.D. 70. The Sadducees repudiated it. So did those responsible for composing the Dead Sea Scrolls (we take them to have been Essenes)." Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 2* (p. 520). France, *Matthew*: "Whatever may have been the common-sense demands of hygiene (particularly when food was taken from a common dish), the only regular ritual handwashing required in the OT law is that of the priests before undertaking their cultic duties (Exod 30:18-21; 40:30-32) or eating the sacrificial food (Lev 22:4-7)." (p. 577). The extension may have been done on the basis of Israel being a "priestly nation."

⁶⁰⁶ Bruner, *Churchbook*: "What is of most moment in this text is this: the sin in the story is religious *devotion*. There is a devotion to God that hurts God because it hurts people. God's commandments have not only God in mind but people as well. God's commandments intend to protect The Rights of Man, The Dignity of the Human Person. But super-spiritual practices often undercut God's humanism." (p. 87).

that very word to a difficult multicultural context. There were strains and even streams of legalism present. Yet that is not the conversation at this moment.

The issue in this case is the relative weight (and content) to be given to the scriptures and the interpretive traditions that seek to give it meaning by extending it in cultural contexts foreign to its original revelation. The complaint against the scribes and Pharisees has to do with extensions and applications of scripture that actually nullify the intention and spirit of other Scripture.⁶⁰⁷ In other words, there are interpretations and then there are misinterpretations, applications and misapplications. The traditions of the elders Jesus taught against and “broke” were in the service of a different definition of purity practices and their role in defining boundaries for the true people of God.

The startling contrast from the Isaiah quote is between “doctrines” and “human precepts.” It would hardly seem to these devout Jews that such was the issue. They were only claiming, in the case of “Corban,” that vows to God supersede our duties to our parents. So, if we have bound our property and goods over to God in an act of devotion sealed by an oath, we cannot later change our minds and take it back. The god-ward connection carries more weight than the family-ward one. Vows are to be kept. The law said so.

Yet by this ruling, the moral entrepreneurs of Jesus’ day (following the sages of prior generations) nullified the clear command in the Torah to honor parents. The moral seriousness meant to accompany our “yes” and “no,” and with them the vows we make, was rated so highly that not even one of the Ten Commandments could supersede it. Jesus teaches us that there is a hierarchy and dynamic interrelationship of the norms of life before God. He will not allow space for rules that are applications and extensions of commandments that contradict and nullify other clear and more important commandments. We cannot escape the financial and physical support of family by appealing to our duty to sacrifice our goods to the cause of God. Now you may say, we are in a pickle, for Jesus himself plays with this dilemma and says we must even “hate” our parents if we are to follow him.

In this we are back again to the “but I say to you” of the Sermon on the Mount. Scriptures are complex and dynamic. At times Jesus seems to make distinctions that are almost identical to those of his opponents. Corban was built on the idea that divine commitments are more important than familial. Jesus agrees. There are commitments that are higher and so supersede our commitments to parents. The imperative that flows from the presence of the Kingdom of God is one of them. He made it clear that his call to discipleship overrides all our familial duties.

The dispute in this paragraph cannot be abstracted from tendencies and habits of the day. The use of the “Corban” rule had become leverage for impoverishing and neglecting the wellbeing of one’s parents by a child “on the make.” In a social world where generalized reciprocity prevailed in family relationships, anyone with success might become a magnet for clients as well as a source of funds for parents. “Corban” was one way of “protecting” assets in ways that might have little or nothing to do with either honoring God or parents. It twisted the spiritual channels of life in such a way that one might appear very religious and pious while feathering one’s own nest at the same time. Corban’s effect was not to enhance authentic ties with God but to provide a fence by which one could keep more money and wealth for oneself.

⁶⁰⁷ The Greek is emphatic: “*you*” and “*your*” (15:3): “Why do *you* even transgress the command of God on account of *your* tradition?” Cf. Gibbs, *Matthew II* (p. 767). Their interpretation and application of Scripture actually nullified Scripture, rather than filling it out in their context.

By contrast the demands of discipleship that are greater than duty to parents are directly connected with becoming a “scribe of the Kingdom of God.” Not always, nor everywhere does this demand reach everyone. There are times of crisis and times where more ordinary routines are appropriate. Jesus’ time was limited on earth. If a would-be disciple were to learn of him, then she or he needed to do whatever was required to wander about the villages of Galilee with Jesus. Even today there are certain given disciplines and time needed to become well equipped in the things of God. Sometimes that will require a decisive break with the everyday and ordinary. We may find that we cannot invest ourselves as fully as we might like in familial matters—or financial.

The contrast between human precepts and “doctrine” is striking. The complaint in the Isaiah quote in this context is that the word of God is displaced by the words of the human. Rather than holding to what God teaches, these traditions advance humanly rooted notions as if they were the divine precepts. Despite their legitimate orientation toward finding living applications for new times, these traditions gradually fell subject to the displacement of goals by means. The goal had been to please God and secure commitments and life-styles that conformed with the word of God. The means had been interpretive traditions rooted in detailed exegesis. Yet over time the application came to stand for the command itself. What had been a legitimate extension became the only rightful extension.

We all live within such interpretive traditions. We all take for granted certain well-tried paths, even when they are not fully responsive to the map God has given us. Corban may have been a well-meant, devotionally nourishing solution to a dilemma. Yet it was not the only solution. Nor was it given as such with the text of Scripture. Because of its use, it was odious to Jesus. His words seem to suggest that the better solution would have been to permit Corban so long as it did not water the plant of covetousness and so long as it provided adequate support due to parents. His words also suggest that it might be better to “break” this vow when it has brought about the folly of effectively not honoring parents.

By implication, Jesus will now round on the more basic issue at stake: purity regulations. In this case the Pharisees took legislation for priestly activity and applied it to those who were not priests. If God expected a special degree and type of purity from priests, the Pharisees were going to require the same matters from the laity of Israel. They will all be required to be as pure as the priests. That would be a demonstration to God (and others) of the seriousness with which the covenant was taken by this generation of Israel.

As a voluntary discipline or a temporary exercise, it might well have been a vitalizer of spiritual life. When it became the new boundaries of acceptable practice and loyalty, its use and function shifted dramatically. The goal in the Old Testament was to foster such an encounter with God that Israel would mediate the blessings to God to the nations, not wall Israel off from Gentiles. Jesus was now dismantling the wall of the Pharisees.

In the first part of this conversation, Jesus has lifted Scripture above human interpretive traditions and customary applications (*sola Scriptura*). He asks that we keep clear accounts of the boundaries between humanly based accounts and the actual message of Scripture. The confusion of the two leads to all sorts of mischief. He is not banning such interpretive necessities, only the teaching of the one as the other.

In this counter teaching Jesus underscores the priority of inner life over external rituals. What is it that breaks our relationship with God? Not the sort of food we eat or whether we eat with right or left hand, washed or unwashed hands. Defilement before God is something that

relates to what is in our hearts.

It is a serious question as to whether Jesus contradicts the principle he has set up. Scripture is supreme, yet this part of Scripture on purity and defilement is now cancelled! Is he cancelling Scripture or is this a similar move we have encountered before in the Sermon on the Mount? Is he opening up the intention behind food laws or showing their limited goal, now fulfilled? What is going on here?

In the context Jesus is saying that the words of the Pharisees are what defiles in this day and time, not the lack of washing of his disciples. Words are what damns or justifies. This criticism, based on human precepts (on our own best opinions) rather than the Word of God, is what made these religious devotees into hypocrites. They claimed closeness to God and devout dedication to purity. Yet their hearts were far from the true and living God and their words demonstrated that very fact. They scurry about seeking minutiae to dismiss Jesus' person and work. His miracles and teachings were powerfully influential in the countryside and the small towns. What challenged them was their inability to put Jesus down. They seek to discredit him by criticizing his disciples for not observing their purity rules and customs. Their words display their misunderstanding of what God is about in the world.

(7) Explanation of the criticism of the Pharisees (15:12-20)

The fact that the disciples raise questions about the radical words of Jesus show their own respect for the Pharisees. These men, of all the people of Israel, were the most scrupulous and serious about their religious identity. Jesus had clearly offended them by going far beyond the issue of clean hands to that of clean food. If what he said was true, then one of the major boundaries between Jew and Gentile was erased. If what Jesus said is true, then those taken to be the most acute guides of the life of Israel are wrong at the core of their program and advocacy.

Jesus characterizes them as plants to be uprooted by God (like the tares in Matt. 13:24-30). He portrays them as the blind leading the blind. Their rootage is not in the activity of God. In contrast to his own mission and goals, the Pharisees, with their teachings, practices and influence, are not a plant of God. They will be uprooted. The disciples should leave them alone and not be impressed by the imposing range of their piety and scriptural knowledge. Taken as spiritual guides, they will lead themselves and those who follow into a pit.

In addressing the crowds, he underscores the truth that it is heart products not the produce of the field nor the way food is handled that defiles.⁶⁰⁸ The purpose of the food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 were not to set up objective distinctions within nature—as though some foods that nourish are inherently evil and defiling and so to be avoided. The list of matters could have been very different than it is. What God is concerned with is not the quarantining of certain foods so much as making a people holy and distinctive in his sight. They were to be formed into a holy nation of priests through whom the blessings of God would be mediated. Part of the process of nation formation included a regulation of food habits. But that regulation was conventional in a way the Ten Commandments were not.

What defiles are the matter that spring from the heart, not just words but deeds as well (murder, theft, adultery as well as false witness and slander). It all goes back to evil intentions.

⁶⁰⁸Luther, *Works Vol. 67*: "But if food and drink do not make one impure, how much less do clothing, place, time, status, and all the other observances and traditions make one impure, seeing that food and drink are the most important thing in the present life of the body." (p. 246).

This is the same point Jesus made in the Sermon on the Mount. Words and deeds count precisely because they are registers and mirrors of the heart. They might look very pious and good (as did the behavior and rationale of the Corban or the rigorous purity regulations). Yet they can also be duplicitous. Good actions can be connected to evil intentions just as really as evil actions and words are external displays of the evil intention. Jesus' own words stung and hurt. His own words sprang from his heart. What he claims from his disciples in all ages is that they listen to these words. He claims the right to tie the circumference of Scripture application to his own teachings. His words are the authoritative interpretive tradition by which to receive true guidance in these matters.

The stress on the interior does not deny nor denigrate the exterior. Banning lust does not then turn into an overturning of the law about adultery or fornication, as though "without lust" you can do these things. The list of vices said to spring out of evil intentions includes actions as well as words follow relatively closely the sequence of matters in the Ten Commandments (murder, adultery, theft, false witness). The point of Jesus' words is not that the exterior is unimportant or that the division of things sacred and profane is being done away with.

This is no more a passage against the law than the Sermon on the Mount was. Rather the meaning of that law is being pulled back to the radical intention of God's saving purposes for all human beings, Gentile as well as Jew. Jesus' understanding of the place and role of the law in the economy of the Kingdom is vastly different from that of the Pharisees. The conflict is not over the source of revelation or its validity. It is over the interpretation and application of that Scripture.⁶⁰⁹ The offense to the Pharisees is not that Jesus banished the purity laws of the Old Testament or distinguished between human words and divine words in its texts.

We also have clues in this passage that contemporary charges of anti-Semitism in Matthew are built on less than close readings of the texts. We must always distinguish between the uses of Scripture and the intentions of Scripture. That Matthew has been misused to justify the blaspheming and abusing of Jews by "Christians" tells us little about Matthew himself. The "parting of the ways" between the Judaism of Jesus and the Judaism that the rabbis made normative is a story in itself. There is clear evidence in Acts and Paul as well as the rest of the New Testament that the "pillars" of Judaism were upheld by Christian Jews. The struggle was very much over whose understanding of Judaism was to be normative. In significant ways the Pharisees were the precursors of normative Rabbinic Judaism, just as Jesus was the precursor of the Jewish movement now known as Christianity.

Both streams have come to live without a Temple with sacrifice and Aaronic priesthood. Many of the purity regulations in Leviticus and Deuteronomy have had to be adjusted. It also appears that early Jewish Christianity continued many of the observances of Judaism without embarrassment. Only when the dispute broke out over the status of uncircumcised Gentile Christians did it become necessary to spell out the implications of words such as these. We cannot suppose that the disciples understood the implications and applications until the lived experience of the Christian movement faced them with discussion over policies to be followed in new situations. Jesus himself did not set up a Jewish-Gentile yoked movement. Nonetheless,

⁶⁰⁹ Carson, *Matthew*: "It goes beyond the evidence to argue, as does Ernst Käsemann (*Essays on New Testament Themes* [London: SCM Press, 1964], 101), that Jesus now abrogates the distinction between the sacred and the profane; or, as Lohmeyer does, that Jesus now distinguishes 'word of God' from 'word of man,' even within Scripture itself..." (p. 401).

such a movement developed and did so in continuity with the intentions and outlook of Jesus.

One might also suppose that this passage has relevance to the strong language of Luther. His words “offended” the teaching community of the Roman Catholic Church. If our words betray the state of our intentions and heart, then we can only suppose that there are times when words need to be strong and direct. The unvarnished accusation of the Pharisees as hypocrites and the claim that they are endangered by the judgment of God are stinging (fighting) words. Whether they “defiled” Jesus with “anti-Semitism” or faced these leaders with the unpleasant truth in service of seeking their repentance can be adjudicated only by a larger picture. The same is true of the strong language on both sides of the Reformation and Counter Reformation.

There is no simple way to judge these matters. Traditions of interpretation and scriptural intention are mutually interactive. How do we tell when we have slipped from the authority of Scripture to the dictates of human origin? How are we to tell when our rough language and accusatory name-calling threatens us with the fires of hell rather than the people we are attempting to shock into recognition? Jesus Christ tells us we are to listen and understand. Yet how do we know when our understanding is misunderstanding, our sight blindness, our guides blind guides? All we embrace seems so reasonable and congruent.

Jesus draws us back to himself and to the measures given in the Sermon on the Mount. We take him as our guide and come again and again as those poor in spirit needing his instruction and grace. We need to listen repeatedly and watch our words and actions—whether they conform to his example and teachings (or excuse ourselves from accountability because these are “minor matters”).

❖ Discipleship: Sin and Vice Lists

In his book *Whatever Became of Sin?*⁶¹⁰ Karl Menninger lamented the loss of “sin” as a category in talking about human conduct. Our culture’s discomfort with “guilt” meant we largely stopped talking “sin” and shifted our language to “crime.” At one level, that meant we could avoid being part of that group who were ‘criminals,’ unlike us. They were the problem, not us. Then the “permissive” society was taken as a liberation from the horrifying distortions of Victorianism and Puritanism, especially about sex.

Now a half century on, we live in a deeply troubled world with few resources to make sense of morals or ethics other than to embrace a self-undermining relativism that the “right” and the “good” are to be defined by each autonomous individual. The illusion that there is objective, transcendent standards of right and wrong is no more than another oppressive metanarrative that is socially constructed to enhance the power of some group, so it is said.

That is not the perspective of Jesus. The list of things Jesus says “defiles” us are attitudes, actions and words that spring out of our inner being. He does not leave these matters as a vague sensibility or orientation. He picks up the list given in the second table of the Ten Commandments as a beginning point. It is not meant to be definitive or comprehensive. His emphasis on the inner does not cause him to be hesitant in naming specific external action as well that “defile.” He does not disagree with the Law. It is relevant for those who seek the higher

⁶¹⁰ Published first in 1973.

righteousness of the Kingdom of God. The list has a similar order to Matthew 19:18:⁶¹¹

Matthew 15:19	Matthew 19:18	Exodus 20:12-17
(Honor father and mother 15:3-6)		Honor father and mother
1. Evil thoughts (schemes)		
2. Murders	Murder	Murder
3. Adulteries	Adultery	Adultery
4. Sexual immoralities		
5. Thefts	Steal	Steal
6. False testimonies (lying)	False testimony	False testimony
7. Slanders (defamation)	Honor father and mother	Covet

No list is ever exhaustive.⁶¹² There is no intrinsic problem with lists but when they are made definitive markers for spirituality or morality, they very quickly become legalistic codes that destroy life and community. They can become exactly the same sort of human “tradition” that Jesus opposes in this event: the “best” intended words for immature disciples that functionally and practically displace the better words of Scripture.

What vice lists point to are significant exemplars of what destroys the character of a person and the communion with God. Jesus ties the externals to the internal (“evil thoughts”). The six items that follow “evil designs”(the only double-membered item) and grow out of what starts in the heart and mind. Only as lists are kept closely tied to the central thrust of the law and the prophets (and the matters that they underscore) do they function as a life-giving signpost to the freedom God offers to us.

The use of vice and virtue lists was fairly commonplace in the first century, found among Jewish, Gentile (especially Stoic) and Christian writers.⁶¹³ They were codes of conduct that provided concrete indications of the sorts of attitudes, dispositions and actions were censored or expected from the members of the community. Those expectations were not subjective prejudices of deluded fanatics but commonly shared norms of social life.

⁶¹¹ “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” Matt. 19:17-19.

⁶¹² Mark’s parallel gives a longer list: 7:20 “[Jesus] went on: ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—[acts of]sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, [the traits of] deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’” The UBS Handbook on Mark indicates: “It is to be noticed in the list of twelve sins which follows that the first six are plural, referring to acts, and the last six are singular, referring more directly to the sin itself.” Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida (1993) *A Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*. New York: United Bible Societies (p. 233). Both are traced back to their source in the heart. Note Matthew’s list is also in the plural.

⁶¹³ In the New Testament we find such lists in: Virtue Lists: 2 Cor 6:6–7a; Gal 5:22–23; Eph 4:2–3, 32–5:2; 5:9; Phil 4:8; Col 3:12; 1 Tim 3:2–4, 8–10, 11–12; 4:12; 6:11, 18; 2 Tim 2:22–25; 3:10; Titus 1:8; 2:2–10; Heb 7:26; 1 Pet 3:8; 2 Pet 1:5–7; (1 Cor 13:4–7). Vice Lists: Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21–22; Rom 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor 12:20–21; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 4:31; 5:3–5; Col 3:5–8; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 6:4–5; 2 Tim 3:2–4; Titus 1:7; 3:3; 1 Pet 2:1; 4:3, 15; Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15.

In the modern era, lists have gotten a bad name. Partly due to the petty legalisms of the first half of the 20th century (make-up, movies, dancing, card games, liquor, smoking, hair style, clothing, music styles etc.). Externalities became marks of inner spirituality. There was an undue emphasis on negative rules: you were judged by what you did not do and what a person's character was mattered less. More subtly, there were culturally driven notions of masculinity and femininity that were preoccupied more with form than substance. It all fed into a spiritual bullying: you were not a "good" Christian if you did "those things," regardless that at the same time you might be greedy, racist, self-indulgent or prideful.

The Sermon on the Mount was clear: the righteousness of the disciple must exceed that of the Pharisee and the Scribe, whose lists of externalities were used to judge and censor Jesus and his disciples. The problem with lists is that they can become a check-list which, when done, signifies the fullness of righteousness and justice. They can become occasions for violating the very goal and purpose for which legitimate externalities such as spiritual and ritual practices were given in the first place. Without keeping them closely tethered to the spirit of the law and the motives that should animate them, they can become pathways of judgmentalism and death.

The fact that there are so many virtue/vice lists in the New Testament shows that the life of the disciple has a very specific shape: it is the life that we find modeled by Jesus himself. Those lists give concreteness to the general imperatives of love, justice, and mercy. While it may be the case that the fully mature and wise disciple doesn't need such rules and lists in order to live righteously, most of us still are not fully formed. So, we know, without external guidance, what is the right and good thing to do or feel in given circumstances is often murky. The paradox is that the immature need lists but often misuse them; the mature don't need them but are the very ones who know how to use them appropriately.

This is where lists need to be embedded in relationships: where the mature can mentor the immature, where lists function like training wheels for those learning to ride a bicycle but aren't needed once the ability to ride is an ingrown ability not needing such balancing wheels. Virtues are strengths that have become "second nature" so that they are deployed across an extraordinarily wide range of relationships and situations where lists of rules do not give the sort of precise guidance needed for responsible action. When virtues and wisdom are spotty or weak, lists often provide the sorts of negative guide rails that keep the disciple on the proper path, even when they do not spell out what is the best positive conduct.

(8) The great faith of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28)

After this Jesus withdraws, this time to the region of Tyre and Sidon, gentile territory. Having dealt with a very intramural Jewish issue, he now relates to Gentiles.

Where Jesus spoke harshly to Jewish leaders, he speaks honorably of the lost sheep of Israel to this gentile woman. She comes in faith, seeking help in a desperate situation. The contrast with the Pharisees and scribes who came from Jerusalem with an accusation is striking. Jesus' vocation was to the lost sheep of Israel. Yet numbers of them did not think themselves lost or in need of the messianic ministry of Jesus.

Tyre and Sidon carried with them several connotations that may well have flavored the hearing of this event. Tyre was an island state, about 25 miles from the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. It possessed power and wealth. Over the years it had expanded its hegemony from the time of Hiram to the Roman era. Its commerce on the sea provided it with significant resources. Most of its food stuffs were purchased from the area of north Galilee, a territory

oriented toward this bustling market town.

Jesus is now in an area through which he must pass on his way to Caesarea Philippi. It would have a mixed population, both Jew and Gentile. This woman (labelled Syro-Phoenician by Mark) is baldly called a Canaanite by Matthew. This places her socially and ethnically among the most unwelcome to most Jews. These were the traditional enemies and corruptors of Israel in Old Testament days. In recent history they were those whose resources took bread out of the mouths of Jewish children. In times of shortage, the wealth of Tyre and Sidon meant the high market prices of grain could be paid by them, leaving only left-overs for the poorer Jews.

So, there may have been an echo or two in the sharp, angular riposte Jesus issues to this woman's positive honor challenge. Jesus' words (to whom?) that he is sent only to the house of Israel provides a larger context. Within honor principles, there was little need that he respond to the woman. Not only was she a woman, but she was also not Jewish. She could be shamed in her quest by the sort of expedient that might be in the disciples' minds ("Send her away...."). They might have thought a dismissive refusal to interact might end what they considered somewhat irritating and disruptive. Or they might be suggesting that he grant her request so that she would leave them alone.

This is the second time in Matthew that we encounter the persistence of a Gentile seeking a miracle. This is the second time that he will note great faith (this time close on the heels of the contrasting lack of faith in Israel) and grant the miracle (*sola fides*).⁶¹⁴ Within Israel Jesus at times seeks out people in need and provides a miracle without any note of faith by anyone. In the case of these two Gentile miracles, they are both elicited only in connection with faith.

Neither the miracle nor its effect is developed; the emphasis falls on the mother's faith (not her cleverness that traps Jesus in his own words). (a) She is an exemplar of faith (15:28). Faith is unshakable confidence in Jesus, and her faith in this Jewish messiah is tenacious. It is like that of the centurion (8:10), and it contrasts with the total lack of faith exhibited by the synagogue of Nazareth (13:53–58) and the little faith of Peter (14:31) and the disciples (16:8). (b) She also is one who is poor in spirit. Pride goes out the window when one is truly desperate. She acknowledges the difference between Jew and Greek, but she acts on her conviction that the barriers that separate her, a gentile, from Israel are not impregnable. (c) Her will is also emphasized (contrast 8:13; 9:29). She ardently wants only healing for her daughter, which contrasts with what others want or do not want in the Gospel.⁶¹⁵

This time the context is even more pertinent to what is going on. The conversation about what defiles a person would always have at its boundaries a larger discourse and set of convictions about Gentiles and their relationship to the elect people of Israel. Jesus' words on purity practices, in principle, levels one of the traditional barriers between Jew and Gentile. If what

⁶¹⁴ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: "At the risk of sounding somewhat impious, there don't seem to be too many things in first-century Palestine that amaze Jesus. To be sure, Matthew doesn't say, 'And Jesus was amazed.' Earlier, however, another Gentile had approached Jesus with the needs of his servant. The Roman centurion spoke and showed his faith and understanding, and Matthew wrote: 'Now when he had heard, Jesus marveled and said to those who were following, 'Truly I say to you, with no one have I found in Israel so strong a faith!'" (8:10)." (p. 787-788).

⁶¹⁵ Garland, *Matthew* (pp. 165-166).

counts are heart products rather than the sort of food one eats (or the washing practices), then even a Gentile might be clean before God.⁶¹⁶

This is one of the implications that comes with this story. This woman had the right heart product: great faith. Though her need and that of her daughter was not within the direct focus of the vocation of Jesus to the house of Israel, she found herself included. She was clean because of faith, not defiled because of being a Gentile, a Canaanite at that! She was willing to see herself in the picture Jesus paints of the blessings (healing) of God being dispensed by his ministry. Even as a “little dog” (house dog) she sees herself as under the table where the bread is being given to the children of the household.⁶¹⁷ All she asks is a small morsel, not the bread due to children of Israel. She asks, not for herself, but for her daughter who is possessed by a demon.

This again is startling. Faith can bring miracles for others. There is no indication of the daughter’s faith (anymore in the Centurion’s case for the servant who is paralyzed and in terrible distress). This miracle is done in response to the faith of one person for another. Already we have an indication of faith directed at Jesus, not just toward God (as well as in the case of the four friends of the paralytic let down through the roof). This woman calls him Lord, Son of David. She is not blind as are the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. She can see who Jesus is and what he will do for those who cry to him for help and mercy.

(9) Healings on a mountain (15:29-31)

She is not alone in her notion that Jesus can help in concrete ways. As he returns and walks alongside the Sea of Galilee, many come to him. “Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others.”⁶¹⁸

This is another indication that Jesus was known in his earthly days as a healer as well as an

⁶¹⁶ France, *Matthew*: “The whole of the second half of chapter 15 thus puts into practice the message of its first half, the relaxation of the Jewish ‘purity’ culture which had hitherto kept Jew and Gentile apart. In that process, so essential to the eventual internationalization of the Christian movement, the cheeky persistence of the Canaanite woman plays a defining role.” (p. 591).

⁶¹⁷ This whole exchange is offensive to many moderns. It seems denigrating to the woman, coming from the very One who has scored denigrating language. See comments and explanations on the use of “little dog” in its context and what it implies: Keener, *Matthew* (pp. 415-17); Gundry, *Matthew* (pp. 314-15); in contrast Carter, *Matthew* goes so far as to say: “To refer to her as a dog or bitch, even a ‘little bitch’ or puppy, since a diminutive form is used, is offensive and insulting (Josephus, *Con Ap* 2.85). Jesus seems to be ‘caught with his compassion down.’” (p. 324). On the contrary: Bruner, *Churchbook*: “Whatever Jesus’ prior sentences meant—and she is not sure what they meant—she is sure of this: Jesus is moving, almost perceptively, toward her. She and her daughter are, at least (like house dogs themselves), ‘in the house.’ She refuses to look at the shadow side of Jesus’ remarks. Instead, she grasps at what he did not say in what he did say—he did not say, Go away, and he did not say, No. Faith is holding on to Jesus for dear life, like a drowning person to a life raft, believing that Jesus is good even when his words do not seem to be (for, in Henry’s striking image, 218, ‘there may be love in Christ’s heart while there are frowns in his face’). She sees where Jesus’ words are taking him, and they are taking him toward her. In Jesus’ new sentence, when he had at least put her in the house, though under the table, she found shards of hope.” (p. 102).

⁶¹⁸ While this description indicates the sorts of needs found in peasant societies, Carter, *Matthew*, takes it beyond reasonable conclusions to say: “The great crowds bring him a cast of religious and socioeconomic marginals, *victims of the imperial structures...*” (p. 326, italics added). In the context this attributes common diseases to “imperial structures.”

exorcist. His attractiveness was not simply that he told a good story or sharply barbed wisdom that subverted the taken-for-granted oppressions of his day. His message of the Kingdom was eschatological. People heard him in terms of a variety of understandings that took God's decisive intervention to be a possibility. His miracles accompanying the Kingdom also identified him with the events that Isaiah and others associated with the divine favor of God poured out on Israel. These clues were not mistaken, even if some of the eschatological interpretations were not quite on target.

In whatever way we wish to take Jesus, we cannot make him out to be a Jeffersonian purveyor of philosophical platitudes and advocate of "reasonable" religion. The stir he created, leading to his death, cannot be understood once we make him over into a sort of modern day look alike of the left-leaning university gad-fly. We cannot extract him from his context and suppose we confront anything more than our own modern, biased projections.

The quest for the historical Jesus turns out to be a litmus test of the assumptions brought by the scholar. The image created by many writers is given in the beginning with the framework of working principles they adopt. Once those are laid out, it is not difficult to predict the results. Each generation seems to have a different bag of preferences. Each creates a new Jesus along the lines of its assumptions. Frequently the data beliefs shift with each generation of scholarship, eternally renewing the quest. The long-term impression created is that the methods and assumptions seem inadequate to the task. Finding a "Jesus" behind the Jesus of the Gospels seems to result in only finding the profile of assumptions brought to the task.

Some have concluded it is impossible to reconstruct a plausible and well-founded picture of Jesus. The documents only allow us to recreate (and that with difficulty) how several early Christians saw Jesus. What Jesus was becomes the "thing-in-itself" that is unknowable. For some this is the end of the matter and we can get on with more scientific, pragmatic and modern matters. Good riddance to antiquarian and speculative religious matters anyhow! For others this is turned into a virtue. We can never know things in themselves and that is the glory of human creativity. We can only know the play of ideas and what our placement in the flow of historical development allows us. So, we celebrate the loss of an illusory "objectivity" and freedom of "subjectivity." Viva la imagination and radical freedom.

Yet the dismissal of the quest or the radical retreat into infinite subjectivity are not the only options. Even if we are unable to get "behind" the view Gospel writers have of Jesus, they do have a view of someone, not simply a reporting of a day dream or psychedelic fantasy. Pushed to its limits, we only know in part, only see from a particular place, only experience things through our senses in our historical placement. That is no less true for us than for those who felt, heard and viewed Jesus' earthly life. We cannot ask for a sort of knowledge we do not have. Nor can we deny the knowledge we surely have. We do have at the least, four interrelated portraits that give us a three-dimensional view. But once we confuse our categories and blur all boundaries, we do not wind up with greater clarity and freedom. We fall into a chaos of know-nothing. We wind up with less than the Gospel accounts, not more.

We may spell out our subjectivity: modern, Enlightenment-bred skepticism. That is not the same thing as a refutation of the concrete experience of lame people who no longer were lame or blind people who could now see or diseased people restored to vigorous health. Our interpretation may witness to our own modern subjectivity. But it raises the question (as anthropologists have been doing for some time): why our subjectivity and not that of the culture and peoples we are seeking to understand? Why are the philosophical and metaphysical

accompaniments of our modern “scientific” world view to be preferred over differing religious and metaphysical assumptions? The problem with Hume’s view of miracles lies unresolved in this very place.

How we resolve this challenge, we cannot simply dismiss the testimony of first century people on the basis that such events “cannot happen” and thus “did not happen.” That is a logical and historical stumbling block. We cannot be equally open to all possible possibilities. But we cannot rule out miracles of this sort, not even with our far more powerful medical understanding. Things of this sort happen. We must admit that much.

(10) Feeding the four thousand (15:32-39)

This story of the feeding of the four thousand has many commonalities with the prior feeding of the five thousand. Some take that to be proof that this is a doublet.⁶¹⁹ Yet the differences are also striking and multiple. Furthermore, this is found first in Mark. It would be strange for either writer to retain a doublet here. It was only decades after the events and credibility would be shattered if people who were there knew only one occurred. Making a theological point does not require making up a historical event. In fact, the theological could be undermined by someone pointing out that the event did not happen. In the next chapter (Matthew 16:9-11) Jesus will mention both events.

This story is recited for the simple reason that it happened and was the second time Jesus did this sort of feeding. The confusion and stumbling comments of the disciples is revealing of their inability to follow through on all they “knew” and experienced. Only in a neat, completely consistent world where people learn lessons the first time would such behavior seem implausible and strange.

Jesus does not ask the disciples to do anything. He notes his great concern for the crowds who have been with him for three days. They have run out of food and he does not wish to send them back home lest some collapse from hunger on the way. So, he wishes to feed them.

The response of the disciples shows that some of them understood him to be considering purchasing bread for this large group and they are sure there is not enough in the nearby towns to feed so many. There is no indication that they were foolish in their comments or reasoning. They had seen Jesus feed a large crowd only once. Why should they assume every time a hungry crowd is present he will do a miracle? We know from John that Jesus castigated the crowd for following him about as though his task were to turn stones into bread and feed them all.

The fact that he asks them for the resources they have (seven loaves) indicates that he will do the miracle a second time. Some take their response as somewhat sarcastic or disbelieving. They not only mention the seven loaves but the few small fish as well! Yet this seems to add an unnatural twist to the story. As it stands, the story is bare-boned, without many clues as to the state of faith or unfaith on the part of the disciples. They have not been commanded to do anything about the need of the crowd or the desires of Jesus. Jesus wants to feed them. The challenge is how to accomplish such a desire.

⁶¹⁹ For example: Hagner, *Matthew 8-20*: “Although it is of course not impossible that there were two similar, miraculous feedings, the data surveyed above seem more consistent with the hypothesis of one original event that came to be transmitted in two different versions, each with its own symbolism.” (p. 450). Carson, *Matthew* (pp. 407-408) lays out a clear explanation for seeing these as two independent events. Also, France, *Matthew* (pp. 600-601).

The event then unfolds in a manner like the feeding of the five thousand. We do not know how such a miracle takes place, only that the crowd get their belly full and there are seven baskets of fragments left over. This detail about the remainders seems to aim at underlining the abundance of the miraculous supply. There does not seem to be any symbolic correspondence or implication as one might make of the twelve baskets left over in the feeding of the five thousand.

So why this story? In the context one might wonder if it points back in part to the controversy with the Pharisees. These people could not have properly washed their hands before this meal! Nor is there any guarantee that the passing of the bread might not defile the disciples or some in the crowd. This is eating where one cannot pick one's company carefully. Who knows who is unclean in such a group? This sort of point would be emphasized even more were there gentiles in this group (some see this as the feeding of a gentile crowd because of the way in which the miracles of vs. 29-31 are acknowledged: "they praised the God of Israel").⁶²⁰

If these are gentiles, then we have indication of Jesus taking the bread meant for the children of Israel and giving it to the gentiles. Yet this is certainly not clear from the context. It probably is better to leave it ambiguous or to revert to Jesus' own practice: to serve the lost sheep of Israel.⁶²¹ This event serves to set the stage for the subsequent dispute with and warning against the Pharisees and Sadducees in the following chapter.

Jesus is the one who defines the boundaries of eating. It is what comes out of our mouth that reveals what is in our heart. Jesus speaks of compassion and his thanksgiving multiplies food for the masses. The Pharisees and Sadducees speak very differently and thereby show themselves to be defiled: to be compromised by a leaven that destroys their relationship with the God of Israel.

(11) The Sign of Jonah (16:1-4)

There appear to be contradictory or strangely counterpoised attitudes about "signs" in the Gospels. John's Gospel is built around a series of signs that point to and reveal the divine character and saving power of Jesus as the Word made flesh. The demand in this encounter is for a "sign from heaven."

The difference in use of the word "sign" may resolve itself in terms of the context. Miracles act as authenticating pointers to the reality of the activity of God. The "signs" Jesus did in the

⁶²⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*: "So it is better to see Jesus as deliberately repeating for Gentiles what he previously offered to Jews. He is the Bread of life for all the world, even if a more consistent and thoroughgoing ministry to the Gentiles still awaits his resurrection." (p. 245). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: "...it has been common since the time of Augustine for interpreters to emphasize that this second miraculous feeding takes place in the mixed Jewish-Gentile territory of the Decapolis and that through it the Gentiles receive Jesus' messianic provision." (p. 794). Agree: Osborne, *Matthew* (p. 601); Chamblin, *Matthew* (p. 798-800); Carson, *Matthew* (p. 406); France, *Matthew* (pp. 600-601); Contrary: Luz, *Matthew 8-20* (p. 345); Turner, *Cornerstone: Matthew* (pp. 214-215); Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (pp. 445-446); Witherington *Matthew* (pp. 303-304); and Nolland, *Matthew* (pp. 640-641).

⁶²¹ Some see typological significance: Chamblin, *Matthew*, "In the *typology* of this passage, as in 14:13-21, Jesus is greater than Moses and Elisha. Indeed, the contrast is greater here: for whereas Moses fed his own people, and Elisha some Israelite 'sons of the prophets' (2 Kings 4:38), Jesus—having already satisfied the hunger of a Jewish crowd—now shows the same mercy to a yet hungrier multitude of uncircumcised Gentiles." (p. 802)

John are pointers to the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, a revelation of the truth and graciousness of God's salvation for those who trusted in Jesus as God's Christ. To faith, miracles open a window onto the character and power of God.

To the negative challenge of the religious leaders, miracles were no more than a teaser, raising the question as to the source of the power at work. They wanted an ultimate indicator: some eschatological intervention of God so powerful and wondrous that all questions about the authentic source of Jesus' power would vanish. They wanted not merely an "ordinary" miracle but something super-powerful, super good. Instead of such a demonstration, only the sign of Jonah will be given, hardly the sort of "sign" that would suffice.⁶²²

Jesus' words indicate what divides him from these religious leaders. Their implicit critique is that his authority is not from heaven. Their challenge is: provide a definitive demonstration of such authority. They are blind to the signs that are all about him in the form of the miracles and the feeding of the four thousand. One might wonder what more is needed to such a demonstration to be enough for these religious leaders. They are the blind leading the blind (15:14). They are a contrast with the crowds who praised the God of Israel for what they saw.

Rather, they are the ones who lack authority from heaven. They are an evil and adulterous generation (a shocking accusation to a generation that tightened the rituals and boundaries of Israel in order to display their intense commitment to the things of God). They are plants not planted by the Father who will be uprooted (15:13). What they teach defiles the land and those who follow their instruction (16:12).

In this interchange, one wonders why Jesus did not turn the challenge back upon them. The reality is that their claim to divine authority is rooted in no more than a tradition of biblical interpretation and practice. Their claims might equally be a matter of self-referencing: the elite considering their own origins and education as sufficiently clear that all ought to defer to them. Why Jesus needed to produce a definitive sign when they did not is part of the socio-cultural milieu that must be understood in order to see what is going on here.

We may suppose the reason they even ask for such a demonstration from Jesus already indicates their culpability to the critique of Jesus. After all, why ask for such an event from someone who did no miracles? Only a miracle-worker (as opposed to a non-miracle working teacher) would seem to possess the capabilities to rise to such a challenge. This is raising the ante on Jesus. If he is from God, then work the sort of miracle that goes well beyond the "ordinary" miracle! Let God do a "sign."

The words about weather prediction indicate that the "same" sign means very different things when it is in the morning or the evening.⁶²³ Red tints in the morning suggests clouds and

⁶²² Henry, *Commentary*: "Some other sign than what they had yet had. They had great plenty of signs; every miracle Christ wrought was a sign, *for no man could do what he did unless God were with him*. But this will not serve, they must have a sign of their own choosing; they despised those signs which relieved the necessity of the sick and sorrowful, and insisted upon some sign(s) which gratify the curiosity of the proud.." (p. 1693).

⁶²³ Some early manuscripts do not have the words: "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." (6:2-3.) It is rated a {C}. Metzger, *Textual Commentary* (p. 33). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II* defends the inclusion. (p. 797).

rain; red in the evening indicates clouds in the east, going away from the observer. The Kingdom is dawning in the miracles and teaching of Jesus, yet these spiritual “leaders” cannot make sense of it. They do not have the proper horizon against which to interpret the meaning of the actions and teachings of Jesus.

What is the sign of Jonah? Is it the sign of powerlessness—the exact opposite from what these leaders requested? Or might it be the sign of the resurrection, the return to life after three days in the grave? In this context, it seems that the sign might be the weakness and helplessness of a prophet who proclaimed the message of repentance (and did so to the Gentiles!). Yet its meaning is probably best lined out by seeking the earlier reference to Jonah in Matthew 12:38-40. While it is possible that he varies the thing referred to by this metaphor, it does not require such for it to be sensible here.

The blindness of these leaders is seen in the very fact that they request a sign when Jesus is working numerous “signs” and wonders in clear sight for them to see. But seeing is not believing in this case. The final and definitive sign will be God’s vindication of Jesus by the resurrection and that also under their very noses with equally negligible results in terms of their acknowledgement. Their very tendentiousness is an indication that they do not seek the truth. This is strategic communication. What they seek is to make Jesus stumble and be discredited in the eyes of the wider populace.⁶²⁴ They have come in order to test him – to put him under pressure in order to discredit his claims in the eyes of the people.

(12) The disastrous influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5-12)

This conversation brings up the core issue between Jesus and the leadership of the two major parties in Israel. Since the time of the Hasmoneans, these two groups vied for the dominant position in the life and thought of the Israelites. In Jesus’ eyes the choice between the two of them was equally unpalatable. The effects of both added up to the same reality: neither accepted the burden of repentance before God and, at the same time, led the people away from God.

Their evil and adulterous ways manifested itself in their teachings. Rather than bringing people to the place of purity before God, they created impurity. Their teachings were a leaven of evil that permeated the whole lump of Israel. Furthermore, these were people who sought for the sensational, the real action. They wanted more than the humdrum drudgery of everyday covenant faithfulness. They sought the presence of the divine in some super-added fashion.

Jesus’ powerful teaching and miracles was creating an upheaval. The average peasant family was astounded at what was going on. These Jerusalemite leaders come to investigate. They want additional proofs. What might satisfy Galilean fisher and farmers was not good enough for them. They wanted a sort of ultimate validation and justification. Jesus’ status markers were all wrong. He was not priestly. He was not part of the leading class of aristocracy. He had not trained at the feet of the great Jewish teachers of the day. He was not part of the network of notables from Jerusalem or any other major center of Jewish life. He was a “hick” pretender from the hills of Galilee.

What appears at first glance to be puzzling is the sharp reaction of Jesus to the response of the disciples. He warns them about the leaven of the Sadducees and Pharisees. They puzzle over what this might mean, concluding that they had missed some clue about getting bread for the

⁶²⁴ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2nd Ed. (1966) London: Palgrave Macmillan “...if He tries to give a sign He will fail; if He refuses He will lose popular support.” (p. 362).

journey. They have an animated discussion that concludes in self-accusation of not remembering to get any bread!

Jesus' words are sharp in return. He calls them people of "little-faith." Their response registers less than adequate faith.⁶²⁵ They had not yet realized the significance of what those miracles revealed about him. Rather than listening to the overtones of what he was saying, they focused back on the physical realities of bread. Faith and teachings are twins. Without the word of God, we cannot have faith. Faith in this sense is not a general quality of trust in a variety of sorts of objects or realities. It is the trust in the God who is more than enough in the work and word of Jesus Christ. They had seen the power of the word of God in the miracles of feeding both the five and four thousand. They had heard his teachings about the Pharisees and scribes.

If their concern was where they would get food in a Gentile area (on the other side of the lake), they need only remember the ability of Jesus to multiply the loaves. If their concern was what Pharisee or Sadducee might think about them, they need only remember Jesus' characterization of them as wicked and adulterous.

Jesus reminds them of the math of the two prior miraculous feedings: five loaves for five thousand and twelve baskets left over; seven loaves for the four thousand and seven large baskets left over. The less the disciples had and the larger the challenge, the more adequate was Jesus to deal with it. The disciples were focused on the wrong matter. The issue is the baneful influence of the religious leaders, held in high regard.

Matthew focuses the application on the doctrines of these two groups. Luke emphasizes the ethical side to the Pharisaic understandings (hypocrisy as the condition resulting) and Mark focuses on the Herodians (whom Matthew does not mention). Mark's application may well emphasize the inadequacy of the political solution: the teachings that the Jews need vest their hope in the Herodian dynasty as a way of making it forward.

Jesus indicates that there is a proper zeal about doctrinal precision and content. It may not be that of the Pharisees or Sadducees, both of whom had their zealotry for the "things of God" as they defined them. The one had a Torah without comment (no oral tradition as such but with a clear minimalist interpretation and application). The Sadducee doctrine set them free to redeploy Jewish life in a Hellenistic context with few restrictions. It was a doctrine that meant license to accommodate across a wide range of cultural matters.

The Pharisees had a Torah with lots of comment. Their oral tradition tightened down, building many new barriers and boundaries so as to protect what they saw as a compromising dilution of Jewish covenant faithfulness. Hellenism was the enemy and Jewish identity needed protection. Their doctrine narrowed the boundaries and rigidified the life-adjustment possible. In the process, they became hypocritical in principle as well as in the real actions they continued to follow in seeking advantage and advancement in Israel.

The leaven we are offered is that of Jesus' doctrine. It alone can protect us from the left and the right, from the secularizing license and theological liberalism as well as the hyper-zealous, legalistic, fundamentalist obscurantism. Both are in full display today. The one side sees science and modern knowledge as overturning the obscurantism and ignorant parts of the Bible, where human error has not been overcome by revelation. The Bible is a book of fiction and embedded

⁶²⁵ Keener, *Matthew*: "If Jesus' opponents were active in their unbelief (16:1–4), his disciples were passive in their unbelief. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples had stayed with him and witnessed the miracles of the loaves; nevertheless, they still fail to understand his power." (p. 422).

in historical worldviews now clearly falsified. It advocates ethical conduct that must be repudiated (and even views of God that are equally repugnant and false) in favor of modern notions on a range of topics.

The other sees nothing good in modern science, objecting to any mountain of evidence that does not affirm a six 24 hour day creationism that occurred perhaps no longer ago than 10,000 years ago. The Bible is turned into the only book one need read, answering all the essential questions in order to navigate science, law, ethics, politics, economics etc. It is turned into an encyclopedia whose “plain meanings” are not subject to human interpretation. It is obvious that modern knowledge and discourse are false philosophies that displace the Word of God. Some go so far as to advocate a Theocracy as the only legitimate polity.

In like manner the two have divorced what the Bible has married: personal and social ethics, holiness and justice, the secular and the sacred. The liberals take one pole and the conservatives the other and condemn each other for their equal and opposite errors.

❖ Discipleship: Human Knowledge and the Knowledge of God

“It is surprising that in a wide variety of different fields of knowledge human beings can be so knowledgeable and perceptive, yet in the realm of the knowledge of God exist in such darkness. The explanation of the latter sad state is not to be found in a lack of intellectual ability—no more for the Pharisees and Sadducees than for today. The evidence is there, examinable and understandable for those who are open to it and who welcome it. The issue in the knowledge of God is not intellect but receptivity.”⁶²⁶

The question of what is needed for persons to come to initial faith and then to a deeply rooted faith is controverted. From observations it is clear people enter the kingdom of God in very different ways, from very different starting points. But all must come to discern “the times” (including their own biased take on those times). For some, intellectual argument is important as an avenue into such discernment. For others, it is dramatic “signs” from God, significant, unusual events that point in the direction of the supernatural.

In our day, “spirituality” has come to cover all sorts of religious (and non-religious) practices, centered in the self-definition of the person. There is confusion as to whether “god” can be known at all, much less how to separate false from true notions of “god.” One strong theme is that exclusive claims as to knowledge of God are the grounds for discrimination, war and violence. Any such claim is seen as arrogant if not dangerous in a pluralistic world.

Yet in the interactions and exchanges of this chapter, we see Jesus distinguished between true and false notions, between different foundational sources of knowledge claims. Sincere beliefs can be just as wrong as insincerely held knowledge claims. He assumes there are somethings that are real, objectively so apart from perception, and embedded in a coherent world that was created by God and contested at present by forces hostile to God.

In our day postmodernism has made the self-defeating claim that all communication is in the service of power, that no amount of careful reasoning or grounded “evidence” in the end

⁶²⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 456).

decides matters or claims of truth.⁶²⁷ It is all a matter of use of words (“signs”) in service of dominating others. All meaning is socially constructed so meaning, morality and truth do not exist “objectively.” There are no objective standards of truth, rationality, and logic. These are basically linguistic conventions or power moves made by people to gain dominance over others. Such a claim is self-referentially incoherent; it refutes itself, and therefore is false. If true, then the claim that ‘there is no objective truth’ is itself merely a power play to dominate others and cannot claim any special status because it is true.

Jesus’ worldview was that we all do in fact serve some Master – and our knowledge and understanding in the end is rooted either in God or an alien falsehood. The problem with the Pharisees and Sadducees was not that they were not intelligent, thoughtful, or religiously devout and spiritual. Nor was it that they cared little for seeing God’s ways honored and engaged. It was that, in their zeal for governing and reforming Israel, they had embraced falsehoods that were damaging since it lead them to practices and beliefs that were wrong. Those ideas and practices rendered them blind to the truth. The clash between Jesus and these religious leaders was about the truth and righteousness, not two different rhetorics seeking to dominate the Jewish world. Truth and justice are not simply rhetorical bully-club terms used to promote the power and influence of some party over all others. They are important realities.

(13) Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah and Jesus’ affirmation (16:13-20)

The identity of Jesus is under consideration in all parts of Matthew. At this point in his ministry, the discussion with the disciples as to that question becomes explicit. The amazement and admiration move from implicit conclusions and a variety of possible labels to explicit decision. In the process, the turning point in the story is reached. The conclusion articulated by Peter is acknowledged by Jesus: he is the Messiah. Yet what that means is hardly clear nor is the witness and confession of that conclusion appropriate to this stage of his ministry. It is a confession that will form the foundation of the community that gathers about Jesus. Nonetheless, until there is more experience and the events of the passion, this confession cannot serve adequately as a means of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Several themes and issues appear in this passage that form the matrix of meanings:

1. What people and disciples say about Jesus. Confession and conclusion about Jesus are not irrelevant. Christ-following is not an anonymous endeavor or something one can withhold from saying who Jesus is. The core and center of Christian faith is found here: who Jesus is. To be wrong on Christology is to be wrong everywhere else. It is not enough for us to say exalted and positive things about Jesus. The outsiders are represented as doing just that concerning the mysterious “son of man” who was to appear. They rose as far as “flesh and blood” can. Saying nice or positive things is not sufficient. Jesus did not come with a public relations portfolio (“get them to have positive images about yourself and God”). He came to die as the messianic servant of Yahweh in order to deal with sin and be resurrected.

Yet it is interesting that the three opinions mentioned are all views of the Son of Man, the

⁶²⁷ This means the postmodern claims about truth or knowledge must be applied to the postmodernism’s claims themselves. The claim that there are no objective standards to test whether something is true or rational when applied to that very claim is self-undermining. Such a claim cannot itself be tested to see whether it is true or rational. It is self-referentially self-refuting. It is like the self-refuting generalization: “There are no universal generalizations.”

future judge of the world, as “spectacular.” All see him as a great figure from the past (John the Baptist reappearing; or the expected Elijah or even an unexpected Jeremiah from centuries ago). If not these, then one of the other prophets. These opinions are high, but not high enough, in some ways heading in the right direction, but not arriving at the truth. Jesus decodes this title (son of man) by referring it to his own person.

In the end Jesus’ concern is not with what is said by those who stand on the outside looking in. What do you (you disciples, emphatic) say about me: that is what he is after? His disciples are the ones whose image and understanding need to be rectified. They are the carriers of the tradition and the chief stewards of the mysteries of the Kingdom. What they say about Jesus makes an eternal difference. Their words will bind and loose. Their words will guide people to the narrow gate or to the broad way. Their words will be the ones heard when Jesus is long gone.

2. Peter’s meaning and role within the founding and on-going reality of Christ’s community. This confession, the truth articulated by Peter, is accepted by Jesus as divine in its origins. There are many ways of viewing Jesus, many important and helpful perspectives. But there is only one integrating and unifying framework within which to focus all these approaches. It is not that Peter’s conclusion cannot be reached by the ordinary processes of study and reflection. Rather his conclusion is the one that is validated and affirmed by divine approval.

Peter’s words need to be carefully listened to. He does not say “for us, you are the Messiah.” This is not merely another among other valid opinions held by Peter and his comrades (so relative – for others there may be other “Christs” and Saviors). Nor was it “I think you are...” as though expressing a tentative conviction of Peter, contestable and revisable. It is assertive of a settled truth: “You are the Christ.”⁶²⁸

Peter serves as the first (chronologically and socially) among the apostles to acknowledge the foundation stone that undergirds the building of the new temple. The new assembly that gathers around the profession of Jesus as Messiah will find its stability and grounding by repeating and embracing Peter’s recognition and acknowledgement. They too need a way and a community whose foundations are rooted in the revealing activity of God. Peter points to the substance of that revelation.⁶²⁹

The other apostles add their voice and vision as well. One by one the foundation of the apostles and prophets is laid upon the one Rock that grounds the Church through time. We now

⁶²⁸ “You” is emphatic: *σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος*. Note that it is “the” Christ. This is not the confession of one among many or a vague Christ-spirit in Jesus, which is found in other great religious figures of history. This is a designation of God’s ultimate One, God’s very son.

⁶²⁹ Punning with Simon “Peter” (“rock”) is not fully clear in its application. Is the “rock” Peter or Peter’s confession – or something else? It is (1) Peter himself: *Πέτρος* himself is this *πέτρα*, not just his faith or his confession... He is this, of course, only as the Simon whom Christ has taken in hand.” Kittel, *TDNT* Vol. 6 (p. 99). (2) Peter’s confession: “Having said that his confession is a rock, he stated that upon this rock I will build my church. This means he will build his church upon this same confession and faith.” Simonetti, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 45). Also Origen, Chrysostom, Eusebius, Ambrose. (3) Jesus’ words: “Instead, the demonstrative echoes 7:24; i.e., “this rock” echoes “these my words.” Only Matthew put the demonstrative with Jesus’ words, which the rock stood for in the following parable (7:24–27). His reusing it in 16:18 points away from Peter to those same words as the foundation of the church. ... The two words retain their peculiar Greek connotations, for Matthew’s Jesus will build only on the firm bedrock of his law (cf. 5:19–20; 28:19), not on the loose stone Peter.” Gundry, *Matthew* (p. 334).

can build on it because of its availability to us in the written testimony of the New Testament. What is designated as Peter's role is later shown to be the role of all twelve apostles.

It is not fair nor desirable to separate Peter's person from Peter's words. Nor is it fair to see the whole papacy in nuce in Peter. There is no indication that Peter is more than a foundation. He is not the bedrock upon which the foundation is built. We do not need an ongoing presence of Peter, but an ongoing presence of Peter's Lord to constitute an authentic Church. It is the living God we serve and by whom we recognize the reality of the true Church. Apostolic succession is not rooted in some historical continuity or formal structure whose ideology centers on a Petrine set of claims. Peter serves to provide integrative continuity in the decisive initial decades within which the Christian movement develops. Once that is done, there is no further need for Peter in this same way or for some supposed delegate of Peter, as if the foundation had not been well laid.⁶³⁰

If Catholics have too exaggerated a view of Peter and of contemporary claimants to the authority and place of Peter on earth, Protestants have too narrow a view.⁶³¹ In repudiating the apparatus of saints, merit and the teaching authority of the papacy Protestants do not provide enough room for Peter or contemporary leadership. The Christian movement is carried by charismatically gifted and Spirit endowed leadership. Weight bearing pillars are needed throughout the new temple to give safety, stability and opportunity to the service of God. These are given in the Apostolic witness recorded in canonical scripture. But the rock on which the Church in all phases of history is built is Jesus Christ.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2* argues that Peter, like Abraham, stands at the beginning of a new people of God: "Matthew seems to present Peter as one like father Abraham. He is the patriarch of the church, the man of faith whose name was changed, the man who became the rock on which the ecclesia came into being. If this be correct, then Peter's uniqueness in salvation-history lies in this, that just as Abraham stands at the beginning of the birth of the old people of God, Israel, so does Peter stand at the birth of the new people of God, the church." (p. 651).

⁶³¹ The Roman Catholics on this have departed from Saint Augustine: "'Then the Lord said to him, *Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, because it is not flesh and blood that revealed it to you, but my Father who is in heaven.* Then he added, *And I say to you.* As much as to say, 'Because you said to me, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,* I in turn say to you, *You are Peter* (Mt 16:17-18).' Previously, of course, he was called Simon; this name of Peter was bestowed on him by the Lord, and that with the symbolic intention of his representing the Church. Because Christ, you see, is the *petra* or rock; Peter, or Rocky, is the Christian people. I mean, the basic name is 'rock,' Therefore Rocky is so called from rock, not the rock from Rocky; just as Christ is not so called from Christian, but Christian from Christ. So, *You*, he says, *are Peter, and on this rock*, which you have acknowledged, *on this rock*, which you recognized when you said *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, I will build my Church*; that is, on myself, the Son of the living God, *I will build my Church* (Mt 16:18). I will build you on me, not me on you." Augustine, *Works Vol. III/3* Sermon 76 (p. 311). Even if we take the rock to be Peter, Jesus does not say on you *and all your future successors*.... Those who like Peter, properly confess Christ will be built into the Church whose foundation is Christ alone.

⁶³² Saint Bede (672-735 A.D.) takes the "rock" upon which the Church is built to be Christ himself, not Peter's confession. "In this interpretation of the 'rock,' Bede was joined by biblical interpreters of his own and of later periods; for 'the most astonishing fact' is that 'in the specifically exegetical literature of the entire Middle Ages one looks in vain for the equation 'petra = Peter,' which was so prominent in the

3. The gates of hell shall not prevail. This seems to refer to the power death takes to hold people away from those who are living. Passing through the portals of death (hades) is a one-way trip. No longer can we converse or comfort, plan or propose. We cannot see one another and watch as our lives unfold, and our history develops its shape. What we have said and done is finished. We cannot add to or take back one day or one wrong. We cannot repair any of the damage we have done or encourage others to greater accomplishments. Our time on earth is ended. Yet resurrection power will tear these gates down.

Jesus is going to build a community that transcends the power of death. The first proof of that will be his own resurrection. Already there are hints and signs of that in the raising of several individuals from among the dead in his own ministry. Such assurance and reality are critically important because of the persecution and opposition that will dog the growth of the Church. What do people do when intimidated by the power of death? The quality and continuance of their commitment to the truth, to witness to the reality that holds them and the history that transformed them—all of this is at stake. If the testimony carried by the messianic community is not voiced even under the threat of death, then this movement will peter out as have thousands of others.

Death's power also manifests itself in the way leadership is swept away. Every movement loses momentum and direction as various charismatic path setters fall by the wayside. When Jesus leaves his apostles, they will suppose for a while that all is lost. Death has triumphed, and nothing will ever be the same. Yet in the wake of that death, new possibilities came about because of the power of the resurrection. The Apostles received the living presence of the resurrected Christ, as have all generations of Christian leaders since.

The building of the assembly of Christ-followers continues into this day. The vision of John the elder unveils the ongoing life of those who sealed their testimony with their blood. Death does not hold them in some sealed crypt of silence. Even just now their voices are heard round the throne of God. One day the very gates of Hades will be sealed away from the experience of this world. A new heavens and new earth will arrive where death is no more.

4. What flesh and blood tell us in contrast with what only revelation can adequately give even those who are disciples. One of the most significant struggles of our day is over the sources and nature of knowledge. For many the issue was settled some centuries ago. Revelation from an invisible God, the reality of an unseen world of powers that are above and beyond nature, the notion of normative structures that judge the patterns of our social constructions—all of these are myths and fictions. They may nourish us in ways that the cold edges of science do not. But they nourish our emotional security not our cognitive categories.

For contemporary Christian intellectuals and knowledge-brokers the explosion of information and patterns of interpretation marginalize even more radically the claim to some sort of privileged knowledge. Christians find themselves in the unenviable position of being frequently represented in the media by obscurantist Biblicists. They argue what Jesus never said: all we need to know can be poured into the wineskins offered by the Bible. A literalism gone haywire is invoked as well as a distorted and uncharitable reading of contemporary thought. The result is a very potent ignorance parading under the name of truth. The only folks who cannot see the "emperor has no clothes" are these self-appointed defenders of the Bible.

polemical and canonical literature." Pelikan, Jaroslav J. (1978) *The Christian Tradition: 3 The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (p. 47).

We must not lose the validity of all the sources of information and knowledge God gives to us. What Peter confessed was the correct conclusion. It was not given to him in some powerful vision or ecstatic experience. It came as a product of the interactions he had with Jesus and the experiences of his own life history. That he reached such a conclusion was not by means of an abstracted, unnatural process not involving brain, senses or traditions. It was in the very mixture of those things that brought him, by God's work, to the correct conclusion, a conclusion that changed his life and our own history.

If we ask how we relate revelation with our own contemporary brew of information, perspectives, research and knowledge, we say: as frequently and carefully as possible! Not everything requires revelation. Knowing the mystery of the Kingdom in such a manner that we enter it and live by it requires the work of God. Knowing about it does not. Peter's confession is more than information. It is confession and submission.

5. The meaning of the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. There are some minimums here (beyond which the maximums made of this by the Roman Catholic Church may not be accepted). It is tempting to say that the keys to the Kingdom are the activity of Peter in this context. In that case it is pointing to Jesus as the Christ (with all that entails). Only when people acknowledge Jesus as the messianic servant of Yahweh who alone delivers his people from their sins, only then do they enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the door into the presence of God (and out of the gates of Hades). The use of the keys is opening that very door for people.

Yet that is probably too minimal to capture the whole meaning. The keys are bestowed in the face of Peter's confession. The confession is what demonstrates Peter can hold the keys and use them properly. It seems strange to identify the keys with the confession. There appears to be more than simply that, even if we wish to make that the central core. What is that more? That is what is tricky.

Peter exercises a sort of authorizing legitimation when he releases the Jews into the Kingdom at Pentecost and does a similar thing in the gifting of the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit. His presence at the falling of the Spirit upon the gentile Cornelius and his household likewise seems significant. The transition from the mono-ethnic Israel to the multi-cultural Church was "presided" over by Peter. Here they "keys" open the doors to various groups.

This too seems too minimal. The public acknowledgement of God's making one out of Jew and Gentile in the new community of faith in Jesus Messiah does not seem to encompass the tasks of binding and loosening. That appears to be more personal. We are reminded of the specifics of the sending out of the twelve. Their reception or rejection by households and villages fated those who responded to them. Insofar as they came as representatives of the Kingdom of God there could be no simple neutrality. Nonetheless, the significance and boundaries of this status and the effects of binding and loosening is not self-evident.

Yet at the same time we have a tantalizing parallel when Jesus says: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them" (Matt. 23:13). These religious leaders and teachers misuse the "keys" of the Kingdom. They shut people out of that Kingdom by their message and morals. They deflect faith from Jesus as the Messianic Savior and they degenerate life by elevating minor issues of religious practice above the imperatives of justice and mercy. Only those who confess Jesus as Lord and who follow his path of greater righteousness can handle the keys to the Kingdom properly.

6. Binding and loosening: what is this activity and what effects does it have within the community of those who follow the King? In later contexts this same notion is applied to the retaining and releasing of the guilt of sin for those who encounter the Apostolic ministry. People are bound to their sins and not extended mercy or released from them.

Interpretative possibilities are not so easily limited in this context. It might be a matter of doctrinal binding and loosening, setting forth the limits and liberties of God's way. People are given the commands and commissions of the Lord and thereby enabled to enter or barred from entering the Kingdom.

It may be disciplinary: excluding or including people in the community of faith (Matt 18:15-35). By forbidding or permitting certain sorts of behavior patterns, Peter and the apostolic ministry sets forth the boundaries of faithful commitment. Inside those limits people experience the power of the Kingdom. Outside them, they are lost. There is thus a sort of divinely given authority that can properly be exercised in discerning what sorts of beliefs and practices are compatible with authentic discipleship. They must be alert not to be leavened with the way and outlook of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The future perfect verbs in this saying create their own sort of problem. What is their force? Are they saying that the only effective binding and loosening is that which is already decreed in heaven? Or is it that the authentic apostolic voice binds and loosens in heaven what it binds and loosens on earth? Is there a synergistic sort of dialectic between earth and heaven? There seems to be the promise that God will stand behind the words of these human agents. However fallible and fallen they are, however weak and incomplete, insofar as they point to the living Christ, their words will have the accent of the divine authority behind them.

The most dramatic way in which we see Peter using the "keys" is in presiding over the three "Pentecosts" of the book of Acts: for the Jews, the Samaritans and the Gentiles. In these cases, Peter's presence seals the legitimacy of a new thing among the people of God. He proclaims the message of Jesus – i.e., Jesus' own words – to open the doors of the kingdom to others, even Gentiles. The messianic assembly associated with Jesus Christ differs from the old Israel in its inclusive embrace of non-Jews on an equal standing with the Jewish believer. In Jesus all three are made one by the gifting of the Holy Spirit. Peter is the Apostle whose presence demonstrates that God is beginning a new thing and provides Apostolic legitimacy for it. But he uses Jesus' words not as the "first Pope" but as every Christian "scribe," well trained in the things of the kingdom will use them in the future (Matthew 13:52) – to bring out things old and new in order to enable others to confess Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world.

❖ Discipleship: Denominations

Jesus does not say, "on this rock I will build my churches." Yet what we confront is a vast array of denominations embedded in seven major traditions of the worldwide Christian movement. There never has been a more diverse religious movement in world history. This means thousands of different languages and cultures have been drawn into discipleship.

It is not unusual for a denomination to claim exclusive "rights" to the name of "Christ's Church" and to label all others as heretics, false "churches" or schismatics. It raises the question: who is the authentic descendent of this one, Jesus Christ? Which "church" has he or is he currently building? If Jesus says "on this very (ταύτη τῇ πέτρᾳ) rock" what is referenced?

It is clear that Peter in the same context can be called “Satan” – so it is not Peter in any of his roles but the divinely illuminated, correctly professing Peter, the one who articulates the clear message of who Jesus is. Most who now look at this question see this assertion as unrepeatable, unexchangeable assertion and promise made to Peter when he pointed to Jesus.

Apostolicity is one of the four marks of the true Church (“I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”) given in the Nicene Confession. For Roman Catholics apostolicity means there is a physical, historical succession of Bishops that can trace continuity back to Peter. For Protestants there is no problem with the concentration of the apostolate in Peter or the possibility of the primacy of the Church. The objection is that such succession in the Roman Church is not a spiritual one. Any history of the succession process, putting them in charge, from the second, third and even hundredth “Peter,” reveals it to hardly be an unbroken or uncontested succession. For Protestants what counts is not a succession of ordination but the binding of any leaders in the Church to the word of God, to the apostolic witness.⁶³³ The Church is present where the confession of Peter and the gift of the Holy Spirit is present.

“Historical ‘Peter,’ whom Jesus made ‘Rocky’ when Peter pointed boldly to Jesus, will always mean, ‘Church: Go back to Peter’s touchstone witness for all your directions!’ or, even more practically, ‘Church: Go back to the historical-canonical Jesus for your direction in all issues.’ Pointing Peter will always bind us more closely to Jesus, and in Matthew’s understanding, especially to Jesus’ Commands. Peter’s primacy will always, therefore, mean Jesus’ primacy.”⁶³⁴

Denominations will be with us in the foreseeable future. Part of their existence is simply due to different languages, worship preferences, geographic location, contextualization of the gospel, political pressures and valued traditions. When a congregation or a league of local congregations, whether national or international, claims the exclusive inheritance of Peter’s heritage, one needs to be suspicious. Jesus already gave warning about this matter in the parable of the weeds in the field (Matthew 13). One can be an active participant in a particular denomination and recognize many other brothers and sisters in other churches and denominations. The unity of the Church is not an organizational or national unity but a spiritual one, rooted in Christ and the faithful Apostolic witness.

(14) Prediction of the Cross and the path of discipleship (16:21-28)

Jesus then tells his disciples not to spread this correct conclusion by sharing it. Jesus binds their testimony to secrecy for now. Part of the reason for this becomes crystal clear in this paragraph. Their understandings of what it means that Jesus is the Christ is very inadequate. If they, after the time spent with Jesus, continue to have misconceptions, it is expected outsiders

⁶³³ The Catholic scholar, John Paul Meier (2004), points clearly in this direction: “The authoritative magisterium of Peter is thus put under a check and a proviso. Peter is the legitimate interpreter of Jesus’ teaching in the church, as long as he passes on the teaching of Jesus, and not the thoughts of men, and as long as he teaches the whole of Jesus’ revelation, and not just the part that is appealing to men. Peter, or any church leader who does not accept the whole message of Jesus, especially the message of the cross, becomes a demonic spirit, an adversary of Jesus and his church.” *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel*. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock. (p. 118).

⁶³⁴ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 130).

will project onto Jesus whatever notions they might have of the Messiah. Another reason for the secrecy is the desire not to stimulate false hopes and premature movements among the masses that might lead to most unfortunate interventions by the authorities.

This is not to detract from the significance of Peter. He was given the keys to the Kingdom. What that means and how it will develop is not known at this point in salvation history. Peter's confession and Jesus' affirmation is the rock-firm foundation for the Church. Peter will play a primary role among the Apostles in the unfolding establishment of the Church. He will lay the foundations for what will become a multicultural, multi-ethnic movement. Such a role could not even be imagined on this day. Nor can he yet imagine a messiah who suffers. At this point in time, that too is a cognitive and emotional impossibility for the twelve Apostles.

One of the surprising aspects of this tale is how this Peter acts. The next two times he converses with Jesus in Matthew's Gospel he is contradicted by the Lord. No matter the acknowledgement and description of Peter as a "rock" by the Lord. He is not infallible after this blessing, nor after the events of Pentecost and the falling of the Spirit on Samaritan and Gentile. Peter may be intimately involved in the rock-firm foundation of the Church, but he is not himself suddenly lifted out of his limited fallibility or foibles. He is still this Peter, acting out of his own response patterns and habits. He remains that for life: a strange mixture (as are all believers) of attention and response to both divine things and transient human things, inattention and nonresponse as well.

The meaning of Jesus entails two things: that he is the messianic servant of Yahweh and that it is necessary for the messiah to suffer greatly, be killed and the third day be raised to new life by the Spirit of God. Both who he is and how he is that One are placed side by side. The disciples have reached the correct conclusion as to who he is. What they struggle to grasp is how he embodies the vocation entailed in his identity.

The first thing Peter says is that mercy belongs to Jesus. The conclusion he draws from that is that such suffering and terrible execution would never come to him. How is it that God is merciful, that he is the Messiah, and that such terrible things might happen? The theology is way off, so far as Peter is concerned. This figure of speech uses "mercy" to say: "God forbid" or "Far be it." It is a striking rejection of suffering. Peter's confession of the person of Jesus is as an unsuffering Messiah! Peter gets the identity correct but not what it means for Jesus.

We might note that this same sort of logic is present in much discourse that negates or softens the hard edges of Jesus' words. If God is merciful toward his chosen people, then (the implication is) there can be no final judgment that leaves people outside the Kingdom of God; nor can the truly righteous suffer from genetic defects, horrendous natural disasters or criminal ravages. More specifically, mercy means permission to divorce, encouragement to succeed and acquire great riches, automatic absolution for following one's strong desires against "puritanical" and unnatural rules. Mercy becomes the great theological negation of the Bible's words on same sex sexual practices and fornication, as well as the more common violation of heterosexual boundaries in polyamory or adultery.

Mercy is God's heartbeat. We are told repeatedly to love mercy in our human affairs. When and how mercy functions is important, lest mercy become the negation of truth, holiness or love. The truth cannot be sacrificed to the sort of mercy Peter understood God to exercise. With his concept, Peter removed the cross from the center of mercy. Without the suffering of God at the heart of mercy, there remains only a sentimental wish that everyone be "happy."

Jesus' rejects this "correction" of his understanding of the vocation of the Messiah as satanic.

This notion does not come from God but from the Evil One. Satan even tempted Jesus to believe that God would protect him from harm as the Son of God, come what may. “Throw yourself down from the Temple pinnacle!” Jesus rejects the same suggestion when Peter seeks to teach him a better theology.

Peter is the teacher of the Church only insofar as he passes on what is divinely originated, what points to the authentic Christ and the living God of true mercy.⁶³⁵ Insofar as he proclaims that which is rooted and shaped by human notions and dynamics, Peter represents Satan, not God. Peter (or his successors) are definitively negated when they take on the role of those who can teach Christ a better way than His way. Following Christ means even in the suffering of his cross. This is no prosperity gospel.

The word most frequently translated stumbling block (to refer to the temptation to avoid suffering) also refers to the trip stick in a trap. The pictures are different. The stumbling block is something that causes us to fall and injure ourselves. We must raise ourselves up again and continue the path interrupted. One might suppose that some fall so seriously that there is no remedy. They are out of the race. Yet ordinarily we would think of it as slowing us down, discouraging us and providing room for our exhaustion to triumph over our determination to finish the course.

The trap image is more serious. In this case the touching of the bait stick releases the trap and it holds one captive for death. Once trapped there is little remedy to set us free. Think of the wolf held tightly in the modern steel jaws. Release comes only by chewing off the paw that is caught, crippling the wolf and most likely damning it to death in its highly competitive environment.

For Jesus the temptation to avoid the suffering, humiliation and death of the cross was more like the trap. There would be no remedy, no second plan, no escape route from such a disaster. That is why Jesus labels the communication as satanic. This is not simply a slight misunderstanding that was unimportant. It went to the center of the meaning of messianic vocation. Remove this element and the rest collapses. Without the cross the results are a completely impotent Christ. One might have a startling teacher and exemplary model for life, but one who is no longer the holy Son of God who saves his people from their sins. Peter’s words expressed the center of the attack Satan made against the messiah.

Besides Peter there are others who do not have the mind and intention of God in them: the elders, chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem. They too had received the revelation of God. They were the guardians and teachers of the oracles of the Torah, Prophets and Writings. These spent

⁶³⁵ Barth, *CD II.2*: “If we want to make a ‘prince of apostles’ out of this spokesman—in the starkest contrast to what Jesus Himself said about the use of such categories—then in view of what we are told about him from Mt. 16 to the passion we have to say that he is this only as their leader and representative in this defection, in their misunderstandings and mistakes, in their weakness and disloyalty. And as the ‘prince of the apostles’ in this sense he—and the others with him—are led through temptation by the faithfulness of Jesus which never fails. What is Peter apart from Jesus, apart from His continual Word, apart from His intercession, apart from His vicarious suffering and death, apart from the glory which was not the goal of his own way but of Jesus’ way? What is Peter apart from what Jesus makes of him as He wills and expects it from him? If there is any warning at all against an ecclesiasticism which makes itself independent of the person and Word and work of Jesus, which transforms Jesus’ authority into its own authority; if there is any underlining of the ‘without me ye can do nothing,’ it is provided in the Gospels by the figure of Peter himself.” (p. 441).

their lives in worship, in study and in applying the Word of God to the everyday affairs of the people of God. These too lived within the circumference of God's activity in human history. Yet like Peter they were far removed from the things of God, being preoccupied with matters that obscured and negated the things of God. They would construct a set of reasoning and put together the forces necessary to bring Jesus to his death.

We might understand Peter's folly. He was a "layperson," an ordinary fisher from Galilee without the detailed exposure to the written texts of God's word. He would have heard the scriptures expounded in the synagogue and would probably have studied them, memorizing many passages. He was not ignorant as pagans were. Yet he was not one of the experts of his day, able and skilled in quoted and reciting the details of the Torah. When brought before the Sanhedrin the Acts, he is recognized immediately as unlettered and unformed by the professional training in formal schooling in the law.

What seems genuinely puzzling is how these experts could be so blind that they could not and would not recognize the Lord of glory. The chief priests were the most prominent among the priestly families. They held the office that allowed them once a year to enter the holy of holies and there offer atonement for the whole nation. The scribes acted to copy the Torah, to read, write and think about the meanings of God's word for the people of God. Their intellectualism was their bread and wine. Their knowledge carried the high tradition of Israel. If anyone should be able to give judgment, they were the ones. The elders were the pinnacle of leadership, controlling landed estates. They provided the judgments that negotiated the everyday disputes of village and town life and mediated the power of the political elite.

This saying portends a complete failure of the leadership of Israel. What happens in the case of this one small incident foreshadows the utter failure that would manifest itself in the Great Revolt of 66 A.D. What is striking is how small the failures of leadership need be to bring disaster. Few would have looked at the skilled and crafty leadership of the day and said what Jesus said: that it all would end in a devilish disaster. From hindsight we can see that it did. The little room for maneuvering, the little light given by history for foresight, the little opportunity in time to do the right thing—all these were squandered. The Lord of Glory would hang on a cross and only a few decades later tens of thousands would hang on Roman crosses.

What may not yet be clear is brought into the bright light by these short words. How is it that we go about doing the words of the Lord (Sermon on the Mount)? How is it we not be preoccupied with human things instead of divine? What is required for that to happen?

Jesus tells us it requires no less than a grave for our own will. We must renounce our very selves if we are to embrace the divine things Jesus represents and requires. This is more than the rigor of asceticism, more than the good intentions of positive mental attitude, far more than the discipline of years of study. It is the death blow to our ambitions and mindsets. We are to treat ourselves as though our lives were over—completely over. There is nothing that is to rise to such a level that it will stop us from the supreme task of following Jesus.⁶³⁶

⁶³⁶ Calvin, *Harmony* "He lays down a brief rule for our imitation, in order to make us acquainted with the chief points in which he wishes us to resemble him. It consists of two parts, *self-denial* and a voluntary *bearing of the cross*. *Let him deny himself*. This *self-denial* is very extensive, and implies that we ought to give up our natural inclinations, and part with all the affections of the flesh, and thus give our consent to be reduced to nothing, provided that God lives and reigns in us. ... *And let him take up his cross*. He

Christians, not just Christ alone, are called to suffer. The glory comes only after suffering death. In these stark words there are two decisive acts followed by a present continuance. “Renounce” and “take up” are aorists; “follow” is a present imperative. Each is the explication of the other. Following Jesus is not like following some other teacher whose ideas and methods we adopt. Today, to be following Jesus means a decisive inner act of renunciation and taking up a cross as though walking to one’s own death. The suffering of Christ is not an incidental part of his life, without ethical import—or its exemplary nature for all disciples.

What that death-following means must be experienced for these words to have their significance. We cannot know what they mean simply by some exposition of the linguistic possibilities or the prior exegetical decisions made by commentators. We can say that Jesus opens a void at the center of our being. He tells us that our own resources and reasoning are not adequate to either his mission and vocation or ours. We are now to say no not only to our so-called “lower nature” but to our “higher” self. Jesus does not lay hands on a divine spark within or an inner zone of true spirituality and tell us to follow it. We must follow him and do so explicitly in the death of the self. If we will not lose ourselves in this way, we will not find our authentic, eternal self that will have eyes to see and the right to enter the glory of the Father.

We can now be ourselves in such a way that we say to many of our inner desires and consciousness: we will not comply or conform. Our suffering comes first from the refusal to bow to the inner dynamic that drives us from within our deepest inner psychology. There is the terrible emptiness of having raging desires (lust) and saying never to them—never will I satisfy them outside the will of God. This means a sort of dismemberment: the cutting off the hand or the tearing out of the offending eye. The very elements God created for us to be active, creative, productive creatures within his good creation are now infected with such virulence and violence that we must die to their use and development.

But the meaning of Jesus’ words is not limited to a passive agreement to unchosen suffering or to suffering that results from the setting right of wrongly broken and “healed” elements of our inner self (like the resetting of a broken bone by re-breaking it to correct it). The agreement element on our part is, of course, crucial. Only those who take this cross willingly bear it in discipleship to Jesus Christ. His own cross was a voluntary acceptance of suffering and death. Our own cross bearing is likewise to be voluntary, however unchosen and unwanted might be the suffering that comes from such a willing.⁶³⁷

There is a suffering that comes after our choosing. It comes from the public humiliation and

lays down this injunction, because, though there are common miseries to which the life of men is indiscriminately subjected, yet as God trains his people in a peculiar manner, in order that they may be *conformed to the image of his Son*, we need not wonder that this rule is strictly addressed to them. It may be added that, though God lays both on good and bad men the burden of the cross, yet unless they willingly bend their shoulders to it, they are not said to *bear the cross*; for a wild and refractory horse cannot be said to admit his rider, though he carries him.” (pp. 303-304).

⁶³⁷ Augustine, *Works Vol. III.4* (on Mark 8:34) “What does ‘take up his cross’ mean? Let him bear with whatever is troublesome; let him follow me like that. You see, when he begins to follow me in his manner of life and by keeping my commands, he will find many people speaking against him, many telling him to stop, many trying to dissuade him—and among them apparent companions of Christ. They were walking with Christ, those people who tried to stop the blind men crying out. So whether it’s threats or enticements, or any kind of attempts to stop you, if you want to follow him, turn them into your cross; endure it, carry it, don’t collapse under it”. (p. 31)

insults that occur when people experience us as violating ordinary human things. Jesus' followers are not eccentrics in that they are "difficult" people because they have hardened around their own peculiar ideas and driving will. They are centered in the graciousness and goodness of God and so cannot and do not accept the cruelty or pride of the culture they live within. Their non-conformity internally to their own consciousness and desires translates into a non-conformity at critical points with the shaping power of the culture that surrounds them.

Having died to their selves, they also die to the world. Taking up a cross leads them to a place where they no longer have a life of their own making. Those who claim them no longer find a person from whom to secure compliance for their own agendas. They are dead to friend and foe alike, dead to the causes and glory of country and culture, dead to human things within and without.

Saving and losing life are the topics of this paragraph. What seems to be reality often is only a pleasing appearance, hiding an ugly fact. There are many whose lives show every sign of "getting ahead." You can follow them across the decades as their houses improve in quality and location (or even multiply), as their bank accounts fatten, and cars grow sleeker and fancier. Everything we can see proclaims success and advancement. At the same time, none of it may have any relationship with the power of the Kingdom or the presence of God's Spirit.

Who does not want to save his or her life? Who does not want to discover the fount of wisdom, the secret of fulfillment, the center of gusto or the maximum of excitement and significance? We all have within us the drive for a better future, the longing for something beyond futility, despair or depression.

On the surface, Jesus' words seem hardly encouraging or attractive. They seem paradoxical. How can we find our lives by throwing them away? How can we lose our life by taking pains to save it? Does not Jesus give us his detailed teaching for the very reason that he wants us to take great pains to save our lives? What is going on in these words?

The context suggests that Peter and the others will be tempted to calculate their life chances as they reckon with the costs of discipleship: is this suffering worth the payoff? Authentic discipleship does not calculate these sorts of costs. In fact, only those who renounce themselves and take up their crosses can follow Christ. There is no gentle way, no alternative path. Discipleship means laying one's life down in a living sacrifice to the will and way of Jesus. What seems at first blush to be a profligate act turns out to be the most prudent and wise investment one can ever make.

The life lost or found is the eternal Life that is fully manifest at the end of history. When we face the judgment of God, then we will either find ourselves eternalized in the presence of God or banished into an eternal death. What we decide and how we relate to ourselves in the present makes the critical difference. Peter's desire to deny suffering and the cross to Jesus was symptomatic of an aversion to the very path Jesus describes.

The equation is not equal. What we seek to save is our present, temporal life. What we believe in the modern world is that such is all we have. What happens today and tomorrow is all we will ever get. We need to spruce up the rooms of our lives, maximize the pleasures and comforts, minimize the discomforts and difficulties. Life is only as good as we can make it. We are to take responsibility for its quality and quantity. We are to calculate the risks and invest its minutes and weeks wisely. All we have is the sum of days between our birth and our death.

If we reckon in that manner, scratching and searching for enhanced control over more and more of the "good things of life" in order that we might find real "life," Jesus tells us we will lose

eternal “life.” Jesus strikes at the preoccupation we have with our physical life and its security or comfort. If we identify life with the matrices that make up ordinary, this-worldly living, then we will lose it. It will slip through our fingers and when we face the final judgment, we will lose the truly worthwhile life, the eternal life with the Father.

In contrast, if we break with such this-worldly preoccupation, if we are willing for the sake of Jesus to lose that life, we will find an authentically eternal life in its place. This is the life we were created to experience, losing it with the loss of the Garden of Eden. This is the life we were redeemed to experience in the age to come. Even for those who are “disciples” there are no automatic passes into the Kingdom, not even for the one who holds the keys to the Kingdom.

There is nothing that can be given in exchange for one’s life. Not the sum of one’s possessions, achievements or connections weigh as heavily as life itself. What profit is there in the securing of all the wealth, accolade, and power found in the world, only to be rejected from eternal life? It might seem to some (in their disbelief) a fine bargain. At least they will have had gusto here and now. But it reckons by false scales. The weight of the life eternal is of such value that it outweighs all that is encompassed in this world—all of it. This is the pearl of such great price that we are beckoned by it to sell all we have or are and purchase it or suffer infinite loss.

This promise has become a stumbling block to many. People have seen many meanings:

1. The transfiguration occurs in a few days. There the glory of the Father surrounded and shone through Jesus. Moses and Elijah both are present, both bringing with them powerful eschatological hopes. Yet the interpretive stumbling block is the thrust of verse 27, portraying the conditions of the parousia.

2. The resurrection appearances indicate that Jesus is heir to the power and authority of the Kingdom of God. He comes to them with the angel descent and words to the women and to the disciples on the mount in Galilee. He commissions and sends them as children of the Kingdom to continue sowing the good seed of the word of the Kingdom. Yet there is little here in the way of judgment.

3. Some say that this is a reference to the outpouring of the Spirit first at Pentecost (yet this is not at all obvious and not mentioned in Matthew).

4. Gregory the Great took this saying to refer to the triumph of the Church. This is surely the great error of the Roman Church, equating itself with the Kingdom of God in the same way it errs in marking its leader as the vicar of Christ on earth.

5. Some connect it with the destruction of Jerusalem, the judgment meted out on that generation in its resistance to the Holy One who came in fulfillment of John the Baptist’s prophecy (Matthew 24:4-31 is taken as about the Jewish war and temple destruction).

6. Many refer it to the second coming in triumphant power and visibility (that is, this is a mistaken prophecy that was not fulfilled as anticipated). In this case verses 27 and 28 have identical referents.

7. Tasting death may refer to the second death, the outcome of the final judgment warned against repeatedly by Jesus. However, this seems straining to get out of a box that seems inescapable. It would not seem natural to understand the reference in the context to be talking at that level.

8. Perhaps Matthew passes on this obscure saying because it came from the Lord without understanding its reference.

The clearest reference in the context is the certainty of accountability as well as the coming of Jesus with the angels of heaven. The focus is on losing and saving one's life. What can a person give in exchange for life itself? Judgment is coming in a final day when the Son of Man arrives with angels and the glory of the Father. What has been revealed only to the humble, the childlike, the poor in spirit will be displayed for even the arrogant and indifferent to see. Then what will they marshal to gain the life that comes with him?

The assurance in verse 28 that comes hard on the heels of that guarantee seems to indicate that there will be those among the inner circle of disciples who will experience that event. Yet the words do not say that directly. What they indicate is that they will see the "Son of Man coming in his Kingdom." That is not equivalent language (the semantic field of reference is not the same as verse 27). There is overlap with the notion of final judgment and the arrival of the entirely other world of the heavens with its angels and glory. But it is not identical.

It may seem to Dale Bruner and others that the best we can do is "damage control." This reporting of Jesus' mistake—or mistake by the Gospel writers—simply shows the integrity of the witness. Everything is passed along, even that 'most human' of elements, erroneous prophecy. As Bruner puts it,

"We believe authors who include the mistakes of their heroes. (It is possible, however, that the mistake is the evangelists' or their sources; I do not know a foolproof way to dissociate what the evangelists said from what Jesus said. Historical-critical exegesis helps.)...I believe the church is obliged to be as honest as the original evangelists and to speak with a candor the evangelists learned from their Lord. We do Jesus little honor by interpreting his words so creatively that they no longer mean what they say. While there seems to be a mistake here chronologically, Jesus' point about a universal-individual judgment is still true and still addresses us."⁶³⁸

This seems to me a counsel of unimaginativeness. It smells of the odor of the Enlightenment-dominated rationality that is applied in a procrustean way. We do Jesus little honor when we suppose his words are transparent and univocal, having seen what John's Gospel does with them (or even what Jesus does with them in confronting his disciples with the "obvious" meaning of his words). The difficulties we have with the reported sayings of Jesus are no different than those the first disciples had. We should not suppose the techniques of modern historical criticism put us in a privileged position vis-a-vis the Gospel writers.

The words of Jesus don't simply "mean" exactly "what they seem say," as though the words alone carry the meaning – and the most literal rendering of them is definitively established as Jesus' meaning. Perhaps the counter question is: what other mistakes did this hero make? How do we determine that Jesus is not mistaken about more fundamental things? What force to we

⁶³⁸ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 159.) Later on Matthew 24:34 "There is a refreshing honesty in many of the best commentators, of whom McNeile, 355, can be representative: 'It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Jesus, as Man, expected the end within the lifetime of His contemporaries' (and he refers to the major parallel texts in Matthew: 10:23; 16:28). I can accept this conclusion, which means, bluntly, that Jesus made a mistake." (p. 519). Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: "Since the nineteenth century claiming that the word was not a genuine saying of Jesus has been a favorite way of avoiding the recognition that Jesus was in error." (p. 387).

give in these words to “truly” (ἀμῆν)? Jesus seems to underline the truthfulness and gravity (and difficulty) of what he is about to say. He repeats it later when he speaks about this same topic in Matthew. Is it a counsel to ponder these difficult words rather than say ‘mistaken’?

In some way we are back to the issue of hermeneutics, not history or even grammar. One can pour over the various passages that declare the “imminent” return of Jesus as the Lordly power of the Kingdom of God. The “words” seem to say what they say. Yet we know decoding them properly is more than what is written. It depends equally upon what is left unsaid, what the articulator of the words meant by using them and what the social world into which they were said might take them to mean.

The reality is that we can neither appeal to the sequence of the words as though some people were dense in their reading and understanding. Focusing on the words and the syntax alone will not settle this one. We also have to say that we know Jesus used words and images in strikingly new ways. The message he communicated was not a function of the socio-cultural meanings already present in his environment.

He took cultural elements (including the language and tradition within which he stood) and rearranged them in startling ways. His own inner disciples did not comprehend some of them until after the events occurred that gave them meaning. They had no referent in their experience to which Jesus could point as indicative of the meaning he was communicating. How does one talk of things that have not yet happened and are not even in the common stock of the culture’s expectations?

It is clear from our vantage point that the notion of an imminent second coming of Jesus was wrong, if we suppose that was the notion here communicated or understood by the early church. The time line has gone on for too many generations for us to suppose there are interpretive possibilities for rescuing such an idea (taken as the literal notion that within a few years of the ascension, Jesus would bring in the second phase of the coming of the Kingdom, the visible, powerful invasion of history that would end normal human politics and affairs). It did not happen in a few years, much less before the generation of Jesus and his first disciples/apostles died.

That leaves us with more than the choice of labelling this a mistake. The mistake may well be on the interpretation that gives these words a literal, imminent return interpretation. One of the strange products of the modern interpretive endeavor has been the assertion that the Gospels were written down during the crisis that came when the Apostles began dying and disappearing, contrary to the eschatological expectation. This is a by-product of a scholarship that no longer can be considered decisive or adequate. Tom Wright writes:

“The usual scholarly construct, in which the early church waited for Jesus’ return, lived only for that future and without thought for anything past (such as memories of Jesus himself), only to be grievously disappointed and to take up history-writing as a displacement activity, a failure of nerve—this picture is without historical basis. The church expected certain events to happen within a generation, and happen they did, though there must have been moments between AD 30 and 70 when some wondered if they would, and in consequence took up the Jewish language of delay.”⁶³⁹

⁶³⁹ Wright, N. T. (1992). *The New Testament and the People of God* (p. 463). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

The church moved forward into the second century without a crisis of the sort asserted by the dominant interpretation Albert Schweitzer (and now Dale Allison) have offered. Whatever Jesus' words might mean, they cannot be confined to the narrow corridor of the literal, imminent return, ushering in the visible Kingdom.

In this passage the crux lies on the decision as to whether verse 27 and 28 are a sort of elaboration of one another that exhausts their referents. If we take verse 27 as the controlling and encompassing meaning, then verse 28 turns out to be a repetition that adds the notion that some of Jesus' own circle will not physically die prior to this great eschatological event. If we take verse 28 as the controlling framework, then verse 27 is only one expression of the coming of the Son of Man in his Kingdom. Matthew's own presentation of Jesus does not restrict such references to the Son of Man to the final vindication at the end of ordinary history. We have no need to restrict it that way ourselves.⁶⁴⁰

The point seems to be the assurance that the Son of Man will come to balance all accounts of human history for each person. None will avoid that reckoning. At the same time, some of his own contemporary disciples hearing this promise will receive experiences that will validate those words. They will see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom. The transfiguration, the resurrection, the powers of Pentecost—all validate that.

❖ Discipleship: "Self-denial" and the "higher Christian life"

There have always been those in the Christian movement who have wanted a more "active" self-denial than simply enduring the unwanted and unsought hardships of life and discipleship. To them, this approach seems too "passive." Early on there were those who actively sought martyrdom. When the Church was finally legitimated and martyrdom was no longer on the horizon, some fled into deserted places and become hermits and later on communities of monks or nuns living a regimen of world-denying asceticism. Later in Church history, especially among those called Anabaptists, an active withdrawal from the larger civic life into a countercultural pacifist community (such as the Amish or Mennonite) became a viable alternative to what was seen as "trivializing" this call to bear the cross.

In these cases, the drive is for a "higher Christian life," a special Christian lifestyle or ethic that rises above the ordinary "Christian" disciple who is participating in the ordinary affairs of the larger surrounding culture. "Taking up one's cross" is taken to mean very concrete physical, social, political and economic choices not made by the vast majority of Christian disciples. In the Roman Catholic Church, this is found largely in the religious orders (as distinct from the "non-religious"). We see it even in modern movements whose modus of operation is the sacrifice of property, energy, and even choice to a leadership that determines all things.

Along with a neo-Platonic thread in the early Church, an ascetic tradition hostile to the bodily self and to ordinary economic life (both Greek notions originally) infected practices. An

⁶⁴⁰ A number of viable suggestions have been fulfillment coming in stages or specific events: (1) The transfiguration – Augustine, *Works III/4* (p. 340); Turner, *Matthew Baker* (p. 413); Blomberg, *Matthew* (p., 261); Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II* (p. 846-847, 853); Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 694-696). (2) A series of events including the resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit, the destruction of Jerusalem – Luther *Works Vol. 67* (p. 303); Calvin, *Harmony Vol. II* (p. 307); Carson, *Matthew* (p. 434); Morris, *Matthew* (p. 435); France, *Matthew* (p. 641); Mounce, *Matthew* (p. 165).

ego and world-denying asceticism came to be identified with a “higher” way, a way of perfection, something beyond the ordinary expectations for the common disciple. The making of “Saints” as distinct from all other Christians was underway.

The Reformers, such as Luther, saw this as a “self-choosing” of a cross that led in the direction of a spiritual pride: “But they are wrong, not only with respect to their choosing their own cross, but also in that they flaunt their suffering and make a great merit of it and thus blaspheme God, because it is not a true suffering but a stinking, self-chosen suffering.”⁶⁴¹

Jesus’ words are stark: the disciple must break every link that places the self first. We are not our own but belong to another. We die to our own personal ambition in favor of the choices he makes for us. We are to put ourselves in the position of having already died. It means the willingness in being identified with him to suffer and even lay down our life. We are in the position of one who is already condemned to death, who regards life in this world as not something to be treasured and held onto. It changes the way we experience what comes at us and afflicts us. It changes the choices we make about everything in life. It is an alternative form of life that no longer has the self and its manifold desires and demands at the center.

What this means for each disciple will vary. What is clear is that one can be a heroic monk or nun, engaging in astonishing acts of self-sacrifice and yet not be taking up the cross. It is something that reaches back into motivation and intention. The sacrifices of fasting and heavy ritual requirements of the strict Pharisee did not signify this sort of righteousness. Even in the monastery, even in the strictest practice of spiritual disciplines, even in the laying down of privilege and comfort, the deadly virus of self-righteousness can infect it all.

“The path of discipleship is the path of the cross for everyone who would follow Jesus. Paradoxically, it is the one who gives up his or her life in discipleship to Jesus who will truly find life, both in the present and in the future, while the one who seeks to have life on his or her own terms will in effect lose it.”⁶⁴²

(15) The Transfiguration (17:1-8)

This event comes shortly after stark and difficult words of Jesus.⁶⁴³ This prefigures his coming

⁶⁴¹ Luther, *Works*, Vol. 51 (p. 199). “It should be, however, and must be the kind of suffering that is worthy of the name and honestly grips and hurts, such as some great danger of property, honor, body, and life. Such suffering as we really feel, which weighs us down; otherwise, if it did not hurt us badly, it would not be suffering. Beyond this, it should be the kind of suffering which we have not chosen ourselves, as the fanatics choose their own suffering. It should be the kind of suffering which, if it were possible, we would gladly be rid of, suffering visited upon us by the devil or the world. Then what is needed is to hold fast and submit oneself to it, as I have said, namely, that one know that we must suffer, in order that we may thus be conformed to Christ, and that it cannot be otherwise, that everyone must have his cross and suffering.” (pp. 198-199).

⁶⁴² Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (p. 487).

⁶⁴³ Mark and Matthew, using an exclusive counting system counting only intervening days, say “six days later.” Luke 9:28 says “*about* eight days later.” Luke uses an inclusive method more common among the Greek speaking world which counts even partial days. Both are different ways of counting that mean “about a week later.” Calvin recognizes this. *Harmony*: “The difference as to time ought not to give us

in the “glory of his Father with the angels.”⁶⁴⁴ The three taken with him will also be brought intimately into his grief and agony in Gethsemane. In this event they will hear the confession of the Father about His unique Son. They will also learn more about the reality that he is not Moses or Elijah.

This event comes at a turning point in the Gospel. It also repeats words found at the beginning of Jesus public ministry, a dramatic assurance that what is now to come is not simply the unfortunate events of a history gone awry:

“The heavenly voice repeats verbatim the words of Matt 3:17 from Jesus’ baptism. Just as God publicly endorsed Jesus as the royal Messiah and Suffering Servant prior to the beginning of the main stage of his ministry, now at the beginning of the road to the cross he repeats his endorsement even more dramatically, though much less publicly.”⁶⁴⁵

The stakes at risk in the conclusions we reach about Jesus involve life and death. Various interpretations put forward as to his identity are not adequate (even the partly right, partly wrong notions Peter articulated). Most of them place him alongside and equal to a variety of other spiritual heroes, threatening life by so doing. Yet the only identification suited to his real character is that of Peter: he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. In this event the Living God agrees with Peter’s earlier confession and Jesus’ affirmation of it.

What was most difficult for Peter to hear were the words on crucifixion. The messianic hopes he harbored did not include this “detour.” Modern interpreters of Matthew find different words difficult. Among the most difficult to hear are these words about the coming of the Son of Man in glory to serve as judge of all. If we are to “listen” to Jesus, then it is a strange procedure to declare him “erroneous” at this point of eschatology. We have not genuinely listened and are engaged in the sort of Petrine “correction” that comes from Satan.⁶⁴⁶

Most of us are dependent upon others for our conclusions as to the quality and accuracy of our picture of Jesus. This particular incident is witnessed by only three of the inner circle of contemporaries. Whether such eyewitness is sufficient depends upon other additional

uneasiness. Matthew and Mark reckon six entire *days*, which had elapsed between the events. Luke says that it happened about EIGHT *days afterwards*, including both *the day* on which Christ spake these words, and *the day* on which he was transfigured. We see then that, under a diversity of expression, there is a perfect agreement as to the meaning.” (p. 309). Cf. Augustine also: *Works I/15, 16* (p. 232).

⁶⁴⁴ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*: “The transfiguration narrative has a remarkable twin of sorts in the account of Jesus’ execution, 27:32–54. In the one, a private epiphany, an exalted Jesus, with garments glistening, stands on a high mountain and is flanked by two religious giants from the past. All is light. In the other, a public spectacle, a humiliated Jesus, whose clothes have been torn from him and divided, is lifted upon a cross and flanked by two common, convicted criminals. All is darkness.” (p. 706).

⁶⁴⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 264).

⁶⁴⁶ Peter recalls this event, decisive in his consciousness: “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” 2 Pe 1:16–18. This event also appears to be, if not the prediction that some would not taste of death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, at least a sample or specimen of it.

conclusions about their credibility and reliability. Nonetheless, if it happened, the witness is sufficient. We cannot ask for events to happen other than they did, as if they must fulfill some criteria for authenticity other than actually occurring in space and time—or other than being witnessed as and how they were.

No doubt each of us moderns would like to have all we conclude rooted in primary experience. This is not possible when it comes to the Jesus of history. Such a Jesus is different than the Jesus of historians (given the various filters they use to meet criteria they adopt to provide as high a degree of credible evidence as possible). Actually, it is not possible to have such knowledge of anything in ancient history. We cannot expect everyone who desires it to go to the top of a mountain and have a primary experience of Jesus' transfiguration. This is an event of the Jesus of history and he chose to have only these three ordinary men with him.

What we have is their report. Or more accurately put, we have the account of Matthew's recording of their report. The assurance we have of this account as valid (historically actual) can be no stronger than the confidence we have in the witnesses and their recorder. Such confidence comes only from a wholistic assessment of the larger testimony given in the Gospel accounts (and secondarily the larger movement's documents).

The more difficult task is what to do with this witness once we conclude its authenticity. We can at least engage in a "what if" exercise if we remain skeptical. What if this represents an actual space-time event and reports for us its actual structure? What if, indeed!

The first impressive matter is the portrayal of Jesus as more than the ordinary Jewish spiritual leader. This comes from several, overlapping signs as well as the context. Jesus brings the three up a "high mountain" (echoing Moses on Mt. Sinai, Elijah on Mt. Horeb, or even the act of Satan taking Jesus up on a high mountain to show him the nations of the world).⁶⁴⁷ The shining radiance of the person, the face and clothing radiating like the sun, and the shining cloud that came to overshadow them suggest the luminous glory of the Father. Though this would be impressive to any, it would be particularly startling to the Jew who knew stories of the shekinah glory of God in the Temple and with Moses or Elijah on the mount.

Then the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah. How did the disciples know the identity of these two ancient heroes? It may be that the nature of the conversation provided sufficient clues—or that Jesus indicated to the disciples who these figures were. The first thing that might have occurred to them was that they were angels (this must be only a speculative guess) given the earlier words of Jesus. Some supposed Jesus to be Elijah or another of the Old Testament figures. Now it is clear that these are separate characters, separate personages with very similar experiences that in some ways echo those of the Messiah.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 2*: "Why are Moses and Elijah mentioned? Probably because they are the two OT figures who encountered God on Sinai/Horeb. But Moses and Elijah have most often in Christian exegetical history been taken to represent, respectively, the law and the prophets—which leads to the conclusion that in Jesus the Messiah and Son of God the law and the prophets are surpassed or fulfilled and confirmed. Such an interpretation would help account for Matthew placing Moses before Elijah: this accords with the fixed formula, 'the law and the prophets' (cf. 5:17; 7:12)." (pp. 697-698).

⁶⁴⁸ France, *Matthew*: "Both are men of God whose earthly life ended in a supernatural way: Elijah was taken up to heaven without going through death (2 Kgs 2:11), and mystery surrounds the end of Moses on Mount Nebo. So these two men, along with Enoch (Gen 5:24), became known as the deathless ones.

Jesus shines with the glory of God. The giver of the law and the zealot for the honor of God converse with him. The law and prophets find in Jesus their true conversation partner. Peter's desire to provide shelter for all three springs from an unclear motivation. What he was thinking is difficult to know.⁶⁴⁹ What occurs after his request makes it crystal clear that Jesus is not on the same level with Moses and Elijah. He alone is the unique Son of God. He, above all others, is to be listened to. For those for whom Moses and Elijah were great authorities under God, such an instruction would rivet their obedient attention in a new manner.

Why do we need constantly to engage in a sort of one-up-manship of authority (who is more authoritative: Moses, Elijah, Jesus etc. or are they all the same)? It does not stem from the inadequacy of the Scriptural record. All of the scriptures testify of God's truth, though not of the same truth or equally of that truth. All parts of the scriptures (as Jesus will assure his disciples and now those of us who live after them) find their fullest meaning and destiny in the light they shed upon Jesus as the Christ. We need to listen to God's Son on this matter. He is not on the same level as Moses and Elijah but the open secret to both the law and the prophets.

This "game" is due to our inadequate interpretations of the written revelation of God. We allow our social and personal passions, our cultural filters to echo back into the Scripture. Then we hear all sorts of messages. Then we enlist Scripture in all manner of unholy and half-baked causes. Our own banners and reasoning are not persuasive enough. So, we hope to find even in the Bible another ally to tuck easily into our tool kit of persuasion.

The discomfort we feel with parts of the Old Testament (and even of the New) reflects our own culture and history. There has been too much genocide, repression of the gifts and dignity

This was no doubt a major factor in the belief that Elijah would come back in the last days (Mal 4:5, and see on vv. 10–11 and above on 11:14), and while there is less evidence of a clear expectation of a return of Moses himself, the promise of a 'prophet like Moses' in Deut 18:15–19 played a significant role in Jewish (and still more Samaritan) eschatological hope. In John 1:21 Elijah and 'the prophet [like Moses]' are suggested together as categories (alternative to 'Messiah') to explain the role of John the Baptist as an eschatological figure. These two men therefore also symbolize the coming of the messianic age, and their conversation with Jesus marks him out the more clearly as the Messiah who comes as the climax to their eschatological role. There are also further connections in that both Moses and Elijah went up on Mount Sinai (Horeb) to meet with God and see his glory (Exod 24:15–18; 33:18–23; 1 Kgs 19:8–13). Both men also suffered rejection and hostility from the people to whom they were sent, and so prefigured the experience of Jesus the Messiah." (p. 648).

⁶⁴⁹ Augustine sees it as a desire to avoid the same difficulties Jesus is to suffer, to stay on the mount. *Works III/3*: "Come down, Peter. You were eager to go on resting on the mountain; come down, *preach the word, press on in season, out of season, censure, exhort, rebuke in all long-suffering and teaching* (2 Tm 4:2). Toil away, sweat it out, suffer some tortures, so that by means of the brightness and beauty of right and good activity, you may come to possess in charity what is to be understood by the Lord's white garments. We heard the praises of charity, you see, when the apostle was being read: *It does not seek its own advantage* (1 Cor 13:5). It does not seek its own advantage, because it gives away what it possesses. Peter didn't understand this yet, when he was eager to live with Christ on the mountain. He was keeping that for you, Peter, after death. But now he himself says to you, 'Go down to labor on earth, to serve on earth, to be despised, crucified on earth.' Life came down, to be killed; bread came down, to go hungry; the way came down, to grow weary on a journey; the fountain came down, to experience thirst; and are you refusing to endure toil? Don't seek your own profit. Have charity and love, preach the truth; then you will arrive at eternity, where you will find security." (pp. 342–343)

of others, distortion of the facts of events in history—all “justified” by some reading of the Scripture. It is not a matter that the Christian history is particularly unique among the religions (a religion of blood, violence and greed as compared with the beauty, peaceableness and simplicity of other religions). It is a matter of the Christian religion being distorted in ways that mirror the distortions other religions also display. We don’t like the fact that there are elements in the holy Scripture that provide room for inadequate interpretations and uses.

We might even suppose that certain Mosaic laws or certain bloody actions of Elijah (how many prophets of Baal lost their life because of Elijah’s zeal?) disqualify these stories of the label “holy.” They are texts of “terror” in the uses to which they have been put. Jesus, Elijah and Moses stand and converse about his own bloody death at the instigation of close readers of the Old Testament writings! If there is proof of the inadequacy of the Scriptures, it appears in this very story. Scriptures do not prevent misinterpretations.⁶⁵⁰

Nonetheless, we never find Jesus pitting himself against the authority of the oracles of God in the writings of the Old Testament. He definitely goes beyond them, but not against them. The problem in his day has replicated itself like a virus in the blood stream of the Christian religion. Scripture can and is being misused. The Kingdom of God is still present as a word, a fragile, vulnerable message whose meaning can be missed and rejected. The difficulty in our day is the same as it was in his. Some make Scripture into an impossible procrustean literalism and legalism. Some make it an impossible mess of contradictions, errors, and nonsense.

The claim of this event is that listening to Jesus will set things in a framework that is sufficient. We need to listen to him as the unique Son of God. His voice is the guide and key to proper appropriation of the message of the total Word of God. It enables us to see continuity and discontinuity without degrading or denying validity to every part of Scripture. It does not answer all questions we may have about Scripture and specific passages, but it gives us the keys to the Kingdom that enable us to live confidently and consistently with its message.

It allows us to live with a diversity that normally has been restricted in the history of the Church. We see both a gentile and Jewish version of Christian worship and faith-expression occurring in the pages of the New Testament. Jesus and the New Testament are not corrections of the Old Testament. They are fulfillments of it, not negations. The many lights of the Old Testament are not extinguished by the great light of the Son of God. Moses and Elijah stand alongside Jesus Christ.

This means we must be careful in our zeal to assert the superiority of this or that. Jesus’ words, “but I say to you” are not a way of downgrading the Old Testament nor of separating the chaff from the fruitful in Jewish religion or Hebrew Scripture. It is his distinctive manner of providing a corrective to the corruption of the very way God had given to his people. The covenant was

⁶⁵⁰ This was an issue early on with Marcion pitting the loving God of the New Testament against the blood-thirsty god of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather than make a booth for Moses and Elijah, Marcion cast them into outer darkness. Later in the Medieval period, the Cathari also viewed the Old Testament law as given by the prince of darkness. “Though retaining the NT and the prophetic parts of the OT, the Cathars interpreted them as allegories, teaching that Christ was an angel with a phantom body who, consequently, did not suffer or rise again, and whose redemptive work consisted only in teaching man the true doctrine. The Catholic Church, by taking the NT allegories literally, had been corrupted and was doing the work of the devil.” F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds. (2005) *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (p. 303).

distorted and misshapen by the way in which Moses and Elijah were misunderstood, manipulated and misapplied.

Jesus' coming in one way represented nothing new in the economy of God's relationship with the world. His vision and reasoning were rooted in the central thrust and spiritual intention of Old Testament writing. In another way Jesus' coming was unique and strikingly new. His interpretations were novel. His prophecy and revelation were definitive in a way that all that came before and after were not. We need to listen to him, really listen. That is a more difficult task than most of us imagine.

There are so many additional voices now – some sitting on the chief seats of religious bureaucracies today as did the Pharisees and Sadducees. Some are charismatic religious populists on the media and in mega-churches. Some are premier biblical scholars. We can often learn somethings from them but the test is whether we authentically listen to what Jesus says.

This passage also has a hint of "Christo-monism." The heavenly voice says to listen to Jesus.⁶⁵¹ We cannot read too much into this as though we should not listen to anyone else (stop reading the newspaper or the great books of the past and present!). Or to think, as some moderns do, we need to be "red letter" Christians who "correct" the rest of Scripture by the words of Jesus. 'His words are inspired but not some of the other chaff in the Bible.'

Nonetheless, the suggestion is that we listen to Jesus. There is nothing essential that God says elsewhere that we need in order to complete what is said here, though elements of what is essential can be found elsewhere. Nor do the Spirit and the Father speak with a different message or demand elsewhere. We cannot pit the so-called god of Nature against the voice of Jesus, as though Jesus needs correction in the light of words from other sources (though our interpretations of Jesus or nature may need correction!).

In this way Karl Barth was correct in his emphasis. God is revealed to us through Jesus Christ. We do not and cannot get to a fully clear and genuine knowledge of God by some other means. The door into the sheepfold is Jesus. The light of the world is Jesus. The water of life is Jesus. The good shepherd of the flock is Jesus. The resurrection and the life is Jesus. Grace and truth come through Jesus. We do not expand our possibilities by adding a variety of additional sources or side-stepping Jesus Christ as "too narrow" and restricted.

In fact, we need to note that in this setting Jesus is surrounded not only by the notables of the Old Testament, but also by the New Testament notables. Peter, James and John offer us the apostolic witness in its pointing back to the person and work of Jesus. If the Old Testament is not dismissed by Jesus' presence and proclamation, nor is the New Testament. So, we can listen with confidence to both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament testimony, knowing that they will tell us what is complementary to Jesus' own voice.

Is there meaning in the difference of posture between the figures? Moses and Elijah in their glorified state converse comfortably with Jesus as God's unique Son. Peter, James and John fall terrified on their face once they hear the voice coming amid the cloud. Peter's easy words turn to trembling flesh when he realizes the nature of the event.

⁶⁵¹ Bruner, *Churchbook*: "God does not waste words or talk for mere effect. In the Synoptic Gospels, God the Father talks directly to earth only twice (3:17; 17:5), and both times God says exactly the same thing: "This is my priceless Son; I am deeply pleased with him." What does this twice-repeated Voice mean? *It means that the single most important fact that God wants the church and the world to know, barring none, is all that we have in Jesus of Nazareth.*" (p. 172).

It might be easy from these details to reverse the ordinary evaluation of the difference of value of Old and New Testaments. Moses and Elijah stand alongside; the apostles fall on their faces in fear! However, it is unlikely that this is signaling anything more than the difference in knowledge and experience of the figures present. Jesus removes the fear of the Apostles by his words and touch, lifting them up to stand where they have been most of the time prior to this event. When they open their eyes again they see Jesus only.

We need remind ourselves that Jesus is not only the definitive fulfillment of the Old Testament but the fundamental subject matter of the New Testament. The witness of the apostles is accomplished when it leaves us with the sight of Jesus only. Again, we do not need to fear the apostle's words any more than we need to be suspicious of Moses or Elijah. The stories and words given in gospel, epistle, sermon and apocalypse point to the holy Son of God. In them we will find ourselves falling before the majesty of God in Christ and find his gracious touch lifting us up to stand with him on the Mount.

Nonetheless, we find ourselves in a generation with many arguing the inadequacy and even danger of the Bible. Its words are not easy to interpret and apply in a world that changes dramatically decade by decade. We can get so caught up in the passions of our day and cultures that we can hear no message other than that to which we have grown accustomed. The superficial brushes we have with Scripture do not root out the noxious ideologies or interests our physical bodies and body politic give to us. So, we tend to find in the biblical portraits those details that justify ourselves, the views that surround us and our own kind. This gross misuse of the Bible leads some to conclude we cannot and should not allow its words to be heard as authoritative or determinative of life and thought.

There is a new graphic out in recent months. The caption says: "Bad Religion." The graphic is the circle crossed through indicating something to be rid of. In the circle is a cross. The intention is to portray the "bloody religion" of Jesus as leading to such bad behavior and thinking that we would be better off without it. Even some of us who are Christ followers sympathize with the intent behind it. There are some quite gross caricatures of Christ-following that render its message suspect and repulsive or hijack it for terrible ends. We are often culpable in not speaking out against the misuse of God's word as we ought.

The challenge is to live so deeply with the glory of Christ that we are transformed into what we are not naturally: wise, effective, loving people who stand alongside Jesus, not simply alongside contemporary issues. Our first duty is to listen to Jesus. The first word we need to hear from him is the same Peter, James and John heard from him after God's voice telling them to listen: "Get up, and stop being afraid." (17:7). Then go with him into the future.

❖ Discipleship: The disciple and the Old Testament

There has always been debate and division over the role of the Old Testament in the life and practices of the Christian community. For some, the first duty to listen to Jesus becomes stop listening to the voices in the Hebrew Scriptures (the very voices Jesus listened to!). After all, the voice from heaven doesn't say, 'listen to them' (Jesus, Moses and Elijah). But it also doesn't say "stop listening to them." To listen to Jesus is to listen to all of Scripture because the voice of Jesus is found in it all.

Yet for some this means some of the Old Testament is discarded, terminated while other parts remain both authoritative and valuable (since Jesus ends some of it). For others this means all of

it remains to be heard – heard in a different register since its fullness of meaning is found finally in Christ, but still useful and important, even if no longer practiced (such as blood sacrifice). It is clear that for those who are not Jewish disciples, circumcision requirements are no longer in force. The book of Hebrews is a key text for the effect of Christ's coming on a variety of ordinances and laws embodied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet there is a clear interplay between practices found in the Old Testament and the freedom in practice in the New. This has led to a variety of approaches to the Old Testament.

1. The New Testament seems to have dealt with this in a flexible manner, with a pluralistic freedom that meant different practices and observances. While Gentiles were not required to adopt Jewish scruples about food, special holy days, or circumcision, they were not forbidden to Jewish disciples. While Gentiles did not have to become Jewish to convert, Jews did not have to give up their Jewish distinctives. We even have the example of the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, undertaking a Nazarite vow and offering blood sacrifice in the Temple nearly 30 years after the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Acts 18:18; 21:17-26). So long as these practices were not made conditions of salvation, they were matters of freedom. Torah-observant Jewish Christians ("messianic Jews") believe Jesus did not and could not abrogate standards of godly obedience but affirmed both the weightier and lesser matters of Torah. In modern times messianic Judaism is an example of the continuation of this.

2. The dualism of some Christians such as Marcion and the Cathari are the most dramatic cases of complete dismissal of the Old Testament God – and, for Marcion, much of the New Testament. Peter, James and John were present. Yet God did not say "listen to them" either. But this sort of dualism has been repeatedly rejected by all the major Christian traditions. It requires an alien worldview imposed upon Scripture to reach such conclusions. It requires reading much of even the Jesus story as mistaken since he quotes the Old Testament repeatedly as though it were the very word of God.

In the modern world, we have fellow travelers of this ancient dualism who see parts of the Old Testament (and sometimes New) as simply due to misperceptions and attributions to God of bad theology and ethics. In places the Bible is simply a bad book, displaying a "bad" god, with elements that genuinely offer bad theology and ethics. For example, Moses and Joshua attribute to God their sinful genocidal strategy for the conquest of Palestine. Or the imprecatory Psalms express the violent anger and bile of a very malformed spirituality. We need to "clean up" those parts of the Bible by a modern theological Occam's razor such as the golden rule. We do not listen to those texts other than to find what we must reject unconditionally.

3. The Anabaptists make a clear functional distinction between the equally inspired Old and New Testaments. The Old is read from the perspective of the New; the New is the fulfillment of the Old. The Old Testament is interpreted in light of God's final revelation in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. Anabaptist ethics are learned first from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, then the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the entire Bible. But it is clear, the highest norm are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. In practice this has led to a viewing of certain elements of the Old Testament as "lower" in revelatory significance, especially aspects dealing with violence, than Jesus' words.⁶⁵² Progress in revelation means that

⁶⁵² Even some reformed take this view: "Christians who take seriously God's singular ('Listen to him!' not 'them') know that they can no longer pray every word in the Psalms. In reading the great Psalm

parts of the Old Testament are superseded and are even now forbidden to modern disciples though they were not to the ancients. This means disciples cannot take up roles serving in the police, military, civil governmental positions that involve coercion of any sort. This has often led to an alternative, counter-culture community such as the Hutterites.

4. Dispensationalists traditionally saw the Bible as divided up into various eras or dispensations. The Mosaic law was given to Israel and no longer applies since Jesus ushered in a new Covenant era. For most dispensationalists, this means only the New Testament applies to disciples today while another sub-group considers only the last half of the New Testament as salient (starting either in the middle of Acts or at Acts 28). The covenant of Sinai has not been replaced but is quiescent at present until the Millennium when it will be reinstated when there is a restoration of the Jews. For many even the Sermon on the Mount is for Jews, not Christians. This is seen as “rightly dividing” the word of God. It is all the word of God, but different parts apply to different eras or dispensations.

5. The Roman Catholics and Reformation have variations on a similar theme: the Mosaic Law continues in some way under the new Covenant. For Catholics following Thomas Aquinas there are three sorts of laws in the Old Testament: moral, ceremonial and judicial. The moral is permanent, rooted in nature. The ceremonial and judicial were temporary, instituted for a particular time, foreshadowing and then ceasing when fulfilled by the coming of Christ. Many of the judicial laws contained universal principles that reflect natural law, so we learn from them. For Jean Calvin there are similarly three sorts of law: moral, ceremonial and civil. Only the moral laws, including the Ten Commandments and the commands repeated in the New Testament directly apply to Christians today, though we get guidance and direction from all parts of the law. For Lutherans the key distinction is between the Law and the Gospel. Some Scripture, whether Old or New Testament, presents the Law and others promises about Christ. The Law demands obedience to God’s will while the Gospel refers to the promise of forgiveness through Christ.⁶⁵³

139, for example, even conservative Christians sensitively skip the end of the psalm that reads, “How I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee!... I hate them with undying hatred; I hold them all my enemies” (vv. 21–22 NEB). Jesus’ teaching about enemies simply does not let us pray or talk this way about enemies anymore (cf. C-7, Matt 5:43–48).” Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 175). But this misunderstands the nature and function of such imprecatory Psalms and their proper use, even today. We remember that Psalm 69 and 109 are quoted approvingly in application to Judas. The Bible forbids revenge but not imprecation. The Psalms that model this do so in service of God’s kingdom, not selfishly. They rage against injustice to God rather than take up the knife or sword to slash and burn enemies. For a theology of imprecation see Nehrbass, Daniel. (2013) *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms*. Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock: “...the psalms were written by inspired, mature people who suffered at the hands of hard-hearted enemies. The psalmists knew that God was grieved by the plight of the helpless, and he was more capable of exacting justified vengeance than they. So they transferred their own schemes of vengeance to a sovereign God who, though just, defends the innocent. In short, the imprecations are prayers of dependence upon God.” Kindle Edition. Loc. 1250.

⁶⁵³ There has been a small movement among the reformed tradition of “theonomous” or “dominion theology.” It asserts the Old Testament judicial or civil laws are to be applied in modern states. The Bible is seen as giving a permanent and sufficient standard for all government. This means disciples should support a theocratic democracy where citizenship is held by Christians only. Society is to be ruled by divine law. Some are Christian reconstructionists who advocate a theonomic government and libertarian economics. Capital punishment is to be applied to much the same list as found in Mosaic law.

The main function of the law is to show us our need for the gospel and forgiveness.

It can only be said that followers of Jesus need to read the Hebrew Scriptures just as Jesus did and find in it the word of God, as he did. It is far more than simply arcane laws and “texts of terror” that strike us as difficult, alien, even repulsive. To be sure, some parts of it are challenging and strange, embodied in a culture we no longer participate in and have difficulty understanding in its own terms. There is an important caveat that we are listening into the ways God spoke and worked with people in very different historical and cultural contexts than our own. We cannot simply and directly transfer God’s commands to this or that figure in the Bible and have authentically “heard” what God is saying to us in our time and culture. It means disciples will continue to debate the meaning and applicability of various elements of Scripture.

Yet the virtual “silence of the Old Testament” in many Churches is appalling. It means some of the critical resources needed for the life and practice of disciples are neglected, if not discarded (and the consequences are evident in the level of wisdom and spiritual maturity in many Churches). It can only be said, in not applying ourselves diligently to the Law and the Prophets (and Wisdom literature) as Jesus did, we show ourselves not to be his followers. We need to hear the words Augustine heard at his conversion: “*tolle lege*” (take up and read).

(16) The coming of Elijah (17:9-13)

For the last time in Matthew’s Gospel, the instruction to be silent about an event is given to these disciples. These things they have witnessed are not to be discussed with anyone until after the resurrection. Only then would the meaning of these things become clear.

They discover the key to the meaning of Israel’s identity. Jesus is the beloved Son of the living God, the one to listen to above all the other voices they find in their setting. In this vision they find the unity of the living and the dead, the foreshadowing of the unity of the Old and the New, and the connection between the glory of God and the death of his Son. Packed into this event are many possibilities for opening up the actual meaning of this person. Nonetheless, Jesus tells these three to say nothing until after his resurrection. Only then will the pattern of meaning be complete and obvious enough for this event to have its genuine function.

Their response to all they have seen carries the conversation back to another issue, one that seems a bit disjointed in this context. They want to know about the scribes’ teaching and interpretation about Elijah preceding the restoration of all things. If Jesus was the Messiah, then Elijah should have come already.

They may have wondered if this encounter of Jesus with Elijah was that coming. If so, it would be puzzling that the restoration of all things would be delayed. Or they might have wondered how one, declared the unique Son of God and hence the messianic figure of end times, might suffer, die and be raised (perhaps they were thinking a general resurrection would happen and so it would be a bit redundant to talk about this incident at that point in time). Then again, this might relate back to the prophecy six days earlier of some seeing the coming of the Kingdom in glory.

Jesus takes on their puzzle and repeats his earlier teaching with some elaboration. The notion of Elijah’s coming is correct.⁶⁵⁴ But his coming is fulfilled in a typological manner in John

⁶⁵⁴ Typological in John the Baptist: Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 499); France, *Matthew* (p. 654); Morris, *Matthew* (p. 443). Some see it perhaps as also future, perhaps the two witnesses of Rev. 11:3-6: Turner, *Baker Matthew* (p. 422); Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 266); Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 708).

the Baptist. Rather than foreshadowing the restoration of all things and their transfiguration into something more glorious, John showed how obtuse and resistant the leadership was in seeing the beginnings of that restoration. It may also be that the use of the Greek tenses is meant to indicate a further coming of Elijah. In one sense Elijah has already come in the person of John the Baptist. In another sense the coming spoken of in Malachi is not yet present and thus “Elijah” has not come in that way.

Jesus’ response to their question indicates that Elijah’s coming and function is not to prevent the suffering of the Messiah. The way in which he has already come points to the opposite fate. So, there is no triumphalism present in the transfiguration event. This is not the harbinger of the restoration of all things at this point in human history. Jesus is transformed and a bit of the glory of the Father shines through and around him. It is a beginning of restoration, but only in the same weakness in which the Kingdom is present

Jesus holds in his person the very glory and precise image of the living God. As the unique Son of God, he is the Word who declares grace and truth. The later Christological interpretations draw out of this incident the striking and decisive meanings that are resident in it. Despite the exalted status of this one, the scribes and power brokers of Palestine will not listen to him but will mislabel and crucify him.

Whatever happened in this transaction, one light of understanding appears to have gone on. How certain these apostles were of their perceptions in the moment is not clear. It is at this moment that they realized he was talking about John the Baptist. This way of looking at contemporary events would necessarily require a revision of the teachings of the scribes. Jesus was only partly agreeing with their understanding. What would be impossible for those teachers to assimilate was his identification of John with Elijah.

What has been impossible for the scribes of Jesus’ day has continued. Only the circle of impossibility has expanded. Francis W. Beare calls this transfiguration and supplement on Elijah

“obviously a creation of mythopoetic imagination” and “unquestionably a literary creation, not a fragment of tradition shaped by the processes of oral transmission. There is not the slightest hope of recovering any element of historical fact that might conceivably lie behind it.”⁶⁵⁵

The vigor of the rejection is equal to the colossal lack of argumentation for the conclusion. Bultmann suffers the same defect in his simple assertion that this is a post-resurrection incident retrojected back into Jesus’ earthly existence. An old principle can be applied here: what is arbitrarily asserted can be equally arbitrarily rejected.

(17) The healing of the epileptic that the disciple’s failed to heal (17:14-21)

Down from the mountain of glory to the valley of inability, from the mountain of divine majesty to the valley of human misery. The disciples had exercised the power of demon release already. Nonetheless, they confront in this child an impossibility. The nine together could not solve the tragic condition of this one.

Jesus’ response to their inability is surprisingly strong. He does not act “pastorally,” as though this were simply an issue of further experience and gradual change. Rather his scorching words

⁶⁵⁵ *The Gospel According to Matthew: Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (Harper & Row, 1982) p. 361.

include them with the larger circle of unbelief. Their problem is faithlessness and the distortion of mind-set and action that manifests itself repeatedly in Israel.

The power available to them is not limited as is their faith. The issue is not the depth and breadth of their faith or its size (even the size of the smallest seed known to them would suffice). It is whether it is authentic faith, faith that is in contact with the living God. There are so many substitutes for genuine faith. Faith is only as real as the object in which the trust is placed. The subjective trust must be connected to an objective trustworthy. This is a story about power that is released to help others. Faith is not that power but accesses it.

There is the faith in faith, the glorification of some human potential residing inside of each of us. This is the dynamo supposedly unlocked by positive thinking and optimistic outlook. Think no negatives and a spring of mighty possibilities will unleash itself, blowing away all “mountains” of obstruction. All things really are possible! The American culture of the United States is saturated with this. Think positively is one of our national anthems.

What is right in this faith in faith, this positive outlook is several fold. Believing the best is yet to come, that our day is going to be productive and solutions are going to be found for intractable problems gets us more readily out of bed and into work. A positive outlook releases energy and strengthens our determination. A can-do attitude is a wonderful tonic in the face of daunting and tough challenges.

What is poison in faith in faith is its inability to acknowledge the reality of human limits. It stretches the hopes of people unrealistically. It sets people up for even greater disappointments, turning those who are victimized by powers far beyond their control into self-blamers. What is equally poisonous in it is the notion that faith is meant to be a fast track to health, wealth and success. Listen to the cadence and tune of most purveyors of faith in faith, of positive thinking, and their goals are tied to the gods of Mammon, fame and personal enhancement. There is no room for suffering as a friend, for poverty as a blessing, for difficulty as the heart of God’s will and way.

Jesus is not castigating his generation (or the Apostles) for not being optimistic enough. Their problem is not that they don’t think positively enough. Their problem is that they are still not aligned properly with the character and reality of God. It is not the power of faith that enables the miracle Jesus works. It is the power faith accesses that does it.⁶⁵⁶

What Jesus teaches is metaphorical in its meaning. Using the mountain in whose shadow they stood, the very mountain where the shekinah glory of God had but a short time ago enveloped six figures, he dramatized the sort of power faith can mobilize. The very power of God placed the mountains where they stand. That power is not diminished in these centuries and millennia since creation! God continues to sustain and uphold all things by his power.

All things are possible (nothing is impossible) when one has a faith connection with the unlimited power of God. This does not mean all things are permissible. We have no indications of Jesus (or God) moving literal mountains. All things that comport well with the Kingdom of God’s agenda and meaning are possible. This is not *carte blanche* for any and every “word of power” that we can utter out of our mouths. There remain many changes that await the coming restoration of all things in Jesus Christ. In the meantime, we cannot simply shout some word of faith over a bent and broken figure and find that God works.

⁶⁵⁶ The repeated “could not” is underscored by being repeated three times (vs.16, 19, 20). The root repeated is δύναμαι (οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν, οὐδὲν ἄδυνατήσεται).

Sometimes such a word of power is given to God's people. Sometimes problems and suffering remain unnecessarily because we are faithless and perverse. Sometimes it is God's will for the miracle to change and transform. But not always. We see too much of a different sort of faithless perversity in unwise, unholy, unhealthy claims for healing powers that blame victims twice when healing does not occur.

This passage is paradoxical. The problem is "little faith." The solution is a faith as tiny as the mustard seed! The correction of little faith is an absolutely tiny faith. What is going on here?

Faith is faith not because of its amount or size, but because of its quality as faith. Jesus does not align himself with those who suppose there is some sort of merit in the sheer quantity of faith. Jesus does distinguish between little and great faith (commending the latter). Nonetheless, the key is not quantity but quality. Faith that connects our weakness with the strengths of God is what is needed. The power of the promises of God is not expanded when our faith expands. The largest promises are available to even the smallest of faith.

It is the presence of faith that is critical in the presence of God. Without it, what is displayed again and again is our own present weakness. Having worked miracles in the past was no guarantee to these mighty Apostles of an ongoing capability. The ability of faith is tested anew each time some mountain is confronted. It is not quite like the body builder, who through dint of exercise and time expands capabilities. Our ability to discern right from wrong in wise and capable manner is honed and strengthened by exercise and time. Not so our ability to deploy the supernatural helping power of God.

Even in its beginnings faith is sufficient to release the reality of God's compassion. Even in miniature faith can walk into the presence of God and pray. It is not the size but the actuality of faith that Jesus singles out as the crucial matter. There is one thing necessary: living faith. The root of the inability of these experienced and trained Apostles is unbelief (not lust, covetousness, or pride). Pride will rear its ugly head at the beginning of Matthew 18, but it is not the root of their problem in this incident. They may well have been humiliated and chagrined that their abilities had suddenly left them. Jesus tells them the problem is the nature of their faith.

Mark (the parallel) indicates that Jesus tied this little faith to their little prayer as well.⁶⁵⁷ Prayer is singled out as the expression of faith necessary for this miracle. One wonders why and how they had not been praying. What had they been doing? Had miracles of healing become perfunctory? Had they ceased coming to God for the essential spiritual resources that underlay the release of power into the lives of people? What was it about their approach and attitude that undermined the quality and authenticity of their faith?

We may have little insight for many of the slips and stutters that happen to our faith. There are times when everything seems to be running as well as it ever has. Our inner emotions and external habits join hands and move from strength to strength. Everything we do goes well and is productive. The impact of our ministry is evident in the testimony and changes of those who are influenced by it. Yet we then founder and fumble suddenly. Nothing has changed. Everything begins to dissolve into futility.

At other times we are tired, irritable, dragging into our tasks with unfinished preparation and emotions that are frayed. And then it happens: a spiritually redemptive moment that reaches far beyond our feelings or our flagging performance. What normally is well disciplined and ordered

⁶⁵⁷ Metzger, *Textual Commentary* rates 17:21 as an insertion from Mark 9:29 so it is omitted from most Greek texts and most modern translations though still appears in translations such as KJV, NKJV.

for the sake of effective performance cannot be credited because it was disordered and slipshod. Our faith in that moment was wavering. Yet God works the work of salvation and changes of a permanent and promising sort occur.

Faith is necessary yet we seem unable to command its presence and shaping up. We can go through the process of listening to the words of Jesus and the pages of Scripture and still not be productive in our use of them. We can pray and pray without sensing or seeing the movement of the hand of God. Saving, powerful faith that moves mountains and delivers the troubled comes only with the prayer that is grounded on listening to Jesus as God's unique, beloved Son. It is prayer that knows the peace of God because it knows that what is necessary for life and ministry rests in God's hands and heart, not ours. The death and resurrection of Christ are the sufficient basis for redemptive results. Faith is no more than a resting of our whole persons—body, emotions, habits, strivings, desires, dreams, reality definitions—on the actuality and activity of those saving facts.

❖ Discipleship: The disciple, disorders and the demonic

In this story we encounter the difficult issue of worldviews and the limits of human understanding. Some take this story of demon-caused disorder (perhaps epilepsy)⁶⁵⁸ as an indication of an outdated, pre-scientific explanation for what was at that time inexplicable. Epilepsy was so unusual that, on this account, it was attributed to malign supernatural forces. Today we know better and can state the actual physiological and anatomical causes.

Others on the other end of the spectrum attribute all sickness, mental and physical, to malign forces and all healing needs to be divine healing without the intervention of doctors, vaccines or drugs. All disorders find their healing in the atonement (or are simply illusions of the moral mind). To consult a modern doctor, even a Christian doctor, is to short-circuit faith.

How do people decide what is true and what they will believe and do about their physical and spiritual ailments? What is the role of “secondary causes” that are frequently used by God as the means by which healing occurs? What relation is there between faith and “secondary” means built into creation already by God that do not require a miracle?

It is important to emphasize that all hope, comfort, help, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and salvation for sinners, and everything that is good and perfect, is found in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20–21; Philippians 3:7–11; James 1:17–18). Still, that doesn't mean faith is defective when it relies on secondary causes such as dynamite and back hoes to remove a boulder that is blocking a road. Faith that cannot move the boulder is not inadequate faith. Yet in the case of physical and mental disorders, there are those who see a conflict between consulting doctors, receiving vaccinations, taking well-established drugs for treating given physical or mental illnesses. Nor is there indication in this event that every practical case of life requires a miracle (such as finding your tax money in the mouth of a fish – Matthew 17:27).

⁶⁵⁸ The Greek is *σεληνιαζομαι* (to be ‘moonstruck’). Mark 9:17-18: “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak [ἔχοντα πνεῦμα ἄλαλον]; and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.” The addition of “mute” spirit in Mark indicates there is more than the common notion of epilepsy going on. Note, Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: “Moon sickness is epilepsy, the ‘holy illness’ that according to a widespread view in antiquity could be caused by the moon goddess Selene and be connected with the phases of the moon.” (p. 407-408).

That the Apostles and Jesus interact around this particular case of severe seizures in a child is not indicative that all cases are to receive their “solution” by an act of a faith healer through a “miraculous” cure.⁶⁵⁹ The story is first of all about Jesus as the foretaste of the Kingdom where all illness is banished. It is part of the fabric of multiple, astonishing miracles that point to this decisive time in salvation history. It is one of the signs pointing to the open secret that Jesus is the messianic figure of the end times.⁶⁶⁰

Faith is not magic. Nor is it folly. Praying for a miracle in dire circumstances such as this is not a process of commanding God or screwing up inner intensity as though trust in God is measured by the volume of the voice or the passion of the emotion felt. Many of us have prayed persistently and trustingly for the healing of a friend only to have the outcome his or her death, the ultimate healing from all disease. It was not a lack of faith but a leaning into the will of God as the only One who knows what is best. At times the claims of faith-healing move from faith to presumption. Even Jesus refused to do miracles when they were not in service of the will of God but testing and temptations by the evil one.⁶⁶¹

The positive in the “word of faith” tradition is its emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the power of God within creation. It seeks to interpret human life and experiences in the light of Scripture. Yet it has some downsides. Since healing is already an accomplished fact in the work of Christ, the strict adherence to the word of faith can result in “blaming the victim” when healing does not happen. One’s spirituality comes to be questioned, the longer the disorder is unresolved. It can leave the sick to their own devices and increase doubts that either God can do this or that one’s faith is inadequate (actually weakening faith) and that is why it is not happening.

The reality is God responds to sickness and disorders in a variety of ways.⁶⁶² Disciples should avail themselves of all the means at their disposal, including the best of medical care and faith-healing. In the larger context safeguarding our health is a stewardship issue. We are embodied

⁶⁵⁹ “... this is one of the times in the Gospels when the distinction between illness and spirit possession is blurred, and where removal of the unclean spirit also brings relief from physical symptoms.” Amanda Witmer (2013). *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist: His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context*. New York: Bloomsbury. (p. 185).

⁶⁶⁰ Graham H. Twelftree (1999). *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (pp. 136–137) sees this as also another in the theme of Jesus as the “new Moses” – just as Moses went up to the mount and encountered the glory of God, when he came down, he encountered unbelief, as Jesus does here.

⁶⁶¹ See Tammy R. Williams, “Is There a Doctor in the House? Reflections on the Practice of Healing in African American Churches,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Miroslav Volf (2002) Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. (pp. 94–120).

⁶⁶² “...while demons do cause symptoms which we might at first interpret as psychological dysfunction, it is not true that such problems are all that they cause. Such diseases as epilepsy (Mt 17:14–18), paralysis similar to that caused by some forms of malaria (Lk 13:10–13) and probably fever (Lk 4:38–39) are all attributed to demons. Therefore, many forms of physical disease were attributed to demons, although not all physical disease was attributed to them, for the Gospels differentiate between healing diseases and casting out demons. The key is whether those physical diseases attributed to demons really disappeared when Jesus cast out the demon. If so, his claim that a demon was causing the problem and that it took casting out rather than a healing word would be confirmed.” Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al. (1996) *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. (pp. 80–81).

souls or besouled bodies. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We glorify God in our bodies. We must care for our bodies (and minds) in all seasons of life and health so we can be effective in living fully in the vocations and purposes for which God has made us. This means following the wisdom available about things such as sleep, diet, exercise, and acceptance of the “thorns in the flesh” God brings into our experiences. Faith in all its exercises has a purpose and an end: to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Faith healing only has its place in that context.

There is a doctor in the house, and his name is Jesus:

“This doctor in the house is a peculiar kind of doctor, whose aim is not to cure and then disappear but whose healing more profoundly consists in our knowledge of him and his presence with us. If healing essentially concerns our relationship with God, then the aim of healing is ‘getting to know the doctor better’ and honoring our relationship with him in ‘sickness and in health,’ in ‘life and death’ (Phil. 1:20). It is the kind of doctor Jesus is that characterizes the nature of Christian healing. The gospels not only highlight Jesus’ prowess as a healer but also his empathy for the sick.”⁶⁶³

(18) Another Passion prediction and Temple support (17:22-27)

This appears to begin a subsection within this part of Matthew. One note sounds twice, bracketing this section: “they were greatly distressed” (17:23; 18:31). The problem at stake appears to be the shape and meaning of the authority and destiny of the Messiah and his followers. For a third time in short compass Jesus portrays his own fate as that of suffering and death, followed by resurrection. It is this theme that greatly distresses the disciples. Why does he continue to harp on losing life, on suffering, on God allowing the death of the Son of Man? The problem at stake is self-denial, the acceptance of humiliation, smallness, suffering.

What seems incongruous is that such a fate awaits those who, by faith, can move mountains! Jesus comes off the mount of transfiguration and delivers a demon-possessed boy, curing him instantly. That such a powerful figure should be betrayed into the hands of the malicious and wind up suffering and being killed seems incomprehensible. Of what good is the glory and power of heaven if it allows such absurdity?

Yet by the time we reach 18:31 we find ourselves with the disciples in the middle of a story that reverses the values and perspectives that brought this great distress. If it feels distressing to deny self, to lay down one’s life in suffering and death, to lose one’s life to gain it, then the behavior of the servants in the parable tells a different tale. In this case the forgiven servant is confronted with an opportunity to deny himself for the sake of another. Instead, he refuses to sacrifice his own comfort and interests but requires the debtor to pay up now. This unmerciful, self-preserving action that comes at the expense of another is what causes great distress.

The sort of world sin has knit together should be distressing. The fabric of human affairs is of very coarse weave, roughly torn and unable to cover the gross deformities of the body politic. Even in the community of faith, the humility and self-denial that are essential for the harmonious functioning of the whole are in scarce supply. Instead, what distresses people has less to do with the brokenness of the community and the selfishness of the leadership than their own self-

⁶⁶³ Ibid., p. 120.

preserving instincts being thwarted.

The story that follows displays two things. Jesus is not set against the Temple system as such (and thus is not principled in the same way the Essene withdrawal is). Paying the Temple tax is a voluntary act whose supply comes from God himself. It may also be a small indication that, despite the gifts and supply of well-wishers, Jesus and the disciples were on the cusp of poverty (at least at times).

It appears there are offenses and then there are significant offenses. Jesus is concerned in this matter of the freedom of the children of the Kingdom not to give certain sorts of offense. The dilemma in this challenge from the tax collectors is that whatever is done, the wrong impression might be given.

Peter is right: Jesus and the disciples do pay the Temple tax. Yet Jesus, as the son of God, is not subject to the Temple tax as might be the ordinary Israelite. Peter is confronted with that reality by the questions posed by Jesus. If Jesus is not on a par with Elijah and Moses, he is also not on the same level as the ordinary Israelite male, subject to this tax. Those who belong the household of the King are not subject to the taxes of the King. The implications of this puts the disciples of Jesus even more dramatically outside the circle of compliance than the Essenes (who paid the head tax once and never again). Nor does Jesus follow the Sadducean view of this tax ('a modern innovation that has no standing').

His point seems to be that those who stand as children in relationship to God as Father are treated as children. God does not tax his own children. Whatever the meaning of this Temple tax, it is not an obligation rooted in obedience to some requirement that falls from God upon the pious. There is freedom in this case, not obligation, least of all a divine obligation.

That one consideration does not settle the issue of behavior. Human perceptions and expectations are also a part of the mix. Divine obligation will not motivate payment in this matter. What is decisive is the desire not to be offensive to the very people with whom one seeks to share the Kingdom. If Jesus will not pay the tax because of his status within the Kingdom, he will pay it because of his desire to see more enter that Kingdom. He models a form of self-denial for the sake of the benefit of others.

The Temple tax was part of a larger economy focused on Jerusalem.⁶⁶⁴ How we see the participation and attitude of Jesus toward it depends on a variety of other conclusions. It appears Jesus does not remove the disciples from the Temple cult. What he does is to declare them free from the obligation to pay the tax demanded by its leadership.

What about this command to catch a fish with a coin in its mouth? Even though there is no notice that Peter succeeded in doing what the Lord commanded, we have no reason to suppose this was solely an abstract or hypothetical discussion. The tax was to be paid—with a coin provided miraculously in the mouth of the first fish Peter caught with his hook.

This "nature miracle" is like others. Nature miracles occur largely for the benefit of the disciples. They are a revelation of the special care of God as mediated by Jesus. The miracle power demonstrates the out-of-ordinary qualities of this teacher, healer and miracle worker. There had been earlier (and perhaps even contemporary) workers of miraculous deeds. Yet the evidence continues to accumulate for the disciples that this one is unusual and unique even

⁶⁶⁴ This tax supported Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. It was a head tax on Jewish males twenty years and older of a half-shekel (or two-drachma) each year based on Exod. 30:11–16 and Neh. 10:32–33.

among those who work miracles (such as Moses and Elijah).

One of the common arguments is that this story is legendary on the basis that such stories are common among many peoples and cultures. That is like arguing a particular auto accident is legendary because auto accidents are commonly reported on a given highway. The commonness of the story does not settle the issue of the time and space occurrence of such an event. It may well be that people have experienced such events in many places of the world. They would be remembered because they are unusual, beneficial occurrences. That they get recited and remembered in stories and legends is not because they are wish fulfillment. It is because they happened and struck the fancy of the people who experienced them. They may well be elaborated into fictional stories and myths. Nonetheless, their origins lie in unusual experiences.

This nature miracle seems to be an even more selfish and a matter of convenience than the others. A tax needs to be paid and so a miracle! No sums need to be taken from the common purse. These are the interpretations of little imagination. We begin with noting a larger theme: where Jesus and the disciples are in the service of the King, the King is in the service of his servants. God provides in extra-ordinary as well as ordinary ways. There are those who conclude faith is not faith when it acts in ordinary ways (moving mountains shovelful by shovelful). There are others who conclude instantaneous, unmediated moving of mountains by “faith” is always presumption. The mountain-moving faith of Jesus (see the healing of the demon-possessed son) is also a tax-providing, fish-producing faith. If faith moves mountains, why can it not also move fish with coins in their mouth? If faith moves mountains, why cannot love for outsiders move fish to bring needed resources?

If Jesus is in the business of not offending those who stand outside the circle of his disciples, he is not above offending the faithlessness of those who claim to be his disciples. We modern disciples who come to this text with an Enlightenment “faith” in a closed-universe or an inconsiderate demand that texts from other times and cultures suit our sensibilities set ourselves up to be offended by such a story. Who measures what is reasonable? Which criteria are given in the nature of the universe so definitively that we can only seek some redeeming features in a story otherwise improbable or impossible? Who set us up as judge over the texts of the Gospels so that we rule some “in” and others “out”?

We may “test” this text by our grids and assumptions. At the same time, this text tests our grids and assumptions. We may be far more likely to jettison a story of this sort because of the levels of commitment and comfort we have in our own “scholarly competence” than we are to jettison parts of the paradigm that leads to the sorts of judgments of inauthenticity of this text.

The importance of this word to Peter resides in its context. The children of the King are free, genuinely free from the ordinary ecclesiastical obligations. Yet that freedom is circumscribed by the drive to serve others and hence not offend them. All of these “principles” are themselves within the provisioning providence of God. Freedom and the limiting of freedom in service are together grounded in the miracle power of God. Love limits our freedom. Though free from paying the tax we are also freed for paying it.⁶⁶⁵

What is discouraging is to discover even evangelically oriented scholars being pulled into the

⁶⁶⁵ Bruner, *Churchbook*: “But precisely because disciples are freed *from* paying the tax they are also freed *for* paying it, if paying it will mean winning men and women in Israel to faith in Israel’s Messiah. Jesus subordinates almost everything to himself. For Israel might understandably take offense at Jesus’ rejection of the tax and so, for this piddly reason, hesitate to believe Jesus.” (p. 203).

skepticism and little imagination of the modernist and liberal. A too naturalistic interpretation is absurd and unnecessary (such as Barclay's claim that Jesus sent Peter out to fish long enough to earn the four-drachma tax for the two of them).⁶⁶⁶ It placates a modern sensibility without treating the narrative story fairly. It suggests every time we hit such supernaturalistic elements, we figure out some rationalistic explanation or dismiss it as legendary.

On the other hand, we ought not be embarrassed by a supernaturalistic explanation (that Jesus had some sort of divine insight into the presence of the fish or that Jesus' faith was such that what he pronounced came to pass). It is just such explanation that would have been part of the original world view within which this story was communicated. To be sensitive and respectful readers, we need first to put ourselves within the horizon of assumptions of the first century and seek to allow the story to speak to us as it spoke to them. An exegetical imagination trained through many years of graduate school and decades of careful scholarship that imagines this interpretation is an embarrassment. The labelling of this as "oriental hyperbole" or adjustment to an outmoded world view for the sake of communication are both dodges. They subvert the debate over what happened and why we prefer a naturalistic (often monistic materialism) to a supernaturalistic theism?

It is equally a dodge to imply that we need not face the question of miracle because such is not recited in the story. Besides, such an argument runs, the center teaching of the story is that we are free within the world and we are to limit our freedom in service to that world. Both of those things can be true. But they have no relevance to the question of what we do with a world view that is supernaturalistic.

God is in the service of those who are in His service. This story of the fish, like that of the donkey carrying Jesus into Jerusalem, are indications. There is no way the God of the Bible can be active except supernaturally (for God is not nature reified). God stands above, free in relation to and within nature. Nature has its own autonomy and dignity, without being insulated from the activity of God. Yet God's activity within nature is not simply a religious way of talking of nature's own self-activity.

We need to get beyond the identification of the supernatural as simply the wondrous for which we do not yet have scientific explanation or understanding. God is not only the God of the gaps (and he is that). God is the God of the seamless "miracle" of nature, bringing it into being, establishing it in all of its mechanisms, controlling and sustaining it in its operations—and, yes, intervening to bring about "coincidence" and even transcendent ordering of its forces.

This story of flexibility in the exercise of love teaches us that the Church's purpose and goal is bound up with the purpose and goal of Jesus' death and resurrection. It has to do with faith and love, with tapping into the power of God through faith to display the love that seeks not to offend the outsider but to bring her or him into the community of faith. Faith is to move mountains. Love is to sacrifice freedom in service of drawing more and more into the fellowship of the Crucified.

Later Peter's desire not to offend the legalistic Jewish Christians who came up to Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14) would lead to a confrontation with Paul. Every principle can be taken to an extreme where it becomes no longer a principle of faith but of unfaith. Peter removed himself from eating with the Gentile Christians in order not to hurt the faith of his fellow Jewish

⁶⁶⁶ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, Rev. ed. (1975) p. 172. In the 2001 third edition, this rationalistic interpretation is gone.

believers. The problem in this case was that he was confusing insiders with outsiders. His eagerness not to hurt the “faith” of one set of Christians threatened the very meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection (and hurt the faith of another set of Christians).

Whatever love sacrifices, it cannot sacrifice the very basis of the freedom we have in Christ. Too frequently our community life has been based on the inadequate and incorrect “faith” of a few whom we do not wish to disturb. In the process we have undermined the authentic and correct faith of the many. We are set free for freedom, not to keep the scruples of the conservative legalists in the Christian movement.

❖ Discipleship: To “compromise” or not to – that is the question

This incident raises the question about the freedom and flexibility of Christian discipleship in matters of “adiaphora.” In seeking not to offend, to hurt the faith or faith journey of others, we may wind up compromising the truth of the Gospel. Peter may have applied this flexibility at Antioch, not wishing to offend the Jewish Christians that came from James on the matter of eating with Gentiles (perhaps they were part of the party of Judaizing Christians who felt the law must be kept by Jewish Christians, and even by Gentile converts too). In not “offending” these Jewish Christians, Peter hurt the truth of the Gospel itself (Galatians 2:11-21).

In Romans 14 (and I Corinthians 8-10) Paul recognized the principle of not misusing Christian freedom in ways that harms the discipleship of fellow Christians. We need to acknowledge that our conduct can cause others to stumble into sin. Paul adjusts his own lifestyle and preferences where the matters concerned are adiaphora, matters indifferent to salvation:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

In these matters Paul (and Jesus) seem to practice a utilitarian calculus, guided by solidarity to the gospel and its ethics while looking at the consequences for others of the choice and conduct. We seek not to offend in matters not central to the faith.⁶⁶⁷ At times a negative legalism, insisting on demonstrating our “freedom,” is no better than a positive legalism.

There is a divine scandal that cannot be avoided. Jesus is described as a stone of stumbling because some cannot assimilate or reconcile their convictions with what Jesus actually is. The word of the Gospel can either result in life or death. The person and work of Jesus can either evoke faith or stir up opposition. That cannot be avoided.

⁶⁶⁷ See Σκάνδαλον, σκανδαλίζω in Moisés Silva, ed., (2014) *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Second Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. (pp. 296–300) Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley (1985) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. (pp. 1036–1038).

What is in view with the case of Temple tax is a human action that outsiders might find offensive that can be avoided. In this case it is not a matter of offending other “insiders” within the Christian fellowship but “outsiders,” those who are yet to enter the kingdom of God.

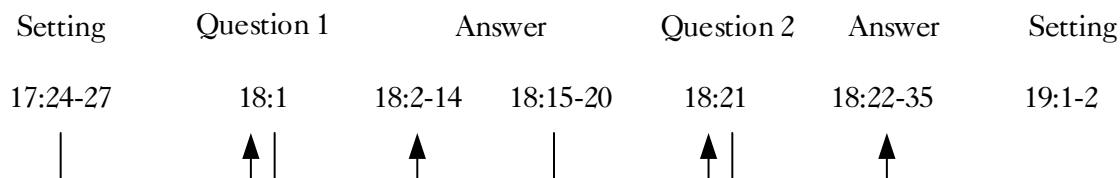
Another side to this is to realize that there is an “offense” that is more than simply eliciting a reaction from others because they don’t agree or like your choice. This sort is not an offense in the sense of simply emotionally upsetting or shocking, something that repels another, though that is often the response that is engaged. The stronger sense of “offend” is to cause to sin or obstruct another’s path (so cause one to reject faith or disbelieve). In the very next chapter Matthew will recite Jesus’ words about causing “little ones” to “stumble” (same Greek word as “offense”) and how dire the consequences for those who are the occasion of such (18:6-9).

B. Discourse 4: Status and (mis)conduct in the kingdom community (18:1-19:2)

Chapter 18 reads very much like an early church manual. Themes that are present include humility (vv. 1–4), responsibility (vv. 5–7), self-renunciation (vv. 8–10), individual care (vv. 11–14), discipline (vv. 15–20), fellowship (vv. 19–20), and forgiveness (vv. 23–35). This discourse focuses on insiders just as Matthew 10 focused on relations with outsiders.⁶⁶⁸

Before the end of the age, the Church community is a “mixed” company of both authentic disciples and others who say “Lord, Lord” but do not do the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21-23; 13:24-30). Severe warnings are given about status seeking, causing the young, immature disciple to stumble or despising the least socially significant disciple or child among disciples. When sin does occur in the community, it is to be dealt with in a process of a “discipline” seeking restoration that moves from the two involved up to the whole church community if needed. At the same time, if the one at fault listens and repents, he or she is to be forgiven. Love and “not judging” does not mean ignoring misconduct among disciples.

The discourse is structured around two questions: “Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (vs.1). “Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times? (vs. 21). More specifically, this discourse is situated within two settings:⁶⁶⁹



⁶⁶⁸ Bruner, *Churchbook*: “Jesus’ Sermon on the Congregation teaches disciples how to live in the world—in the world of non-Christian neighbors, with a free and willing flexibility (17:24–26); in the world of competitive fellow-Christians, with humility and service (18:1–5); in the world of weak fellow-Christians, with sacrificial personal discipline (vv. 6–9); in the world of slipping Christians, with visitation and outreach (vv. 10–14); in the world of flagrantly sinning fellow-Christians, with confrontation and, if necessary, discipline and even excommunication (vv. 15–20); and finally, in the world of Christians who are sorry for their sins, with forgiveness and patience (vv. 21–35).” (p. 246).

⁶⁶⁹ Chart based on David J. Clark (2019) *Analyzing and Translating New Testament Discourse*. Dallas, TX: Fontes Press (p. 67).

The setting in chapter 17 singling out Peter leads into the first question, posed by the disciples: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Peter increasingly is appearing as the spokesperson for the Apostles. The second question comes from Peter himself and grows out of the second part of the answer to the first question dealing with the brother or sister who sins and is confronted by the community: “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” Following the completion of his discourse, we have the indication of Jesus leaving Galilee for the region of Judea beyond the Jordan followed by large crowds and more healing there. This marks the end of his ministry in Galilee.

This fourth discourse arises as a corrective to the disciples’ grief and lack of understanding concerning the coming suffering and death of Jesus and its implications for discipleship (17:22-23). The notion that Jesus is God’s Son and they were also God’s sons exempted them from the required Temple tax comes just before this teaching. There are privileges in being part of the kingdom of heaven. Are they like the kings of the earth (17:25)? It’s in “that hour” that this question about rank and privilege among the disciples appears. Greatness will be defined as taking up the position of a child.

(1) Greatness in the Kingdom of heaven (18:1-20)

The first question is rooted in Jesus’ own teaching that there are distinctions in the kingdom (the least and the great in the kingdom, 5:19). He has now singled out three of the disciples for the Transfiguration event and more particularly Peter (14:28-29; 15:15; 16:16-18, 22-23; 17:4, 24-27). In an honor-oriented culture, it is little wonder it sets off this sort of squabble among those closest to Jesus. Given the recent events, this question bubbles up in the community of his disciples.⁶⁷⁰ While their focus is on ranking, Jesus focuses on the qualities disciples are to display.

(a) The child as paradigm of kingdom status (18:1-5)

This begins a section on the nature of life within the community of faith, within the congregation. Jesus does not seem to answer the question directly. Rather than outline the hierarchy in the kingdom of God, he seems to say: more important is the basic issue of getting into the kingdom. Once in, the beginning is the continuation.

So, he begins with the front door, the only door through which one may enter: the door of humility. Just as the Sermon on the Mount begins with the poor in spirit, the meek and humble, this recapitulates the same logic.⁶⁷¹ Only those who are willing to position themselves as children do, as unpretentiously, uninvolved with the advancement of one’s image and ego-interests,

⁶⁷⁰ Note ἄρα (“then”): it indicates the result to be inferred from what has preceded it (at least 17:24-27). Osborne, *Matthew*: “The question is in essence: ‘Who is the top disciple?’ In the prior events Peter seems to be singled out, to serve as the spokesperson for Jesus, even to have pay the Temple tax for just himself and Jesus. It raises questions about rank and honor that were common in the larger society. While the question is posed in general terms, the preoccupation of the disciples with their own greatness is noted in 17:19; 20:20–21. It is clear that they are not so much interested in the qualities that lead to greatness or the kingdom realities behind such greatness. Their question, ‘Who then is the ‘greatest’ [the comparative μέζων for the superlative]?’ shows their primary interest is in status, power, and authority—in particular, their own future power position (as will be demonstrated in 20:20–21).” (p. 668).

⁶⁷¹ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: “Much as the evangelist earlier began the Sermon on the Mount with his ethically reformulated beatitudes, he begins his fourth discourse with a basic demand of the Christian life that involves a completely new standard of judgment.” (pp. 429–430).

unsensitive to the spotlight and puffery of one's fellows, untroubled by the honoring of others—only such can enter the Kingdom of heaven. The selfish desire to be prominent blinds and blasts religious striving as surely as it distorts and destroys political life.

“The instruction to ‘become like children’ is thus not about adopting some supposed ethical characteristic of children in general (innocence, humility, receptiveness, trustfulness or the like) but about accepting for oneself a position in the social scale which is like that of children, that is as the lowest in the hierarchy of authority and decision-making, those subject to and dependent on adults.”⁶⁷²

In the culture of the disciples, greatness consisted in wealth, patronage, office, birth, education and power. It is very easy to carry into the fellowship of disciples those cultural lenses used to evaluate people and assess how to treat them. Children were largely excluded from the important public affairs carried out largely by adult males.

In the preceding paragraph Jesus made clear that we are to be compassionate toward outsiders. Though we are authentically freed by the death and resurrection from the definitions of cult and ritual, we are freed in order to love. Love seeks the salvation of those not within the Church. It stretches itself out into self-sacrifice to reach into the religious rigor of others and help them find the door to the Kingdom. The seriousness and salience of this instruction is underlined by the formula: “Truly (amen) I say to you...”⁶⁷³

In this portrait love stoops down to the dwarf-sized reality of a creature before its Creator, a fallen sinner before its Savior, a small child before its heavenly Father. Those impressive to God are not the hyper-scholars whose brains burst with religious or spiritual information; nor the ascetic whose body is riddled with scars and indifferent to pain; nor those rich with good works, even the ultimate work of martyrdom. Love may motivate and do all these things in service of the Kingdom and the outsider. Yet the “saint” placed before our eyes as exemplary is the child with no accomplishments, no pretensions, no position or reputation.

Key words in this discourse are “little child” (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5) and “little ones” (vv. 6, 10, 14).⁶⁷⁴ Jesus is clear: unless our life, our innermost attitudes and motives are transformed by the chemistry of repentance and we take up a position like one of these children, we cannot enter

⁶⁷² France, *Matthew*, (pp. 676-677). The thrust of 18:4 seems to be “whoever humbles him/herself [to be/become] like this child.” It is not suggesting this child is an ethical exemplar of humility. This is not first of all a subjective attitude but an objective state of utter dependence. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*: “The child’s humility is its lack of status, not its actions or feelings of humbleness.” (p. 518).

⁶⁷³ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: “The sentence is quite emphatic, beginning with the solemn introduction ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ‘truly I say to you,’ and ending with the emphatic negative proposition that uses οὐ μὴ plus the aorist subjunctive, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃτε, ‘you will surely not enter.’” (p. 898).

⁶⁷⁴ The term for “child” (παιδίον) covers infancy up to puberty. Children are selected not because they are selfless or innocent or consistently show humility but because they have no status in this society. The problem in the history of interpretation of this text is that all sort of qualities of the child have been read into Jesus’ words, depending upon the interpreter’s culture. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: “The point of comparison between children and the disciples is paraphrased as ταπεινῶω (‘to humble,’ ‘make low’). The first association here for the readers is the smallness of children. Ταπεινός can mean ‘little.’ The primary meaning of the root ταπεινο-, however, is ‘low’ or ‘humble.’ One who is low is insignificant, impotent, weak, and lives in poor circumstances.” (p. 428).

the kingdom. Inwardly and in conduct we are to identify with the child, the small, the powerless, the dependent, the marginal.⁶⁷⁵

There is something fundamentally wrong with a spirituality that dresses up bishops and archbishops magnificently, places them prominently on ornate, throne-like seats in the front of resplendent cathedrals as the paragons and exemplars of faith. Jesus never did such. Jesus never did such. Never! We need to hear that repeatedly. In Jesus' day the child was considered small and weak, as limited to listening to and obeying adults, period. That is the secret to greatness.

This childlikeness is not optional (as though this were a way to deepen what is already an authentic spirituality). This is the only spirituality, the only way to enter the Kingdom of heaven. It is not an add-on or elective course of action ('be childlike but if you can't, at least admire it'). There are great ones in the Church but only because they are made great by Christ himself and their marks are not the normal calculus of earthly success. Humility is a spiritual acid that eats away at the foundation of the cult of saints and super-heroes of the faith.

The logic and life of the kingdom of heaven is very unlike that of earthly kingdoms. There the great ones of earth possess great power, great wealth, great notoriety. It is the king of the hill, the largest and fastest, the survivors in the competition for first place who are celebrated. This is the inversion of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

Yet we often confront power struggles over whose will will dominate the boards of congregations, assemblies and boards. Christian leadership has forgotten servanthip and childship.⁶⁷⁶ The child has no trouble getting down to doing little, minor things—and doing them whole heartedly. The child does not whine or complain that the games they play are too trivial or unimportant to enjoy. The child receives what is given gladly. The child learns readily and makes mistakes without embarrassment. The child does not hunger and thirst over fame. The point of comparison is the situation of the child: low, needy, dependent. Getting in and being greatest is found here.

In the larger picture of the New Testament, we find Jesus as the one who occupies that status. He who was equal with God did not grasp that status but stepped down from heaven to become a man and then to embrace the worst, most humiliating death on the cross. Our own "turning" and embracing the position of the child do so only in conformity with his stepping down from heaven and humbling himself.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁵ Morris, *Matthew*: "In modern Western societies children are often seen as very important, but in first-century Judaism they were not (other, of course, than that a man who had many children was seen as richly blessed; children formed an important indication of divine approval). In the affairs of men children were unimportant. They could not fight, they could not lead, they had not had time to acquire worldly wisdom, they could not pile up riches, they counted for very little." (p. 460).

⁶⁷⁶ Calvin, *Harmony*: "That man is truly humble who neither claims any personal merit in the sight of God, nor proudly despises brethren, or aims at being thought superior to them, but reckons it enough that he is one of the members of Christ, and desires nothing more than that the Head alone should be exalted." (p. 333).

⁶⁷⁷ Barth, *CD Vol. 4/1*: "It is the deity of the true God revealed in the humility of Christ which as such can and must find its confirmation in our own humiliation. But the confirmation is of something which so far as I know Gregory of Nyssa (*Or. Cat.* 24) was the only one of the Church fathers expressly to mention: that the descent to humility which took place in the incarnation of the Word is not only not excluded by the divine nature but signifies its greatest glory: *περιουσία τίς ἐστὶν τῆς δυνάμεως* [it is an abundance of power]." (p. 192)

This word about humbling oneself is not valuable moral advice, a prudent strategy for getting ahead in the Christian world. It is not the counsel of the weak, de-clawing the strong. It is not the infantilizing of person, confirming them in irresponsibility and immaturity. Nor is it a belittling of ourselves ('I'm nothing. I'm insignificant. I'm a worm.' – a sort of one-down-manship). It is a recognizing of our true size and significance before God and stepping into that status. It is recognizing the path Jesus took and taking it ourselves.

This is a life or death matter. Without humbling ourselves there is no entering the Kingdom of God. To pursue greatness is to pursue death. We are asked to turn from the pursuit of prominent greatness and turn toward God's Kingdom. In that world we are truly small (only in the worlds we create do we seem giants). Because we live in that world, we have new eyes, new attitudes, new relationships. Competition and comparison with other disciples go out the window. Because of whom we really are as disciples, we approach others very differently than we have and often do in our dog-eat-dog world. We never look into the eyes of one whom God does not love as much as he loves us. Nor do we encounter another disciple who is beneath us.

Because we take that position, the remainder of the instruction in this discourse makes sense. Having been called to take up a humble position, we are then shown major ways to practice humility. One of the ways we manifest our position as among the humble is how we treat even the most insignificant disciple or how we relate to the brother or sister who sins against us. As Bruner puts it "We become childlike by giving ourselves in warm ways to what is given us in little people and little tasks (cf. Luke 16:10)."⁶⁷⁸ In this way Christ makes "little" people our true cause.

(b) Treatment of "little ones" as an indicator of Kingdom living (18:6-14)

[1] Warning not to be the cause of stumbling (18:6-9)

We have no greater task than to face our own smallness and to offer our warmth, time and energy to the little ones of the earth. In doing so we will find a self-forgetfulness and astonishing possibilities that stare us in the face without our seeing them otherwise. One day Christ will say—"just as you did it to the least of these members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40) When we look into the eyes of a little one, the eyes we see staring back at us are those of Jesus.

We cannot underestimate what it takes for ones such as us to join the "little ones." We are to welcome those who are children and like children in Jesus' name. That seems such an insignificant event, so easy, so simple, so costless. At one level it is just that simple. Children come without the sorts of multi-layered expectations or complex agendas adults often bring. To welcome them is very straightforward.

The problem is not so much in them as inside of us. We are multi-layered in our motives and hooked by a variety of imperatives of our social status and the pressures of our culture. We want things from people. We want recognition for doing deeds of kindness. Extending hospitality to a child means dying to our own larger hopes. Children can do virtually nothing for our adult agendas. Nor can they return "the favor." Expending energy and attention on them seems a waste in the face of limited resources and fierce competition for status and success in our larger world. Even in ecclesiastical worlds, the name of the game is not welcoming little ones but influencing the big ones. But there is an even more difficult reality we must face.

Jesus tells us one of the most terrible things we can face up to: we can serve the cause of sin

⁶⁷⁸ *Churchbook* (p. 211).

while claiming the identity of Christ follower. The “best” we can do is welcoming; the “worst” is putting stumbling blocks in the way of other disciples. What sort of people are we?

We are not to cause the little one to apostatize or stumble in sin. Not even one of these is to be brought low by our words and actions. We are not to be the cause of setting even one insignificant disciple on the path to perdition. By comparison, the summary meaning of our life and discipleship would be better if we were simply to have an enormous grinding stone tied about our neck and we were cast into the deepest part of the sea. That’s not a career path most of us would recommend or embrace!

Whatever we may imagine is the meaning of following Jesus, it does not propel us into a place where we are immune from doing terrible things. Nor is the meaning of our lives bound up with a list of accomplishments that are built on ignoring the effects of our agendas and behavior. We are not in a win-lose game. Rather we are in a nursery for righteousness.

Nor are we to be naive or “prophetic” about this, as though the mother of all sin and stumbling is the Christian Church. Sin and stumbling will continue to happen within the fellowship of Christ followers, but the world is even more invariably a source for such stumbling blocks. Christ’s coming and our entrance into the Kingdom of God does not renovate us or the world so thoroughly that sin vanishes. Occasions for stumbling are inevitable given the sort of world we occupy and the sort of people we and our neighbors are. Nonetheless, this inevitability does not lift responsibility from the one through whom such occasion comes. We are not excused because of the world surrounding and pressuring us nor because of our inner brokenness and confusion. Jesus’ “woe” is both a lament for this situation and a warning about its results.

What then are we to do? Where do we seek remedy for our terrible responsibility and the tragic inevitability? If we cannot pretend, we are invulnerable, even as dedicated disciples, we must climb back into the position of the dependent. God must help us. Jesus tells us how that help comes.

We are to act with decisive and deadly intent against any aspects of ourselves that bring sin and hurt our own faith. We are to start the process of dealing with sin first in our own self. The world-condemning prophet who singles out the sin of others may discover the specks in the eye of others while neglecting the log in his or her own. If we can cause others to stumble, there are parts of our very selves that can haul us entire into the eternal fire of hell. This is similar to what we already heard in the Sermon on the Mount:

“The hard sayings about cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye are connected in the Sermon on the Mount with adultery and sexual lust (5:28–30). Here the same images are applied to sins of leadership: lust for power and rank and position, the tendency to treat little ones like second class citizens, sweeping them into the corner, acting as though they were members of the community only by the grace of the leaders.”⁶⁷⁹

There is a starkness in these words that is chilling. The danger is not simply the termination of our physical lives (as by a millstone and watery depths). It is the danger of eternal death. We are at least responsible for our own responses. We can recover from the stumbling blocks others put in our ways. We can step around them, remove them, pick ourselves up after tripping. The occasion for them is external. Hands, feet and eyes are not external to us. There are ever present

⁶⁷⁹Smith, *Matthew*, p. 219.

helps in times of need (or ever-present occasions for stumbling). We cannot simply run in another direction (as Joseph did when enticed by Potiphar's wife). To deal with them requires a very different procedure. Jesus recommends amputation.

Perhaps we get a small window on the invalidity of an argument: what is natural is good by being "natural." So much ethical discourse appeals to the vividly experienced sense that something feels good, corresponding to the "way I am." We are faced with the spectacle of Christian divorce justified largely claiming that self-fulfillment was not possible with a given partner. We find Christian gays and lesbians affirming their sexual inclinations and practices on the basis that "God made me this way." It's in the genes. Or it's in the socialization. Wherever something came from, once it is in there, programmed so deeply that it springs from within as though from a vital spring, it is good. It is a God-created good by virtue of being "natural."

Jesus picks on some of the most "natural" of things—hands, feet, eyes. None of us would dispute the normality or naturalness of these physical facets of our bodies. When healthy, they are virtually indispensable instruments for accomplishing human tasks. They were created as part of the essential tools for imaging God, for tending the garden, for orienting us and enabling us to be body-selves in a physical world. How can it be that God now says, "Kill them?" Why should we not welcome these little limbs of our very selves? What sort of lunatic would tell us to chop them off, pluck them out, throw them away? We are not even left with the option of "healing" by reattaching them later on!

The point is contained in graphic imagery which some have taken literally. Some have felt the only way to deal with a sinning habit was to amputate the physical limb that implements sinful desires. If we take Jesus in this fashion, we shall be a church completely filled with the lame and blind. The point is not so much the literal or physical as several related things:

1. The most natural and normal aspects of our created being can become the occasions that lead us away from God and into sin. Conversion begins the process of remaking us into new creatures. Part of that renovation may confront things so ingrained, so distorted that accounts can only be settled by a decisive death-dealing blow to them. Anyone who has attempted to break a deeply rooted habit knows it is almost as hard as cutting off a finger or a hand.

2. Jesus does not mean this list to be the typical parts of our body-selves that are the trouble-makers. They are only focal instances that lead us to look more carefully at what it is in us that brings our imperious demands for honor and status, that leads us to treat people as insignificant, that causes us to ally ourselves with money and murder. Our hand lifted to kill, our foot rushing to places of sin, the eye's glance that inflames our inner desires—these are trouble makers. But they are servants of something deeper—the inner drives and longings that they serve. It is significant that Jesus does not single out body-parts that have been most despised by Christian ascetics. This is not a spiritual formulation recommending asceticism.

"And the habits and attitudes that Jesus has in his sights in this passage are as hard as any. Cutting off the 'hand' that refuses to give to the poor; cutting off the 'foot' that refuses to walk to the soup kitchen to help out; and, in particular, plucking out the 'eye' that refuses to notice the weak, the vulnerable, the helpless all around us, in our cities, on our streets, in our wider world: all these pose a challenge every bit as severe today as the day Jesus first

issued it.”⁶⁸⁰

3. Jesus is not a romantic. The danger in not dealing decisively with these matters is hell-fire, not frustration or neurosis. His portrait of eternal fire is not his own “occasion of stumbling.” He does not have a hyper-active religious imagination or sublimated anger. He sets before us the stakes of reality. This is the most loving thing we can do for people like us, trapped within our own inner distortions. It is the height of unlove not to tell people the real and permanent consequences of continued action, especially if it threatens the highest and the best. It is unloving to tell people that choices and habits have no effects on our eternal destiny. The God-is-love-so-everyone-is-saved line is an example of causing little ones to stumble. It lulls them into eternal sleep.

What we face in Jesus is a person who embodies and describes the structure of the world according to the God who made it all. The fact that we find our very selves in absolute contradiction with elements of that model can mean the model is wrong or we are wrong. Jesus warns us not to play the eternal fool. Even our hand, foot and eye can be eternally wrong. We are asked to trust his Word more than the ways that seem “natural” to our bodily-selves. The contradiction we experience is a clue as to the degree to which sin is rooted in us and the death-struggle we find ourselves in that engages this cosmos. In the very history of our body parts we find inscribed a parable of the terrible pain repentance exacts in us.

Elsewhere Jesus describes it in terms of the death of all we are and have: crucifixion. Paul says we are to yield up every part of our body-selves, not just hands, feet and eyes. Jesus claims everything. In Chapter 5 we have a similar exhortation, dealing with the issue of lust (“cut off the right hand; pluck out the right eye”). In this case the strong desire is pride, honor, prominence, recognition and the discounting of “little ones.” More broadly, whatever in our attitudes or actions are occasions that mislead these little ones astray. These too need the same draconian treatment as lust if we are to be followers of Jesus. All are treated as a deadly spiritual gangrene that has to be excised, even at the pain inflicted with such cutting, or death comes.⁶⁸¹

There is a heavenly connection between the little ones and God. Their angels behold the face of God continually. They have very significant connections! These are those considered “insignificant” within the Christian movement, those who have been part of the flock of believers but who now wander away for some reason, perhaps scandalized by something we or others have done or said.

We are to welcome even such little ones and not put additional stumbling blocks in their path. We are not to despise them. The progression and connection in all this are not immediately obvious. The greatest one in the Kingdom of God is Jesus himself. Yet welcoming the least among his followers is equivalent to the act of extending hospitality to Jesus. We are not to be preoccupied with honor and status rankings—most of all not with our own positioning. Our concern should be with the reality that Jesus is the criterion of greatness in the Kingdom.

For this reason, we are not to underestimate the importance of these little ones. Causing them

⁶⁸⁰ Wright, *Matthew*, part 2, pp. 31-32.

⁶⁸¹ Alfred Plummer (1910) *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons) “We sacrifice even the most valuable of our limbs, in order to avoid the death of the body by incurable disease. We ought to be ready to sacrifice things of still greater value, in order to avoid the death of the soul in ‘the eternal fire.’” (p. 250).

to stumble in sin is an extraordinarily deadly offense. If this is what is happening, it is a flashing red light and loud siren telling us something is fundamentally wrong with our discipleship, regardless of how “orthodox” we may be. Realism indicates that the world we are in and the way we are in that world means stumbling occasions will occur. We are to be sure we are not the agents who produce these sorts of spiritual landmines. In fact, discipleship means the merciless putting to death of those parts of our bodily self that cause us (or others) to fall into sin. Sin is so serious that its flourishing in us produces hellish results. It will do no good to say:

“Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matthew 7:22-23)

[2] Restoring the straying little one (18:10-14)⁶⁸²

Say we now have our own matters and responsibilities straight. We are hospitable to little ones. We no longer live by a calculus that dismisses or downgrades the socially unattractive or “strategically” unimportant. We have taken our position as a “little one,” having learned that is indeed who we are. We are careful not to do things that lead them into sin. We are well on our way toward offering all our bodily members as living sacrifices. Whatever responds to a world of temptation and draws us forward in sin is consistently repudiated. We can look down on those in the fellowship whose errant ways and thought are not so effectively or evidently in place. We can be contemptuous toward those who go astray. We did not push them down that path. We have removed ourselves from such paths.

There is the possibility of a new circle of “greatness”: those who see themselves as Christ-followers in these very matters. The old hierarchy was a ladder of the strong and competent. The new is the inverted pyramid of the humble and self-despisers.⁶⁸³ We can become mirror images of the very thing Jesus is undermining. The revulsion of the right-doers can be as astringent as the disgust of the spiritual super-stars. In either case the little ones are lost in the shuffle.

We are not told why or how these little ones might have gone astray. The very fact that the sheep is missing is the paramount reality. The concern of the shepherd for this one who no longer is safe is the paramount motivation. The concrete action is that of leaving the ninety and nine to rescue the missing. There is no guarantee that the quest will succeed. But if and when it does, there is high celebration. The will of God is that not one of the little ones might be lost. Their going astray puts them in danger. The will of the Father in heaven can be thwarted and resisted. There is no guarantee in this picture of inevitable success.

⁶⁸²Note that 18:11 is not found in most modern translations: “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.” See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*: “There can be little doubt that the words ἦλθεν γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (ζητήσαι καὶ) σῶσαι τὸ ἀπολωλός are spurious here, being absent from the earliest witnesses representing several textual types (Alexandrian, Egyptian, Antiochian), and manifestly borrowed by copyists from Lk 19:10.”

⁶⁸³Bruner, *Churchbook*: “Their insignificance is due in part to their spiritual indifference. (These weak Christians almost exactly resemble the first three soils in the Parable of the Sower, 13:4–7, 13–15, 18–22.) The temptation for the spiritually serious is to look down on half-hearted or ‘nominal’ Christians to whom Jesus Christ seems to mean too little. Fourth-soil Christians find it hard to like the three less serious soils because they rightly despise unseriousness in themselves. But, surprisingly, Jesus asks us to learn the hard art of not hating in others what we hate in ourselves.” (p. 217).

How valuable are these little ones? They have angels who represent them or acknowledge them before the very court of heaven. They have a heavenly Father whose will we need not guess or speculate about. God wants these straying ones found and restored to the flock. Is it wrong to be concerned with the ninety and nine? Not at all. But not at the expense of the missing little one. If the community turns its prayer network on in the face of the threatened loss of a “great one” but not in the face of the straying of a little one, one wonders about the authenticity of its commitments.

Christian organizations under the conditions of the market place have become infected with the push and pull of courting the “great ones.” Fund raising and friend making are important activities for any of us who survive in marginally funded institutions. Yet there is real danger in being cynical and callous when it comes to the little ones. We spend lots of money and effort to track with the affluent and powerful. Our alumni and former ministry partners drop off the spiritual radar scope.

In this context it seems the “shepherd” is the Church.⁶⁸⁴ The next part of this discourse will line out measures to take in dealing with members of the body who have strayed into sin. The seeking and finding, the bringing back and restoring is given as a responsibility of the Church. It is not good enough simply not to cause stumbling. We are commissioned to go after those who, for whatever reason, stray and endanger their eternal destiny. We are not to mistreat, nor are we to neglect; we are not to act contemptuously toward but to respect and care for these little ones.

Fortunately for us the long-term connection and care for these little ones rests with the angels and the heavenly Father. We need not suppose ourselves to be the spiritual center of the world in our hospitality, spiritual harmlessness or self-sacrificial discipleship. The fate of the little ones is not finally in our hands. Yet they are offered to us as compatriots and colleagues in our journey away from hell and toward heaven. We are not to despise them or their gifts, not even when they go astray. Nor are we to be simply indifferent to the sort of straying that might itself be the occasion of stumbling for little ones in the community of faith. Sometimes there is even an occasion for expelling a so-called disciple from the community.

(c) Urgent care in the Community of the King (18:15-20)

Going astray happens not simply because we lay spiritual land mines that blow people off the narrow way. Christian brothers and sisters can go their own way because they have not disciplined the unruly elements of their inner self. They may have found the discipline of extirpating strong desires such as lust and pride too painful. They may spiritually join Peter in his initial repudiating the notion of bearing one’s cross and dying to self.

Christians also sin against each other. This is not simply straying but trespassing. Boundaries are crossed that are serious. It is not contemptuous to point out the reality that a sin has been committed and perhaps even against oneself. Jesus has already taught us to remove the log from

⁶⁸⁴ Snodgrass, *Intent*: “Matthew—regardless of whether Jesus or Matthew applied the parable to disciples—wants his readers to apply the character and desires of God to their relations in the community, especially to those who appear to be marginal.” (p. 109). Turner, *Baker: Matthew*: “In Matthew, Israel’s leaders are not faithful shepherds, and Jesus compassionately rescues the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 9:36; 10:6; 15:24, 32; 26:31). By implication, Jesus’s disciples must model their lives and ministries after the concern of the Father as exemplified in Jesus and expressed by the parable. Jesus calls on his followers to serve one another as he has sacrificially served them (20:27–28). Disciples must receive one another, not cause one another to go astray (18:5–9). (pp. 440–441).

our eye that we might remove the speck from our fellow disciple's eye (Matt. 7:3-5). It is part of the way the good Shepherd brings the straying and sinning back.⁶⁸⁵

This paragraph concerns forgiveness and reconciliation. The major goal is the continuing relationship between Christian brothers and sisters after sin has marred a relationship or the confessing community. This has relations internal to the disciples in view. The counsel of "turning the other cheek" (5:38-42) is about a response to outsiders. This process assumes a strong community of fellowship. It makes clear that the process of forgiveness and reconciliation becomes a community matter only after the issue cannot be settled directly between the parties involved. It elaborates on a ministry of correction that Jesus first treated in the Sermon on the Mount (7:1-6). Reproof and correction are to be done by people who have removed the "log" from their own eye.

We must remember that this instruction in confronting another brother or sister comes after a section on self-confrontation. Those who are concerned with the little ones, who are humble, who sacrifice their own freedom and rights for the sake of others and who act decisively against the offending elements within themselves ought not find themselves in this confrontation with a fellow believer. Yet it does happen. Because they have come through the door of humility, they can approach those who have sinned in order to win them over, not win points over them. But what wisdom and maturity it takes!

On the one side we have to acknowledge that the conditions of Christian maturity are met only rarely in our experience. If all Christians were well practiced and experienced in these earlier matters, it would still be hard to imagine this process. Sins will occur in the body of Christ, even against those who are well along their journey toward maturity and self-discipline, even by such mature members. We might imagine when such events occur, the humility and self-awareness of these Christians would bring self-recrimination—or at least self-recognition when confronted with the nature of the act.

Unfortunately, this is not at all a given of Christian community life. People who claim the name Christian can commit sins that are blatant enough, clear enough, serious enough that they must be confronted.⁶⁸⁶ Urgent care is required since the eternal fate of the sinner and those in his or her circle of influence can be blown out of the path that leads to eternal life.

These words balance the earlier teaching not to judge (7:1-5). Here we learn that there are

⁶⁸⁵There is a significant Greek variant in vs. 15. The best texts read "If a brother or sister sins..." The variant is "If a brother or sister sins *against you*..." Older versions such as the KJV, NAB, NRS leave the disputed phrase in. Most other modern translations leave "against you" out. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*: "It is possible that the words εἰς σέ are an early interpolation into the original text, perhaps derived by copyists from the use of εἰς ἐμέ in ver. 21. On the other hand, it is also possible to regard their omission as either deliberate (in order to render the passage applicable to sin in general) or accidental (for in later Greek the pronunciation of η, η, and εἰ was similar)." p. 36. Abernathy, *Summary 17-28*: "It is included by CC, NTC, PNTC; CEV, ESV, KJV, NCV, NIV, NLT, NRSV, TEV, and is also accepted as original by ICC, Lns, MY, and NAC. It is included in brackets by BECNT and WBC, both of which view it as probably original. It is omitted by BNTC, NICNT, NIGTC; GW, NASB, NET, REB" (p. 40).

⁶⁸⁶The Old Testament commands and models this sort of reproof and correction (Leviticus 19:17b; 2 Sam. 12; Ezek. 33:8). So too the rest of the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:12; Gal. 6:1; James 5:19-20; 1 John 5:16). For a detailed account of the larger societal context for this sort of conflict resolution see: Dennis C. Duling (2012). *A Marginal Scribe: Studies of the Gospel of Matthew in Social-Scientific Perspective*, vol. 7, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books (pp. 212-244).

times when we need to judge, not lightly but in a spirit of gentleness and with the assistance of other fellow disciples and for the good of another fellow disciple. This is not about outsiders but only brothers and sisters in faith.⁶⁸⁷ This sort of confrontation is a form of judging in the service of reconciliation, of caring for both the trespasser and the health of the larger fellowship.

It should also be noted that the person to talk to about the sin is the sinner, not everyone else in the circle of disciples. Gossip is out. The process is first private where clarification can occur and discovery of the true nature of what is going on. Only after a second try with a colleague does this become a matter of public discussion. Gossip is not permitted.

Yet even compassionate and careful nudging toward repentance can fall on deaf ears, even when confronted by the core of committed fellow Christians that serves as one's primary base of fellowship. It is possible that such a person can come to the place of being "disfellowshipped" or excommunicated and treated as a person needing evangelism, not just exhortation. It is astounding that a movement based on the confession and confrontation of sin can wind up with members whose responses show an inability to recognize, confess and be absolved of sin.

Disciples must pursue the straying sheep (18:10–14), but certain very exceptional circumstances demand expulsion of wolves in sheep's clothing who may not wish to leave (18:15–20; cf. 7:15–23).⁶⁸⁸

This practice is only one form of confession and community discipline. There are the instances where people come to us to confess sins. Some of these are not against us. They are simply sins for which they wish a human voice and companionship to validate and articulate the voice of divine grace. As real and powerful are the assurances of the grace of God, we often need a human face and voice in order to ground our sense of the reality of the divine attitude and action toward us. Hearing another pray with us and for us is part of the larger process of stripping ourselves of our sin and walking in the truth.

Others are sins for which they are seeking our forgiving voice beyond that of the voice of God. They have done something that is wrong against us and the relationship we share. They know someone has something against them because of something they have said or done. They come seeking to set things right that they might properly bring their sacrifices of praise to God. They need that voice of forgiveness from the one they have injured as an expression that the human relationship is rectified.

We must admit that in many cases this process of confessing our sins to one another does not happen in Church circles. If it happens, it is normally in small circles of long-established friendship. There the levels of trust and intimacy are deep enough that people feel safe and secure. They are willing to speak frankly and seek to narrate their lives (and have others help them re-narrate their stories). We need brothers and sisters to aid us in the process. Yet we often find people unwilling to confess their sins in the presence of other believers. They have seen enough of what happens. Instead of reconciling grace what people find is judgment without grace. So, they confess sin to God and leave it at that.

This is not enough for Jesus. It is not enough for the sort of community he seeks. It is not enough for what our sins do to ourselves and others. What is in view in Matthew is something beyond others coming to us. Because of the difficulties in the manuscript tradition it is not clear

⁶⁸⁷ The Greek word for church (ἐκκλησία) occurs only here (18:17) and in 16:18 in the Gospels.

⁶⁸⁸ Keener, *Matthew* (pp. 452–453).

whether this has in view someone who has sinned against me or simply is sinning. In either case we are asked to go to the brother or sister in private and challenge the sinning. The purpose of this initiative is “gaining” a fellow Christian.

We find this extraordinarily difficult. We are uncomfortable with the deep suspicion that we may be self-righteous, holier-than-thou trouble makers whose logs of sin are still embedded in our eyes. We are not comfortable “making a scene.” We are uncomfortable with the reality that we are not so strongly related to the person that we have the relational leverage of social “capital” necessary to inflict pain and assume our ties will remain strong. Our treasured individualism has left us too weakly tied to one another to allow the sort of confrontation and dialogue about sin in our lives that is necessary for restoration.

Confronting a sinning Christian is not to be undertaken lightly or self-confidently. Yet it is to be undertaken. It is commanded by Christ himself. It must be done in a spirit of gentleness, by those who are “spiritual” (as Paul puts it in Galatians 6:1). It is not a process we can avoid. Otherwise, we allow people no longer to walk in the truth.

Neither is this an exercise in loveless judging. It may be experienced by people as such an event, especially in a community which has not done this sort of thing for many years. Expectations about appropriate behavior tend to assimilate to actual practices. Over time the lack of any significant community building can make such an unacceptable condition appear and feel “normal.” What is abnormal is a faith community without confession or discipline. What is loveless is leaving people alone in their sins by doing nothing.

1. It must be a matter of sin, not some peccadillo or abrasive personality habit or style.

2. It is aimed at fellow Christians. May we say within that, it is aimed at Christians we are close enough with to call brother or sister (and mean it)? This is not permission to take potshots at the more general public and their bad behavior. Outsiders are outside the boundaries of this process—and if it does not elicit repentance from the fellow Christian, they become outsiders. This also does not give us permission to correct any and every Christian we see in sin. There are those with whom we have no relationship other than knowledge of a common profession of faith. This is to be done within a circle of committed and mutually known Christians.

3. Its manner must be such that it has the hope of “winning” back the sinner. This must be loving, gentle, thoughtful action. Confrontation does not give permission for any and every sort of action that seeks to bring the sinfulness of the sinner before his or her eyes.

Several other qualifications help giving us a focus on the sort of transaction that Jesus has in mind. With those who are outsiders, we are to bear the burden of some of their sins (giving our inner garment along with our outer; turning the other cheek; loaning money without realistic expectation of return). We bless those who curse us. We pray for those who persecute us. This is not blanket permission to seek restitution and rectification wherever and whomever wrongs us.

There are some delicate balances to be observed. The parable of the weeds indicates that the children of the Kingdom and of the devil will coexist in this world. We are not a community with a mission to produce the purified Kingdom on earth. Jesus speaks tolerance in Matthew 13 and discipline in Matthew 18. It is clear there is a zeal for purification that can violate boundaries of

our limits on earth—and a tolerance that never binds and looses anything on earth.⁶⁸⁹

Jesus is not simply giving us permission but responsibility. This is not an option but a command. It is true that some confrontation is more sinful than the sin confronted. Yet such considerations cannot lead to passivity. There is an initiative to be taken. There is an internal Church “evangelism” to be done that is important for preserving the nature of the truth and authenticity of the believing community. It is an insider who is to be kept from or brought back from straying. We are to go, not wait for the person to come to his or her senses. But not to go as the “big” ones to the “little” ones who have caused a lot of trouble for us and others and need to be put in their place.

There are blatant sins of false teaching and moral lapses that are serious enough to require checking by the community. The Ten Commandments set significant boundaries. We cannot simply dismiss this sort of Christian action as impossible given the fact that we are all sinners. Matthew’s concern is with blatant, persistent violations of the core elements that structure Christian identity.

Nor does he allow this to remain at the private level when there is little or no response of the person in question. If there is to be a distancing of the offender, it must be the judgment of the corporate body that this is the appropriate action. It begins at the private level, allowing room for explanation and exploration of perceptions (which may well be wrong or distorted). It stays at the private if it becomes clear there is no serious lapse or there is repentance. It begins at the private, not at the corporate (though we can imagine in our day that much begins corporately simply because of the lack of structures and relationships that exist at the private).

Augustine writes well on this:

“So then you must neither be on the side of bad people and approve of them, nor be unconcerned about them and fail to take them to task, nor be arrogant toward them and take them to task in an offensive manner.”⁶⁹⁰

What feels unbelievable to moderns is the following comments on binding and loosing. In Matthew 16 we have the promise of the keys of the Kingdom given to Peter. The disciples receive a similar power in this promise. The pretension of the Church is often found in this claim. In preaching it calls people to the salvation in Jesus Christ as the place where forgiveness and release of guilt may be found. This teaching is skewered as intolerant by moderns. In discipline the community confronts its own members and demands moral uprightness from them. In this, moderns also claim to find intolerance. But it is an essential task of every community: to insure

⁶⁸⁹ Bruner, *Churchbook*: “Jesus is Lord, and so the faithful church will practice the discipline of her Lord, but prayerfully and carefully in order to avoid giving unnecessary offense to the accused, to the church, to the world, or to God’s name. In the final analysis, the undisciplining church not only disobeys her master—she has less impact on her community. When she seeks conversations with members who flaunt God’s commands, she shows her conscientiousness....When the church *disciplines* Christians she will more effectively *disciple* non-Christians. A disciplining church will prove more loving in the long run than a church that advertises God’s love but then shows no great interest in whether this love is practiced by her members.” (218-229); Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. II*: “In 7:1–6, the message is this: Your brother or sister is precious to you, as precious as a holy thing or as a pearl! Care for him! Do not cast him out! In 13:24–30, 36–43, the message is this: The wheat is too valuable, and Jesus does not want his disciples to attempt to purge the field now.” (p. 927).

⁶⁹⁰ *The Works of Saint Augustine, Sermons, Vol. III/3 (51-94)* (New City Press, 1991) p. 432.

its integrity. This apostolic approach, John Howard Yoder argues:

“...gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individual than does liberal humanism, makes moral standards more binding than did Puritanism, and is more open to the new situation that was what some called ‘the new morality’ a quarter century ago. If practiced, it would radically restructure the life of churches.”⁶⁹¹

This great divide runs down the heart of some so-called Christian denominations. Christian identity means believing at least a few specific intellectual truth claims. Christianity is not simply a set of value-commitments to the transcendent that are more a sensibility and a mood than articulate rational claims. There is an angularity and exclusiveness to those claims, calling people into a change of mind and a change of direction. These are claims that derive from a world view and a narrative story about the universe. We preach Christ as the Lord and Savior of the sinful, rebellious creation. Yet there are so-called Christians who challenge the uniqueness of Christ, the lostness of creation, the reality of sin or guilt before a loving and holy God.

The same divide now appears on basic ethical and moral issues. Christian identity has always entailed a patterned discipline to life before its Creator and within human community. Sexuality has been expanded by some bishops to urge “Christian” acceptance of forms of premarital sexual relations, extramarital affairs and same-sex practices. Those who follow this line label the so-called traditionalists on these matters as heterosexuals, patriarchal oppressors, and homophobic gay bashers. The names fly from the mouths of fellow Christians as though the morality of the Bible were outmoded because of vividly experienced bodily drives and practices clearly and repeatedly placed in the category of evil and sin by the Hebrew and Greek scriptures.

Jesus still confers upon the faith community the ability to ratify a finding of guilt or a remission of sin in the case of individuals who at one time were a part of the Christian followership. That they now refuse to practice Christ-following on clear and fundamental matters cannot lead to indifference or indolence. Christ himself stands with even the two or three who walk through this process in his name to do this difficult deed. Done as wisely as serpents and innocently as doves in the name and for the sake of kingdom righteousness, such discipline is an essential part of a faith community’s life.

The important qualification is that such confrontation, such binding and loosing is done in the power and for the sake of Jesus Christ. This is something that is permissible and possible only within the enabling power of the Holy Spirit by those who are themselves living in the Spirit. This is not something new. It is already implicit in Jesus’ words against censorious Christians (“judge not”) and against a coercive community (parable of the weeds). The Church is not to be censorious or coercive, but it is to confront and discipline those professed Christ-followers who sin blatantly. In forgiving repentant sinners in the community, it does not humiliate them by requiring signs and satisfactions that subjects them to scorn.

Not exercising discipline with Priests abusing children was a bad choice of some Catholic bishops. Not taking seriously the sexual misconduct of evangelists and pastors in Protestant churches has been an equally egregious abuse. There are times and places where the task of

⁶⁹¹John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Herald Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

restoring the wandering lost is a ministry as important as evangelizing the unrepentant lost.⁶⁹²

What is striking is the keys that loose and bind are given not just to Peter (or his supposed successors), and not just to the Church community (or its ordained leadership), but to the small group of disciples in prayer. Where ten men were required to form a synagogue, only two or three are required for Jesus to be right in the middle of them without respect to gender, race or status. What they ask in agreement will be done for them by the Father in heaven.

This is limited in its application. It has to be a Christ-centered small group, neither censorious in its prayers for others, or coercively excluding “little ones.” It is the conscientious group of disciples who are living out the Sermon on the Mount and praying in the Spirit of Jesus. These are those who authentically are gathered in Jesus’ name, not some other name or agenda. If Jesus is not in their midst, it is not the sort of small group Jesus describes that looses and binds.

In summary, we can only say this process is not given as a legal or rigid pattern. Its aim is that of resolving conflicts and wrong-doing through confrontation (18:15), negotiation (18:16) and adjudication (18:17). The variety of situations where this is called for means how this plays out needs to be done in the spirit of seeking the good of the trespasser as well as the health and well-being of the community. Davies expresses it clearly:

“18:15–20 tackles a very difficult subject. Reproving one’s brother is always a most delicate matter, and one must undertake the sad task in a spirit of love and humility. One can make the case that the three paragraphs before vv. 15–20 and the two that follow serve as buffers of a sort; that is, they emphasize the qualities which are required if one is going to be so bold as to carry out the directions of 18:15–20. Before talking about reproof Jesus goes on at length about humility (vv. 1–5), about not offending others (vv. 6–9), and about God’s love for those who have gone astray (vv. 10–14). And as soon as he finishes the subject of disciplinary measures he turns to reconciliation and forgiveness. The effect is to strike a balance. Just as, in 7:1–6, the evangelist joins a logion about discernment to injunctions prohibiting judging and condemning others (7:1–5), so in chapter 18 he surrounds the material on fraternal correction with short, the way in which Matthew encircles vv. 15–20 is proof of his deep pastoral concern.”⁶⁹³

(2) Infinite forgiveness and the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:21–35)

The goal of any discipline of those who have sinned in the community is reconciliation. The community seeks to retain the life and gifts of the person who sins by the process of confrontation and seeking repentance. Taken alone, the provisions of 18:15–20 could be carried out in a statistical and rigid manner. Its hard teaching could be hardened into an absolutism and harshness

⁶⁹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2013) *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, vol. 14, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press: “For the sake of the sacred, for the sake of sinners, and for the sake of the church-community, the sacred should be protected against being given away cheaply. Such protection of the gospel is found in the sermon calling for repentance, which calls sin sin and pronounces the sinner guilty. Protection of the key to loose is found in the key to bind. Only within the protection of the penitential sermon can there be a sermon of grace.” (p. 828).

⁶⁹³ Davies, *Matthew Vol. II*. (p. 751).

that did more damage than the original sin. The heart of the sinner against must not be hardened in this process. To be sure, if the sinner does not repent, the steps listed above are in place to bring about the unsought, unwanted, tragic result of exclusion after repeated attempts to elicit repentance.

Peter's question about how many times forgiveness is to be extended seeks boundaries on this process. Are there not limits within which one concludes the repentance of the other is phony or ineffective? How many times must one go to a brother or sister and confront? How many times must one release the other from the guilt and amends due in response to the injury incurred in response to professed repentance?⁶⁹⁴

Jesus' parable and lesson underscore the unlimited nature of God's forgiveness as well as its sheer graciousness.⁶⁹⁵ The impossibly indebted servant asks for patience and a rescheduled repayment timetable. Instead, he is given a complete release from the debt by the King. There is no limit on forgiveness. It is not something that calculates the amount of pain and injury that is being erased. It does not calculate whether the person forgiving can "afford" to forgo vengeance or reparation. Forgiveness in response to repentance cannot be placed on a scale of reasonableness. Its quality control comparison, its benchmark is the gracious forgiveness of a King who releases a servant from a debt so large it can hardly be imagined.

The question that faces Peter is what sort of forgiveness he will extend, given the fact that he is that forgiven servant of the King. He is placed in the position of just such a person, asking the King how many times he ought to forgive those to whom he is creditor, those who cannot repay but seek exactly from him that he sought from the King. Peter is repositioned. He comes with the vision of himself as a magnanimous forgiver with seven-fold patience that extends mercy. He is given a new picture of himself as one who has been forgiven an impossible debt.

The second and third panels of the parable rewrite the question of Peter. The real situation is not the abstract question of how many times to forgive one who offends and repents. The real situation is that we are forgiven sinners. We live between the gracious forgiveness and the final judgment of God. The responsibility of forgiveness faces us. We cannot win the forgiveness of God, but we may lose it by refusing to share it with the humans who are nearest to us. The past is wiped away. There is no question as to the quality of that era of our life. It is an era of grace and mercy, the freedom of unlimited forgiveness. There is question as to what the quality of our present and future will be. Is it marked also by grace and mercy, the freedom of unlimited forgiveness? Will it be?

The contrast in the story is meant to drive home the latent absurdity in Peter's question. The debt owed to the servant is minuscule by comparison to what the servant owed the King. To be sure it is not trivial (representing about three month's daily wages for an average day laborer). A quarter of a person's annual salary is not insignificant. But neither is it an unimaginable and insurmountable debt. It is quite manageable from a human standpoint. There is little reason we

⁶⁹⁴ Repentance is assumed (directly state in Luke 17:4) in the words that the sinner "listens" (18:15-17). The number Peter uses is reminiscent of Lamech's seventy-seven times being avenged (Gen. 4:24).

⁶⁹⁵ One question is the relation between 18:21-22 and the parable: "The parable *is not, and was not intended to be*, an illustration of 18:21-22. In keeping with Matthew's use, *dia touto* ('because of this') in v. 23 indicates a connection rather than an example or proof. This is the case in seven of the ten times he uses the phrase. It picks up only part of the subject of forgiveness, the necessity to forgive." Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 67).

cannot imagine this debtor living more simply, exercising more rigorous self-discipline and creating the sum for repayment.

But the servant will have none of it. He even begins to throttle the debtor and pours out contemptuous threats because he does not have the sum ready. The fellow servants of the King view this and are deeply saddened (not angered). They are in tune with the King's heart of mercy and free grace. They sense the plight of this debtor and his identical plea to his creditor. In response to their complaint the King executes judgment. He brings his once-forgiven debtor before his throne and reinstates the debt, this time showing no mercy.

Peter is being asked to see himself in this story. The mark of unreal discipleship, of inauthentic understanding of Jesus' teaching about discipline, repentance, forgiveness, is a faith community that cuts off either mercy or judgment. We see this one-sidedness repeatedly: communities in which forgiveness and mercy eradicate any sort of discipline and confrontation;⁶⁹⁶ alternatively, communities that are judgmental, harsh, unforgiving, highly bounded without compassion. There is a self-righteousness of the left and the right. The left congratulates itself on not being fundamentalist legalists. They can't imagine a final judgment by a loving God. The right congratulates itself on not being liberal relativists. They can't imagine a love that welcomes the prodigal and forgives unimaginable sin. Both are alien to God.

“This text is a clear example of the tension between two or more truths that are always present in Christian theology. The community cannot tolerate sin without confrontation and reproof, but must always love and forgive without limits. Deciding what should be done is always a matter of wisdom. Sin has disastrous and eternal consequences, confrontation and discipline are necessary, and excommunication from the community is a real possibility. At the same time, God searches out those who stray and wills that none be lost, and the community can lay no bounds to its forgiveness or forget that its forgiveness is modeled on God's forgiveness of its members' own much larger debt.”⁶⁹⁷

What about eternal security? What about the doctrine of purgatory? Does not this parable give us grounds to deny the one and affirm the other? Does this not even open the possibility of universalism? After all the vicious servant is handed over to the torturers until the debt is repaid. If it is repaid at some point, then the servant will be set back into freedom again in the future.

The debt is of such a sum that it would be virtually impossible to pay, especially if one is imprisoned. One would have to be a king in the first place to have the resources to repay such a loan, or so it would seem. The unreality in the story is that the king would risk the immense amount in the first place, or that the debtor thought something might make it possible to repay.

⁶⁹⁶ Luther, *Works Vol. 4*: “The antinomians will obscure this doctrine, and they will stress grace so much that they will blot it out and bring people under the wrath of God, because they will make people altogether unconcerned about God's wrath and judgment, as though no sin remained and no fear of death and hell.” (pp. 241–242).

⁶⁹⁷ Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 74). Note Augustine's comment, *Works III/3*: “What after all could be more considerate than the doctor bringing his scalpel? The patient due to be cut open cries—and is cut open, cries at the prospect of cauterization—and is cauterized. That's not cruelty. God forbid we should charge the doctor with ferocity. He's ferocious against the wound, in order to cure the person, because if the wound is just fondled, the person's finished.” (p. 386). This is an antidote to cheap grace.

But the point is not in the details, but in the drama of the immense gulf between being forgiven an infinite debt and not forgiving a small debt. The story teaches that there is a responsibility that comes with the gift of forgiveness.

The punishment portrayed is not the purgatory of pain, polishing up the hard-hearted forgiven sinner as though salvation were a twostep process. First, we are forgiven our great offences against God. Then we are put through a finishing school to bring us to the perfection that this life of discipleship did not manage to complete. In this case the debtor has admission papers to heaven but must take a few more preparatory classes before being allowed to matriculate. The hard-hearted forgiven debtor who refuses to release what is owed to him must now learn to do so.

When we read the story, the point is not pounding on this cad until he says, “Ok, I forgive the debt!” It does not have to do with remedial lessons. The punishment is a revocation of the original forgiveness. It is the ultimate demand that what is owed the King be rendered in full. The original debt is reinstated.

In this matter of “eternal security” (once saved, always saved) there is a delicate balance. We can stress security so much that grace comes to justify wickedness. Or we can stress responsibility so much that we know only internal insecurity, not the peace of security God offers. Matthew repeatedly ties the forgiveness of God together with our forgiveness of fellow humans. What we must say is that God offers a real, permanent forgiveness and demands that we exhibit the same mercy toward those who sin against us. “Disciples walk the narrow path (7:14) between a too-secure smugness on the one side and a too-insecure fearfulness on the other.”⁶⁹⁸ An unwillingness to extend mercy is proof that one has not received God’s mercy in forgiveness.

However strong sin is, forgiveness is stronger. God’s love never runs out on us, but we can run so far away we no longer live in it. Nor can we overcome one sin with another. Sometimes sin can be overcome with forgiveness. We cannot say that the person we forgive will experience the release so deeply that their heart becomes a forgiving heart as well. In this parable the goal of forgiveness is not simply reconciliation. It is the creating of a new inner reality. The King could have said that his former debtor’s behavior was something not between them. It was a private matter. Instead, he seizes this heartless man and puts him back into the status quo ante. In this world you can either be King, be like the King or be thrown into punishment. There is no additional option.

❖ Discipleship and the Task of Reproof and Correction

Matthew 18:15-17 outlines the responsibility of disciples to engage in reproof and correction when they see a brother or sister sin. There are two other passages that, on first blush, seem to be in tension with this instruction: Matthew 7:1-5 (judge not) and 13:24-30, 36-43 (don’t pull up the weeds among the wheat). All three have to do with “boundary maintenance” of the community of the King during this age:

“Early followers of Jesus recognized that their community had boundaries, and they dealt with it in different ways. The available texts vary depending on whether it is the church or the leader who acts and whether it is the individual

⁶⁹⁸ Bruner, *Churchbook*, p. 245.

or the church that is seen to benefit from the disciplinary actions taken.”⁶⁹⁹

We have already seen that Matthew 7:1-5 does not banish discernment or assessment of the conduct of our brothers and sisters in the community of faith. In these tensions, what is needed is mature wisdom. Both the imperative of forgiveness and discipline are essential parts of the community of faith. What is banished is the censorious, unmerciful harsh judgment that condemns another. Both our method of assessment and standard of measurement must first be applied to ourselves and only then will we be able to judge righteous judgment. Reproving another and seeking their repentance and restoration is essential to the vitality of the community. Otherwise, the “little ones” will indeed be stumbling right and left due to the bad conduct of the older members of the community.

The parable of the weeds (13:24-30, 36-40) acknowledges that we won’t always get it right. We may decide someone is a “dog” who despises the holy or a “pig” who can’t recognize the most valuable things of the kingdom and not have it right. If we are to exclude someone from the ongoing life of the faith community, it must be for very clear and important reasons – and only after there has been a sensitive process of inclusive judgment that engages the faith community. To uproot someone, banning or excommunicating them from the community, is extraordinarily difficult and dangerous. Yet it must be done.

We see it being done in the early church. It displays neither the censorious zeal nor the coercive community. It draws a boundary and excludes a few. Not often, but clearly decisively – and at times a congregation of believers had to be exhorted to take up this difficult task rather than avoid this rather messy and challenging process. It requires wisdom and maturity on the part of those involved. No set of rules or procedures apart from wise people works.

The goal of the Sermon on the Mount is the creation of disciples who are well-formed in the image of God, whose love of neighbor and of God is free from the common vices that surround us in everyday life (or the false righteousness of much religious piety). The parables of the Kingdom (Matt. 13) aim at equipping those disciples with the insight and connection to kingdom realities so they can bring out of their storehouse, things new and old (13:52) to meet the situations they will confront. The challenge of dealing with those who say “Lord, Lord” but do not do the will of the Father confronts every community of disciples. What they do about it, how they go about it, what results come from it is a test of their maturity.

Perhaps the counsel that goes with this process is Paul’s word in Galatians 6:1:

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”

There is no time limit put on this process of reproof and correction. Nor is this an invitation to display the sinner and sin before the whole community. This does not justify the Hester Prynne treatment of having to wear a scarlet letter in public (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*). This is to be a “gentle” process, something that is positively “for” another’s spiritual well-being. It is not a punishment or something for the leadership to allow it to display its zeal for righteousness. It is not about protecting the reputation of the community (rather, the restoration of the sinner), enhancing the power and control of the senior leaders, imposing retaliation against someone or an unfair selective application (aimed at women but not men; those

⁶⁹⁹Talbert, *Matthew*, p. 226.

marginal in the community but not the wealthy or powerful).

In our day and age, any “discipline” is usually a lose-lose proposition. Those confronted can always pick up and move to another congregation or denomination. Those engaged in the process of seeking accountability, repentance and restoration are often labelled as hypocritical, self-righteous prigs, guilty of doing significant harm. Because it is rare and, when done, is done very poorly, it tends not to be done at all. Yet there are shining exceptions where discipline is exercised, grace is extended, the body of Christ is purified, the wolf in sheep’s clothing is expelled and the flock protected.

An important question is raised by some “red letter” Christians who see this text of unlimited forgiveness as applying not simply within the Christian fellowship and not simply having to do with the boundary keeping of the Church but in civil society as well. In Leo Tolstoy’s novel, *Resurrection*, his major character, Nekhlyudov, concludes that the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be taken literally as a blue-print for all of society. In reading these words from Matthew about forgiveness he comes to a fundamental conclusion:

“In this way the idea that the only certain means of salvation from the terrible evil from which men were suffering was that they should always acknowledge themselves to be sinning against God, and therefore unable to punish or correct others, because they were dear to Him. It became clear to him that all the dreadful evil he had been witnessing in prisons and jails and the quiet self-satisfaction of the perpetrators of this evil were the consequences of men trying to do what was impossible; trying to correct evil while being evil themselves; vicious men were trying to correct other vicious men, and thought they could do it by using mechanical means, and the only consequence of all this was that the needs and the cupidity of some men induced them to take up this so-called punishment and correction as a profession, and have themselves become utterly corrupt...”⁷⁰⁰

This is the notion that all societal magistrates, courts, policing etc. are contrary to the radical kingdom of heaven and must be rejected by the Christian community. In all spheres of life, disciples must live by this ethic. In the matter of justice, the only stance is full, complete forgiveness. Jesus’ words here have no limits and encompass civil and societal responses. On this account forgiveness and justice are both responses to wrongdoing but are opposites.

The Catholic and Reformed traditions have insisted that governmental authorities cannot “forgive” violations of the positive law but must enforce the penalties due them. The special vocation of the policeman or the judge means they bear the sword and must use it to protect the weak and vulnerable against the vicious and strong (and thereby image the God of justice who protects and cares for the weak and vulnerable). To be sure, they are to carry out their duties fairly, justly, prudently, and faithfully, including opposing governmental corruption and abuse of power that does happen in such contexts.

The problem is not coercion in a fallen world, but its abuse. Forgiveness does not remove the civic consequences that are given in response to some offenses. Even a church treasurer who embezzles money can be forgiven and removed from church responsibilities. A murderer may be

⁷⁰⁰ Tolstoy, Leo. *Resurrection*, Part III chapter 28 (p. 253). Neeland Media LLC. Kindle Edition. Italics added.

forgiven personally by the family of his victim and still insist on justice in the courts and incarceration, even a murderer who has repented. Forgiveness and civic justice are not enemies.

The complexity is that, in our world, forgiveness seems to undermine justice and justice seems to preclude forgiveness. Part of the problem is that our notions of forgiveness and justice are both inadequate to the reality of the issues at stake.

If justice is “giving people their due” then forgiveness seems to subvert that rendering of what is due. When we see forgiveness as “letting the perpetrator” off the hook, not rendering the punishment someone deserves, forgiveness seems to short circuit justice. Yet forgiveness must affirm and acknowledge the severity of the offense, the damage it has done not only to the individual but to the fabric of social life. Without justice forgiveness can become the soil for impunity, where justice breaks down. People are not held accountable or penalized for their wrongful or illegal actions. Victims suffer without any remedy. When justice fails it also tends to feed unforgiveness and the movement of “justice” to revenge and vendetta.

There is an equal seeming opposition in justice with forgiveness. If rendering everyone their due is an ultimate and primary goal, then it trumps mercy and certainly any forgiveness that releases a person from what they are due given their wrongdoing. But does forgiveness need to be sacrificed in favor of justice? Is there no forgiveness unless justice has been rendered? Is forgiveness conditional: without justice, no forgiveness?

One solution has been to distinguish the personal/private from the impersonal/public. Forgiveness is for personal, interpersonal realm; justice is for the public, legal world. Yet this dichotomy between the two seems extremely permeable: wrongs are not merely personal. If wrongs are not purely personal, then a response to them cannot be purely personal. In addition, in the judicial, legal world notions such as mercy, pardon, clemency, amnesty function as analogues to forgiveness. This is a complex and challenging topic about which much has been written. In our world we can see we need large doses of both forgiveness and justice. How they get played out in a way faithful to the gospel and the coming kingdom is important. What is common to both justice and forgiveness is the seeking of the common good. When that good has been harmed, there is an imperative to both forgive and seek justice.⁷⁰¹

“There can be both forgiveness and punishment. Forgiveness itself is an expression and communication of disapproval, indignation, opprobrium, and condemnation on the part of the forgiver or those ‘in whose name’ the forgiveness is offered. Forgiveness is also an affirmation of the dignity of the victim, the wrongdoer, and the community. Forgiveness can also call for the protection of innocents through punishment that disables the wrongdoer so that he can injure no more. The vindication of victims as a purpose of punishment is also not necessarily opposed to forgiveness. Forgiveness would also seek the instruction and discipline of the wrongdoer, if necessary, through punishment, for the good

⁷⁰¹ For more, see: O’Donovan, Oliver (2005) *The Ways of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Volf, Miraslay (1996) *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon; Torrance, Alan J. (2006) *The Theological Grounds for Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Sociopolitical Realm*. Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland; Murphy, Jeffrie G. and Jean Hampton (1988). *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

of the wrongdoer himself. Finally, forgiveness will also strive for the reception of the wrongdoer into the community in reconciliation.”⁷⁰²

(3) Transition: Moving to Judea (19:1-2)

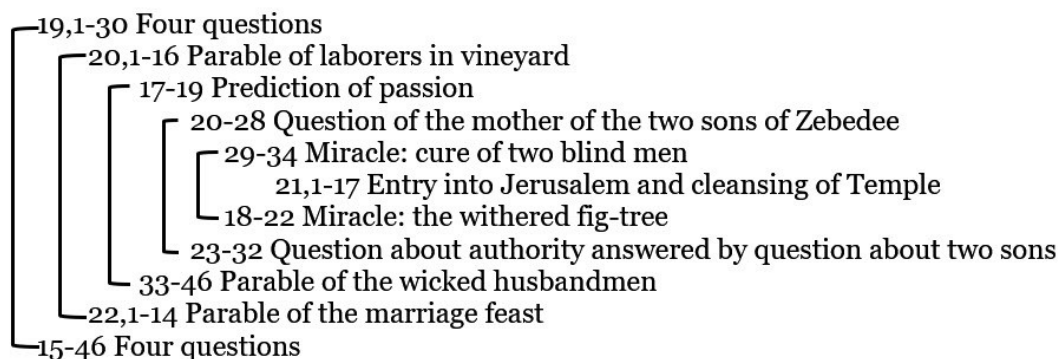
This summary rounds off this fourth discourse and signals the end of the ministry in Galilee. While he moves geographically, his ministry of healing continues to attract large crowds. They are found with him here in Galilee and then later mentioned in 20:29 as they are leaving Jericho on the way up to Jerusalem. The storm clouds of opposition and crucifixion gather.

⁷⁰² Kevichusa, Kethoser Aniu (2017) *Forgiveness and Politics: A Critical Appraisal*. Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs. (pp. 115–116).



VI. Opposition comes to a head in Judea (19:3-26:2)

Parts of this section seem to display a chiasmic structure. Charles Lohr has noted the following possible arrangement of Matthew 19-22:



A. Narrative 5: Ministry in Judea (19:1-23:39)

The transition to “the other side of the Jordan river” upon finishing his teaching is noted. It seems business as usual: huge crowds accompanied him with their sick ones and numbers of healing miracles took place. There the Pharisees also came to trick him with a theological test. They pose the position of the followers of Rabbi Hillel: can a man divorce his wife “for any reason he wants”?

(1) Family Values: Marriage and Divorce—Conflicting views (19:3-12)

(a) Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage (19:3-9)

The gift of marriage and family is as great a gift as we receive within those benefits given to us by God. In creating Adam and Eve, God also created what we call marriage. The “commands” for divorce are not requirements, but reluctant permissions, given to lessen the evil of divorce. What we are offered is a difficult set of norms, dealing with the matter of divorce. The Pharisees raise the question in full knowledge that John the Baptist perished because of his ideas about divorce. They hope to undercut Jesus’ popularity, if not trap him into rash statements that might land him in King Antipas’ prison cells.

This passage is also placed after one on forgiveness—and the admonition we are to forgive seventy-seven times (something every marriage needs). What about a spouse who sins against me? Am I then to forgive or can I reach for the bill of divorce? Jesus does not give quite the response expected or sought. He does not take sides in the debate between Hillel and Shammai (the liberal vs. the conservative interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4). He contextualizes the Deuteronomy permission for divorce by Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. The controlling context for asking and answering this question lies first and foremost in the Creator’s design.

The ethics of the Kingdom in a fallen world point back to the original goals of God. When we dwell in the fullness of the Kingdom there will be no divorce, just as there was none in the garden of Eden. This sort of division between people will not happen. The creation story already shows us the premises essential to any debate about the goodness or badness of divorce. The process of bringing two together intends to create a permanent union. Jesus seems not to be interested initially in debating the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 but with underscoring a larger context for that text.⁷⁰³

Nonetheless, there is a concession to the realities of the present. Under some conditions it is permissible to divorce and remarry, even though this falls short of the ideal. But it is a concession, not a command and is rooted in the hard-heartedness of people, not the kind-heartedness of God. So, Hillel is wrong (divorce cannot happen for any reason—marriage is too substantial and significant) as well as Shammai (sexual immorality⁷⁰⁴ is a sufficient reason, but divorce is not necessary as an outcome nor is it commanded).

❖ Discipleship: Sex, marriage, divorce and remarriage

1. Our physical sexuality is a creation of God, intended as a good gift and graced with the sole ability to reproduce. The making of Adam and Eve and bringing them together is a sign for all time that heterosexual love underlies the meaning of our sexual duality. This does not mean that all individuals are destined for marriage (as the following paragraph demonstrates). It does mean that there is a larger framework in creation that marks out the boundaries and meaning of sexuality in our world. It provides both the permission to celebrate and enjoy this good gift (as Song of Songs does) and it stands as the measure and model against which distorted sexualities may be gauged. To be sure, some sexual “identities” are not chosen. Genetic and epigenetic factors may well deploy a gendered body that does not conform to the binary ideal of creation. This text is not dealing with the question of sexual anomalies but with the issue of marriage.

2. Walter Trobisch taught us that there are three angles in this divine reality: leaving (the public separation and recognition of a new couple), cleaving (the inner binding together in love and loyalty of the pair) and becoming one flesh (the sexual bonding that symbolizes and enacts the oneness of the pair).⁷⁰⁵ Marriage, love and sexual intercourse are the three corners of a safe new world within which children can be placed and find security. Too much of our modern world is marked by the stolen marriage (cohabitation without legal marriage), the empty marriage (wedded, sexually active but loveless coupling) the marriage of convenience (marriage for money, status or some other reason) and the sham marriage (legal and loving but without sexual expression). The so-called trial marriage is a means of playing at marriage without accepting all

⁷⁰³ Instone-Brewer, David (2002) *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (p. 137).

⁷⁰⁴ The Greek is πορνεία (porneia). This has been variously understood as premarital infidelity, adultery, or a marriage between kin that constitutes incest. It has a much broader scope than the Greek for adultery. It refers to “sexual immorality” of every kind in this context and not just marital infidelity.

⁷⁰⁵ *I Loved A Girl: Young Africans Speak* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1963).

the promises and responsibilities of it.⁷⁰⁶

3. Marriage is placed at the head of the family relational network. In creation marriage comes before parenting. The command to honor parents stands beneath the imperative to leave and cleave. When we have taken our vows of marriage, we have not disbanded our responsibility to parents. Nonetheless, those ties must forever be evaluated within the larger set of considerations that make us a married couple. We honor our parents in the very act of establishing a separable new unity, a male-female oneness that reimages the garden, re-symbolizes to the fallen world the good world of creation we have lost. We are not to think any other loving, committed tie does quite the same. This and this alone serves as a reminder of our origins.

4. The couple is yoked together by God. The picture is that of two draft animals, held together under a single yoke, toiling away at some task. God puts a couple together for more than their mutual self-fulfillment, security or sensual pleasure. The phraseology is not that God has bedded them together or merged their assets. Marriage is itself a task with its own specific disciplines. Walter Wangerin has lined them out as:⁷⁰⁷

- Truthfulness and dependability. This work builds trust. It means we come to know that our spouse tells us all and that what he or she tells is told truly. We also know we can rest on the promises spoken. The deeds match the commitments we make. Not being able to count on the words or the deeds undermines marriage.
- Sharing the work of survival. Sharing life means a wise division of labor and a fair shouldering of the menial and joyful cycles of activity. The duties of making a living and making home livable need to be mutual and willingly done, with what both do supporting the marriage and enhancing the relationship. The unique interests and capabilities of each needs to be blending together in ways that are productive. We must sustain a continued interest in the labor of each other.
- Talking and listening. Both must be learned if they are to be done well. We must shape our speech for our partner so that it is life-giving. Our listening must be a knowing and acknowledging of the other. Listening is active work, hearing behind and within the words the heartbeat of another. It is frequently easier to talk and not listen, to be done when we are finished with our talking.
- Making love. Our culture pushes us into a mold that stifles creative sexuality in marriage. We are to shape our own sexuality in mutual encounter with one another, freely giving and caring, discovering our own patterns in a relationship made safe by truthfulness and dependability and sensitive by talking and listening. The prudes and the promiscuous push and pull at us in ways that make us feel inadequate and strange.
- Healing. Suffering is part of our world. We are to nurse one another in sickness, to be merciful and sympathetic in the face of each other's pains. We bring to our marriages many open wounds that we may glimpse in our partners only after years of marriage.
- Gifting and volunteering. Beyond all the duties and routines, beyond the necessities and

⁷⁰⁶ It is interesting that the title of a later parable in Matthew (25:1-13) has changed from the "the wise and foolish virgins" to the "wise and foolish bridesmaids." Is this because in the modern day, not many bridesmaids (or brides) are virgins?

⁷⁰⁷ Walter Wangerin, Jr. (1987) *As for Me and My House: Crafting your marriage to last*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson. (pp. 121-252).

demands, we are to give ourselves freely and gladly in concrete ways to our partner. This is the expression of surprising grace, the overabundance of agape love showering small kindnesses upon the other.

But the task of marriage involves more than the tasks married couples perform to nurture and maintain the marriage. The married ones together have a larger task in our world. Originally Eve was created as a helper suited to Adam. She stood alongside him, face to face with him, bone of his bones to pull with him in the same tasks of filling the earth and mastering its potentials. The cultural work as well as the domestic tasks are shared in the yoking of these together. Why do we put the male in the public and the female in the private, the one in the world of economics and politics, the other in the kitchen and the nursery? There is nothing in these words but the declaration that we are in the tasks of life together—he in hers and her in his. This does not divide culture into specific male and female spheres. It unites male and female in what they do.

5. The possibility and actuality of divorce is seen as an assault upon the Creator's design. God put male and female together. Divorce is a tearing of them apart. Jesus' sees the divorcing happening as mere humans tearing apart what the God of creation welded together. Whether the initiative comes from men or women, whether it is legitimized by church or civil court, it is a ripping up of one of the foundational structures of human life. No matter how we think about the delicate surgery that is needed when couples can no longer do the work of marriage together, we cannot make divorce out to be a positive good. It is a radical surgery that splits apart those who were to become as close as Siamese twins. They undertook a task that overwhelmed them.

To be sure we have many who marry (even in the Church) with no intention of taking on this yoking together. At the best they are ignorant and naive, blinded by a haze of romance and hope. At worst, they undertake marriage as a convenience that can be exited as easily as it was entered. It does not always feel like the drastic surgery, ripping apart two inseparably bound persons. Often it feels like the removal of a deadly gangrene that threatens life itself.

6. While divorce is a radical assault upon God's design, it is still permitted: permitted, not commanded. Jesus makes this point by underscoring the difference between creation's purpose or design and the legislation of Moses. The problem that complicates the matter is "hardheartedness." This points to the taking up residence inside of us of a kind of harsh insensitivity, a cruelty and unyieldingness that cannot reshape the heart to the realities of another weak and needy human being. Instead, we find ourselves in marriages that are worse than barren and cold. They are nurseries of negativity and abuse, cauldrons of spite and argument, circles of loneliness and misunderstanding. What does hardheartedness look like?

- ✓ It is an unresponsiveness. God speaks, and we cannot hear the words or credit them as the most truthful thing about our reality. We may grasp the meaning of the words, but they do not grasp us. It is as though there were rocks in our ears or eyes. The words are encountered, but they do not register. There is stimulus, but no response. In Jerusalem, Isaiah can walk about the city for three years naked and still the words fall on deaf ears and the spectacle on blind eyes. The same is true as we sit and listen to our partner.
- ✓ It is an unkindness. We ought to recognize ourselves in the other person: bone of my bones and life of my life. We make ourselves of a different kind, one who cannot penetrate through the pain or pride, the sin and selfishness in the other because we cannot see the pain and pride, the sin and selfishness in ourselves. The other becomes genuinely alien, not of our kind. So, we can inflict pain or deliver indifference without a flicker of remorse on our part.

We no longer respond to the other person—only to our own neediness or desires. We are unable to look upon the both of us as a “one whole” we make and so we can be cruel and callous to our partner. We no longer feel his or her pain as we inflict it.

- ✓ It is an insensitivity. Divorce is non-sense. It does not respond to what we know is best for us and our children. It creates a world that is confusing and cynical, where commitments mean “maybe,” and love means “as long as I feel like it.” It makes no sense when we measure it by the logic of social relationships. Hard-heartedness is more than lack of empathetic identification with the pain and plight of others. It is also the lack of thoughtfulness in a second way. It is an incapability to discern the logic of situations or to listen to reason in the form of wisdom. It is a type of foolishness that undermines the disciplined following of a path of righteousness. Divorce is not a setting of things right. It is the solving of one wrong by another wrong. Permission for it comes only because of real people in real relationships are insensitive to what is best for them.
- ✓ It is an indifference. One correction needs to be made immediately. Hardheartedness is not always insensitive or ignorant. It is an indifference in the face of knowledge. Some of that “knowing” may be knowledge people should have had by reason of their maturity and experience. We are often culpably ignorant because we repress the truth or avoid it. But some of it is a matter of looking truth squarely in the face and not allowing it to make any difference in our commitments or behavior. Hardheartedness is also perverse knowledge of the truth, a knowing contradicted by a doing. The seared conscience has been burned out of the personality by some inner flame-thrower that wanted silence from this witness to the truth.
- ✓ It is hypocrisy. Hardhearted persons want from others what they do not give in exchange. They make commitments they wish others to keep while they do not keep them. The system of mistresses, kept by the well-to-do alongside their wives and legitimate marriages, is hardhearted. The stiff-necked protests of innocence by corporate and political figures when caught in misdeeds is a sign of hardheartedness. They want a world safe from toxic poisoning for themselves and their children, yet they hide behind legalisms as they burden other families with their rape of the earth. Double-standards are indicators of hardheartedness as is the flight from responsibility. The self-centered pursuit of advantage numbs us to reality. It hardens us against righteousness, against God.
- ✓ It is harshness. God desires mercy. We offer censorious judgmentalism. The hardhearted demand two eyes and a leg for an eye. Their own rights are definitive of justice. Their tongue is sharper than a two-edged sword. They excuse their “peccadillos” while despising the “monstrous” sins of others. There is no compassion in their passion.

7. Creational goals are the measure and meaning of a fallen world’s adjustments. Jesus appeals to God’s design in creation as the only adequate framework for understanding marriage and divorce. Divorce can be an open door to all sorts of abuses. Moses’ concession is demoted to the “second” law of God in comparison with the “first” law in Creation. Its goodness is a secondary and derivative goodness. It helps to place a tourniquet on a bleeding and wounded world. It helps, when properly used, to keep evil from multiplying even more. It rescues those enslaved by violent partners and liberates those who live in fear. But it is not something God gave as part of his joyful gifts of goodness and blessing for our lives. It is drastic surgery for cancers in a marriage, threats so serious they kill marriages. Better the marriage dies in order to save the person, than one sustains a difficult, conflict-ridden, toxic marriage.

Part of what the appeal to creation does is to undermine any attitudes that elevate the circumstantial or relative will of God into the status of God's perfect will. They are not the same. They do not carry the same weight. Divorce is an ugly scar upon the place where sin mortally wounds marriage. It is not a gate through which we can come and go at our will. It is not a revolving door for people to escape the hard work of marriage. It is not the haven for the irresponsible or promiscuous.

There is difficulty beyond the meaning of "sexual infidelity": the exception clause. Grammatically in the Greek it can encompass just divorce or both divorce and remarriage. On the face of it, divorce would lose much of its rationale and goal if remarriage were not permitted at all (that is, divorced persons would have to live a life of celibacy). It seems arbitrary to think all who are divorced are gifted with celibacy. If repentance is genuine, then such should be able to remarry.⁷⁰⁸

(b) The gift of singleness (19:10-12)

Hearing these words, the disciples are rather astonished and frightened. This was not what they were expecting to hear. If it really is an "all in or nothing" affair, then it would seem better to never get in in the first place. Jesus' words seem overly restrictive. Singleness would seem the more prudent route.⁷⁰⁹ Hearing their comment, Jesus acknowledges it (vs. 11) and says that not everyone can accept such a word about singleness being preferable to marriage where divorce is difficult. Only those to whom it is given can accept this notion: that there is a "better" for some not to marry. It is a difficult path. Nor is it always a path chosen: some are born as eunuchs (the impotent, transgendered or asexual), some made so by others (usually for high positions in royal courts), and some choose to adopt that status for the kingdom. The first two categories were well known and literal; the last is the new and appears to be figurative.⁷¹⁰

Yet Jesus is not teaching that marrying is blameworthy or dangerous. It is not something that is attractive only under conditions where, like a contract, it is easy to terminate when it no longer pleases or turns out to be painful and costly. Not only is the word of the disciples (about better not to marry) difficult but his own teaching about marriage and family is not something everyone

⁷⁰⁸ Bruner, *Churchbook*: "The exception in Matthew's sentence means that a cuckolded husband or betrayed wife, where there is no repentance in the offending partner, may be free not only to divorce but to remarry." (p. 266). Given the "Pauline exception" (a deserted believer can remarry) as well as the exception clause here, it would seem even a guilty party who is repentant can remarry.

⁷⁰⁹ One must remember the normal context: marriages were arranged and often the bride and groom had not spent time getting to know one another before the marriage. What if one wound up with someone who was difficult, incompatible, or even violent? To marry and wind up in a painful marriage without the escape clause of divorce would seem to give great advantage to not marrying at all.

⁷¹⁰ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: "Most of the church's interpreters anticipate the modern exegetical insight that *the third type of eunuch is to be interpreted symbolically*. All three types practice abstinence. In the first two cases, however, their abstinence is natural or necessary; only the third kind of abstinence is a gift of grace (*per gratiam*) or a virtue (*virtuosa*)." (p. 497). Through Church history there have been those who have taken this third type quite literally. Origen is said by Eusebius in the early Church to be one who castrated himself to become a "eunuch for the kingdom." Beginning in the second half of the 18th century there was a Russian sect, the Skoptsky movement, who believed human genitals were the mark of Cain. Males practiced either removal of the testes or of both them and the penis while females surgically removed the breasts in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. It seems to have died out by the 1970s.

can assimilate or adopt. Some divorced persons can handle singleness with joy and energy. Others cannot. Singleness is a gift, not a final and finished state for everyone who suffers divorce. Celibacy is not the “natural” condition everyone can embrace, if they simply have enough “grit” or faith.

Paul will line this out (I Corinthians 7) as well. There are very real advantages to singleness that married persons do not have. Yet, without the gift of sane singleness, the persistent drive for sexual intimacy can and does undermine the attempt to embrace such a life. It leads to many disasters (as we have recently seen in the so called “celibate” Roman Catholic priesthood). The unmarried life is a gift for a few, not a command for all, not even for Priests. In addressing the disciple’s concern, Jesus does not tell them the superior way of life is singleness and they need to pray for it. Jesus himself was celibate, but he never makes that a point of discipleship or the superior path for the super-spiritual.

Contra people who make marriage a command for all and the production of children in marriage an imperative, Jesus celebrates celibacy where it occurs (one remembers Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, John the Baptist).⁷¹¹ But just as really (against priestly celibacy such as the Essenes practiced), Jesus honors marriage and children. It is not an either/or. There are those who are “eunuchs” for at least three reasons: (1) unavoidable: they were born that way (heredity); (2) selected: they were made that way (history/environment); (3) uncompelled: they are voluntarily that way (choice). But they are not lifted above the ordinary married persons. If the Roman Catholic Church has entangled itself with exalting virginity and celibacy, the Protestant Church has too often exalted marriage at the expense of singleness. The single life is a gift, not a command. Yet not everyone has that gift of contented singleness. Jesus is not making celibacy morally superior to marriage, nor does he exalt asceticism as ideal.

On this matter we face all three of these facets of life: How were we born? What has been our history with sexuality? What choices must we make and strength must we have in order to position our lives in the center of God’s best for us? In our time and culture, neither celibate singleness nor sexually active marriage are easy paths.

Life in our age means suffering discipleship. Both the married and the single will experience that in their life time. For some married it means sustaining a painful and troubled marriage in the face of a culture of easy divorce. For some singles it means sustaining a life alone (involuntarily) even while longing for a perfect partner.⁷¹² For all of us before marriage, it means living amid a sex-saturated, sex-crazed culture that has little tolerance for the sexual standards of the Bible or Jesus. Our time has put off marriage for years while we expect people with raging hormones to live happily as chaste singles. It is often a burden too heavy for some to carry.

❖ Discipleship: Sex attraction, celibacy and singleness

In the modern era, sexuality has become far more controverted over the issue of same-sex sexuality than divorce and remarriage. The traditional view of those who experience same-sex

⁷¹¹ Even the Ethiopian Eunuch, reading Isaiah (where we find a positive comment – 53:5-6), is welcomed by the early Christians (Acts 8:26-40).

⁷¹² One thinks of the decades after the Civil War in the USA where so many young men died that there was a major imbalance of eligible women. It was an era where a number of the female mission agencies were founded and single women moved more decisively into teaching and nursing, not being able to achieve their so-called “normal” married state, given the monogamous customs of the USA.

attraction was that they should remain celibate or marry heterosexually. In most Western European countries as well as North American, same sex marriage has now become legal and affirmed. The media now frequently represents same sex couples in advertising, sitcoms, and movies, as having the same moral status as hetero-sexual couples, so long as there is love between the partners. A number of major Christian denominations have embraced self-affirming same sex couples for marriage and ordination to Christian leadership positions in ministry.⁷¹³ These are the times we live in and we must still live well as faithful disciples.

In addition, gender dysphoria (transgendered persons) has also come onto the horizon of the Church and its mission as a redemptive community. This is a different matter than same-sex attraction. It involves people who sense a fundamental incongruence between their biology and anatomy and their inner psychological and emotional experience as the other gender. In such cases a female feels trapped inside a male body and vice versa. What do we make of this as well in the light of Scripture and the mission of the Church? Do Jesus' words on eunuchs have any bearing? Or is there a larger tapestry of instruction we need to heed?

In this context in Matthew Jesus says clearly, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given." (vs.11). So, this notion of singleness as a eunuch is not something that is simple, easy to line out, obvious in its import or implications, whether for those with same sex, hetero-sexual attraction or gender dysphoria. This is a difficult word and we need to respect it as such. There is still a lot that is not well understood about sexual attraction, its causes, its dynamics or its legitimate expression, especially for the singles in our midst. We know even less about gender dysphoria in terms of research and clinical knowledge. Nor are the implications of Jesus' words obvious and easily assimilated.

We so know the Church currently has major struggles in two area at least:

(1) We have either overinflated or denigrated singleness. Either it becomes the ideal spiritual condition, the difficult path of priesthood, or it is not provided space and encouragement to deploy its unencumbered gifts.⁷¹⁴ Rather than celebrating both the married and the single, Protestants have too often assumed the "normal" condition is marriage. The number of books and seminars on marriage is overwhelming in contrast to those in service of singleness. If the early church made marriage acceptable (though less so than singleness) but sex questionable, the

⁷¹³ The debate has generated an enormous literature. For two opposing Christian scholar's views see: Via, Dan O. and Gagnon, Robert A. J. (2003). *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. A more practical account is given in Yarhouse, Mark A. (2010). *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publisher. Also: Gagnon, Robert A. J. (2001). *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

⁷¹⁴ Matthew 19:12 is the basis for the first of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience (these latter taken from 19:21). Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.): "Hence Our Lord, in proposing the evangelical counsels, always makes mention of man's fitness for observing the counsels. For in giving the counsel of perpetual poverty (Matth. 19:21), He begins with the words: *If thou wilt be perfect*, and then He adds: *Go, sell all* (Vulg.,—*what*) *thou hast*. In like manner when He gave the counsel of perpetual chastity, saying (ibid., 12): *There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven*, He adds straightway: *He that can take, let him take it*. And, again, the Apostle (1 Cor. 7:35), after giving the counsel of virginity, says: *And this I speak for your profit; not to cast a snare upon you.*" (1a2ae, Q. 108, a.4 ad 1)

Protestant reformation made marriage good along with sex. The modern situation seems to make marriage optional and adult consensual sex good for all, so long as there is (erotic) love.⁷¹⁵

The modern myth of “soulmates” who complete each other has distorted matters. We all have gaps. We all are incomplete and imperfect. The relational ways in which we are supported and overcome loneliness and the desire to be tangibly loved by other humans includes many relationships beyond the marriage bond. Those who complement us include other family members as well as friends and colleagues. The singles are not incomplete (or Jesus, not to speak of Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, were all deficient). There is a deep respect for singleness in the Scripture. But it is not made an ideal.

At the same time, we have treated the single male and female quite differently. We have not considered marriage as the ultimate goal for males. They are “what they do.” Career and work achievement are more definitional for them. Marriage does not particularly “enhance” them (unless they marry money). As long as we (or segments of church and society) consider marriage to be the ultimate goal for females, single women will always be considered “losers.” Marriage “enhances” a woman. As long as men control the question of marriage, single women can resent single men who leave them unfinished. They may wonder why no one claimed them, why no one has valued them enough to want to marry them.⁷¹⁶

The matter of addressing the life of a single person is not simple. After all singles come in many forms: the never-married, the casually uncommitted, the committed but unmarried, the same-sex attracted, the widowed, the divorced, and the single parent (or even the imprisoned). For each individual, his or her life circumstances may result from a mixture of choice and compulsion. They may not have chosen the situation they find themselves in and may struggle to make sense of it. There is no single formula that fits them all.⁷¹⁷

(2) We have done a poor job at dealing with the sexual margins – those who experience gender dysphoria (such as the transgendered) or grow up with a same-sex attraction. Now that these

⁷¹⁵ For a history of marriage in the West: Witte, John J. (2012). *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, Second Edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

⁷¹⁶ “Neither secular society nor the Christian community may value the gift of singleness, but God values it, and that is what counts. So the Christian community must hear the anguish of singles as they struggle with celibacy in a sexually saturated society, and must not add to the tensions of singles by an excessive emphasis on marriage and the family that effectively excludes singles, and must always respond sensitively to the natural human desire of singles for balanced social interaction and for genuine friendships. Any Christian philosophy of human relationships needs to include full acceptance of singleness.” Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, “The Gift Nobody Wants?,” *Priscilla Papers* Fall Vol. 7, no. 4 (1993), p. 20.

⁷¹⁷ Barth, *CD Vol. III/4*: “These are not prohibitions or discriminations, but marriage is obviously relativised. No institutional state of celibacy is, of course, established in these sayings; they speak only of concrete decisions in this direction. Even less do they contain any suggestion of the superiority of celibacy. But what they do clearly affirm is that there are special situations which make decisions of this kind possible and necessary, and that to this extent there are those for whom entrance into the married state is not only not commanded but temporarily or even permanently forbidden. We certainly cannot say, in the light of these sayings, that entrance into marriage is universally the higher way, the better possibility. On the contrary, they indicate that the vicissitudes of life may make it incumbent upon a man to remain unmarried and to express the relationship between Christ and His community in this way.” (p. 144)

segments of society and in the Church have become much more visible, we must ask: are we fairly wrestling with questions of singleness and marriage among them? What responses are we to give to their sexual and social realities that is congruent with Scripture and redemptive in practice? Can we listen well to them and their experiences while pointing toward Jesus?

Any approach to this subject requires a close reading of the theology of sexuality that runs right through the whole of Scripture. There are those who think the Bible's account of sexuality is incoherent, contradictory and, in the end, no specific help.⁷¹⁸ On their account, what we have to do in this matter is reach for the overarching ethic of love and discard what seems to be a heterosexist account (or at least interpretation) of Scripture in favor of inclusiveness. Others see a consistent sexual ethic that is applied in very different cultural contexts, so there is variation within a unified theology and ethics of sexuality, but not incoherence and contradiction.

At the same time, in the modern world we face issues that Scripture does not directly address. Even on those it does address, we find ourselves often at odds in terms of deciding what is salient to the questions we are asking (questions that differ from the ancients) and then what the answers mean as we seek to make sense of the spectrum of sexual realities and perceptions that surround us. Nature is not simply transparent nor is our knowledge of it pure and simple. Much remains unclear, uncertain, obscure, not because it might be in itself, but due to our own limitations and that of our current knowledge. Oliver O'Donovan reminds us of our situation:

“The very societies which impress us by their reverence for some important moral principle will appeal to us by their neglect of some other. Together with man's essential involvement in created order and his rebellious discontent with it, we must reckon also upon the opacity and obscurity of that order to the human mind which has rejected the knowledge of its Creator.”⁷¹⁹

Still, we must take note and engage those whose gendered sexuality seems to exist outside (or at least blurs the lines) of the “normal” mutuality and bi-sexuality of male and female, male or female. None of us had a choice in the genetic or epigenetic roots of how we experience our bodies and its interactions with our inner psychology. In this we need the help of good research as well as well-grounded understandings of the relevant biblical and theological resources offered to us to engage gender, sex and social roles.

Three lenses tend to be used by various Christians in approaching these matters:⁷²⁰

(1) Integrity: this views sexuality through the lens of the sacredness of human bodies as male or female, male and female. There is a creational ideal that is written into the structures of our bodies. We must not minimize, dismiss or denigrate what the Creator has done.

(2) Disability: this may well respect the sacredness of male and female differences, but views phenomena such as gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction as additional burdens that are rooted in the disorder caused in creation by sin. All sexuality is “disordered” due to the fall, but some disorders impose additional challenges beyond those experienced by the majority experiences of

⁷¹⁸ Knust, J. W. (2011). *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire*. New York: HarperOne.

⁷¹⁹ *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (1986) p. 19.

⁷²⁰ See Yarhouse, Mark (2015). *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic. Esp. pp. 46-50 for more on these lenses. One should note that all of us are to some degree and in different ways “disabled” in our sexuality.

sexual congruence. This lens opens the door for supportive care and compassion in a way that the integrity lens does not (and sees the conditions as nonmoral, though the choices made to live with them may well be moral).

(3) Diversity: this celebrates difference and affirms gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction as part of the creation's gifts to be celebrated. For the most part, on this account, gender is socially constructed and the diversity we discover is all part of a wide spectrum of appropriate ways of being humans, sexually. They are moral and existential goods on this account.

Given the pervasive and powerful sex trafficking industry, the destructive nature of addictive pornography, the sexualization of children, the abuse of children by priests, the use of rape as an instrument of war, the culture wars over same sex marriage, the push for LGBTQ rights in the civic arena etc. – there are many dimensions of sexual conduct and policy worthy of commentary. What Jesus points to is that, however we come to our current sexual mode of being, the kingdom of God makes demands on all of us, married or single.

Disciples need to offer their bodies, broken and distorted in many ways (including heterosexuality), to God as a living sacrifice. What that means for each one of us depends upon the calling of God on our lives in our current situation, whether single or married, whether heterosexual or homosexual, whether congruent or incongruent with our bodily self. Still, many of us Christ followers are deeply troubled by the dismissal of Scripture that seems far too common in the diversity lens. Yet we are equally troubled by the harsh dismissal of people with same-sex attractions and gender dysphoria by those who shout “integrity” loudly.

We belong to redemptive communities who are to welcome all who struggle with sin and sins. As disciples we need to find more safe spaces for people who struggle with their sexual past and present, who wish to be faithful disciples of Jesus and obedient to the teaching of Scripture. Those who wish to surrender this part of their life to Christ will be encouraged that even in the community of faithful Christians, welcome as well as healing and change is not only possible but supported by a warm and loving Christian community.

(2) The Kingdom belongs to the childlike (19:13-15)

This is one of the best-known stories in the Gospels. Following the discussion of marriage and divorce (and singleness), it considers children in the family unit. Jesus affirms a positive view of the family. Where the disciples assert it is better not to marry (19:10) and then seek to marginalize children (19:13), Jesus counters. Celibacy is not for everyone and children are to be valued and welcomed. His view of marriage and children is quite positive.

This story has been captured in hundreds of paintings and motivated a transformation of concern for children through the centuries. Apparently, it was a perspective that needed reinforcement for these first century disciples. On another occasion Jesus taught them the value of a child (18:1-10). Repetition does seem at times the only way somethings are learned.

In the larger Roman world, children were among the least in status. A child is without wealth, accomplishments, clients, or patronage. Some think low attitudes toward children were shaped by the high mortality before the age of five. Roman fathers could decide whether an infant was admitted to the family or taken out and discarded on the garbage heap. That was not a custom

among the Jews.⁷²¹

Still the disciples are offended at this request pressed upon their Master. They seem to be of the mind that Jesus' importance was such he should not be bothered with small children. But he would have none of it. Rebuking the disciples, he touches the children and prays for them, giving them his presence and blessing. He follows the example of Israel blessing the children of Joseph or Simeon blessing Jesus in the Temple.

Children matter in the Kingdom of heaven. They stand literally and figuratively for the unimportant, the dependent, the vulnerable, the "little ones" of the Old Testament. To cause one of these little ones to fall in sin is to merit being thrown into the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:6). To keep them from Jesus and the Kingdom is to keep oneself far from the Kingdom. Any who belong to the Kingdom are like small children: only those with humble trustfulness who are poor in spirit can enter the Kingdom; only those who come without achievement or merit.

In this tragic era of the abuse of children by priests and clergy of the Church, we must stand amazed at such conduct by those professionally trained for the ministry of Jesus Christ. Whatever their motive or inner psychology, the flashing red light of danger found in Jesus's words has not stopped them from violating a very clear, repeated warning. Rather than bless children, they curse them with their conduct. Instead of the touch of spiritual love they reach out the hands of sexual lust. "Stop hindering" them is the rebuke of Jesus to all of us. Any conduct or words that hinder are anathema, tinged with the odor of hell itself.

This incident has also raised the question of infant baptism, even though baptism is not referenced here. A lot of ink has been spilled on this issue since major branches of the Church baptize infants as an expression of the faith of the parents and the Christian congregation before infants can believe for themselves.⁷²² The connection between this passage and other texts on baptism is weak. What is clear is that this incident is linked more strongly to imparting a blessing, to the laying on of hands as part of that impartation of blessing.

The later notion that the unbaptized infants or children are consigned to a place between heaven and hell ("limbo") is not found in Scripture.⁷²³ Nor is baptismal regeneration, as though

⁷²¹ "Greeks and Romans did not raise all the children born into their households and regarded those who did (Jews, Egyptians) as unusual." (p. 86). Mark Golden, "Children and Childhood" (pp.85-89) in Michael Gagarin and Elaine Fantham, eds. (2010). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Vol. 2. Oxford : Oxford University Press. Estimates put the death of children before the age of 1 at about 25-30 percent and as high as 50 percent before the age of 10. See Jens-Uwe Krause, "Children in the Roman Family and Beyond" (pp. 623-642) in Michael Peachin, ed. (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷²² The dividing line seems to be whether baptism is essentially connected to the reasoned, self-affirmed choice of the one being baptized or not. Luther's contempt for the Anabaptist insistence on a conscious act by the one being baptized is unrestrained. "Therefore, the argument of the Anabaptists—'A child has no understanding; therefore, it should not be baptized'—does not follow logically. Rather, Christ says that little children should be baptized precisely because they have no reason, for faith cannot take hold or find footing where reason rules and governs." Luther, *Works Vol. 68*, (p. 26) For Jean Calvin, the argument for infant baptism was not rooted here but in the Old Testament practice of circumcision.

⁷²³ This is connected to the speculative notion that water baptism removes "original sin" into which we are all born. Infants (in age and mind) who die in original sin without being assigned to the afterlife in Hell, live on the "edge" of Hell. The Roman Catholic Church has never officially adopted this viewpoint

the ritual of water baptism is a necessary form to impart saving grace, despite the majority of Christians found in such traditions (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, etc.). If anything, this is a radical text: the Kingdom of God belongs to such (and not to those who have had baptism, or some other sacrament). It is unqualified by any religious accomplishments or ritual events. But this is not the first or last word on the issue of baptism. This text simply does not address that issue.⁷²⁴

What we learn is that children need our attention, our time, our touch and our prayers. They need to be an important part of our congregational life as well as our family life. Our culture and family arrangements are quite different from the first century. They are given a very different status in our social world. But they still need these four things from us adults, especially from those of us who are participants and witnesses to the Kingdom of heaven.

Even in church traditions that believe and practice baptismal regeneration and infant baptism, children need more than that once-for-all ritual. It is not once and done. If baptism saves, it is only the beginning of salvation. For church traditions more in the mode of Tertullian, postponing baptism until its significance is understood and personally embraced in a professed faith, children need to be trained in the way in which they should go. Nurturing in the faith is an embrace and touch that congregations need to insure. Even there the process of discipleship continues well after “adult, believer baptism.”

The Kingdom of heaven is such a realm that only the childlike are its “natural” residents. Those who can and do boast of their spiritual achievements, their sufferings and sacrifices, whose disciplined practices are “supererogatory” and merit-worthy are not those whom Jesus singles out. This is an “upside-down” Kingdom where the normal religious and social calculus does not work. Yet discipleship in that Kingdom is essential.

Paul captures it: “Fathers...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Even some of those who came out of Egypt, all of whom were “baptized” into Moses and all of whom had partaken of the same supernatural food and drink (I Cor. 10:1-5), were not well pleasing to the Lord. The Sermon on the Mount starts with blessings (Beatitudes) and ends with warnings. Partaking in sacred baptism and the eucharist does not mean all is well. Blessings come with responsibilities. The blessing imparted to children leads parents and their “village” to engage in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The blessing leads children to grow up into embodying the meaning of that blessing.

on the fate of unbaptized infants and recently have taken a more positive view of the fate of unbaptized infants.

⁷²⁴ The first post-apostolic mention of child baptism comes from Tertullian, citing this text: “Consequently in view of the circumstances and will, even the age of each person, a postponement of Baptism is most advantageous, particularly, however, in the case of children. For what need is there, if it is not so urgent, that the sponsors also should be brought into danger, being as they are themselves also by reason of their mortality capable of falling short of their promises and being deceived by the development of an evil disposition? The Lord indeed says: “Forbid them not to come unto Me.” Let them come, then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are being taught whither to come; let them become Christians, when they have been able to know Christ. Why hurries the age of innocence to the remission of sins?” Souter, A. (Trans.). (1919). *Tertullian's Treatises: Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism*. London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Company. (p. 69) Tertullian is advising in favor of delaying baptism since those who understand the importance of baptism will be more afraid of its consequences than its postponement.

Matthew 19:13-15 The Kingdom belongs to the childlike

(3) Acquiring Eternal Life (19:16-22)

Wealth and its power in human life was a key topic in the Sermon on the Mount.⁷²⁵ This encounter with a rich man contrasts with the blessing of the children. They have no status. This one is rich, male, and devout. He has all the marks one might expect of one blessed by heaven: prosperity, position and righteousness—and yet still young. He seems to come as a disciple should. There is no move by the disciples to “prevent” this great one from coming to the Master. The wealthy were few and so this man (or his family) would likely be well known – and welcomed into the circles of disciples.

Another contrast lies at the heart of this story. A child has nothing and can do nothing to possess the Kingdom of God or eternal life. They have nothing and bring nothing with them. Their participation (as well as the childlike) is pure grace, a gift that is received without reciprocation. Yet this young, rich ruler with vast property must sell all and give it to the poor and leave that life to follow Jesus to “complete” what needs to be done to have eternal life. Everything must be “lost” in order the eternal life can be “found.”

The first word out of his mouth is “Teacher.” That bodes well, it would seem (a parallel to those who call Jesus, “Lord, Lord”). But the promising beginning does not end well. Jesus may be addressed as “teacher” by this wealthy and intense man, but he will not follow his instructions.

Our culture values youth, status (position) or fame, and wealth. All are valued goods. Being a male is equally a bonus (especially a white male). Affluence is seen as a dominant goal that drives life. While many mouth the words, “all I want is for you is to be happy,” what often is a sub-text is “and well-to-do.” This is not to praise poverty. It is an undoubted evil and ill. Two sorts of people are preoccupied with money: the poor and the very rich. The one is anxious about today and whether they will have the basics. The other is anxious about tomorrow and whether some disaster might strip them of their wealth.

This story is also significant since it looks again at the issue of “perfection.” What is it that, when done or accomplished, completes the full circle of the best in human life? In the end what is at the heart of what is “good” in life? This young man is motivated by more than his status, money or youth. He senses something is lacking. He is seeking to know what brings eternal life or life in “the age to come.”

Jesus gives a “conventional” answer: “Observe the commandments.” But not before nudging him theologically: “Why do you ask me about what is good? One only is there who is good.” The emphasis in the Greek underlines an implication this young man may have not considered. He may have not considered who Jesus is or the reality of who God and humans are. His question about eternal life is the right question. If there is any question that we need answered, it is that one. Yet the answer is right before him. If we want to know about the good, the answer is here: all that is good is an overflow from the only One who is Good. By implication: that One stands before this rich ruler.⁷²⁶

⁷²⁵ Bruner, *Churchbook*: “Matthew knew what he was doing when he connected marriage, children, and money in one compact section—these are the ‘down-home’ matters that challenge disciples as few others do.” (p. 285).

⁷²⁶ τί με ἐρωτᾷς περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός The “me” is emphatic, raising the issue of who the rich man thought Jesus was. There is also a play on words from the Greek (vs. 16 “what *good* [thing] shall I do?” – “good” is neuter; vs. 17 “the *Good* is one”- here “good” is masculine, referring to God).

Even in his asking, there is something already presupposed: “What good thing shall I do to have (σῶ) eternal life.”⁷²⁷ It appears he has accomplished all he might to reach the pinnacle of the “good life” of his day. All of it is rooted in what he “has.” Eternal life is another “possession” he would like to have. Having “done” all the right things to fill up his cupboard with the good things of life, he now wants the greatest good. There is something he thinks he needs to “do” or must “do” to obtain this last and best good. All he lacks now is some knowledge of what that “doing” might be to add it to his great possessions. The last words in the story underlines this fact: “for he had many possessions.”⁷²⁸ What becomes apparent is his possessions possess him.

Yet his supposition that “doing” is important is underlined in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:21-17). If he was among those who were told (or listened) to those words, he is coming with a desire to learn more specifically how to build his house on solid foundations by doing the will of God as required by the higher righteousness. Jesus does not challenge this supposition. The issue is not whether doing God’s will as encountered in the law is a good thing to do. Because God is the only one who is “good,” what he says and asks is the key to what we must do. So, Jesus insists: “persist in obeying the commandments.”

But the relationship between our observing the law and eternal life is not what “doing” might be thought to accomplish. Jesus shifts the emphasis from “having” to “entering” eternal life. The metaphor shifts from a transaction (getting by means of exchange) to steps taken (a journey). That journey is the path of God’s will, given in his words and commands. Start down that path and one will discover how inadequate our own “doing” is – how grace and the power of God is the only competence that enables anyone to walk that path of the good. How poor in spirit we really are.

This ruler is a pious and devout Jew. This is also the first verse to indicate he is a “young man.” He knows the commands. He asks: “Which ones?” He senses he is on the cusp of the answer he seeks. He is not far wrong. Jesus repeats the main commands from the second table of the Ten Commandments – avoid murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, honoring parents. He adds Leviticus 19:18 – love your neighbor as yourself. The former are very specific matters of conduct. This last addition is comprehensive and underlines the principle and spirit behind the other five commandments.

The young ruler claims, emphatically, to have been carefully observant of all these (Greek emphasis). So, he wants to know – what is it that is still lacking? He is fatally wrong in his thinking but does not yet know it. Yet Jesus does not challenge the notion that he had kept the law.

“Jesus recognizes and responds to his spiritual ambition. He wants nothing less than the best in his service of God, and merely keeping commandments has not brought him to that point. He wants to be ‘perfect’ (teleios), a word that denotes not so much moral flawlessness as completeness, full maturity. And that is what Jesus wants for him too, as he does for all his disciples according to 5:48.”⁷²⁹

⁷²⁷ “do” is ποιήσω – an aorist subjunctive. This might suggest a single great act of goodness. Indeed, Jesus will suggest the one good thing he can do to possess eternal life.

⁷²⁸ ἦν γὰρ ἔχων κτήματα πολλά. (vs. 22).

⁷²⁹ France, *Matthew* (p. 734).

Jesus appeals to his deeper motive: “If you want to be perfect (τέλειος)”⁷³⁰ then this is what you must do: ‘give away your possession to the poor (love neighbor) and come and be my disciple. Then you will have riches in heaven that cannot be taken away.’ He is told to let go of earthly possessions and embrace heavenly ones. The grip his possessions have on him is his issue. His specific solution lies not in giving generously, but in giving all. He must act as did the characters in Jesus’ parables who, upon finding the greatest treasure, sell all to possess the Kingdom (Matt. 13:44-46). The emphasis is on “completeness” of commitment in this case.⁷³¹

We are not told the long-term results of this story. Only the immediate response by the rich, young ruler: he went away distressed and grieving. Did he get over it? Did he finally let go and let the good God had in mind for him flow into his life? We do not know. It was clearly a “hard” saying of Jesus for him because of the size of his property and its importance in his life. We might suppose Jesus was saddened by this departure as well. His words that follow this story seem to indicate a lament, not a condemnation.

This also is both a particular and a universal story. It is specific to this young man’s idolatry, the priority possessions possessed in his life. What he needed was a complete, decisive break with possessions. It is a universal story in that it raises the question: what is given supreme allegiance in each of our lives? If, like this young ruler, money and possessions have become a driving force in our lives, then this prescription may be the very one we need to enact. What is universal is the call to become a disciple of Jesus – and to turn away from all other things that hinder that discipleship. It may not be money. It may be power or position, sex or status, pleasure or pornography, alcohol or addiction. Paul abandoned the hope of being a great Rabbi. Elisha left his property when called by Elijah. Abraham left family and country at the call of God. Moses risked and lost his position in the court of Pharaoh to do social justice for the Hebrew people. The specifics may be different, but the demand is the same: Jesus claims all of us.

❖ Discipleship and Perfection

This text raises the issue of two paths for Christian disciples: the ordinary, in-the-world secular life and the extraordinary, saintly, sacrificial life that surpasses the minimal requirements of discipleship. What do we make of Jesus’ words about complete or perfect? Is this a word for all Christians? How do we reconcile this absolute demand with other texts that indicate the imperative to give has prudential elements: proportionally, generously? Is the absolute demand

⁷³⁰ There may be a play on words. Τέλειος also has the meaning of “full-grown”, mature (in contrast to being a “youth” – νεανίσκος).

⁷³¹ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*: “But whereas in the SM [Sermon on the Mount] it is the completeness of love, here it is the completeness of obedience. The rich man would be perfect if he exhibited whole-hearted obedience to Jesus Christ. This, then, is the point to be generalized: all are called to be perfect, by which is meant: all are called to obey the divine word that comes to them.” (p. 48). Turner, *Matthew Baker*: “Jesus did not directly cite the tenth commandment, ‘You must not covet’ (Exod. 20:17), but the man’s response clearly shows that he has broken it. Finally the man implicitly acknowledges what he lacks. His wealth has become an idol, and he is violating the first commandment (Exod. 20:2–3). His refusal to do a good thing—to divest himself of wealth and follow Jesus—shows that he does not acknowledge God’s goodness. He serves money, and so he cannot serve God (Matt. 6:24).” (p. 470). Gundry, *Matthew*: “That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command.” (p. 388).

only for especially religious while the more prudential counsels are for the ordinary disciple?⁷³²

One of the strands of the Roman Catholic church has considered this passage as a crucial indication for the “evangelical counsels” or counsels of “perfection” (Matt. 19:21). These are contained in the three vows of chastity, poverty (or perfect charity) and obedience. These are not required as conditions to attain eternal life but are works of “supererogation.” They are for monks and nuns who are seeking perfection. These take aim at three great powers that distort life and distract from living devout lives of worship and service of God. Those called take public vows and adopt a life that is distinctly religious, unentangled with the ordinary affairs of life. They are not counsels for the laity.

Protestants do not consider these matters to be meritorious and meant for special “saints.” It may be that some people are gifted in these ways to be called to lives that entail poverty, suffering, and singleness that are out of the ordinary. But these are matters of calling, not saintliness (any more than John the Baptist in his asceticism was “saintlier” than Jesus who lived an ordinary lifestyle in villages and cities). Puritans addressed these same concerns in the virtues of faithfulness (sex), industry (stewardship of possessions), and order (taking one’s proper role in a social order). They are matters for all Christians as part of the shape of the life of discipleship.

(1) Chastity takes aim at the pleasures of the flesh and the distraction of sex and the married life. Jesus acknowledges there are those who are “eunuchs for the Kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:12). Paul acknowledges not all have the gift of singleness. Yet the married will have a life of many distractions (1 Cor. 7:1-19). The issue is an undivided allegiance and a managing of one’s sexuality so it does not distract from loving God and loving one’s neighbor.

(2) Poverty takes aim at the power of riches and possessions that make life easy and pleasant—and yet take over one’s aspirations and anxieties. One can become preoccupied and identified with one’s possessions. The sins of avariciousness, acquisitiveness and covetousness are all driven by greed. It narrows our vision and imagination and walls us off from the needs of others. Instead of being liberated by the gospel for generosity and kindness to others, we are wrapped up in our own pursuit of a larger paycheck and larger crowd to attend to us. But holding possessions with an open and generous hand frees us from their power.

(3) Obedience takes aim at prideful self-assertion and seeking power over others. It fosters the sober self-assessment of our own unimportance and humility. Rather than the narcissistic, ego-centered need to be “the winner,” we learn to celebrate, advance and serve others. It lays down the drivenness of always having to have things one’s own way.

These are great powers in human life that often are energized by the spirits of the day to turn them from blessings to curses. Henri Nouwen writes of the struggle and joy of abandoning himself to God.

“This morning during my hour of prayer, I tried to come to some level of abandonment to my heavenly Father. It was a hard struggle since so much in me wants to do my will, realize my plans, organize my future, and make my decisions. Still, I know that true joy comes from letting God love me the way

⁷³² Luz, *Matthew 8-20*: “For Matthew ‘perfection’ is not the highest stage of the Christian life, a position to which only a few, ‘better’ Christians are called. Discipleship for Matthew is not something that is reserved for only a few special Christians; it is rather the key to being a Christian at all. Thus the young man is called to a perfection to which all are called.” (p. 514).

God wants, whether it is through illness or health, failure or success, poverty or wealth, rejection or praise. It is hard for me to say, 'I shall gratefully accept everything that pleases you, Lord. Let your will be done.' But I know that when I truly believe my Father is pure love, it will become increasingly possible to say these words from the heart."⁷³³

(4) The Impossible Possibilities of eternal life (19:23-20:16)

(a) A hard saying about the rich (19:23-26)

Jesus' reflections on the difficulty for wealthy individuals to enter the kingdom of heaven astonish (and disturb) the disciples. They raise the disturbing question as to whether any rich person can enter the kingdom or all must give up their possessions. If it is the case, that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, then, indeed, who can be saved? It is as though the disciples had not heard the Sermon on the Mount or not really understood how stark some of its terms were.

The reason for this difficulty is not directly stated. The assumption of the disciples may well have been a commonplace notion we find even today in the prosperity gospel. After all, the promises of God seem to indicate a reward for the pious: many children, fruitful soils, large flocks, full harvest baskets and flourishing in human affairs. "Humility is the fear of the LORD; its wages are riches and honor and life." (Prov. 22:4; cf. Deut. 7:12-13, 28:1-14) This young ruler who went away sorrowful seemed to fit the pattern of a God-blessed, flourishing, devout individual. Jesus' words simply cut across what were taken-for-granted and well rooted in select scriptures.

We are not told what typically holds wealthy persons back. It might be that their wealth cries out against them since they have extracted it unjustly, through oppression of the neighbor or violent expropriation.⁷³⁴ It might be that their wealth, justly hard-earned, has led them to trust in the security of possessions (such as the man who expanded his barns, only to die suddenly – Luke 12:16-21). Or perhaps it is a matter of hard-heartedness against the poor, hanging onto what they don't need in the face of a world of hunger and homelessness (as in the case of Lazarus and Dives, Lk. 16:19-31). Wealth has an imminent power that presses in on its holder. Even "stewardship" can be perverted by the drive to preserve, expand, exploit and accumulate. Rather than shepherding the welfare of one's neighbor, one shepherds the welfare of one's wallet.

The metaphor of the camel and the eye of the needle seems to be literal (though

⁷³³ Nouwen, Henri J. M. (1988) *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Image Books: Doubleday. (p. 120).

⁷³⁴ Some read this as the problem with the rich young ruler who claims to have kept the law including not stealing. But there is no indication in this context that his riches came illegally or unethically. He may well have been a generous young man of wealth who treated his workers well (such as Boaz in the Old Testament or even Joseph of Arimathea in the New). Yet we have some who read this into the text. Cf. Carter, *Matthew*: "This man's abundance means greed, violence and oppression. He has impoverished, not loved, his neighbor (22:39). He has stolen what belongs to another." (p. 388). France, *Matthew*: "This pericope does not say, however, that this young man was guilty of oppression of the poor, and Jesus' demand on him, while it includes giving to the poor, is expressed in terms of his own 'perfection,' 'treasure in heaven' and discipleship. It is his actual wealth, and his attitude toward it, that is in focus rather than his social behavior; his affluence is a danger to the owner himself, rather than a threat to others." (p. 730).

hyperbolic). So, Jesus moves from calling it hard to labeling it impossible. The point of the saying is the impossibility of the rich entering the Kingdom of heaven. Only when the rich see the impossibility will they seek the grace of God. Their position puts them at great peril. Beyond the texts in the Old Testament that undergird the one-sided prosperity gospel are much darker ones (Psalms 9:18; 10:3, 9; 12:5; 14:6; Isa 41:17; 47:8–11; 53:9). The rich are often the oppressors who do evil whom the prophets often excoriate. They need to be saved from their riches, not simply saved with their riches. It is impossible to simply put on piety personally but continue with business as usual or public affairs as if they have nothing to do with Jesus or God's Kingdom.

If this section started with the notion that only God is good, it continues with the claim that only God can save. The rich have no advantage and no license in their success to suppose they are specially favored by God and then write off the poor as those who are where they are due to their sin and evil natures. Salvation is a human impossibility, for the rich and the poor. It is an illusion to think that any of us have a proper and sufficient relationship with God without the impossible miracle of God's grace coming down from above. In our world, if we want to know how to enter the Kingdom of God, we must understand the kingdom of wealth (Mammon) is a rival god whom we cannot serve along with God.⁷³⁵ Wealth is a peril and an obligation.

For those who supposed success and wealth were clear signs of the favor of God, it would be shocking to suppose it impossible for these, who ("we know") were closer to the Kingdom, to be saved.⁷³⁶ If those who manifest the favor of God by wealth can't be saved, who then can?

(b) A promise of reward (19:27-30)

Peter expresses the thought on the minds of his closest disciples: What about those of **us** who have done what you commanded the rich young ruler to do? We have left all and followed you? What about us?⁷³⁷ If there is treasure in heaven for leaving all, what is our treasure? What about all the affirmations of wealth and honor in the Hebrew Scriptures?⁷³⁸ His description of what they had done is as clear cut as the rich young ruler's claim to have kept all the laws.

Both were correct but not yet understanding that there is more at stake than just doing the commands of God. Jesus will acknowledge and celebrate what the disciples have done and then give them a warning (the parable of the workers in the vineyard). These who have voluntarily become "last" will become "first."⁷³⁹ Yet they will need to beware lest, as "firsts" they become "lasts" (as will happen with Judas). The rich young ruler walks away because he could not face the loss of his possessions. Later the disciples will flee from Jesus because of the threat of sharing in his arrest and death.

This interchange also indicates the connection between observing all God commands and

⁷³⁵ This is one of the few places in Matthew (only 4 times for sure) where the phraseology is "kingdom of God" (in parallel with the "kingdom of heaven"). It shows they are synonymous. Perhaps the reason for "God" in this context is to underline the reality that Mammon (wealth) can be a rival god. (Matt. 6:24).

⁷³⁶ Modern prosperity gospel advocates are such. See Bowler, Kate (2013). *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Salinas, J. Daniel (2017). *Prosperity Theology and the Gospel: Good News or Bad News for the Poor*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson.

⁷³⁷ "We" is emphasized: Ἰδοὺ **ἡμεῖς** ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήσαμεν σοι. τί ἄρα ἔσται **ἡμῖν**;

⁷³⁸ Gundry, *Matthew*: "Thus the question reads, 'Who then can be saved?' and shows that the disciples have understood Jesus well enough to see an apparent contradiction between wealth as a sign of God's favor (as often in the OT) and wealth as an obstacle to entering God's kingdom (so Jesus)." (p. 390).

⁷³⁹ Note the Greek is plural both here and in 20:16: πρῶτοι ("first ones") and ἔσχατοι ("last ones").

rewards. The Roman Catholics have tended to expand the scope of these words into a system of merit and supererogatory works—a road to sainthood. The Protestants have tended to break the link between faith and reward. The one leads into works-righteousness, the other into workless faith. Jesus joins them in a way that avoids both errors.

Salvation is an impossibility. Only God can save and put us on the path to eternal life. But that path entails obedience, the observance of the will of God. For both the rich young ruler and the disciples, God's demand first and foremost is not their doing but their being. You cannot be held captive by wealth and belong to God. Nor can you be held captive by a spiritual pride that thinks it merits the rewards of heaven and thus belong to God. The idol of money and the idol of self-congratulation are both deadly. We are saved by faith. But saving faith yields the fruits and works of the Spirit. Faith can be as dead as unbelief.

Reward is an important word in the calculus of heaven. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, it is used repeatedly (seven times in 6:1-18 dealing with giving away one's substance; and pervasive in the Beatitudes). Rewards for generous giving is promised, so long as it is not done to enhance one's own status, done to be seen by others. Nor does striving in ways that are motivated in part by reward undercut the moral integrity of the action. It depends upon the reward sought and the motive of that seeking ("for my name's sake" Matthew 9:29).

Jesus assumes an eschatology that includes the re-generation or renewal of this world. The future Kingdom of heaven encompasses this earth and its peoples. In that regeneration, the twelve disciples will sit on thrones around the great throne of the Son of Man. They will be "princes" who rule or judge the twelve tribes of Israel. The "treasure" they have includes honor and responsibility in the coming new age. Yet just as the honor of Jesus sitting on his glorious throne is not yet so too is their reward not yet. As Matthew Henry puts it:

"As long as our Master's glory is delayed, it is fit that ours should be so too, and that we should wait for it with an earnest expectation, as of a hope not seen. Rom. 8:24. We must live, and work, and suffer, in faith, and hope, and patience, which therefore must be tried by these delays."⁷⁴⁰

Jesus also indirectly acknowledges another "letting go." It may seem from our perspective the disciples had left very little (a small fishing business; a low-level tax booth etc.). Yet they had left family and home. They made the call of Jesus to follow him first in their lives, even over the love of father, mother and household. In response to that he promises a larger family – and eternal life. Peter's question is answered in ways that likely went far beyond what he imagined.

The proverb at the end of this section leads into the parable that follows. Both put a sobering qualification to this conversation about securing the highest reward that can be sought. On the one hand are the "firsts" who are in power now, sitting in the seats of wealth and status. This world's calculus of the significant people will be turned upside down in the coming age. Many of them will find themselves as "lasts" in that age. At the same time, many of those who are considered "lasts" (insignificants, unqualified, outsiders) will be "firsts" in that age. The most natural referent for this is the contrast between the rich ruler and the poor, homeless disciples.

⁷⁴⁰ Henry, *Commentary* (p. 1713).

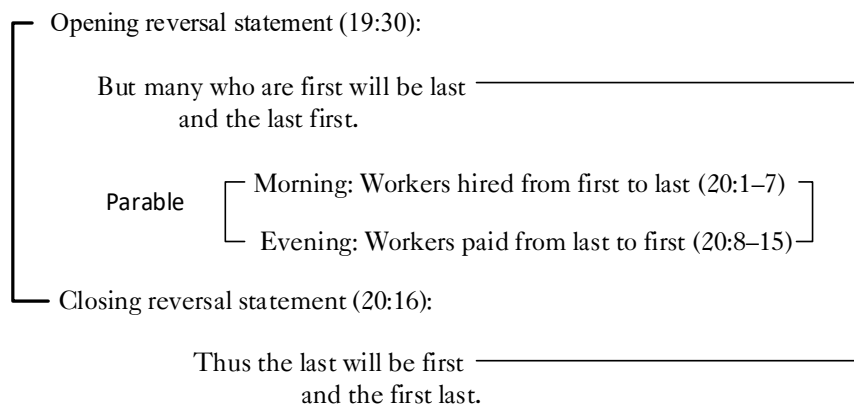
But the following parable gives it greater depth of meaning.⁷⁴¹

The disciples' concern, voiced by Peter, is that they have been "first" in giving up all and following Jesus. Their hope (as we discover in several places) is that they will be "firsts" in the coming kingdom they and Jesus have been proclaiming. The parable Jesus tells is a sobering account. Others may well come in much later and end up getting rewarded as much as those who were up front and first. God does not make contracts and mete out wages on the basis of a bargain struck (for x amount of works for the kingdom, x amount of rewards). What comes isn't actually what we think of as a wage or reward for our effort or sacrifice. It is a free gift of grace.

(c) The Parable of the Laborers and the Vineyard (20:1-16)

The whole section from 19:30 to 20:16 is structured in such a way as to underline the meaning of the reversal Jesus is characterizing:

Structure of Matthew 19:30-20:16



Peter's question is understandably about fairness and justice: what is the fate of those who cast their fate in with Jesus? If belonging to him means letting go of possessions and even family, what does that result in? Jesus' answer is the outcome of significant reward in the age to come, significant reversal of the present age's hierarchy and evaluation. This parable is an explanation of how it is many firsts will be last and many lasts firsts. Jesus does not make this to be "class warfare" in that it is not all firsts and all lasts will be switched. It is "many" will experience this reversal. This should already be clear in that even the rich can be saved (and we have examples of it in both Testaments); and even those who are last can be lost. Many. That is a sobering word. At the same time, the saying indicates many fewer "firsts" will make it, and many more "lasts" will be found in the Kingdom of heaven.

This parable is one of the most difficult to make sense of. This is because it seems to be in tension with the former words on rewards. In his characterization of "compensation" for the

⁷⁴¹ Turner, *Matthew Baker*: "The reversal saying of 19:30 is repeated (with its clauses transposed) in 20:16 as the conclusion of the parable, and so it is clear that the parable completes Jesus's answer to Peter's question in 19:27." (p. 477) The chapter division at 20:1 is unfortunate. The chart following is based on the analysis of Turner (p. 478) showing the interconnection of the passage.

disciples, Jesus seems to be working with some sort of calculus that matches outcomes with sacrifices, the greater for the greater and the less for the less. In other texts final judgment falls unevenly, depending upon the degree of misconduct. "To whom much is given, much is required." But this parable seems to indicate a level, completely equivalent degree of compensation for any and all, the less deserving no less than the more deserving, the firsts and lasts getting the same compensation. Some have labeled this the parable of "the eccentric employer."⁷⁴² Who would reward the very last laborers who worked but an hour the same as a laborer who has worked the full day? What is the point of this strange story?⁷⁴³

The story is of a master who hires numerous day laborers. Five groups of them span the time from 6 am to 5 pm, the last group hired at 4 pm. The contrast is between the last group who worked the least and the other four groups who put in more time and labor and would naturally expect more compensation than the last group. Yet all are paid the same. No one gets less than promised, but some get more than they seem to deserve. None get very much: a denarius for a day of work would leave a person still in the shadow of poverty. It is enough to survive but not to advance. The point does not seem to be about sheer generosity.

The workers are the people of God who are given entrance to the Kingdom of heaven, the gift of eternal life. Those who were first and those who were last get the same wage. This seems to undercut any idea that different degrees of sacrifice and labor for God are rewarded differentially, of some sort of hierarchy of privilege and benefit where some are "saints" and others just ordinary, "minimal" Christians. The points seem to be that God treats everyone fairly; that some get much more than they "deserve"; and that all authentic disciples are given the same compensation for their work.

This is a parable meant to exclude spiritual arrogance, as though the more rigorous rejection of possessions and comfort, the greater the saintliness and the greater the resulting reward and recognition. This undercuts a "celebrity" sort of Christianity. Jesus has assured the disciples their sacrifice and that of those after them will be compensated generously. But "God's treatment of people, his judgment, is not based on human reckoning and human standards of justice."⁷⁴⁴

The Master puts his finger on the problem at the end of the parable: "Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (20:15).⁷⁴⁵ We have an echo to the beginning of this discourse: The master in the parable is "good." The "evil eye" is the eye that looks out without generosity and is envious. In this case the complaint and envy are occasioned by seeing the goodness of the Master given to others. The first hired voice it: "you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." (vs. 12) There is the scandal, the injustice: the Master makes no distinction between his workers.

Envy creeps in when disciples begin the comparison game. It is clear from other passages

⁷⁴² Beare, Francis W. (1982) *The Gospel According to Matthew*. New York: Harper & Row. (p. 401)

⁷⁴³ Herzog, William R. II. (1994) *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. Herzog sees the parable as being subverted and distorted as we have it. It is originally a depiction of the oppression of poor day laborers by a rich landowner, who unfairly does whatever he wants. The reversal of payment, with the first being paid last, is meant as an insult and indication that he can do whatever he wants to keep the workers subjugated. This ideological reading has little to commend it. (pp. 79-97)

⁷⁴⁴ Snodgrass, *Intenet*. (p. 376) Italics in the original.

⁷⁴⁵ Lit.: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρός ἐστὶν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθός εἰμι;

that there are degrees of reward just as there are degrees of judgment. The reality of human nature and conduct is that we all wonder what Peter asked: “What do we get for leaving all and following?” (19:27) We look about to see whether anyone is getting more than we are, more than they deserve in our eyes. We have strong notions of equal pay for equal work, fairness in rewarding different levels of accomplishment and hard work. This parable undercuts that. What we consider “fair” is not what God may consider “fair.”

“God rules by grace, not by desert. The ‘rewards’ which this gospel has so persistently spoken of (see on 5:3–10, 11–12; 6:1–6, 16–18, 19–21; 10:41–42; 19:27–29) are not earned, nor are they proportionate to human effort. The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds (6:26–29) delights to give his servants far more than they could ever deserve from him. It is that principle, rather than the disappointment of the whole-day laborers, which is the main focus of the parable, but their very natural disappointment and sense of unfairness helps the readers to re-examine how far their reactions are still governed by human ideals of deserving rather than by the uncalculating generosity of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom in which the first are last and the last first there is no room for envious comparisons.”⁷⁴⁶

So, we have the two threads: there will be differential rewards for disciples. But disciples are to give up envy and a calculus that is self-centered. They should not get caught being preoccupied with who gets what in the Kingdom of heaven. Instead, disciples are to be content that God who is the only One who is good will reward generously, fairly, and certainly. We are to embrace God’s generosity and mysteriously gracious calculus where many who are “firsts” in our calculation of merit and honor will be last, and many of the “lasts” will be “firsts.”⁷⁴⁷ There is no room for envy or jockeying for position and honor at God’s table. The One who is Good will pour that goodness out on all who are his honored workers.

(5) The Cross and the Cup (20:17-28)

(a) Jesus predicts his death a third time (20:17-19)

In context, this prediction of death and resurrection is a way of indicating how the calculus of the “firsts” and the “lasts” are radically askew. The very “last” in the Roman world would be made up of the scum of the earth who were crucified. Yet that is the path the Son of Man will take. This prediction adds more information: he will be handed over by the religious leaders to the Gentiles to be mocked, scourged, and put to death. It almost reads like a table of contents of what is to come.

If the disciples are thinking that Jerusalem will mean the Son of Man sitting on his glorious throne – and they on twelve thrones next to him, ruling the twelve tribes of Israel, they are in for a shock. Not only they but he will be treated as the lowest of the low. If they are the “firsts” in the kingdom of Heaven, they will be treated as the “lasts” in this world’s kingdoms. As we learn

⁷⁴⁶ France, *Matthew* (p. 748).

⁷⁴⁷ Contra: “This verse [20:16] does not belong to the parable proper.” Hultgren, *Parables* (p. 39). This saying is not free-floating but an integral clue that ties this section together, repeating Matthew 19:30. The parable is an exposition of the proverb’s meaning in the context of Peter’s question about reward.

later, this message was too shocking for them to assimilate and understand. They did not even get the reversal part when God will raise him up as The First.

This illustrates, again, the strange calculus of the Kingdom of heaven. So far as compensation for leaving all to follow Jesus is concerned, there is no room for thinking great spirituality is rewarded with great prosperity and reward. The way into the Kingdom of heaven is one of suffering. The parable of the laborers was a warning against spiritual pride and envy. The story that follows is a warning about spiritual ambition.

There is a thread about leadership and its dangers in this text as well. Who would not like to be among the most honored and respected? Roman society was infected with the Greek passion for honor and reputation. In the Hellenized elite of Jewish Palestine, we find the same sickness. The people who will be responsible for the rejection and murder of Jesus are at the pinnacle of religious leadership. If Matthew is sometimes seen as “anti-Semitic,” this text is a counter point. Matthew repeatedly portrays the religious leadership of Palestine as the responsible agents (27:20-21). Great theological knowledge and high positions among God’s people is no guarantee of wisdom or goodness. In a crime of this sort, it takes the leaders to pull it off.

(b) Greatness in the Kingdom of heaven (20:20-28)

Feeling superior started this longer sequence, with a devout rich young ruler thinking he was only lacking something easily resolved to burnish his sterling record of law-keeping. After all, his spiritual house was in good order and he bore the marks of God’s favor in his prosperity and success. It continued when Peter noted that the one thing lacking in the rich young ruler was precisely what the twelve disciples had done. Perhaps they should feel at the top of the “qualifiers” for eternal life.

In this story we encounter seeking superiority. Spiritual ambition in this sense is an evil, a drive to establish superiority by means of spiritual practices and accomplishments, to be recognized as the greatest in the Kingdom next to Jesus. Such ambition is the fuel of envy, the fertilizer for resentment, the fodder for malcontentment. Comparison is often the mother of all unhappiness. Here it is also the road to spiritual ruin.

Should we be surprised (again) that immediately after Jesus highlights his own coming humiliation in Jerusalem, the disciples focus on the pathway to their own glory and greatness. At this point in their discipleship, there is a hard core deafness to his words about the cross. It is an obtuseness that will only be overcome with the resurrection.

This narrative is a continuation of the theme that offers both promises and warnings in answer to the question of the connection between sacrifices of discipleship and divine rewards.⁷⁴⁸ In contrast with Jesus’ projected sufferings, the Zebedees seek future glory.

In this account it is the mother of James and John who makes the request that her sons sit on the right and left hand of Jesus when he comes into his Kingdom. Her correct theology and beliefs did not keep her from ambition (or them). In Mark’s gospel (10:35), James and John make the request. It may well be that they put their mother up to this request. When Jesus answers the request, he addresses them directly as well (vs. 22). They knew what this request of their mothers was. Jesus knew the Zebedee family well.

⁷⁴⁸ Turner, *Matthew Baker*, notes the connection between the parable of the laborers and this story: “This parable anticipates the problem of Zebedee’s sons—ambitiously seeking the greatest status in the future kingdom (20:20–28).” (p. 481)

Once again, Jesus blunts this drive for rewards in the form of status and honor. The aroma of power, privilege, and prestige fill the atmosphere. Jesus does not deny that there are honors and positions that will be given as well as different levels of rewards. Yet this honor is not his to allocate. If they wanted to be on his right and left hand, then the real honor would have been to be where the two thieves were during his crucifixion. In fact, James and John claim they can share the “cup” Jesus must drain. Jesus does not disagree that they will drain a cup of sorrow and suffering much as he will. But the status of sitting next to him in glory is not something he can bestow.⁷⁴⁹

This interchange ignites the passions of the other disciples against James and John. The indignation is a form of envy. It is a clear indication that the notion of rejoicing in the exaltation of another because of seeing oneself as a “child” or as “last” or “least” in the Kingdom has not yet seeped into the perspectives of the disciples. The aroma of power, authority, status, honor and glory is heavy in their nostrils. They snort out their displeasure that James and John might have beaten them to that privileged status.

Jesus once again, returns and from another angle repeats the message that runs through this whole section of Matthew. The way up is down. The way to be great is not to lord it over others, but to serve them. The “firsts” must become the “lasts” in the Kingdom of heaven. The pattern and model of authority in their larger culture is not to be injected into the community of Jesus. Encouraging, enabling, empowering others rather than wielding power for oneself over others is the secret. To be the “first” among the disciples is to be their “slave”; to be “great” is to be their “servant.” It is the upside-down kingdom.

In the end, the exemplar and model for the disciples is Jesus himself. The meaning of his life and death is the voluntary giving of his life as a “ransom” for many. The demand of the love of neighbor is not limited. The “cup” Jesus would drain is offered to every disciple. Only those who take up their “cross” and go to the place that kills their ambitions (spiritual as well as secular) walk the way of Jesus.

The reason Jesus drains this “cup” is because it means his life is given as “a ransom for many.” That is the primary example of spiritual leadership: a laying down of one’s life in whatever form to see others released from the bondages that restrict them. What makes the contemporary travesty of the misconduct of priest and pastor so horrendous is its absolute contradiction to the spirit and nature of the Jesus they profess. They re-crucify the Lord they profess to follow by harming those they have authority over.

❖ Discipleship: Authority and Its Exercise

Early in the 21st century, power has become the issue. The wider intellectual horizon has been ablaze with the modern critiques of people such as Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault. Their claims: all discourse, all speech including theology, is a secret bid for power. In the wider political scene, the reaction to globalization and the pressures of global crises such as climate change has exacerbated authoritarian political movements and leaders. Democratic institutions seem to be weakening by populist movements as well as the insinuation of technological surveillance and

⁷⁴⁹ Nor can later Christians bestow it. Christian art often has John the Baptist and Mary sitting on either hand of Jesus, interceding for those who pray in need. Such imagery cannot be taken seriously, given this saying. We have no idea who sits there and no commission to guess or speculate.

tracking of huge amounts of information about citizens.

The longer history of Christendom is a picture of the Church increasingly seeking more and more wealth and dominance in the larger culture as a papal Church. While the Church's influence has declined in the West over the last 100 years, we have still witnessed the modern scandals of misuse of religious power in clerical abuses and coverups. Jesus' words on leadership coming on the heels of his words on the cross remind us how much the jostling for position and power can corrupt the heart of discipleship.

There is some question about the translation and meaning of key words in verse 25: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." Two Greek words are involved.⁷⁵⁰ It is significant that, rather than use the simple verbs for "having power over" and "having authority over," the terms are intensified. This suggests a style of leadership that is domineering and authoritarian.

Within the church there have been movements and instances in which "obedience" to elders, abbots or abbesses, pastors, bishops etc. have violated the letter and spirit of Jesus' comment. Some very gifted leaders have dominated their followers (one thinks of the cult around Jim Jones that led to a mass suicide). The so-called "Shepherding" movement of the 1970s-80s demanded "submission" from the sheep to the "shepherds." In the "chain of command" that developed, power was misused and abused.

To be clear: it is not a matter that power or authority are illegitimate or "dirty." Leadership entails power, influence and authority. Without them, leaders can't lead. It is a matter of the goal, manner and spirit of their exercise. To be mentored is a wonderful relationship when there is no abuse of authority or influence. Jesus' word of warning in this case is set within the context of servant-leadership. To be led by a great leader means much gets accomplished that otherwise would not come to pass.

Jesus was a person who exercised authority. He issued commands and directives as well as instructions. He also was one who embraced the cross and set it at the heart of discipleship. Even Paul, in dealing with the Corinthian Christians who seem to be slogging it out in four different groups, brought them back to the foot of the cross (I Corinthians 1-2). The cross was the answer to their competitive disunity and their arrogance. God's wisdom is exemplified in the scandalous reality of a crucified savior as the means of salvation. The way of leadership is the way marked out by the cross.

The way of the cross is a protest against forms of manipulative power that displace the relationship of love we are to have with others. What Jesus gave us in his own path and words is a reality that is not oppressive but liberating because it is connected to a self-giving love that places itself in the service of even the least and the lowest among us. It is not an ideology but an expression that follows the God who loves and serves the least and lowest.



Discipleship: Substitutionary Atonement and Violence

In modern times there has been a great deal of discomfort with views of the meaning of Christ's death as satisfaction or vicarious penal substitution. The problem lies not in the notions

⁷⁵⁰ κατακυριεύω and κατεξουσιάζω. Both verbs are compound with the addition of the preposition, κατὰ. It intensifies the meaning of the simple verb to which it is attached. The simple verbs would have sufficed, if the point was any and every sort of power or authority being exercised.

themselves as in the perceived connection between them and violence, the logic that sees a causal relationship between divine punishment and the justification of human violence, suffering and abuse. At the least, it is said, such views of the atonement dull our sensitivity to the violence that surrounds us – or even idolizes suffering.

But it is not clear that such a connection is valid. We need to receive Jesus' words as stating not only what we need saving from but how that saving takes place. To give a ransom is to make a payment that frees another from bondage. Matthew 16:26 ("What will one give in exchange for one's soul") finds its answer here: Jesus gives his life blood as a ransom in exchange for "the many" (20:28).⁷⁵¹

"The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone."⁷⁵²

The violence exerted against Jesus is the beginning of the end of the violent world humans have made and unleashed upon one another. The modern discomfort with violence goes far beyond the view of the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice but is rooted in a broader perception of the Bible as legitimating violence in unacceptable ways that are integral to the larger narrative of salvation as a whole.⁷⁵³ Often the discomfort is about this portraying a God who inflicts a violent punishment upon his own people, Israel and even upon Jesus and encourages a victim mentality while glorifying suffering.

People sometimes think: if only we could get away from the violent god of the Old

⁷⁵¹ Λύτρον means "ransom payment" – a price paid to release someone from captivity, to redeem them. ἀντί with the genitive means in the place of or in exchange for (sometimes, for the benefit of).

⁷⁵² John R. W. Stott (2006) *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books (p. 159). MacNall, Joshua M. (2019): "To sum up, every version of 'mere' penal substitution agrees that Christ acted and experienced certain things both in our place and instead of us. Likewise, all agree that Christ takes on the penalty for human sin even while this penalty can be described in diverse ways. Finally, all accounts maintain varying levels of divine sanction behind the penalty despite the fact that 'wicked men' (Acts 2:23) were to blame for the injustice of the crucifixion. All three components—substitution, penalty, divine sanction—allow room for diversity as one moves from the broad hall into the particular rooms of specific theologians." in *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic. (p.107). For careful accounts see: Hans Boersma (2004), *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; Fleming Rutledge (2015) *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

⁷⁵³ For example: "The full canonical shape of the Christian Bible, for what it is worth, still concludes with the judgment scene in Revelation, in which the Lamb that was slain returns as the heavenly warrior with a sword for striking down the nations. In short, violence is not the only model of behavior on offer in the Bible, but it is not an incidental or peripheral feature, and it cannot be glossed over. The Bible not only witnesses to the innocent victim and to the God of victims, but also to the hungry God who devours victims and to the zeal of his human agents." John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 19–20.

Testament, or Puritan Protestantism's angry god, even away from all monotheistic religions, we could find refuge in a world free of gods and conflict. The embracing of atheism in the 20th century by Communist and Maoist ideologies proved that a false hope. It turned into the bloodiest century in human history.

This is an issue that is as full of problems as a hedgehog is full of prickles. What needs to be said at this point is this: Jesus is the ultimate solution for violence. He absorbed it in his person in the crucifixion without paying it back. Without glorifying suffering or victimization, without justifying human violence and vengeance, he took the penalty for human sin and in exchange opened a door to life for all who seek liberation from their own violence and sin. In exchange for the violence and sin of the many, he paid the ransom. No one else has to do that.

As for the core metaphors of the notion that history and the human soul are caught in a cosmic conflict which cannot be resolved without violence, we find that throughout the Old and New Testaments. The struggle is not simply caused by economic, political, ethnic, gender, racial divides or lack of knowledge. There is a much larger narrative of sin and redemption, of hostility and hospitality, of alienation and reconciliation. The final eschatological resolution comes with a final violent overcoming of violence itself. Too often we underestimate the positive side of violence. Sometimes constructive violence is necessary to put an end to destructive violence. Just so is the picture of God's active, persistent, faithful engagement with sin and the violent world we have created. The eschatological hope is for a world without alienation or violence. The end of the world and of our history is an eternal embrace of peace. But the end of violence comes by violence, but not a violence ginned up by human passions and militarism.

"The violence of the Rider is the righteous judgment ... of the one called 'Faithful and True' (Revelation 19:11). Without such judgment there can be no world of peace, of truth, and of justice: terror (the 'beast' that devours) and propaganda (the 'false prophet' that deceives) must be overcome, evil must be separated from good, and darkness from the light. These are the causes of violence, and they must be removed if a world of peace is to be established." ...

"After all, the cross is not forgiveness pure and simple, but God's setting aright the world of injustice and deception. The polarity is there because some human beings refuse to be 'set aright.' Those who take divine suffering (the cross) as a display of divine weakness that condones violence—instead of divine grace that restores the violator—draw upon themselves divine anger (the sword) that makes an end to their violence. The violence of the Rider on the white horse, I suggest, is the symbolic portrayal of the final exclusion of everything that refuses to be redeemed by God's suffering love. For the sake of the peace of God's good creation, we can and must affirm this divine anger and this divine violence, while at the same time holding on to the hope that in the end, even the flag bearer will desert the army that desires to make war against the Lamb." ...

"Redemption cannot, therefore, be an act of pure positing but entails negation and struggle, even violence. First God suffers violence on the cross for the salvation of the world. Then, after God's patience with chaotic powers who refuse to be redeemed by the cross has come to an end, God inflicts violence against the stubbornly violent to restore creation's original peace. Hence in the

Apocalypse the creative word at the dawn of creation becomes the double edged sword at the sunset before creation's new and unending day (Revelation 19:15)"⁷⁵⁴

(6) The Blind receive their sight (20:29-34)

The spiritual blindness of the disciples stands in stark contrast with the two physically blind men on the road-side just outside Jericho. While James and John (with their mother) ask for seats of prestige and power, what they needed to ask for was new spiritual sight. The power to heal blindness for these two who immediately follow Jesus once again demonstrates the ability to have blindness of all sorts removed. These blind men are present at this place because it was a major route for pilgrims coming from the north via Perea and the Jordan valley to Jerusalem. Passover pilgrims would bring with them alms and offerings for the Temple. They would not only have the means but likely the motivation to fulfill the laws dealing with almsgiving.

It is also the route the original Israelites took as they entered Palestine after the death of Moses. Here the new "Moses" traverses up the same route, recapitulating Israel's path to bring into being the new people of God. This time in Jerusalem will be different from his prior visits. Now he will acknowledge the identity his inner circle of disciples had already confessed.

Surprisingly, it is this very pilgrimage crowd that seeks to silence the cries of the blind. The disciples had sought to prevent children from distracting Jesus and tried to silence the shouts of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-18). But not here. Nor does Jesus silence this messianic recognition. Just as Jesus did not allow his disciples to determine his actions, he does not allow the crowd to do it either. Instead, he asks the blind beggars what they want. This would clarify they had heard of him and discover whether they would ask for more than a few shekels to survive the next day. These, who are among the least and last in society, go for the one thing most desired in their lives.

As a result, this large crowd, among whom is Jesus and the disciples, will witness a miracle. The blind beggars address Jesus as the Son of David. He does not repudiate the identification. They may be physically blind, but they see more clearly who Jesus is than the sighted. His response is compassion and mercy. He is the merciful messiah and touches their eyes.

If we wonder how it is that Jesus is hailed as the Son of David on entrance to Jerusalem, in part it is due to the presence of these two healed beggars and the stories told about what had happened just outside Jericho. In this case he does not tell the men he healed to keep it quiet (in contrast with 9:27-31).⁷⁵⁵ This is no longer the time to be quiet since things are running quickly toward the end.

This event's details would have run through the surrounding crowd like wildfire. Many who might not have known that this person was the Jesus of Nazareth, of whom they had heard many things, would now know who he is and that he is in their Passover pilgrimage crowd. When they come to Jerusalem, telling the story of the healing of the blind (and other stories), they are primed for the symbolic entrance he makes to the city.

⁷⁵⁴ Miroslav Volf (1996) *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (pp. 296, 298-299, 300)

⁷⁵⁵ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*: "Note that there is no longer any attempt to keep the so-called messianic secret: the blind men are not instructed to be quiet (contrast 8:4; 9:30). Is this because the public ministry is just about finished?" (p. 108).

(7) First Day at Jerusalem (21:1-23:39)

(a) Hailed as Son of David, King (21:1-11)

This begins the most important week in the most important life ever lived. This day of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is celebrated today as Palm Sunday. We celebrate along with the first crowds and disciples in recognition of who Jesus is. He is the Messiah King who comes in peace. The large crowds acclaim him as the Son of David outside the gates of Jerusalem. The time for quiet and concealment are over. Jesus makes a statement with this entrance. In the throng of pilgrims on foot, someone up on a donkey's back means to be seen.

Matthew ties the symbolic act of entering on a "donkey" (ass) to elicit the text of Zechariah 9:9.⁷⁵⁶ He rides no stallion as did Alexander the Great entering Jerusalem on his great steed, Bucephalus. This is not the mighty warrior King, come to cast the occupying Romans from their perch in the Fortress Antonia. It is an expression of humility and even sorrow. Many see an echo to Solomon's riding a mule to his coronation (1 Kings 1:33-44). He is a modest messiah.

This is an arranged gesture. He had no need to ride since he had walked the 100 or so miles from Galilee, including the 15 miles rising up 3500 feet from Jericho. Jesus sends his disciples ahead to borrow the donkey in such a way that seems to be prearranged (perhaps with one of his followers). Two animals are brought, the mother and her foal.⁷⁵⁷ Disciples place garments on them, and then Jesus sits on the garments placed on the foal.⁷⁵⁸ The cloaks and palm branches also suggest royal recognition.⁷⁵⁹ When Jehu was recognized as King cloaks were laid down (2 Kings 9:13). In the time of the Maccabees palm branches were carried in the celebrations (1 Macc. 13:51; 2 Macc. 10:7).

⁷⁵⁶ E. P. Sanders, (1985) *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press: "To conclude: the entry was probably deliberately managed by Jesus to symbolize the coming kingdom and his own role in it. I account for the fact that Jesus was not executed until after the demonstration against the temple by proposing that it was an intentionally symbolic action, performed because Jesus regarded it to be true (he would be king, but a humble one) and for the sake of the disciples..." (p. 308).

⁷⁵⁷ In this case the two make sense, given what we know about previously unriden foals. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* comments: "And the tumult with which Jesus would enter Jerusalem would make such accompaniment all the more necessary (see Winterbotham). There is thus an *ipso facto* probability that historically two animals were involved in the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem." (p. 594)

⁷⁵⁸ Some moderns have thought Matthew was saying Jesus rode both animals, due to his not understanding the parallelism of Zech. 9:9. The synoptic parallels mention only one animal, the colt on which no one had previously ridden. In considering the options, Turner, *Matthew*, comments: "More likely, Matthew means that Jesus rides sitting on the garments spread on the colt (cf. Mark 11:7; Luke 19:35; John 12:14), although the garments have been spread on both mother and colt." (p. 496); Gundry, *Matthew*: "Addition of the prefix leads to a change of Mark's ἐπ' αὐτόν, 'on him,' to ἐπάνω αὐτῶν, 'on top of them,' which probably refers to the saddle garments rather than to the animals. ἐπάνω is a favorite of Matthew (7,1). It is doubtful that he intends his readers to visualize a trick rider balancing himself on two animals at the same time." (p. 410); France, *Matthew*: "The author of this gospel was not ignorant of OT idiom, and would surely have recognized parallelism when he saw it." (p. 778).

⁷⁵⁹ Keener, *Matthew*: "Whereas Jesus by riding the donkey implies his dismissal of revolutionary aspirations, the crowd's use of palm branches, an allusion to the Maccabean triumphs, implies that they still see him in more revolutionary messianic terms. The garments (21:8) also may function as royal acclamation (2 Kings 9:13)." (p. 494).

The shouts of the accompanying crowd come from the royal Psalm 118:25-26. “Hosanna (O save) to the Son of David” are words of blessing. It may be a way of saying “praise to the Son of David.”⁷⁶⁰ The phrase “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” is also from Psalm 118. It might be used normally for any and every pilgrim arriving in the holy city. But in this context, it echoes the blind beggars’ recognition of Jesus as the son of David, the coming King who would hopefully restore Israel. Finally, they were thinking, the sort of King we really need.

We should note this is not the same crowd that later cries out for Jesus’ execution. These are the pilgrims who had seen the miracle of the healing of the blind shortly before. This crowd included the group of disciples who had come with him from Galilee. They knew there was more than just another pilgrim riding that colt into Jerusalem. Their joy and hopes were unleashed. With the tens if not hundreds of thousands present from all over the known world, there were others present with a different agenda.

This was not hidden to the rest of the city. While there would be tens of thousands of pilgrims entering, this event shook the city: “Who is this?” The crowd answered: “This is the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” The whole city was disturbed (literally “shaken,” σείω). Such a popular affirmation was noticed even by the powers that be. This was always a time when volatile things could happen, given the discontent accompanied by eschatological hopes. A small spark brings about a very large fire.

(b) Jesus at the Temple (21:12-17)

That spark could easily happen in the Temple. The Romans looked down into the outer courtyard of the Temple from the fortress, Antonia. They knew that charismatic figures could well whip up the crowds, surrounded as they were by the most sacred signs and artifacts of Israel. Jesus was just such a person. When he steps into its courtyard, he immediately creates a ruckus, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and casting out both those selling and buying.⁷⁶¹ The money exchange was for changing various regional currencies into the shekels needed to pay the temple tax or purchase sacrificial animals.

This text is often cited as the fly in the ointment for pictures of Jesus as the meek and mild other-worldly pacifist. Anger boils over at what is happening. Jesus may also be enacting this as part of the coming of the Kingdom. The end of Zechariah 14:21 indicates there would “no longer be a merchant in the house of the Lord Almighty.” So, this might be a symbolic action signaling the end of the sacrificial system. Without the proper money, pilgrims could not pay the Temple tax or purchase sacrificial animals.

The unfortunate use of this text has been to stereotype Jews through the centuries as money-grubbing cheats who extract extortionate fees from Gentiles. Shakespeare’s Shylock epitomizes this. It has been a self-fulfilling portrait: usury laws prevented Christians from making interest-bearing loans and many professions were closed to Jews. The result was Jewish banking and over

⁷⁶⁰ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*: “... it is reasonable to infer that in the first century ‘hosanna’ could mean ‘praise.’ (p. 125).

⁷⁶¹ It might have been more general than worshippers from abroad securing correct currency and needed sacrificial animals. This could refer to all sorts of commercial activity in which the temple treasurers were engaged in buying supplies for the temple and merchants purchasing items people had donated to the Temple. Having stalls in an outer court may have seemed natural, following Hellenistic agora patterns. Nolland, *Matthew* notes this suggestion though in the end sees them as licensed merchants (pp. 843-844).

time, thereby, the confirmation of the greed of Jews.

It is not clear what the issue was that provoked such action. Many have seen it as the abuse of commerce, charging excessive fees for sacrificial doves, thus placing a great burden on the pious poor. But it seems to be the location of these activities: in the very precincts where Gentile god-fearers were confined if they came to worship God, a not so subtle denigration of Gentile foreigners.⁷⁶² The fact that the buyers were cast out along with the sellers suggests it is where this is happening that is the issue.

This seemingly “out of character” action of Jesus reminds us how different he is than we are. There is a zeal for the house of the Lord we know little about in our day and age. The expectation of the end days included the purification of the Temple. This too may be part of his own self-identity, fulfilling the words of Malachi 3:1-4 where the Lord comes suddenly to his Temple:

“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.” (Mal. 3:2)

In addition, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 56:7, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” and Jeremiah 7:11, “But you [emphatic] are making it a ‘robbers’ den [σπήλαιον ληστῶν].”⁷⁶³ Its purpose was being subverted. Some see this as labeling it as a corrupt, exploitative money-making machine for the wealthy elite Priestly families that ran it. Some see this as indicating the Temple was being turned into a “nationalist stronghold” with revolutionary intent. Whatever the reference points to, it is clear the Temple leadership, with their commercial activities, had lost sight of the Temple’s main purpose. It was a place where people came to meet God, not to make market exchanges, however necessary those might be for the sacrificial and tax system.

Several details are important for his disciples. This was an action he did, not his disciples (nor did he commission them to follow in his steps). This is not the beginning of a popular protest. He was not seeking to take over the Temple by force. If we take up the club to purify the house of the Lord, we better be sure we are commissioned to do so. Note also he does not touch or hit the persons at the stalls or move from the outer to the inner sanctuary to block the activity of the Levites and Priests. This is not stopping the sacrifices or worship of the inner temple on the grounds the Temple worship was illegitimate. It is another indication that property has less value than persons in the ethic of Jesus.

Isaiah 56 had foreseen a day when the foreigner and the eunuch, formerly banned from the Temple would be welcomed. The deformed, the lame, blind, deaf and disabled were restricted within the Temple precincts. Yet the blind and lame come to Jesus and he heals them—in the Temple—granting them full access to the Temple. Children there took up the refrain from their parents: “Hosanna to the Son of David.” It was a riveting occasion for the many pilgrims pressing into the Temple.

The chief priests and scribes, protectors and stewards of the Temple and Torah, were

⁷⁶² France, *Matthew*: “It is where the trade is being carried out rather than how that is the focus of his displeasure. And that means that the protest is directed not so much against the traders themselves but against the priestly establishment who had allowed them to operate within the sacred area.” (p. 784)

⁷⁶³ The question of how to translate and understand the reference to ληστής [bandits, robbers, highwayman, revolutionary, guerrilla] has commentators coming down in many different directions.

witnesses to the “marvelous”⁷⁶⁴ things Jesus did and to the echo on the children’s lips of the Triumphal entrance. Rather than being curious or convinced God was in their midst in a special way, they are angered by all this affirmation and implications of the identity of Jesus. They felt Jesus should repudiate their praise (since, of course, Jesus obviously could not be the promised Son of David). There is a great mismatch between what they expected and what they witnessed in front of them in “their” Temple.

(c) Cursing of the Fig Tree (21:18-22)

This is the third symbolic act in this sequence. His entrance on a colt and his disruption of the commercial activity in the Temple were the first two. This “acted parable” is one of judgment on what Jerusalem with its alliance with Rome and its Temple economy had become in the larger economy of Israel. Because they were not producing the results (“fruit”) that they were supposed to, they will be cursed and destroyed just as is this fruitless fig tree. The leadership that runs Jerusalem has not recognized its true king, nor has it arranged the affairs of the Temple to be a house of prayer for all the nations. It faces the judgment of God for its blindness and subversion of the Temple.

Questions about the fig tree complicate understanding what is going on. Apparently at Passover time (March-April), fig trees are leafing. Early fruit may well be on the tree, even before leaves are fully developed. When the leaves are fully developed one expects fruit. Perhaps, this was a tree that appeared fully leafed. In that state it appears to promise fruit. But on closer inspection, there were none.

It was profession without fulfillment, similar to what John the Baptist demanded: fruits that are suitable accompaniments of repentance. It is easy to say, ‘I believe’ or ‘I repent’. It is another to see those words turned into changed actions and habits. In the coming parable of the vineyard, this very point will be made (21:33-43). The multiple rejections and resistance of the Jerusalem leadership during this week is indicative of fruitlessness.

This is what happens when “religion” of any sort, however orthodox, becomes fruitless. The seven Churches of Revelation (2-3) are repeatedly challenged with the words: “I know your works” and other comments about “works.”⁷⁶⁵ Not “your faith.” The focus is on what faith has led those communities to do. Living faith issues in positive actions and effects. For the seven churches, the question is about what fruits (effects) they bear in their larger communities. To be sure, this is also an individual matter of the fruits of the Spirit. But here the focus is not personal but social – the way in which collective religious groups have been subverted from their intended purpose and service and no longer have the effects on human life that such shared faith should.

The symbolic acts of overturning the commercial tables in the Temple and this curing and withering of the fig trees seem to be commentaries on each other. As Waetjin has noted:

The two incidents are interdependent and have bearing on each other in

⁷⁶⁴ This adjective is found only here in the New Testament: θαυμάσιος. It echoes the LXX marvelous deeds of God, especially in the Exodus (3:20, 15:11, 34:10). In effect this identifies “the children’s praise as a repetition of the contribution of the children to the song of Moses and the Israelites in Ex. 15. In any case, God is the one addressed in the psalm [118:14]. The ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ of the children is their recognition and affirmation of what God is doing and is thus fitting praise to God.” Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 848).

⁷⁶⁵ Rev. 2:2, 5, 19, 22, 23, 26; 3:1, 2, 8, 15.

terms of both comparison and contrast. Scrutinizing all things in the temple on the previous day corresponds to Jesus looking for fruit to satisfy his hunger. Like the fig tree, the temple is intended to serve the needs of human beings. But while a fig tree can produce fruit only in its season, the temple as an institution that mediates divine-human relationships cannot be, indeed must not be, regulated by the cycles of nature. ... When, like the fig tree, it shows only leaves, it has lost its integrity, it is no longer fulfilling the purpose and therefore stands under divine judgment. The cursing of the fig tree symbolizes the condemnation of the temple institution which, as the central systemic structure of Judaism, has been regulating the religious, political, economic, and social life of the Jewish people.⁷⁶⁶

Prayer and faith are immediately commented on, given the disciples' amazement at this deathly outcome for the fig tree. There are depths to the reality and power of prayer that most of us do not understand. We pray with as little-faith as did these early disciples. When we see this-worldly, powerful results such as this we are astonished. Astonished at a person who was in such contact with God that just a simple word was sufficient to wither a fig tree. Do we know such a person? Do we want to be around such a person? What about us: can we pray and see results that manifest the Kingdom of God? If the old Temple is no longer a place where prayer is central, then this act is an indication that the place where God can be found is somewhere else.

The point of this comment on faith and prayer is at least about how things impossible for humans are possible with God. It is quite possible, as was the case here, to have the form of godliness but deny its power. Herod the Great had completely renovated the Temple. It gleamed with splendor worthy of the living God. Its priestly cohorts came and went; its musical Levites sang the sacred Psalms; the crowds pressed in with glad sacrifices and offerings to touch the hem of God's garments and have their lives changed. Boat-loads of religion. But how much transformation? When we have other "gods" before the Lord, our religious trappings cannot hide the nakedness of our spiritual life.

The chief failure was the eclipse of prayer by the business and status interests of the powerful families of Jerusalem. It was a prosperous and rewarding venture. All the rites and rituals—and a good profit as well. What's not to like? Yet where there is faith, with or without rites and rituals, there is no failure in the kingdom of God. Nor is there fruitlessness.

The reference to removing "this" mountain probably has the Mount of Olives next to Jerusalem in sight. Even more than just having faith to do something humanly impossible (as in Matt. 17:20) may be in view. "Not only ... but even" seems to suggest something even more dramatic (perhaps echoing Zechariah 14:3-5): the leveling of the Mount of Olives may foreshadow the restoration of salvation (as the fig tree foreshadows judgment).

In this context one of the most dramatic promises about prayer appears. It raises the same questions in the minds of disciples about prayer that the Sermon on the Mount (7:7) must have stimulated: Anything we ask? Or anything we ask according to God's will?⁷⁶⁷ Jesus says: "if you have faith and do not doubt...all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." The scope

⁷⁶⁶ Herman J. Waetjen (1989). *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press (p. 182).

⁷⁶⁷ Many have wrestled with this tension. See C. S. Lewis (2014) "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer" in *Christian Reflections*. New York: HarperOne (pp. 142–151).

and depth of that is astonishing! It seems to have no limits except that of the faith of the disciple. It seems to be an ideal text to legitimate the “name it and claim” theology.⁷⁶⁸ It seems to suggest God is like a giant ATM machine, if you only have the proper faith-codes to enter. It seems to suggest that, if the good things we want and pray for do not come, that is due to our lack of faith.

Heaven knows, there are hundreds of things we want removed and thrown into the sea: third world debt, AIDS in Africa, homelessness, abortion, sexual trafficking, racism, hate crimes, drunk driving, unjust wars, environmental destruction, pornography, terrorism, drug resistant microbes, birth defects, school shootings, crushing poverty, famine, ethnic cleansing, brutal dictators etc. Equally hundreds of good things we want instead: excellent health care for all, human rights, prison reform, adequate housing for all, productive employment, clean water and air, freedom from crime, healing from genetic defects, justice systems that are just, fair wages, world peace etc. All we need do is ask, in faith, without doubting.

Yet we know not only from our experience and that of people like Paul (I Cor. 12:7-8) and the wider teaching of Scripture not all faith-filled petitions are granted as prayed. God is not like an ATM machine when the right codes are entered, spits out the asked for benefit. Prayer is directed toward the future. As petition, it is a request that the marks of the coming Kingdom be manifest in the present (justice, peace, forgiveness, salvation, the Spirit’s fullness). It is directed toward the future God is bringing into being.

We have been given the dignity of physical action and prayer, both of which produce real effects in our space and time world. We can contribute to the course of events in both these ways. As C. S. Lewis says:

“The kind of causality we exercise by work is, so to speak, divinely guaranteed, and therefore ruthless. By it we are free to do ourselves as much harm as we please. But the kind which we exercise by prayer is not like that; God has left Himself a discretionary power. Had He not done so, prayer would be an activity too dangerous for man and we should have the horrible state of things envisaged by Juvenal: ‘Enormous prayers which Heaven in anger grants.’

“Prayers are not always—in the crude, factual sense of the word—‘granted’. This is not because prayer is a weaker kind of causality, but because it is a stronger kind. When it ‘works’ at all it works unlimited by space and time. That is why God has retained a discretionary power of granting or

⁷⁶⁸ “God wants us to move beyond naïve belief in an all-powerful god who magically rescues us from all our problems and makes us happy. This is the health and wealth god, the 10-steps-to-a-full-life god. This is the triumphalist god of social reformers who imagine that with a little more prayer and social elbow grease, we can establish a pure outpost of the kingdom in our day. This is the god who has nothing better to do than to make us happy or make the world a better place to live. The religion that emerges when we worship this god is, in the end, a religion whose totem is the self. It is a religion about my life, my problems, my happiness, or our political life, our social problems, and our nation’s well-being.” Mark Galli, “Serving a Two-Handed God: How We Love Our Neighbor Depends on What We Think Divine Power Looks Like,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 53, No. 4 April, 2009 (p. 33).

refusing it; except on that condition prayer would destroy us.”⁷⁶⁹

In prayer, we align ourselves with the purposes of God. God has chosen to do some things only through the agency of human beings. God has willed the creation into existence and invited our free participation in tending to that creation. To be active and effective partners with God in that we have to see the vision of that future kingdom of God and pray in alignment with its qualities and purposes. In prayer we rebel against the evil that has infected creation and the status quo as things already headed for destruction. Sometimes that means we do not yet understand either God’s intentions or timing. Robust faith is needed, but such faith is not to be confused with ignorant faith or simple positive thinking. Nor is it a matter of how passionately we shout in prayer as though the louder we are, the deeper the emotion, the greater the faith and the more certain the answer.

In addition, this comment of Jesus is balanced with his comments on persistence in prayer (Matthew 7:7-12; Luke 18:2-5). Persistence is a means to a growth in faith, in patience, and even in becoming aware of what we genuinely desire. At times, we learn why God is not granting what and as we ask (as Paul did in his thorn in the flesh). It also fosters a gratitude when the answer comes after long persistence. Sometimes, it is the stimulus that brings an awareness of something we can do that will be a partial answer to what we are praying to happen. Prayer, after all, is a conversation, a dialogue (sometimes with God’s seeming silence). Prayer taps God’s willingness and ability to act in our situations in ways beyond our ability. We wait on God even as we ask.

(d) The Authority of Jesus Questioned (21:23-27)

Two groups who were guardians and administrators of Temple affairs confront Jesus: the “chief priests” and the “elders of the people” (Mark and Luke add “the scribes”).⁷⁷⁰ The real question the Sadducees wanted to ask (and discredit) was: Are you the messiah? The messiah would have authority over the Temple. People thinking Jesus was the messiah was a danger to their control and position. But they did not come at it directly. Instead, they asked another question, meant to expose him as a fake.

They are upset by what he has been doing and saying. Their question is a challenge: “By what authority does he do these things?” Their intent is to make Jesus look bad, to be a populist adventurer with no real authority. Their tacit assumption is that, not being a certified Rabbi priest, he should not be playing a public role in the Temple.

Jesus’ response or riposte is a counter question about John the Baptist and the authority. It

⁷⁶⁹ C. S. Lewis (1994) *God in the Dock*. New York: HarperOne. (p. 107). See also: Calvin, *Harmony Vol. 3*: “This passage shows also that the true test of *faith* lies in *prayer*. If it be objected, that those prayers are never heard, *that mountains should be thrown into the sea*, the answer is easy. Christ does not give a loose rein to the wishes of men, that they should desire any thing at their pleasure, when he places *prayer* after the rule of faith; for in this way the Spirit must of necessity hold all our affections by the bridle of the word of God, and bring them into obedience. Christ demands a firm and undoubting confidence of obtaining an answer; and whence does the human mind obtain that confidence but from the word of God? We now see then that Christ promises nothing to his disciples, unless they keep themselves within the limits of the good pleasure of God.” (pp. 19-20).

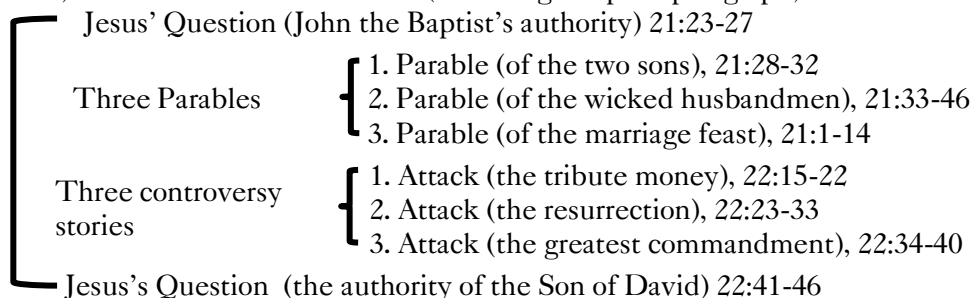
⁷⁷⁰ Matthew pairs these two groups repeatedly in action against Jesus: 26:3, 47; 27:1, 3, 12, 20. The “chief” priests seem to be the current high priest and any who had previously occupied the position along with other leading priests. The “elders” of the people likely were heads of the most influential families who also sat on the Sanhedrin.

exposes their own lack of integrity. Rather than being committed to the truth, they are committed to their position and standing. If they say, from God, the response will logically be why they did not obey him and repent? If they say, from some human source, the crowds, who revere John, will respond with hostility. Their concern is not with the truth but their own continuing authority. Their minds already are made up about the identity and deviancy of Jesus. They are seeking a way of undercutting him.

Matthew has closely identified Jesus with John. So, any conceding that he was a prophet sent by God would provide the basis for attributing the same authority to Jesus. They equivocate: “We do not know.” This is strategic communication: an agnostic answer as if there were not plenty of evidence on the table. It is not genuine ignorance but determined resistance. They could see clearly what the implications were of either answer.

(e) Three More Parables of the Kingdom (21:28-22:14)

The opening salvo questioning the right of Jesus to act as he has done in the Temple is now addressed in more detail with three parables, three attacks and finally Jesus’ own counterattack (21:28-22:46). It can be charted as follows (including the prior paragraph):



Three juridical parables quickly focus the meaning of Jesus and the times that were at hand. They are warnings about the nature of the decisive moment that faces these religious leaders.

The first focuses on the time of John the Baptist and the contrasting responses of people. The second has a focus on Jesus and the consequences that lie ahead for the Israelite leadership and Jerusalem for its determined resistance. The third foreshadows the incorporation of all sorts of people into the Kingdom of God and the rejection of those of the “people of God” who rejected the invitation through Christ. They form an increasing crescendo of denunciation.

[1] The parable of the two sons (21:28-32)

One son declines but later obeys; the other agrees but later disobeys: pretended obedience vs. delayed obedience. There are echoes of the parable of the prodigal son. This one is about responses to John the Baptist and now to Jesus. The leaders of Israel claim to be serving the Living God but are not. They pretend obedience and claim it loudly. They have the markings of religiosity and piety, the positions and standing of preeminent leaders of Israel, yet are far from God. Words are not enough. It is not what people say they will do but what in the end they do that marks the authenticity of their faith. Talk and external appearances are cheap. Listening to the voice of God through his prophet and his son and doing the will of God is what counts.

The first son represents the tax-collectors and prostitutes who are lax in the law, but later

come to repentance under the preaching of John the Baptist.⁷⁷¹ A late coming to repentance is better than a false start that never repents. The second son represents the chief priests and elders who are religious experts and ritual performers, who profess religious devotion but refused the voice of John the Baptist. Those who seem to be the very last to enter the Kingdom will do so before those who seem to be the very first to enter. It is not religious profession or pious passion that counts. Only heeding the voice and doing the will of God. Because these leaders rejected John, they put themselves at the end of the line. Faith entails obedience. True doctrine and correct rituals are worthless without hearty trust and obedience.⁷⁷²

The parable holds out hope since its reversal of entrance protocols means there is still opportunity for the religious leaders to come to their senses and repent. If they don't, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Initial responses are often not final responses. The resistance to Jesus' person and message still can change (and will for some in the Sanhedrin). Yet in answering Jesus' question correctly, the religious leaders pronounce judgment on themselves.

This parable is built on the assertion that John the Baptist's movement was from God – and Jesus own continuation of that call to repentance is the way of righteousness (21:32) that leads to the kingdom of God. For both, the authority they bear is from God.

[2] The parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-46)

Matthew's telling of this parable (in common with Mark and Luke) emphasizes the rising importance of the servants the Master sends to his tenants as well as their increasing violent mistreatment. It is a strange tale, to say the least.

In it the Master keeps miscalculating the tenants' resistance to sharing the crop they have tended. He keeps sending embassies to receive his rent, only to have them beaten or killed. When they had done it to two sets of slaves, he concludes the only one they will respect is his son. But this leads to an even bolder and deadlier idea: kill the son and seize the vineyard for themselves. No landlord. No heir. Theirs. Simple.⁷⁷³

In Matthew, the chief priests and elders draw the conclusion as to what the Master of the vineyard will do: he will bring those original tenants to a wretched end and let the vineyard out to new tenants who will respect him and their obligation to hand over a share of the fruit. As was the case of David with Nathan, the leaders convict themselves by their own words. Like Nathan, Jesus will drive that point home.

The slaves sent to Israel have been the prophets who have brought God's word. But rather than heed them, Israel has misused them and even killed them. Now his son is in their midst, proclaiming the good news of the arrival of the Kingdom of God and they will kill him. The result will be exactly as the chief priests and elders have said: God will bring judgment on Israel and

⁷⁷¹ This is not about Jews vs. Gentiles, but "observant" strict law-keeping Jews and the Jewish people of the land who, by their occupations, are "sinners." It is an intra-Jewish distinction.

⁷⁷² Luther, *Works Vol. 35*: "Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly." (p. 370) See *Works Vol. 68*: "'The closer to Rome, the worse the Christians.' 'More Christians go to heaven from the gallows than from the church cemetery.' This is a sarcastic saying, yet it is true." (p. 110)

⁷⁷³ For differences between the Synoptics on this parable see, Snodgrass, *Intent*, p. 282.

this time give the vineyard to another people who will render the fruit of the vineyard.

In the end of this section, Jesus pronounces that very judgment: “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it.” (vs. 43) This foreshadows what happens in Acts as the transition from a national people to a church happens, with the Samaritans and Gentiles being given a welcome by the Spirit and the Apostles.

It needs to be noted that the context is the conflict between Jesus and the Temple leadership, not between Jesus and Judaism. The church will be made up of Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. The Jews are not sloughed off.

In addition, “a people” (ἔθνος) is singular, not plural. The referent seems to be that community of people (however diverse) who go beyond religious pretensions and profession and produce the fruits of the Kingdom. It is as much a warning to those in the Church as it was originally to these Jewish practitioners. Where the Church’s leadership and followers become similarly fruitless, they also will have the Kingdom of God taken from them and given to another.

At the end of the parable, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22 as prophetic of what is to come. We can see this parable as having the same message as the lament over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:28-29) where Psalm 118 is quoted again. Both focus on religious leaders rejecting their messiah and the dire consequences.

[3] The parable of the wedding banquet (22:1-14)

This parable has similar parallels in the Gospel of Thomas and Luke. Yet there are quite significant differences in detail, suggesting that this might have been a story, reused on several occasions to fit the audience and circumstance.⁷⁷⁴ Matthew’s version is much “harsher” and darker than Luke’s.⁷⁷⁵ In Matthew the first group of invitees who decline and who kill those inviting them have their city destroyed as a new group of both bad and good are invited (perhaps foreshadowing the fate of Jerusalem). In addition, there is an improperly dressed guest who is cast out of the banquet.

The context is the dialog that is happening between Jesus and the religious leaders. In a king’s banquet, the elite of the country (the wealthy and powerful) would be invited. To turn down such an invitation would be unthinkable, tantamount to a prelude to insurrection. Attendance would be an expression of loyalty and obeisance. The Kingdom Jesus brings is like a banquet.

⁷⁷⁴ Of 223 words in Matthew, only 7 are identical with Luke and 14 lexically the same but grammatically different. In Luke the giver of the banquet is a man and it is a simple banquet, not a wedding party given by a King. There are multiple servants in Matthew, two sendings to the original guests and only one sending to the substitutes. It’s location in the sequence of the narrative time line differs as well. See Snodgrass, *Intent*, pp. 306-307 for a comprehensive list of similarities and differences. Obviously, presuppositions are influential here. If you think oral traditions results in many details changing with time, then you might argue that this is a single story transformed by later tellings. Or if you think oral cultures could and did recite events and stories (especially of authoritative figures) with a great deal of precision, then this leans toward separate tellings to different audiences. I am of this latter view: contra Luz, *Matthew 21-28*: “From a text-critical perspective our parable shows how amazingly freely the post-Easter bearers of the tradition, and even Matthew himself, dealt with a parable of Jesus that came to them. They projected their own experiences into the parable. They changed and expanded it, not only in its details but also in its central message.” (p. 90). Cf. Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 310): Luke and Matthew are two similar stories.

⁷⁷⁵ “Matthew’s version is enough to make any interpreter go weak in the knees; I consider it among the most difficult parables of all.” Snodgrass, *Intent* (p. 299).

Everything is ready. The time is now to enter. Refusal, for whatever excuse, courts judgment. Murdering those who are issuing the invitation means even harsher judgment.

This parable portrays four aspects: the opportune time to enter the kingdom as present, the refusal of the religious leaders to enter and culpability for mistreating those inviting them, the gathering in of people, good and bad (by implication, nonobservant as well as observant Jews, perhaps Gentiles), into the kingdom, and the judgment that takes place on both the leaders as well as anyone who does come but is unprepared to enter into the kingdom properly. It may be that the religious leaders would see themselves as those who accepted the invitation and came to God's table. The warning is that not simply "outsiders" but "insiders" as well might not be welcome. Judas Iscariot is one who accepted the invitation but was finally rejected.

It is a parable of both warning/demand and grace/hope. Were we to write it today, we would leave out the warning/demand part, the parts where bad things happen to those who dishonor the King and his son. But here it is. It may be that eventually everyone is invited but that does not mean everyone gets in. This is not a parable of inclusiveness but about how some exclude themselves. Actions have consequences, choices lead to specific outcomes.

It indicates that those who encounter the invitation do not do so on their own terms. The invitation of grace brings with it demand. Those who are too preoccupied with their wealth, status and privilege to bend to the King's will find themselves on the outside. The irony is that the reasons for not going have to do with legitimate, reasonable occupations, not evil matters. Yet those who come at the invitation cannot simply be present at the banquet as they wish or when they wish. There are conditions to be met, a higher righteousness to embody. Not all who say "Lord, Lord," are authentic disciples or will be acknowledged and be seated for the banquet. Not all who are called are chosen. Not all who look like disciples are.

In the context and given the readers of Matthew, we can think of Israelites and Church members who have been given the general invitation to engage with God in life. This is the first invitation of the parable (many are called). The wedding feast is being prepared! Get ready.

The second invitation is specific, not general: "Come, now!" It is ready. But few are chosen. Some don't come because they are preoccupied with other priorities than the King's agenda and timeline (the indifferent, the preoccupied). Some are even hostile to the whole idea. Some come and, like the improperly dressed guest, are not allowed to stay at the party. Only those who "put on Christ" will remain. External profession of faith is not enough. As John Calvin puts it:

"As to the wedding-garment, is it faith, or is it a holy life? This is a useless controversy; for faith cannot be separated from good works, nor do good works proceed from any other source than from faith. But Christ intended only to state, that the Lord calls us on the express condition of our being renewed by the Spirit after his image; and that, in order to our remaining permanently in his house, we must put off the old man with his pollutions, (Col. 3:9; Eph. 4:22,) and lead a new life, that the garment may correspond to so honourable a calling."⁷⁷⁶

Those of us who think we are "in" and have come to the Table should ask ourselves: "How did I get here? Am I properly 'dressed'?" The words of warning in the parable of the soil indicates hearing the life-giving words of the gospel and truth is not enough. Like the shallow soil, we can

⁷⁷⁶ Calvin, *Harmony*, (Vol. 2, p. 174).

rejoice and celebrate and then have that lively joy die and no fruit produced (13:20-21). We can be like the foolish virgins who did not bring spare oil to last an unexpected delay of the bridegroom (25:1-13). To be properly dressed is to be a disciple whose heart has been changed in such a way that the higher righteousness of that transformation is in evidence.⁷⁷⁷ There is no true profession without authentic performance.

If Paul uses election to assure and comfort us, Matthew seems to use it to warn us. But the point is that only those are excluded who exclude themselves. Those who displace themselves will be replaced. This is not a text directly on predestination. There is a guest at the table among the new invitees who did not go home and change into clean garments but presumed to come in “just as he was.” But none come to the banquet “on their own terms.” This is a warning not for the religious elite, but for the disciples.

Two major points are made: (1) Those who reject the invitation face judgment. They show themselves unworthy by refusal, by dishonoring and insulting the King. Others are judged unworthy because they come in inappropriate dress (they are like the son who said “yes, yes” but then did not go to the vineyard).⁷⁷⁸ God’s invitation one day will be rescinded and exclusion will occur. No excuses are sufficient. (2) There are those at the banquet who are completely unexpected. The self-styled “sons and daughters of the kingdom” are cast into outer darkness while the dregs of society are given entrance. An underlying point is the separation that comes with judgment (which will be echoed in Matt. 25). Of the many who are called, only a few are chosen: those who have responded and come to the banquet in appropriate attire. As N. T. Wright has put it:

The point of the story is that Jesus is telling the truth, the truth that political and religious leaders often like to hide: the truth that God’s kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying you don’t want to stay at the party. That is the reality. If we don’t have the courage to say so, we are deceiving ourselves, and everyone who listens to us.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁷ Luther, *Works Vol. 79*: “From this we easily understand what it means that this man was without wedding clothes, namely, that he was without the new finery with which we please God, which is faith in Christ, and thus also without true good works. He remains in the old rags and tatters of his own fleshly opinions, unbelief, and security, without repentance and the knowledge of his misery. His heart does not take comfort from the grace of Christ, nor does he improve his life; he seeks nothing more in the Gospel than what the flesh desires. The wedding clothes must be the new light of the heart which produces in the heart knowledge of the great grace of this Bridegroom and of His wedding, so that the heart clings to Christ completely and, steeped in this consolation and joy, lives with delight and love and does what it knows will please Him, just as a bride does for her bridegroom.” (p. 223).

⁷⁷⁸ This reminds us of the false prophets (7:15-23) and the lawless in the parable of the weeds and good seed (13:41-42). Some who “accept” the invitation in the end are not acceptable (such as Judas).

⁷⁷⁹ Wright, N.T. (2004) *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (p. 85).

(f) Three Questions Answered and a Counter-question (22:15-46)

This following section contains three questions asked about basic issues of life and death but designed to catch Jesus unprepared and to force answers that would show his ineptness. They also frame questions that remain basic for all disciples: our relationship to the state, our hopes for life after death, our moral confusion about which demand(s) should have highest priority, and our need to know whether and where we been visited by the divine. If Jesus is God with us, God in human form, then his answers to the first three questions give us divine wisdom for life.

[1] The political question about the poll tax (22:15-22)

Political matters always stir up strong emotions. This was true in Jerusalem under the hegemony of Rome, with parts of Palestine still subject to Herod the Great's descendants. The cynical tactics of politics often displays the desire for results rather than commitment to principle, the rush to squash a potential perceived threat rather than pursue the truth. The elite of Jerusalem, in this case disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians (unusual bed-fellows), set a trap for Jesus. Trick questions to get Jesus to make a mistake in order to undercut his popularity was the game afoot. But they were about to have the trap snap back.

The setting is an occupied land where the occupiers, having stolen the land, now demand taxes to support their regime. The Pharisees seem to have opposed it; the Herodians supported it. In asking Jesus about taxes for Rome, they knew either response would offend some group and stimulate opposition to him. A "no" answer would open him to scrutiny by the Roman power as well and the charge of inciting rebellion against Rome. A "yes" answer would make him appear pro-Roman and erode his popularity among the people.

Behind their ploy is a more substantial question: how much are followers of Jesus to give themselves to their political rulers? Especially when the ruler is an idolatrous, militaristic foreign power? What are the limits of subservience to political government? Is the "kingdom of God" incompatible with kingdoms of humans?

Some patriotic Jews were not only opposed but actively engaged in seeking the overthrow and expelling of the Romans. The Zealot movement grew out of the simmering resentments of these patriots. A theocratic theology of the "holy land" belonging to the One true God accompanied their sentiments. How could a "good" Jew tolerate idolaters in the land of Israel? Or pay for their upkeep?

Others, like the Herodians and the powerful elite supported the reigning family of Herod and its pro-Roman stance. They sought accommodation. Their realpolitik calculations told them armed resistance was futile, so make the best of a bad situation from which they benefitted immensely. Rome had made it clear when it suppressed the rebellion of Judas with miles of road lined with crucified rebels. Best put up with an odious poll tax and get on with engaging more important affairs of life.

Their approach is one of flattery: "Teacher, we know that you are truthful and teach the very way of God in truth, and defer to no one..." (vs. 16). Jesus had no difficulty perceiving their intent once the question was posed. He addresses them as "hypocrites." The hypocrisy is found as one has put it, in the daggers in their smile. They speak warmly and affirmatively, while plotting to cut Jesus down. They are not sincere in acknowledging and honoring him as a teacher of God's way. They think the opposite. Their question was not a desire for instruction and clarification of the ways of God but for a squashing of Jesus.

In response Jesus asks for a silver denarius.⁷⁸⁰ It bore the image of the Emperor, Tiberius and an inscription on the coin that recognized him as divine. Like it or not, this was the coin for paying the poll tax. In acknowledging whose image was on the coin being used entailed the obligation to give it to the one to whom it ultimately belongs.

Jesus' willingness to handle the coin shows a lack of scrupulosity or shame. Physical things are not what pollutes. Nor did he carry one around with him. His cleansing of the Temple was not about the physical presence of money. He does not object to the tax. What he does is to imply that the coin's image tells you who is its real owner. His response puts a twist on the question. The question was: "Is it lawful to give (δοῦναι)"; the answer was "Give back (ἀπόδοτε) to Caesar the things of Caesar..." The giving back acknowledged something prior, something already received, a prior giving that is to be reciprocated. The kicker is that the same is true of God: whose image do people bear? Then give back that which belongs to God.

This puts a very high fence around the obligations to the state. As long as the government asks for money, it is something legitimate. Taxes are not theft. A strict libertarian view of taxes as theft simply won't pass the test of this saying. We may not like the rate of taxation (and there are times when governments become confiscatory regimes that serve the wealth of a small elite). But this text indicates a limited respect for government, even an oppressive occupier, a respect we see repeated in the dictates and perspective of Paul and Peter. But it is a limited respect.

The state provides all kinds of services and goods to set the stage for human flourishing. Its mandate is to provide limited freedom, peace and justice that mirrors the freedom, peace and justice of God's kingdom. There is no detailed philosophy of state or policy outlines for every state. But each state has a legitimate claim to be honored and supported insofar as it is the servant of God. To be sure it can become demonic, as Revelation 13 indicates. When it asks for "the things of God," it loses its legitimacy and right to respect from its citizens. "My country, right or wrong" is not a motto Christ-followers can embrace. Nor can any single sovereign power claim to be the special servant of God among the nations.

There are two dangers here: those who give too little to the state and those who give it too much. The libertarians, revolutionaries and separationist sects at times face the danger of too little; the overly politicized Christians such as the liberal liberationists or conservative-nationalists are endangered by giving too much. On the one side, Jesus' words repudiate both a quietistic indifference, a withdrawal from civic duties or a revolutionary overthrow of legitimate civil order. On the other side, he equally repudiates absolutist totalitarianism and populist nationalism's demand for the complete supremacy of the state, ruler or nation.

❖ Discipleship: The State and the Church

What then do Christians "owe" to the nation or state and its government? What about the larger circle of humanity, the global international order? The world Christian movement is present in virtually all sovereign states on earth, professing one Lord and one faith in a kaleidoscope of denominations and seven major traditions. What are my relationships with my

⁷⁸⁰ Keener, *Matthew*, "The coin related directly to pagan Roman religion and to the imperial cult in the east: the side bearing his image also included a superscription, namely, 'TI. CAESAR DIVI AVG.F.AVGVSTVS'—'Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus'; the other side bore a feminine image (perhaps of the Empress Livia personified as the goddess Roma) and read 'PONTIF. MAXIM,' referring to the high priest of Roman religion (Deissmann 1978: 252n.2; Ferguson 1987: 70–71)." (p. 525).

own home country to be and what is owed to other nation states as a Christ follower? What about responsibilities when I find I am in power? What are my obligations?

In the larger sweep of Scripture, the state, as a sphere that monopolizes coercive power, exists to bring about a realm of order and peace.⁷⁸¹ It is a provisional, even “emergency” order. It is not an end in itself but comes into being as a necessary response to the entrance of sin into human history. It is not an “order of creation” but an instrumentality to foster and preserve a relative realm where justice, peace and freedom will allow the goods of life to flourish. It will pass away with the coming of the fulness of God’s kingdom. Its divine commission is to act as a “servant of God” (Romans 13). But it is a human instrumentality and can be subverted and infected with the demonic virus of the “beast” (Rev. 13).

Christians have struggled with this text through the centuries. Jesus’ response leaves a lot unsaid. Later interpreters have taken his words in very different ways:

1) Some see it as indicating two different spheres, each with its own integrity and principles (especially in Lutheran thought). There is the sphere of “secular” government. It is rooted in power as well as the threat and use of coercion. As citizens who are the beneficiaries of its relative order of justice and peace, we owe it taxes to maintain it. If we become magistrates and officers of the state, we bear the “sword” and are obliged to use its authority and power to restrain evil and foster good. In this realm we may take life, if necessary, to protect and sustain justice, freedom and peace. We may even participate in war. It cannot be made into a realm of grace and love. It is an “emergency” order, brought into existence for the benefit of human life and to preserve a sphere within which the gospel can be preached and embraced.⁷⁸²

The second sphere is that of the Church, an arena of the Spirit whose only “sword” is that of the Word of God. It is a spiritual realm under the kingly rule of God. We owe it final and absolute allegiance. Whenever there is a conflict between the gospel and the state, we must obey God rather than human beings. This is the realm of faith and love. Coercion has no place in the freedom of the Spirit. In our role as Christian, we are not to take life but preserve and foster it.

Still, the state has only a limited mandate, one to be a “servant of God” in supporting and fostering justice and just arrangements and restricting the unjust and evil. Its “secular” nature does not remove it from the purview of divine oversight. It cannot claim the highest authority. It is a morally ambiguous realm, giving a penultimate response to the waywardness and self-interest of human life. The justice, peace and freedom it achieves is limited and transient. The state is a servant of God but not yet a servant of Christ.

The devil is loose in both the secular (worldly) and sacred communities. So, while the gospel is assigned to the spiritual regiment and the law to the secular regiment, the two complement each other in challenging the kingdom of the evil one. The tendency of this division is to morph into a dualism, a split in the lives of individuals who live in both and find it hard to unite them.

The Reformed tradition (Calvin), while maintaining this division, sees more potential for the

⁷⁸¹ See Jesse Couenhoven, “Law and Gospel, or the Law of the Gospel: Karl Barth’s Political Theology Compared with Luther and Calvin” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 30.2: 181-205.

⁷⁸² Helmut Thielicke (1969) *Theological Ethics Volume 2: Politics*: “The state is an emergency order between the fall and the judgment. Herein is its dignity and its limitation. Herein is the ultimate defense against its being ideologically overinflated. And herein too is a call to sobriety, a warning against either demanding or expecting too much of it.” (pp. 537-38). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

state to be a sphere that is positive and less of a split.⁷⁸³ The State has responsibilities to both tables of the Ten Commandments. In this version of the relation, the tendency is to return the church to some form of subordination to the State or at least a closer relationship between the two seen in versions of Christendom.⁷⁸⁴

2) Some see it as indicating the subordination of the state to the Church. Since all we have and owe is to God, the state is secondary to God and God's representatives. Giving the things of God includes the state giving things it owes to God as well. A union of civilization is entailed whereby the state is made fully into the "servant of God" (Rom. 13) in its laws, policies, procedures and operations. Jesus' words are taken as an indication of this radical relativizing of the state. The state's authority is received from God and must yield it back to God. This is a theocratic vision.

This vision can be seen in Pope Gregory VII's notions. The civil was to be subordinated to the ecclesiastical government and the ecclesiastical was to be juridicalized. While secular rule was demonic (Revelation 13), it could be redeemed by strong clerical and papal guidance and redirection of its ends heavenward to be part of the seamless garment of the Church. A unity of civilization could be accomplished in this way, Christianizing society.

3) Some take these words to indicate an essential rejection of the state. The state is the idolatrous realm of "Caesars" who illegitimately claim from us what we are not to give. By its embrace of coercion, it is inevitably a realm of injustice, an expression of evil that Christ-followers are to avoid. In the Apostle's Creed, the only mention of the state is "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..." That is the essence of the state: putting to death the things of God.

⁷⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes*: "Therefore, in order that none of us may stumble on that stone, let us first consider that there is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. ... the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom. Now these two ... must always be examined separately; and while one is being considered, we must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other. There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority." III.19.15 (p. 847). "Yet civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility." IV, xx, 2 (p. 1487).

⁷⁸⁴ Barth threads this needle carefully: *CD Vol. 2.2*: "Because Christians recognise the order of God in the order of the sword, compulsion and fear, they themselves can be neither anti-political nor a-political. They can be neither hostile to this order, nor alien, indifferent and aloof. ... They will then understand, and realise in practice, that their reasonable service, consistently with the will and work of God Himself, must take the form of the service of God in politics, consisting in their participation in the life of that provisional, graceless order of earthly things.... they are enjoined to adapt themselves to it διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν [*in their consciences*], and to recognise in this graceless order an expression of the gracious will of God. They are enjoined to offer it, even in this form, a free and willing obedience, to affirm it sincerely, actively and completely. It is just because and as they render to God what is God's that they will also—unreservedly—give to Caesar what is Caesar's—every personal service required of them and necessary for the maintenance of the state (Romans 13:6f.), and therefore a share in the responsibility for the continuance of this dispensation." (pp. 722–723).

Instead, in yielding to God ultimate submission, disciples must come out of the world that sits in the lap of the devil and his powers. Christians cannot be soldiers, police, magistrates, judges, political leaders or law makers—in their witness to the kingdom of heaven, they cannot participate in social roles that involve coercion or violence. Many such Christians withdraw into separated (but permeable) conventicles that are based on the Sermon on the Mount whose words are understood fairly literally. Living such a life-style is the witness to the kingdom of heaven disciples are to offer.

The eschatological reality of the presence of the kingdom in Jesus is crucial for understanding the nature of the church and the state. That Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven in a non-violent manner means the church must also practice non-violence. Pacifism is built into the DNA of the church. In the same way, the announcement of the kingdom of heaven was what led to the violent death of Jesus at the hands of governing authorities. That event unveils the actual nature of the powers of this age. It reveals the state's seductive nature and opposition to the Gospel that is built into its institutional DNA.

This perspective does not remove Christians completely from the larger society. But taking up roles in a coercive world means undertaking such roles in the form of “revolutionary subordinationism” – in non-violent, non-resistant, non-conformity to any coercive patterns of conduct. In whatever role to which one is called (and there are some off-limit occupations) one must be Christian there, in absolute obedience to God's peace, justice and freedom.⁷⁸⁵

[2] The question of the afterlife: Resurrection and Marriage (22:23-33)

The Sadducees,⁷⁸⁶ still intent on discrediting Jesus, come with a hypothetical riddle-parable story (a *reductio ad absurdum*) meant to demonstrate the absurdity of the notion of resurrection. They address him as “teacher” while being intent on exposing his “false” teaching.

Rooted biblically in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and its instructions about levirate marriage, the Sadducees pose the case of a woman married to seven brothers in succession. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? There is a clear implication: the only “raising up” the Sadducees

⁷⁸⁵ Hauerwas, *Matthew*: “Jesus is not recommending in his response to the Pharisees that we learn to live with divided loyalties, but rather he is saying that all the idolatrous coins should be sent back to Caesar, where they belong. Just as Jesus knows no distinction between politics and religion, neither does he know any distinction between politics, economics, and the worship of God. Those who have asked him whether they should pay taxes to the emperor are revealed to be the emperor's faithful servants by the money they possess. ‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth’ (Matt. 6:24)—nor can you serve God and the emperor.

“That God and the emperor cannot both be served is, moreover, not solved when the emperor is said to be the ‘people.’ The people often turn out to be more omnivorous in their desire for our loyalty than emperors. Nor is the problem of loyalty to God and Caesar solved by the separation of church and state. That separation too often results in legitimating the state to do what it wants while sequestering the church into the mythical realm of the private.” (p. 190)

⁷⁸⁶ “The Sadducees, the second of the orders, do away with Fate altogether, and remove God beyond, not merely the commission, but the very sight, of evil. They maintain that man has the free choice of good or evil, and that it rests with each man's will whether he follows the one or the other. As for the persistence of the soul after death, penalties in the underworld, and rewards, they will have none of them.” (*War* 2.164-65) Josephus. (1927–1928). *The Jewish War: Books 1–7*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Vol. 1, p. 387).

admitted was that of a dead man's brother "raising" up heirs in his name. The story is also meant sarcastically. After all, the same theological point could be made with two brothers. Seven is a way of driving the point to absurdity.

The Sadducees placed main emphasis on the five books of Moses as the "canon" within the canon. Since there is no direct mention of resurrection in those texts, in their view it was not supported. They were "conservatives" theologically speaking, resisting "innovations" foisted onto orthodoxy (such as resurrection and angels). But they will be exposed not as conservative but reductionist. Even the texts they credit as preeminent are not well understood.

Jesus takes them to task in the very Torah they supposedly enshrined as foundational.⁷⁸⁷ Quoting Exodus 3:6 he emphasizes the present tense nature of God's relationship to the fathers of Israel: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."⁷⁸⁸ These words given to Moses, hundreds of years after the deaths of these patriarchs implies that they yet live. The error of the Sadducees was denial of the resurrection.⁷⁸⁹ That denial shows they do not know the very scriptures they profess or the power of the God whose Temple they manage. If God is God, raising people from the dead, people God created in the first place, is not a problem. Not knowing the scriptures leads to not knowing the power of God.

Their question assumes the coming life of the resurrected in the Kingdom of God is like the present order. Marriage consummated here will be continued in the life to come. Yet, so far as sex and marriage are concerned, human life in the age to come will be like the angels – no marriage or sex. Note that in this case, Jesus may well appeal to something the people believe in but not the Sadducees: angels (Acts 23:8). The change from a world where we know loneliness and the close companionship of marriage will be dramatic. It means a broadening and deepening of love. He does not say the love between married partners will vanish. The implication is that it will be broadened to include everyone.

Jesus indicates that God's commitment to us does not end with our deaths. To belong to God means to belong to him as long as God continues. Death haunts the human consciousness. Some of the full range of hopes and dreams are never fulfilled, even with a very extended life. Every one of us dies with some things left incomplete, things we would like to do over, things we wanted to start but never did. One of the things the disciples were to teach to all the nations is the resurrection hope. Indeed, we find it in all the writings of the New Testament. But there are still Sadducees with us, Bishops who deny resurrection (and even "god" – theological "atheists").

⁷⁸⁷ *πλανᾷσθε* is a present, mid/passive indicative. Its meaning is "You are being led astray."

⁷⁸⁸ The Hebrew of Exodus 3:6 has no verb. Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*: "ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραάμ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακώβ; So Mark, without the verb (cf. Acts 7:32). The quotation is from the famous Exod 3:6, where the LXX has εἰμί (contrast the MT)." (p. 231).

⁷⁸⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*: "The objection that Jesus' argument proves only the immortality of the soul and not the resurrection of the body ignores the fact that immortality was not an option Jews considered. Either all the body was resurrected or nothing survived. Contemporary objections to Jesus' logic here perhaps reveal an unnecessary rigidity in our modern historical/grammatical hermeneutics rather than any fallacy with Jesus' interpretation." (p. 334). "The biblical language of resurrection ('standing up', 'awakening' etc.), when it emerges, is simple and direct; the belief, though infrequent, is clear. It involves, not a *reconstruction* of life after death, but the *reversal* of death itself." N. T. Wright (2003). *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (p. 127).

The response of the crowd overhearing this encounter is astonishment. Those who came to discredit Jesus are themselves discredited. In this “honor” challenge, the crown goes to Jesus.

[3] The ethical question: The Greatest Commandment (22:34-40)

For a third time, the religious elite come to question and test Jesus involving the Torah. This time an expert on the law from among the Pharisees poses the question. They had heard how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees by his quick wit and answers to their trick questions. They have nothing left to say. If Jesus is to be challenged (and silenced), the Pharisees think they might be able to do it.

It is not clear how this is a trick question. Several suggestions have been made. This inquisitor might have hoped Jesus would annul parts of the law or denigrate some laws. Or perhaps it is putting Jesus into the fray over the “heavy” and “light” commandments, a rabbinic debate over the relative importance of various sorts of commands (by rabbinic calculations there were 613 commandments to obey). Answering one way or the other would align him with some streams of theology and alienate him from others. The whole story does not seem polemical in the way the earlier “tests” were.

Yet Jesus’ answer is fundamental to all Christian ethics and discipleship and draws again on the Torah.⁷⁹⁰ His answer points to the Shema, the verse of the Hebrew Scriptures recited twice daily by Jews. The answer is close to hand for his interlocuter, as if they did not know it.

Jesus’ answer resides at the heart of many of the debates over the meaning of the law within the gospel – and the relationship between the first and second great commandments.⁷⁹¹ Like the answer to the question about taxes, it is not immediately clear what relationship Jesus is saying exists between the two. What comes most quickly and readily to mind are the two “tables” of the Ten Commandments (commands dealing with God and then with humans). Is this a way of summarizing those items?⁷⁹² Nor is it immediately clear how the love commands relate to justice as an imperative. Or in what sense all that is contained in the Torah (law) and the Prophets depend on them. It has led to a variety of ways Christians have related the two.

Given the Sermon on the Mount and the controversies Jesus has with the Pharisees, one obvious meaning is that the spirit behind the norms, commands and imperatives found in the law is love. In whatever ways one extends and applies those laws, love is an essential element. Law serves the mandate of love, just as the Sabbath was made for the sake of human beings, not vice versa. Justice is the muscle of love just as love is the energy of justice.

Earlier Jesus said: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). The first and greatest commandment does not appear there. But that is not to say it is not implicated. No matter where one starts with

⁷⁹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

⁷⁹¹ The Greek is “which is the great” commandment. But it is used as a superlative here. See Daniel B. Wallace (1996). *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. (p. 298).

⁷⁹² Talbert, Matthew “It was a cultural practice to attempt to reduce massive legislation to one or two principles. From the pagan world, Plutarch (*Cons. Apoll.* 28) says the two most indispensable inscriptions at Delphi are ‘Know thyself’ and ‘Avoid extremes.’ In the Jewish world, a rabbi asks, ‘What is the smallest portion of scripture from which all essential regulations of the Torah hang?’ (*b. Ber.* 63a, trans. Epstein 1948). Akiba’s answer is that loving the neighbor is the greatest principle in the law (*Sifra* on Lev. 19:18). It is this type of question that is addressed to Jesus.” (p. 255).

love (whether of our fellow human next to us or to the living God), it leads us to the other. Loving God is an invisible matter as is love of our neighbor. Both come to visible expression in our gestures, attitudes, words, and actions. But acts of piety are not an end in themselves. Without the practical, visible, sacrificial loving relationships and actions toward other humans, we have no right to claim we love God.⁷⁹³ Yet without being grounded in loving God, our love for neighbor easily runs out. Love of God is the “greatest” but it is insufficiently understood if it does not lead to the love of neighbor, just as the love of neighbor is only properly understood when it is seen within the context of the first and greatest commandment.⁷⁹⁴

The whole of what we read in the over 23,000 verses in the Old Testament grows out of the two great purposes of God: that we come to love God with every atom of our being and that we learn to love the people who share the earth with us, his people, in the same manner as we love ourselves. While this word of Jesus distinguishes between love of God and love of neighbor it does so without separating them. The love of God and love of neighbor are not simply one and the same thing. Yet love provides the paradigm for discipleship.

Later Paul will indicate that the three great virtues are faith, hope and love, but that only love will remain in the final things. It is the golden thread that makes sense of all the details and stories, as well as the imperatives and prophetic literature. If we wish to know what to make of all the different exemplars, warnings, imperatives, cases, poetry, wisdom and prophecy we find in the Old Testament, we have an answer here. Love of God and of neighbor is the goal and most basic demand. It is the purpose for which they are written for our building up in the faith. If the effect of our engagement with them is not a greater love of God and a greater love for neighbor, then we are not reading Scripture properly.

At the same time, we have to keep these overarching, summarizing threads bound securely to the texts they summarize. “Love-only-ism” often reinterprets “love” in ways that clearly break the boundaries and meaning of love found in the Bible. For one thing, love in Scripture is never separated from justice (nor justice from love). Nor from the many laws that it summarizes.

For some “love” becomes an Occam’s razor – cutting out of the Bible all those things seen by contemporaries as repressive, offensive, retrograde, unenlightened, unredeemable, problematic and simply ignorant. Anything that offends a particularly modern view of “love” is simply removed by these two great commandments. It becomes a canon within the canon, separating the “chaff” from the good grain, slicing out the “human defects” that infected even

⁷⁹³ Romans 13:8-10 similarly tells us “for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law... Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

⁷⁹⁴ The liberal theology of the 19th century tended to absorb the religious into the ethical. The love of God came to have no sphere of action apart from the love of neighbor. For Jesus there are *two* commandments: sacrifice and mercy, love for God and love for neighbor. Not one without the other. Barth, *CD Vol. III.4*: “Though a man cannot for a moment withdraw from his obligation to his neighbour by fleeing to a special religious sphere, and though there exist neither general human undertakings nor particular pious practices by which he could and should gain, augment or preserve the divine good-pleasure, yet only on the basis of a very strained exegesis of Mk. 12:29f. and its parallels could we say that the commandment to love our neighbour in some sense absorbs that to love God and takes away its independent quality. The truth is rather that the double command to love points us to two spheres of activity which are relatively—no more, but very clearly so—distinct. Alongside work there is also prayer; alongside practical love for one’s brother there is also divine service in the narrower sense; alongside activity in state and community there is also that in the congregation; alongside the other sciences there is also theology.” (pp. 48–49).

so-called revelation. It acts as a Kantian categorical imperative where context or internal intentions have no role to play at all. But this is far from what Jesus meant.

We have to remember Jesus never criticized the Hebrew Scriptures. They were for him the Words of God. He went beyond them but never against them. To pit these commands against the Old Testament is to pit them against the source from which Jesus got them. To pit them against the Scriptures is to pit them against Jesus' own words about Scripture. To do so is to misunderstand the very love demonstrated in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Three "faculties" are mentioned: heart, soul and mind (from Deut. 6:5).⁷⁹⁵ This is not meant as a statement of the essential "faculties" of the person but rather as an indication that all of the person is caught up in the relationship with God. Nothing that is essential to the personhood of a disciple is left out of a Godward orientation. Likewise, nothing is held back from the neighbor.

The modern world has frequently identified "love" as simply an emotion, a feeling, often irresistible and beyond one's control. This three-fold list (and its variants including "strength") is an indication of a different theory of what "love" is and how it is expressed. At the least it engages the mind as well as the feelings, is expressed in action, not just in sentiment or orientation, involves choice since it can be commanded. Love is a fully embodied, fully engaged, all encompassing, free expression of the self. It is to spring out of a full-person disposition into a way of life of actions toward God and neighbor.

[4] The counter-question: Is the Messiah divine? (22:41-46)

Jesus turns the tables on his questioners. They had come at him repeatedly with questions having to do with his interpretation of Scripture, how he relates to the law. Now he challenges them on their own ground with a Scripture that they may have not thought through completely. He asks a straightforward and noncontroversial question: What is the human ancestry of the Messiah? All the scholars knew the answer: a son of David, the great King. Then Jesus poses an exegetical question about this Messiah from Psalm 110:1, where David, by the Spirit speaks.

Then the second question is: if the Messiah is the offspring of David, why does David speak of him as "Lord"? This "Lord" is described as sitting on the right hand of God and ruling over all his enemies (110:4). So, how can he be merely a descendant of David? The answer the Pharisees couldn't question is followed by a question they cannot answer. That question leads into an answer suggesting the secret identity of Jesus as Messiah: his dual "paternity." He is David's son by human genealogy; but he is David's Lord because he is equally the son of God. He is David's offshoot and his root.

To sit at the right hand of God is to sit as high as God. Here is one who sits alongside God, not at his feet, not over his head but by him. One who is higher than David is implied; a more than son of David, indeed, in a culture where "fathers" were more than "sons." It is clear in Matthew that Jesus is David's son. But for these religious leaders, that simply was impossible. When they next interrogate him in his Sanhedrin trial, his reference to sitting at the right hand of God will be the occasion to accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

In this dialogue Jesus was not seeking to trick these self-affirmed Scripture scholars but to lead them deeper into the meaning of the Scriptures they treasured so highly. They had posed

⁷⁹⁵ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֵדְךָ (Deut. 6:5 WTT): *lēb, nepeš, mē.ōd*. The Greek is ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ (*kardia*) σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ (*psuche*) σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ (*dianoia*) σου. In both cases the sense is all that essentially makes up a person: heart, soul/life, understanding/intelligence.

questions about the law and its interpretation. Jesus posed a question about the promised Deliverer and Redeemer. It points to the futility of a hope that does not rise above the human and earthly level. Hope comes from above. Their silence does not mean agreement, only the abandoning hope in this encounter of putting him down.

In many ways this last question and its answer is the secret answer to the prior three questions: (1) what to give back to God, what is due God (the honor and service due); (2) how God is not a God of the dead but the living; (3) what loving God with all your being and your neighbor entails. Who is this God to honor, who gives life to the dead, who is to command preeminence in our priorities? It is the Messiah, David's son and Lord.

This sets up the last extended discourse of Matthew and its most challenging confrontation between the "righteousness" of the conventional religious leadership and Jesus' account of a higher righteousness. The One who launches into a full-scale assault on Israel's religious leaders and Israel's national pride is the One who sits at God's right hand.

B. Discourse 5: Judgment (23:1-25:46)

This final discourse has a consistent theme: judgment on the religious leadership and the Temple that served as its base. It balances the Sermon on the Mount in length and ends with the same summary statement as the other discourses (26:1). This discourse opens with "woes" rather than blessings. There is a scene change between 23 and 24 (Temple/Mount of Olives) as well as what seems a focus of audience (crowd and scribes and Pharisees/disciples) from a more public to a more private instruction.

(1) Warnings about the Teachers of the Law and Pharisees (23:1-39)

This whole chapter and discourse section is full of judgment and condemnation, from the one who came to save the world, not condemn it. Some have even seen it as "unchristian" in spirit and letter (or even called it the unloveliest chapter in the Gospel). Is this the same Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who warned about denigrating a fellow human with a contemptuous "Raca" (Matt. 5:22) seemingly calling these religious leaders even worse?⁷⁹⁶ He who demanded we love our enemies appears to scorch his. This chapter has also been taken as a root and branch of anti-Semitism due to its strong language. Yet it is not aimed at all Jews but at specific leaders within the Jewish community and out of the mouth of a Jew himself.⁷⁹⁷

Yet we must remember that, whatever love may mean to us, its profile and practice is modeled by Jesus. Love is not incompatible with anger or judgment. Faithful love entails

⁷⁹⁶ In modern terms, this Aramaic term is equivalent to the "N" word and other strongly denigrating epithets. Two considerations are important: (1) the differences in sensibility in cultures over strong rhetoric; (2) the position of responsibility held by the scribes and Pharisees and their role in the scheme that brought Jesus to his death (and later the persecution of the early Church) as well as their influence in preventing their followers from entering the Kingdom of heaven. Saul is a good example of this discourse before his conversion. We are in the realm of life and death issues. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*: "...it is unthinkable that chap. 23 be used to portray the Pharisees or Judaism negatively. This passage has a very specific historical context (see Glasson), and therefore it is totally improper to attempt to apply it to Jews or Judaism today." (p. 655).

⁷⁹⁷ For considerations about the force of the rhetoric used here and elsewhere in the New Testament see: Johnson, Luke Timothy: "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic" *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/3 (1989) 419-441.

judgment on the destructive and false powers of our world and their practitioners. How is it loving to simply give a pass to those whose ways are destructive of the love of God or love of neighbor? How is it loving to be passively silent in the face of serious falsehoods and half-truths that lead people to destruction? Does love remain silent in the face of those who poison the truth, especially the truth of God? Love does not mean putting on rose-colored glasses in order not to see inconvenient and unpleasant realities. Love is in partnership with truth and justice. That is what we see in this chapter. The prophetic “woes” are a blend of anger and grief.⁷⁹⁸

These searing words are expressing a judgment on hypocritical leadership. Jesus is holding these self-professed leaders accountable to the knowledge they ought to have (and claim to have). Their unbelief and violation of the Torah in the face of their own claims to represent the Law and the God who gave it is damning. Their intent was clear: from trap questions meant to discredit him to their plots to kill him since he threatened their claims to leadership. This is not a prideful Jesus being self-righteous about the self-righteous. He is not being a Pharisee about Pharisees. Jesus is scoring self-righteousness on the part of a corrupted religious leadership.

Matthew 23-25 sound similar notes: chapter 23 takes place inside the Temple and is a judgment on the people who are the chief teachers and religious leaders of the worshippers in the Temple; chapters 24-25 take place outside the Temple, after Jesus has abandoned it, and is a judgment on the Temple itself. An end is coming to the religious leadership and to the Temple around which much of their life revolved. Living without the Temple was a major adjustment in the past (and will be in a few decades). But the disciples would learn that a “greater than the Temple” was in their midst (12:6) and that God’s presence was not destroyed with the Temple.

If the Sermon on the Mount underscores the traits that mark those who are blessed, this chapter scores the traits that mark those who bring themselves under the curse. The “woes” are as much lament as they are warning. Allow yourself to be infected and controlled by pride or hypocrisy, and the results are disastrous. Especially if you profess to be a religious devotee and leader. As Origen puts it:

“There are those who dare to say that God is not good because of the curses in his law that he places against their sin. And yet the one who is truly the Son of God who gave that same law is also the same one who put blessings into the law. The same God who provides blessings for those who are saved in a similar way applies curses which he placed in the law against sinners.”⁷⁹⁹

(a) Pride (the Custodians of the Law) and Humility (the Disciples) (23:1-12)

The contrast between the hypocritical pride of religious leaders in contrast with the humility and servant leadership of the authentic disciple is underlined. It is striking that virtually all the references to Scribes in Matthew are negative. In this case, as custodians of the law, what they teach is not the primary problem. The source from which they teach (Moses) is not the problem. Rather it is the virus of pride and hypocrisy that has infected them and perverted their deeds.

⁷⁹⁸ Turner, *Baker Matthew*: “In oracles of woe, the prophet’s attitude is anger tempered at times by grief and alarm at the horrible price Israel will pay for its sin. Prophets are angry because they are speaking for God against sin. But prophets are also stricken with grief because this anger is directed toward their own people.” (p. 550).

⁷⁹⁹ Simonetti, *Matthew 14-28* (p. 171).

At the front end there is a clear problem: Jesus affirms the authority of the scribes and Pharisees and instructs his disciples to “do and keep whatever they say (λέγω)” (vs. 3).⁸⁰⁰ Jesus is honoring the scriptural teaching office before he subjects its teachers to a scorching condemnation. It is clear Jesus does not agree with everything they say as correct (e.g., the sabbath [12:1-14], ritual hand washings [15:1-2, 10-20], offerings [15:3-9], and divorce [19:3-9]). Commentators have wrestled with this since it seems so out of alignment with the prior rejection of their authority (7:28-29) and of what they teach.⁸⁰¹

The answer may well lie in the social situation behind this saying, as M. A. Powell indicates:

In saying that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah not plentiful. Since Jesus’ disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. In light of such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the seat of Moses, that is, when they pass on the words of the Torah itself. ... Those who are authorized to interpret the law are dependent on those who lack this authority but who know what the law itself says. Therefore, Jesus’ disciples must listen to the scribes and Pharisees when they speak the words of Moses, but in their work of interpreting the law the disciples are not to do as the scribes and Pharisees.⁸⁰²

Jesus’ relation to the law was always affirmative. The Scribes and Pharisees were reliable sources for much of what the law actually said. What Jesus challenged were the interpretations

⁸⁰⁰ In the form of a second aorist: ἐπῴων. Note Luther, *Works*, Vol. 68: “For God had instituted the Levitical priesthood and preaching office so that the people would learn the Ten Commandments that were given through Moses. The whole tribe of Levi was ordered to attend to the Holy Scriptures. That is what the Lord calls the seat of Moses, that is, the preaching office, that Moses was to be preached. He says, ‘If you hear them preaching: ‘This is what the Law and Moses have commanded,’ then do it, observe it, for it is not the Pharisees’ word and work, but God’s and Moses’.” (p. 143). Luther parallels this with the Pope “sitting on the seat of Peter” but not teaching the Gospel. Only insofar as luminaries teach Moses or Christ are any who sit on seats of religious authority to be credited and followed.

⁸⁰¹ Many are the avenues taken to deal with this text and its tension with others in Matthew: Carson, *Matthew* sees irony or sarcasm (pp. 532) as does France, *Matthew*, (pp. 859-60) and Talbert, *Matthew* (p. 257) given the following verse. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18* takes it as approval in principle but not in fact (p. 659), i.e., so far as they teach the law of Moses correctly. Luz, *Matthew 21-28* takes it as a concession: “Imperatives understood as concessions are common in Semitic languages; they appear also in Greek. Thus we can paraphrase: As far as I am concerned you can do everything the scribes and Pharisees say; that is not so bad. However, the main thing is that you do not do what they do.” (p. 101).

⁸⁰² Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7)” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 114, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 431-32, 435). Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. III*: “The scribes and Pharisees read the words of Moses (and the rest of the OT) to the crowds and the disciples, and these words are to be done and kept. But the ‘works’ of these leaders, that is, their teaching and their actions, should not be emulated.” (p. 1192).

they ventured that negated the intent and spirit of Mosaic Law. They were speaking scripture but missing its message. Their behavior in effect annulled the meaning of the Mosaic Law. What he singled out for condemnation was the sort of “law keeping” that distorted its meaning and goal. The practices of the Scribes and Pharisees revealed particular ways in which the central matters of the law were discarded in the pursuit of honor, status and wealth. While much of what they said was good, their practice of it was bad and damaging.

Jesus singles out several problems that mark the example of these religious rulers:

1. They are hypocritical in that they don’t do what they teach others to do. They take the “seat of Moses,” professing to teach the law of Moses with accuracy and adequacy. But their lives do not match their profession. This is no reason not to listen to what is good in their teaching. Bad conduct does not make null and void good teaching, though we often wonder why it is correct teaching/doctrine is insufficient to yield consistent conduct in those who articulate it.

It is a warning not just to the theological experts and popular religious leaders of that day. We have experienced repeated instances of the same issue in our day with priestly and pastoral sexual misconduct, fraud, deceptive fund-raising and misuse of ministry assets. Hypocrisy in the clerical and religious not-for-profits is always disheartening and damaging to the cause of Christ. But there it is again and again: charismatic and gifted teachers, caught short violating the very virtues and practices they teach us. They are self-convicted and come under the same judgment Jesus issues against these scribes and Pharisees. It is one thing to “know” and teach what is actually true and correct; another to allow it to shape one’s motives and actions.

Hypocrisy is especially dangerous because it is a counterfeit of what is true and good with none of the effects of the good it simulates. Rather than giving and transforming life, it puts a mask over it, hiding the deadly corruption that now lies hidden and continues to destroy. No matter what the accoutrements of “authority,” the fruits of life tell the authentic story.

2. They are indifferent. They set very high standards, requiring conformity to stringent rules, to a hugely expanded legal code setting a “fence” about Moses’ law. But they give no help to the ordinary person in meeting the thicket of rules and traditions. Rather than seeing the law as a motivator to help foster the lives of others, they focus on what, in the larger scheme, are trivial, visible matters. They lack mercy and compassion for the heavy burdens people carry, adding to their burden with their scruples. Instead of the sort of thicket of external rules and scruples, servant-leaders in the model of Jesus were to provide “easy yokes” and “light burdens” for their followers.

What may be in view is their “separation” from the “people of the land” (‘am ha’aretz). The ordinary Jewish believer, living near subsistence level, had no way of keeping all the prescriptions and proscriptions with its many sacrifices and tithes laid on them by the Pharisees and Scribes. Instead of nurturing and instructing them, these religious leaders wrote them off, considering them unclean. Theirs was an unaffordable, oppressive, burdensome legalism that effectively excluded the majority from a joyful, vital relationship with God – in the name of God.

3. They are proud. What motivates them is the desire for honor and public respect. Five practices are focused on to indicate this character trait: use of enlarged phylacteries and tassels as outward religious signals of piety; claiming the best seat at public banquets; taking the best seats in the synagogue; wanting to be greeted with respect in the marketplace; and having people call them “rabbi” in recognition of their place as a mediator of the Torah. Hypocrisy includes the gap between motive and deed, not just between profession and practice. Religious show and self-

exaltation underwrote much of this conduct. By creating a thicket of required practices beyond the Mosaic Law, they made it virtually impossible for most people to be truly “pious.”

This was an honor-shame culture, effecting people especially as they assimilated more and more to the Roman world and its values. There was a dominant drive for public recognition, signaled by a number of outward signs (from clothing to size of clientele to honorific plaques and titles). The Roman world was one of the most strongly stratified societies in human history. It appears to find echoes in the hearts of these religious leaders. It is as though the Torah had become a “crown” to wear in public, a sign of superiority and honor.

In all of these matters, the religious leaders and teachers have misunderstood the nature of their role in society. They see it less as an avenue of service and more as a platform for self-advancement. It is a “good career choice” in this time to be a scribal scholar, knowing Torah and teaching it, living the pious life the ordinary run-of-the-mill person could not afford. To be elite was to be in a wonderfully privileged position. Who would not want to be there? And yet, there is great danger: to whom much is given, much is required.

In contrast, Jesus seeks to strike a blow against the seemingly inevitable drift to power and privilege that happens in all human organizations and movements. His disciples have only one who is their master teacher (as “scribes” of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:52). In contrast with the model of religious leadership that was so powerful in their surroundings, they were to orient themselves very differently. In this passage we have examples of what it means not to “do what is in accord with their deeds” (23:2).

Rather than hypocrisy, they are to be aligned in life practices, heart motives and use of words (titles) with a different ethos. Servant leadership was to be their mark, not prominence and status. They were to consider themselves as family, as brothers and sisters. Self-importance was to be avoided as well as titles that set the disciple apart in a special category (Rabbi [great one], Father, saint, even teacher). They were not to join the scramble for celebrity status. They were not to use words that reinforce and recognize such status.

For sure, there will be gifted or commissioned leaders in the community of disciples. The message is not: don’t ever be a teacher or a religious leader. We see them active in the apostolic church. But the apostle, teacher or prophet’s role was not to become the seedbed for a hierarchical structure of power and privilege that set an elite apart. Humble, reciprocal service and interdependence was to mark the community.

True greatness in the Kingdom of God is a matter of service, not function, position or title. Unquestioning submission to a religious leader due to their “special” gifts and calling is outlawed by this. Contempt for the “unwashed” and “ignorant” mass of non-elite who have not been trained is ended. Jesus’ own glad association with “sinners” and tax collectors indicated the Way Jesus modeled for his disciples.

Nor is this text to be applied in a literalistic manner. The point is not the titles themselves, but the attitude and striving for status, however that manifests itself. For example, this is not a prohibition against calling your biological father “father” – or even the person who nurtured you spiritually, serving as your “father in the faith.”⁸⁰³ The point is not about the specific term but its

⁸⁰³ Yet one wonders, even with some in the Roman Catholic Church, at the proliferation of ecclesiastical honorific titles such as “Father.” The early Church Father, Ignatius of Antioch, set the Church off in the wrong direction in advocating a monarchical episcopate and the rallying cry of “Submit

use as an honorific that sets a class of people apart and puts them on a pedestal. The issue is what importance we give to them vis-à-vis the One who stands above everyone. Yet, we must still be careful with titles and labels. They can transform our mindset in very subtle ways.

Perhaps the most difficult title is “teacher” (καθηγητής).⁸⁰⁴ It seems to refer to a tutor, often engaged to do personal and individualized instruction. Yet it is clear that there are those who serve as teachers in the Christian community, with such a gift from the Spirit. What is rejected is the sort of partisan spirit found in I Corinthians 1:12:

“One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?”

One human teacher is set up against other teachers and it becomes the basis for division and denigration of others in the family of disciples. Some are so “spiritual” they even make Christ a cause of division (‘unlike these mistaken others, I simply follow Christ’)! What is being prohibited is that the disciples are not to make disciples for themselves, disciples who pay homage to them rather than to Christ. In this case the problem infects even a proper approach: in recognizing Christ alone, he is used as a means to their own exaltation.

To be sure, honor is to be given to those who deserve honor.⁸⁰⁵ But we are not to exalt them above their actual status in the body of Christ. No human disciple deserves a pedestal. Putting them there is dangerous for any disciple. We who follow might displace the One we are to follow. Those placed there may come to love the recognition and perks that come with such exaltation.

There is a Christological focus in these verses. When human leaders in company of disciples become exalted and revered, setting one “great one” against another, the hypocrisy of religious leadership is afoot. When the pursuit of status becomes the leaven that energizes religious leadership, we find ourselves facing the severe warnings of Jesus. Jesus’ own humility is the true mark of servant leadership. He alone is the great one, the sufficient tutor, whose Father is ours in common as his disciples. There is no rival and no hierarchy that stands alongside him. The only “ranks” are brother, sister and servant. Sometimes our churches become too clergy-centered at the expense of Christ-centeredness.⁸⁰⁶ God finally does the exalting and the abasing.

to the Bishop.” We can say Jesus’ instruction against this sort of exaltation of spiritual hierarchy in the Church was canonized but not heard.

⁸⁰⁴ Winter, Bruce W. (1991). “The Messiah as the Tutor: The Meaning of Καθηγητής in Matthew 23:10”. *Tyndale Bulletin*, 42(1). Though in the context, the more common word for “teacher” (διδάσκαλος) is used in Matthew 23:8 as a counterpoint to “Rabbi” (some translate it as “Master”). So, something is often lost in translation and not fully clear in the Greek.

⁸⁰⁵ Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. III*: “It does not seem too much to say that every use of an honorific title among the disciples of Jesus carries with it the danger of sin, much as the presence of wealth automatically brings with it a situation of temptation. The temptation with titles among the disciples of Jesus could run in either one of two directions—from a (perceived) lower place or from a (perceived) higher one.” (p. 1197).

⁸⁰⁶ “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Teacher (διδάσκαλος) and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher (καθηγητής), the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant.” (Matt. 23:8-11 emphasis in the Greek)

❖ Discipleship and Egalitarianism

“Gender wars” have been present in the Church through the centuries (with a lot of suppressing of gifted women in ministry). But such “wars” have become more prominent in the wake of the feminist movements, beginning initially with women’s right to vote in the West and then later in the wake of the civil rights movements in the 1960s.

Christian feminists have argued for the removal of traditional limits on roles in the family, church and the larger society because of the egalitarian texts of the Bible.⁸⁰⁷ Complementarians have used many of the same texts of Scripture (and science’s findings) to support gendered differences as essential bases to support traditional roles and restrictions.

For the egalitarians, equal opportunity means just that: equal, ontologically and functionally. For the complementarians, since the gifting and roles of the genders are different, “equal” means equal before God as persons but distinct as male and female. Gender is seen embodied in distinctive gendered excellencies of male as male and female as female: equal ontologically but functionally different. For complementarians primary headship roles are assigned to males and support roles to females in the family and in the Church (and some say even in the civic arena).

Jesus clearly relativizes familial, social, ethnic and gender differences. In 23:8 Jesus insists that all of us disciples are “brothers.”⁸⁰⁸ His “egalitarianism” seems to differ from both contemporary streams in the current gender wars. It both recognizes distinctions of gifting, position and honor (10:1-4; 19:28; 23:34; 28:19) while at the same time not conforming to the larger society’s distinctions (12:46-50; 18:1-5; 20:25-28). The kingdom devalues the sort of status distinctions prized by his culture and prizes men and women who do the will of God.

In terms of authority and status, the rule among disciples is humble service within a social community modeled upon reciprocity and egalitarianism. There is only One who is Rabbi, Father, and Teacher. One. In whatever way church organizations and communities work out the division of labor and authority, none stand in for God. None. Not even the Pope or the Pastor. Nor is the husband or master God.

What this means at any given time and culture will vary. It is clear that the egalitarianism of the New Testament is not inconsistent with specially gifted and commissioned leaders (cf. Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). While there is neither “male nor female” (Gal. 3:28) in Christ, in the Church and society, such distinctions still play out in culturally textured ways. The household codes of the New Testament do not overturn traditional roles but rather instruct on the ways in which being in Christ now transforms the ways those roles

⁸⁰⁷ Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. (2005) *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen, eds. (2007) *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds. (1991) *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books; Wayne Grudem, ed. (2002) *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books; Benjamin Reaach (2012). *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic*. Phillipsburg, NJ. P. & R. Publishing.

⁸⁰⁸ Bruner, *Churchbook*: “If all disciples, without question or distinction, are brothers and sisters, and if only one exclusive teacher towers over them in hierarchy, then this text is radically democratizing. It is the single greatest leveler in the Gospel.” (p. 438).

are enacted.⁸⁰⁹ The norm for those codes is the relationship between Christ and the church, where hierarchy is not infected with the corrosive status striving or destructive subordination and exploitation of others for the benefit of the dominant partner.

What the modern disciple has to answer is how these bans Jesus gives on hierarchical titles work out in gendered relationships in the light of the kingdom and its values.⁸¹⁰ What is prohibited in “religious roles” (self-seeking, pride, indifference, hypocrisy, claiming special status, titles and recognition) cannot be practiced in gender affairs either. Here the complementarians are more vulnerable in instantiating male leadership in ways that repeat in gender relations what Jesus banned. God does abase those who exalt themselves. The danger for complementarians is reading cultural accommodations in Scripture prescriptively, thus misappropriating specific, relative cultural patterns as though they were divinely approved universals. At times this becomes atavistic or at least an attempt to freeze in place what was an older cultural ideal now eroding under the stresses of significant social and cultural change that is actually moving toward the biblical ideal.

The egalitarian emphasis on the eschatological reality of the leveling of all social and gender distinctions in the coming Kingdom brings a focus on the ideal that will transform all cultures within which Christians are found. This is a correct focus, one that grows out of passages such as this one. Yet there are less than ideal cultural accommodations that are not inherently sinful. Redemption means the relativizing of all humanly constructed cultures and status hierarchies. But it is possible (as did many early Christians) to live and thrive within less than ideal social structures (including male dominant hierarchies and even Roman slavery, which often were enacted in sinful ways) while transforming them over time by the leaven of the Gospel.

In Paul’s terms, the egalitarians are “the strong” (Rom. 14) since they are correct in their perception that they are free in their adoption or rejection of the common, hierarchical social patterns of their day (or any day). Still, they must balance the biblical ideal with the legal limits and social constraints of their day including gender roles. They adopt and practice some such cultural patterns, not because they are the ideal, but in obedience to Christ, not the culture (as Paul did— I Cor. 9:19-23). Their goal is to open the doors of the kingdom for their neighbors, not shut them as did the scribes and Pharisees. In the meantime, they must also practice charity not to misrepresent or distort the views of others who disagree (“the weak”) or engage in the sort of polemical or polarized language that denigrates the motives of others.

For both egalitarians and complementarians there is at least one danger: neglecting to focus on the ways in which being in Christ transforms how the disciple freely adopts (or rejects) and

⁸⁰⁹ Found in Eph. 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; Titus 2:1-10; I Peter 2:13-3:7. See Timothy G. Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians” in *The Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, 48/2 (June 2005) 317–30. “...the *Haustafel* [is] aimed at counteracting the devastating effects of the powers upon human relationships and in transforming relationships within appropriate hierarchical structures. The solution that Paul provides does not involve over-throwing such structures, but rather subjecting them to new creation dynamics so that relationships within the New Humanity take on a renewed character.” (p. 324) Gombis does not extend his analysis to the question of how this might look in cultures with very different role/status structures and what might be violations of “appropriate hierarchical structures.” For a different account see Craig S. Keener (1992). *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

⁸¹⁰ Michelle Lee-Barnewall (2016) *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

enacts roles within any socially structured institution. That we are all “brothers” (and sisters) and serve One Lord means we are equal to serve—whatever the confines or freedoms of the roles ascribed by our society or achieved within it.

So too there is the call to serve the larger dynamic of the kingdom and its values to counter the false values and oppressive structures of our contemporary social orders. One cannot deny the realities that women have been restricted, bullied, berated, all the name of proof texts from Scripture – or in the larger culture by the dead hand of traditions. We need to live out a lifestyle that frees all people to fulfill the calling and exercise the gifting they have. How we do that is a matter that each of us must be fully convinced is faithful to Christ and his teaching in such a passage as this (and others in the New Testament).⁸¹¹ How we do that is also a matter of bringing the justice of the Gospel and values of the coming kingdom into our contemporary cultures and social structures, as well as into the councils and congregations of the Church.

(b) Seven woes against the Scribes and Pharisees (23:13-36)

The seven beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount are matched by these seven woes. The woe is an expression of lament, anger, and coming judgment. It is an expression of warning, not of curse. The goal seems to be to turn them from these leaders from folly (and warn disciples specifically not to do these sorts of things). It is also a commentary on the reality that religious leaders can do more harm than good, depending upon who or what is their Master and Teacher. Being sincere and devout is not enough. One can be disastrously wrong and completely sincere.

Following the wrong path that goes in the wrong direction will never get you to a planned destination. Not even when you are zealously, persistently sure it will. The woes seem to be spoken more at the scribes and Pharisees than to them. Jesus seems to consider them incorrigible (and was right). So hardened are they in opposition that nothing said would change their mind, nothing would divert them from their hounding him to crucifixion in just a few days.

Each of the seven follows the pattern of the pronouncement of woe, reason for the announcement, and then explanation of that reason. These woes can be grouped by pairs with the seventh acting as the climax and summary. Some are clear elaborations on earlier comments:

- Followers: making salvation hard for others and corrupting converts (cf. 23:4) – misjudging God’s way of salvation (false enthusiasms) – the damning effect of deception of others by these religious leaders: preventing access to the kingdom of God.
- Ministry: trivializing religion and neglecting the important things – misjudging the priorities of the word of God (false emphases) – the misleading teaching that misses what is important: legal rulings (halakoth) that are false.
- Hypocrisy: Appearances hiding self-indulgence and internal wickedness (cf. 23:5-7)

⁸¹¹ One such expression is found in the response of some Christian leaders to the social and political changes brought in Nazi Germany: “‘4. You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant.’ (Matt. 20:25, 26.) The various offices in the church do not establish a dominion of some over the others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give to itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.” (*Theological Declaration of Barmen* 1934).

misjudging one's own spirituality (false exteriors) – the contrast between the inner and outer: external piety that masks internal impurity.

- Rejection of God's word and messengers: murder of God's prophets – the reason for all the tragic misjudging.⁸¹²

[1] Followers: Slamming the door to the Kingdom (23:13).

The first two woes focus on the effects of the lives, practices and teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. In calling them hypocrites, the context makes it clear that this first woe is not about a discrepancy between inner and outer life, double standards. It is focused on the discrepancy between the claim to be true interpreters of the Torah and what their interpretation actually does. They live in contradiction between what they appear to be and what they are. They are not leaders but misleaders. They do more harm than good.

These enthusiastic guardians of the “will and ways of God” not only have missed the door into God's kingdom, but they also actively prevent others from going through it. Given their role as apparent guardians of the Torah and its instructors, they should be those who hold the key to the door to the Kingdom and use it to open the door wide. Instead, they do not go in and lock it tight.

In the context this means they are opposing the Messiah and his announcement of the nearness of the Kingdom. Jesus has come in a long line of prophets and pronounces doom on the religious leaders for their blindness and obstinacy. They have erected a wall of interpretation and practice built on the Torah such that it actually keeps not just themselves but others from entering. Their righteousness, practiced and advocated (5:20), does not even begin to meet the requirements of the Kingdom. This is a fundamental criticism since the final measure of any religious leadership is whether it leads people into the very presence of God.

[2] Followers: Competing for converts (23:15).⁸¹³

The problem with the Pharisees and scribes is not lack of enthusiasm. They are not

⁸¹² Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3* (p. 282); France, *Matthew* (p. 868); Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (pp. 667-678); Turner, *Baker: Matthew* (pp. 551-552); Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 343). Alternatives to this have been proposed: (1) Nolland, *Matthew* (p. 536): “They appear to be organised into an opening set of two (keeping people out of what is good and drawing them into what is bad), a middle set of three (oaths, tithing, and washing of cups) and a final set of two (dealing with tombs).” (2) Carson, *Matthew* (p. 536):

A: First woe (v. 13)—failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah

B: Second woe (v. 15)—superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good

C: Third woe (vv. 16–22)—misguided use of the Scripture

D: Fourth woe (vv. 23–24)—fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture

C': Fifth woe (vv. 25–26)—misguided use of the Scripture

B': Sixth woe (vv. 27–28)—superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good

A': Seventh woe (vv. 29–32)—heirs of those who failed to recognize the prophets

⁸¹³ The weight of manuscript evidence is against 23:14 being original. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*: “That ver. 14 is an interpolation derived from the parallel in Mk 12:40 or Lk 20:47 is clear (a) from its absence in the earliest and best authorities of the Alexandrian and the Western types of text, and (b) from the fact that the witnesses that include the passage have it in different places, either after ver. 13 (so the Textus Receptus) or before ver. 13.” (p. 50).

indifferent toward the things of God. There is a strong zeal for the Temple and God that is a

powerful motivation among them. They spread out through the Roman world seeking disciples and followers. When they gain them, the effect of their instruction is to make their converts doubly children of hell (rather than children of the Kingdom). Their disciples, as converts, act like converts often do: they are twice as zealous for the “way” they have discovered as the supposed key to life and meaning.⁸¹⁴ Since the “way” they have joined as converts resists the Kingdom Jesus brings, they are even more confirmed disciples of hell than their teachers.⁸¹⁵ “But falsehood shares with truth a remarkable missionary zeal; guilt is as motivating as gratitude; the false spirits are sometimes more active than the Holy Spirit.”⁸¹⁶

In the Apostolic days, the early Christians endured the passion of the “Judaizers” who came, subverting the message of the gospel (Galatia and Colossae). Zeal is not enough. It has to be enthusiasm in service of the Kingdom of God, not any old kingdom of religion or spiritual movement. Matthew’s Gospel ends with commissioning the disciples to make disciples of all nations. This is a warning against disciple-making that no longer respects the Way of salvation that echoes the emphases of the Word. This is a “how not to do it” manual for disciple-makers.

This warning is difficult for moderns to hear for a particular reason. We have been taught that “all religions” are equal – equal in their core truths and equal in the various ways they have been misused and corrupted. The notion that, what one embraces as true and lives out can take one to very different afterlife destinies, seems unthinkable. “Hell” is said to be a social construct about an unreal destiny designed to scare people into good behavior. No more, no less. While we deplore the bad conduct of criminals, psychopaths, bullies and “climbers,” there is no literal “hell” for them. We are to consider the “woes” of this chapter as only laments. People will miss out on so much in this life when they clothe themselves with hypocrisy and misguided zeal.

Yet Jesus is not simply using metaphorical, hyperbolic language in order to underscore a point of view. Nor is this the reflection of an anti-synagogue polemic projected back onto Jesus by the Apostolic church in its separation from Judaism. It is a warning about a serious, life-threatening, judgment invoking pattern of conduct. What we believe and how we allow the truth to infiltrate all of our being is destiny setting in its effects. Misleading others only multiplies the effects. The following two woes indicate the ways in which these religious leaders manage to make their converts doubly children of hell.

[3] Ministry: Trivializing religion (23:16-22).

One thing that undermines authentic discipleship for these well-trained, articulate scriptural scholars and devout practitioners of spiritual formation disciplines is their casuistry. Once they become entangled in manipulating oaths for personal and selfish ends, they are blind to the meaning and importance of truth-telling and promise-keeping. Because of that they are “blind

⁸¹⁴ On a positive note: Saul who became a convert to the Christian movement was doubly zealous after his eyes were opened to the Way of Jesus. Doubly a child of the Kingdom.

⁸¹⁵ Matthew has seven of the ten appearances of Gehenna (γέεννα), ‘hell’, in the gospels. Luther, *Works Vol. 68*: “Now if someone has the authority that people are supposed to give heed to him as to God Himself and he does the opposite to condemnation, that is truly an abomination. The most harmful is a false preacher. He is the worst person on earth, and there is no thief, murderer, or scoundrel on earth whose wickedness can compare to that of such a preacher who has the people’s obedience in God’s name, but strikes them dead and leads them into the abyss of hell with false preaching.” (p. 163).

⁸¹⁶ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 445).

guides” (vs. 16, 24).⁸¹⁷ Rather than obey the law, they manipulate it. They are “blind” because they cannot distinguish between central and peripheral matters, between what is binding and what is not. Their hairsplitting distinctions exhibit a mindset completely removed from the reality of God’s ways. They turn simple faith into complex religion, sincere words into arcane formulas to be recited, clear commitments as binding only when just the right, precise expression has been uttered. A thousand and one details replace the one thing necessary.

This a deadly sin, first of all, because of its engagement with the name and person of God in oaths. These are oaths invoking God’s name and in effect taking it in vain. Earlier Jesus pointed out the gap between our character and our words (Matt. 5:33-37). Why do we need to say: “Cross my heart and hope to die” or “I swear by my honor” or “on my children’s heads” or “on the Bible”? Why do not our simple yes and no carry sufficient weight to bring about a truthful utterance or an unbreakable commitment? How is it that a simple change in wording makes an oath valid or invalid? Code words are made more important than a person’s integrity. When hairsplitting distinctions become the basis for what is pious or not, we are in deep trouble.

The specifics Jesus mentions have the problem of making the objects humans bring to God more important than God’s presence. So, swearing by the gold in the Temple or the gift sacrifice on the altar makes the oath binding but not if one swears by the Temple or the altar.⁸¹⁸ It is a slippery logic that provides loopholes based on precise wording for those “in the know” about how to finesse commitments that turn out to be costly or difficult to keep. Any such talk involves heaven, its throne and the One who sits on it. God is always the accompaniment of our oaths and vows. The precise wording is not crucial. The One by whom all our words are binding is crucial.

Jesus rejects this empty distinction in favor of all oaths being binding. In fact, oaths among the children of the Kingdom should not be needed at all, as though there was a real distinction between oaths or vows and ordinary speech. Integrity mandates a full alignment between one’s words and one’s actions. Not just when one is “under oath.” Integrity means we are not blind to the reality that God is always present in all our words and deeds.

There should be something suspicious about arcane, complex, “secrets” of exotic knowledge, only available to the initiated, taught only by the spiritual gurus who have deciphered the arcane mysteries and special words. To be sure, there are things in Scripture that are difficult and need careful, wise handling by experts. But, as a whole, enough is clear and uncomplicated that salvation does not depend on having access to the eschatological “code” of the end times, or “secrets” of the victorious life. Majoring on the majors is what is important. “Success” is not dependent upon certain techniques or ritual correctness. Prayers are not rendered effective by using certain words or phrases; rituals are not rendered null and void if one does not recite them word perfect. The living God and hairsplitting don’t go together.

Some see a contradiction between this text (which does not abolish oaths) and Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount (5:33-37). What this woe does is to display the rationale for the earlier words in the Sermon: all words, including oaths, are related to God. The heart of the issue is telling the truth and keeping commitments. Focusing on what precisely was said in taking an

⁸¹⁷ This phrase (“blind guides”) seems to serve as an inclusio, bracketing the third and fourth woe together, which illustrate how the Pharisees are blind guides. Talbert, *Matthew* (p. 258).

⁸¹⁸ The notions of “graded holiness” and the transfer of holiness seems to be at work in these distinctions. The gold of the Temple and the sacrifice on the Altar have been set aside from ordinary use. But that transfer of holiness comes from the Temple and the altar, not the other way around.

oath, on the right words to seal or to evade a commitment means one has lost their way. It is not some precise wording that makes a commitment valid or invalid. Manipulating people by sophisticated word games is simply wrong and can't release one from fulfilling a vow or oath.

[4] Ministry: Neglecting the important things (23:23-24).

The hyperbole in this section underscores the distinction between the center and the periphery. There is a hierarchy in the law and norms: some things are far more basic and central than other matters. What these Torah experts and practitioners have obscured is that very distinction. In paying such zealous time and attention to minor matters (which have their place), they have neglected to embody and obey the central things. Their logic seemed to be, if we keep the smallest things scrupulously, then the large things will be taken care of also. In being zealous about even the smallest elements of the tithe, they would show their faithfulness to the Torah.

Being scrupulous about tithing is not a bad thing. But it cannot substitute for a neglect of justice, mercy or faithfulness. Jesus' point is that being diligent and scrupulous about small matters is not a problem. What is problematic is doing these while violating or neglecting far more important matters of the law. Their desire to appear conscientious in their religious life got focused on the wrong things. They worried about whether the law concerning tithes applied to the seasoning condiments or just to the food they harvested and prepared. They were counting out tiny seasoning seeds to put in the offering while ignoring justice, mercy and faithfulness.

The hyperbolic metaphors are striking. Wine was filtered with a cloth so as to catch any unclean gnats or larvae that might have fallen into the open container containing wine. In taking such care over minutiae, they forget the unclean "camel" that has fallen in and which they happily swallow. Avoiding eating an unclean camel is easy. Avoiding swallowing a gnat, more difficult and would require more diligence. They are gnat-strainers and camel-swallowers. The problem is that the diligence and care they take over minor things of the law should be focused on the more important things.⁸¹⁹ They are blind to their neglect of the central matters of the law.

❖ Discipleship: Keeping the main things the main things

Three things are singled out as priorities: justice, mercy and faithfulness. If one wants to gauge the authentic spirituality of a group, look for manifestations of these three. They are another way of summing up the Great Commandment: to love God and neighbor. Jesus may have had in mind Micah 6:8: "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."⁸²⁰ For individuals, they are qualities that are to mark their interaction with others, whether as married partners, parents, team leaders, bosses, pastors or priests etc. We can spend a lot of energy and effort on the minutia of correct doctrine, the color of the carpet in the Narthex, or the type

⁸¹⁹ Carson, *Matthew*: "The chiasmic structure of the 'woes' centers on this fourth one, where the basic failure of the Pharisaic teachers is laid bare. Moving out from this center, it becomes clear that where Scripture is interpreted by the Pharisees, there is danger of misappropriation of truth (woes 3 and 5) and of corrupting other people (woes 2 and 6), coupled with blindness to true revelation when it comes supremely in the person of Jesus the Messiah (woes 1 and 7)." (p. 540).

⁸²⁰ Micah 6:8b (LXX): ἡ τοῦ ποιεῖν κρίμα καὶ ἀγαπᾶν ἔλεον καὶ ἔτοιμον εἶναι τοῦ πορεύεσθαι μετὰ κυρίου θεοῦ σου. Here we have two of the terms: justice (judgment) and mercy. Instead of "faithfulness" the third priority is "to walk humbly with your God." The Septuagint terms for justice and mercy translate *mišpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) and *hesed* (חֶסֶד).

of music in the worship service (or what denomination), and at the same time neglect the poor, harbor racist opinions, be a sexual predator, or cheat on our commitments. When small points of theology or religious practice push aside the concerns for justice, mercy and faithfulness in our dealings, we place ourselves under this woe.

(1) Justice (κρίσις): In this context it appears to refer to administering what is right or fair in their roles as leaders and magistrates. The term often means “judgment” in a legal process. But it is applicable to all our relationships: giving to everyone what is right and fair. We all have relationships within which we must do justice in our opinions, judgments, words and actions. Love is not blind but puts sees clearly and correctly what is at stake in our relations with one another and is fair.

(2) Mercy (ἔλεος): This term refers to kindness, compassion, clemency for another. It is always a companion of justice. It pairs with justice in the manner in which justice is done. It tempers and restrains the impulse to mete out harsh judgment and revenge, to disallow mitigating considerations or recognize genuine repentance. Love is merciful, going beyond the strict demands of justice.

(3) Faithfulness (πίστις): Other ways of rendering this is reliability, fidelity or commitment. At the least it means keeping one’s word (without the hairsplitting condemned above). Being a person who displays faithfulness means being someone who can be trusted. The word also means simply having faith in a trusted other. If Micah 6:8 is in view, then this is the correlate of “walking humbly with your God.” It would mean being fully committed to the ways and words of God, reliably obedient to his law, faithful in the justice and mercy that images the character of God. Love is faithful, committed in the long run even through hard times.

[5] Hypocrisy: Appearances hide plunder and self-indulgence (23:25-28).

The problem in focus for this last pair of woes is externalism. Whatever the “marvelously devout” outward appearances are, inwardly there is a very different reality. External ritual cleanness and “orthodoxy” hides an inner covetousness and greed that leads to plundering others and renders these “devout” people unclean.⁸²¹

The problem is more than inner motivation though that is its root. Not only do these religious leaders distort the truth of God by focusing on minor things, but their conduct is also captive to living a “first class” life style because of what governs their inner motivation. It is another example of seeking to serve two Lords: money and God. Since they are not captivated by justice, mercy and faithfulness (23:24) they insure they live in fine mansions with the best food, luxury goods, travel “first class,” great wealth and large clienteles. No matter if a Lazarus or two are at their doorstep because of extreme poverty.

They wheel and deal, cheat and gouge to line their lives with luxuries. But it is all done under

⁸²¹ Some see a hendiadys here where the “and” is expegetical: France, *Matthew*: “Literally ‘plunder and lack of self-control.’ For the former see on 11:12 where a cognate term describes the action of the ‘violent people’ the latter term, ἀκρασία, is a philosophical term for people’s inability to control their baser instincts (its unfamiliarity as a ‘Christian’ word probably accounts for the later MSS which substitute ‘unrighteousness,’ ‘uncleanness’ or ‘wickedness,’ the latter being the reading of Luke 11:39). The two terms together function as a hendiadys denoting an unrestrained selfishness which rides roughshod over the rights and interests of others.” (ft. 6, p. 866). Also, Blomberg, *Matthew* (p. 347).

the cloak of social arrangements whose texture is justified religiously. The wealth that flows to them is part and parcel of their position as leaders and power brokers. If they had known mercy or justice, their wealth and power would have been in the service of much more than their honor and “good life.” Yet the dainties of the rich are often the tears of the poor. They give themselves to rituals and practices of “ceremonial cleanness” while neglecting the inner life and its controlling motives and the outer deeds that flow from them.⁸²²

In our day, the health-and-wealth gospel often falls into this trap with its attention to “tithing” money. Promoters of the “prosperity gospel” and Word of Faith movement often like to talk about “seeding,” “seed faith offerings,” and “hundred-fold returns.” A seed faith offering is money given in faith that God will multiply it and return it to the giver. The more money you give—and the more faith you have—the more money you get in return. Too often it enriches the prophet or pastor who promotes this idea. It is a get rich quick scheme that has little to do with God’s kingdom and more to do with the ministry’s (and minister’s) pocketbook.⁸²³

The issue is the obsession with maintaining the reputation for being very spiritual and righteous while taking steps to ensure that this invariably leads to the “good life.” The effect of neglecting justice, mercy and faithfulness is manifest in the way these early power and influence brokers have skewed the economic system, taking away the rights and spoiling the poor, orphans and widows. It is manifest in the preoccupation with ceremonial questions while neglecting their inner motives and actual conduct toward the poor. Ritual observances have displaced a living relationship with the God who mandates care for the poor, the alien, the stranger.⁸²⁴

The demand to “first clean the inside...” is not in order to establish a privatized, personally-focused piety. This is a call to total moral renovation through ordering the inner motives and outlook by commitment to justice, mercy and faithfulness. Then the outward practices of piety will then take care of themselves and will be appropriate accompaniments to the mercy, justice and love that manifests itself in outward conduct. But when piety is not yoked to justice, mercy and faithfulness, it is impiety of the worst sort. It is simply another way these “blind guides” do not enter the Kingdom and insure others do not enter it either.

⁸²² Many translate the Greek as “they are full of” whereas others as “they are full *because* of” (γέμουσιν ἐκ ἀρπαγῆς καὶ ἀκρασίας). The question is the force of the preposition ἐκ. Is the content of the cup plundering greediness and lack of self-control or is the cup full *because* things were obtained by aggressive greed and intemperance? In the latter case the food and drink in the vessels, obtained unjustly and consumed intemperately, could not be cleansed by any means since the method of filling them was inherently polluting. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*: “The thought is thus that the cups and dishes are unclean because they contain what is robbed from the poor as do their owners, the rich, because they cannot control themselves and in their intemperance stuff everything into their stomachs (and their pockets). Therein—thus must we add on the basis of v. 25b—lies the true impurity of the ‘inside.’” (p. 127) Carson, *Matthew* (p. 541) and Gibbs, *Matthew Vol. III* (pp. 1211-1212) disagree.

⁸²³ Wigger, John, (2017) *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Evangelical Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Bowler, Kate (2013) *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Salinas, Daniel (2017) *Prosperity Theology and the Gospel: Good News or Bad News for the Poor?* Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers.

⁸²⁴ Smith, *Matthew*: “Jesus diagnoses the uncleanness as ill-gotten gain, the result of injustice, plunder, avarice, actions directly opposed to justice, mercy, and loyalty (v. 23). The hottest water will never cleanse such cups. Luke reports the cleansing process in interesting terms: Give to the poor what is in your cups and plates and then everything will be clean for you (Luke 11:39)!” (p. 276)

❖ Discipleship: Transformed from the Inside Out

In Jesus' economy the heart comes first. The only thing that renders one unclean and unsuitable for the presence of God is the heart. Externals such as food, tombs, leprosy, menstrual blood – none of these things rises to the level of the heart. Not that external actions are irrelevant. The order is significant: first the internal then the external, not the other way around. In addition, the inner and outer must correspond. No veiling of an inner chaos and impropriety with a veneer of “proper” orthodoxy and devotion to spiritual practices. At the same time, if the inner is “clean,” the external actions and relationships will show that to be the case.

The fifth woe scores the religious leaders as having insides full of “robbery and intemperance.” (23:25)⁸²⁵ The two terms that are singled out as the inner contradiction of the outward piety deal with two different powerful roots of bad conduct. The outward piety is effaced by outward actions that are a window into the inner motives.

(a) “Robbery” or “Greediness.” The term harpage [ἀρπαγή] refers to the act or product of seizure, hence plunder, robbery or the inner state of mind that leads to seizure, hence greediness, rapacity. This has to do with how one's life and mindset is oriented to economic goods – possessions – and the actions one participates in in order to fatten one's assets. This strong term refers to violation of one's neighbor by various “techniques” to relieve them of their goods. While it is used frequently for warfare, it also has the actions of laws or taxes and the use of economic advantage to strip the weak and poor of the few assets they have (cf. Isaiah 3:14, 10:2; Ezekiel 34:2-6, 1 Macc. 13:34, Matt. 21:13).

If a disciple's motives and relationship towards wealth and possessions are out of order, a transformation is in order. Gordon Gecko's famous speech in the film *Wall Street*, “greed is good,” seems almost unremarkable in our day. “Success” is defined by wealth. Our consumer culture is second nature. Yet excessive love or desire for what money can buy is one of the seven “deadly” sins: avarice. We are surrounded by a culture with a lifestyle of excessive acquisition and careless spending. We over-acquire and then we over-trash.

Greediness manifests itself in several attitudes or habits:

- Avariciousness stresses greed for riches and often implies miserliness, clinging to resources instead of sharing with others.
- Acquisitiveness suggests excessive effort in accumulating wealth or material possessions. Many individuals focus life energy and career hopes on moving upward financially. Pastors hear the voice of God calling them to larger and wealthier churches. People chaff at having less than their peers and complain that God is shortchanging them.
- Covetousness is, perhaps, greed's most general manifestation. Covetousness is a longing, a strong desire for what one does not yet have. Often it refers to a particular greed for something that another rightfully possesses. What they have, I want.

Avoiding greediness and economic gain as “plunder” entails not simply seeing oneself as generous and “ungreedy” but in refusing to participate in economic schemes that strip the poor

⁸²⁵ Luz, *Matthew 21-28* (p. 125). The Greek is: γέμουσιν ἐξ ἀρπαγῆς καὶ ἀκρασίας. Various translations as “greediness, plunder, violence, extortion, what has been stolen” [ἀρπαγή] and “self-indulgence, selfishness, uncontrolled desires, lack of self-control” [ἀκρασία].

and take advantage of the weak in order to enrich oneself. Some “lawful” arrangements that prevail in a given time are of this very sort: slavery, debt-bondage, loan-sharking, deceptive product sales, price gouging in times of shortage or unconscionable raising the cost of life-and-death medicines, shifting “externalities” by dumping toxic waste into the environment in order to fatten profits, etc. The justification that these actions are “legal” is no excuse. The claim that the CEO who does this is a “good Christian whose heart is right with God” is bunk.

The simple claim and justification that the free market “sets the price” is a partial fiction. Often prices are subject to practices that are not genuinely “market-driven.” Too often people in business say that religion and business do not mix. Such a claim is no more than a mask to hide greed, even from themselves. Too often there are a million reasons things can’t be different than they are. It is the “market” that determines things, not the moral or ethical decisions made in the board room or by the management team of the corporation.

Part of our blindness to our economic footprint and our own avarice is that we feel we have worked hard for what we have gained. It is “ours.” We want a more comfortable life for our family, especially our children. So, we rationalize the much we retain and the little we give away.⁸²⁶ We see the reality that some among us are poor due to bad decisions and bad character traits while also not acknowledging the poor educational and job prospects for many of the urban and rural poor that lead many others into poverty. They are “lazy” while we are “conscientious.”

Greediness is an attachment to a good thing gone wrong. Money and possessions are not evils in themselves. Human life needs some minimum to flourish. Living a simple lifestyle so others may simply live and exercising wise stewardship of the goods of the earth so these goods are still available for future generations are important steps. We rob and plunder what belongs to others now and in the future when we over-acquire and over-trash (and destroy the very environment the next generations will need to survive). The hallmark of this sin is that we use people to serve our love of money rather than use money to serve our love of people.

(b) “Intemperance” or “lack of self-control.” The term *akrasia* [ἀκρασία] simply means without self-control, intemperate.⁸²⁷ Temperance has been one of the virtues from Plato’s time to the present. It is a general term referring to voluntary, internally motivated restraint from excesses that damage oneself or the community. It entails restraint from excessive anger, strong cravings for something, arrogance, retaliation, excessive pleasure seeking (such as gluttony or sex). Instead, the self-controlled is calm, reasonable, prudent, modest, self-regulated and

⁸²⁶ “Hence Basil says: ‘If you acknowledge them,’ namely, your temporal goods, ‘as coming from God, is He unjust because He apportions them unequally? Why are you rich while another is poor, unless it be that you may have the merit of a good stewardship, and he the reward of patience? It is the hungry man’s bread that you withhold, the naked man’s cloak that you have stored away, the shoe of the barefoot that you have left to rot, the money of the needy that you have buried underground: and so you injure as many as you might help.’” Quoted in Thomas Aquinas. (1990). *The Summa Theologica*. II-II q. 32 a.5 ad 2. (Second Edition, Vol. 18). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. (p. 545).

⁸²⁷ In Luke 11:39 uses *πονηρία* here: signaling a lack of moral or social values – hence, wickedness, maliciousness, sinfulness. Other Greek terms for self-control include *νήφω* (being well balanced, sober, free from all sorts of mental “drunkenness” that leads to excess, rashness, confusion); *ἐγκράτεια* (to exercise complete control over one’s desires and actions); *χαλιναγωγέω* (figurative: to control with a bit or bridle); *γυμνάζω* (to control oneself by discipline, to be well disciplined); *ὕπωπιάζω* (figurative: to strike the eye, i.e., to give rough treatment to the body to keep it under control); *ἀφειδία* (severe, ascetic or harsh control over – in its context, excessive control).

responds to the evil done to them with non-violence and forgiveness.

In this context, it is the twin to greediness and plunder. The excessive desire for recognition, wealth and power is a sign of lack of self-control. These religious leaders have given an importance to things that distort and destroy the goods of the Kingdom of God. They are motivated to take actions and institute arrangements that enrich them at the expense of the ordinary people of the land. Had they self-control, they would not need to enlarge their palaces, demand special recognition, expand public signs of their “religiousness.”

In the end, if you want to know your inner motivations: watch what you actually do. Claiming to have a heart that is in tune with God while making decisions and taking actions that are motivated more by greed or lack of self-control is a sign of a sickness of the heart.

[6] Hypocrisy: Appearances hide inner wickedness (23:27-28).

No matter the outward acts of religious piety everyone can see and affirm, inward deadness and uncleanness rule. This sixth woe makes much the same point as the fifth with a different analogy. Tombs were whitewashed, especially near the time of major pilgrimages to Jerusalem, to make them conspicuous. Any contact with them would render one unclean for seven days and require suitable cleansing rituals.⁸²⁸ At the same time, such whitewashing gave the Tombs a certain beautiful appearance.

In this picture, the religious leaders are portrayed as full of “lawlessness” (ἀνομία). Those claiming to be the stewards and advocates of the law (Torah) are actually those who abuse it by acting in ways contrary to its intent. How do we explain why people behave in ways that cut corners, oppress others, manipulate systems, cheat and steal – act in ways that are above the law? Is it not that there is something fundamentally wrong with their inner mindset, what they treasure? Yet they can be sitting next to us in the pews of our Church and singing the hymns as loudly as the next person, reciting the creeds and saying, “Praise the Lord.” Religious, yes Lawless, yes! Most certainly blind hypocrites.

[7] Rejection of God’s word: Killers of God’s prophets (23:29-36).

The first six woes climax in this seventh.⁸²⁹ The tombs that render them unclean are those of the prophets. In the sixth woe these religious leaders were tombs. Now they decorate tombs of the great ones of the past. Yet these pious religious leaders are in grave danger because they participate in the sins of their ancestors. Having read the stories and events of those predecessors, they have learned only their bad behavior. Having claimed descent from the “greats” of the past, they have only inherited every homicidal gene of their ancestors. Already they are plotting the murder of the Great Prophet, just as their ancestors not only resisted the prophets but killed them. In effect Jesus says: ‘Go ahead. Complete the long line of killing of prophets.’ The only prophets they truly honor are dead prophets whose words they can reinterpret and nullify.

The main reason for the deadly sins listed in the first six woes is because of one key thing: rather than hearing the Word of God, given by the prophets and now by the very Son of God, the great Prophet, they have gone astray, despite all their religious zeal and scriptural scholarship. In opposing him, they oppose all that comes before and climaxes in him. This is the bottom line

⁸²⁸ “If so much as one’s shadow touched a corpse or a tomb, one contracted impurity.” Keener, *Matthew* (p. 553).

⁸²⁹ “There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him.” Prov. 6:16.

behind all these woes: reception or rejection of the word of God leads to serious distortion and misunderstandings of the affairs of life.

If one asks how such religiously trained, astute people could go so wrong, here is the answer. The problem is not lack of information or opportunity. Jesus is sending them prophets, wise men and scribes. Yet these varied sources of truth will be rejected, persecuted and even killed. It is not just the killing of Jesus that will complete the sins of the ancestors but the terrible treatment of Jesus' own prophets and teachers in the centuries to come.

Jesus adopts John the Baptist's language (Matt. 3:7) about the religious leaders: they are the offspring of poisonous snakes who will be unable to escape the judgment that consigns people to hell. This is not a condemnation of the Jewish people but of their leaders. Unfortunately, as the next section tells us: judgment falling on leaders often also affects those beneath them. The guilt of the leaders is far heavier than the followers. The judgment will come "upon this generation" who have been misled. This is not "collective guilt" but "collective fate." The innocent and the guilty are caught up together in the fate leaders bring on their communities.

This woe essentially encompasses the Hebrew canon: from A to Z (Abel to Zechariah). The Zechariah in view seems to be from 2 Chronicles 24:20-22.⁸³⁰ In essence, all the guilt for all the killings of God's messengers from A to Z will now fall upon this leadership since they will kill not the servants of the King but his very son (Matt. 21:33-46; cf. Acts 7:52).⁸³¹

The community of faith must be a community of truth or it becomes a den of poisonous vipers. Too often we witness the perverse effectiveness of charismatic, gifted leaders. Their persuasiveness brings them to positions of leadership where they exercise the very sort of hypocritical veneer of virtue and truth, covering over a life-style of greed and lack of self-control. Given their communicative competence, they have all sorts of rationalizations and justifications that "explain" what they are doing. They not only deceive but are self-deceived.

(c) Judgment Coming on the Religious Establishment (23:37-39)

Having pronounced the coming judgment, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem's fate. Once again, as in past history of Israel, the city will be desolate because of its unwillingness to be taken into the very care of God. Jesus' love for Jerusalem and its people gives way to the lamentation of a broken heart.

Considering Jerusalem as the place where God had placed his name, where his "house" was located, the destruction of the city would signal the departure of God. The prophets had seen the glory of the Lord leaving the Temple for exile in the past (Ezekiel 10:18) and then return (Zech. 1:16, 2:10, 8:3). The real desolation was God's abandonment of his house, the Temple.

⁸³⁰ Perhaps following one of the orders of the Hebrew canon that begins with Genesis and ends with Chronicles. There is some confusion since "Zechariah, son of Berekiah" on the surface seems to refer to the prophet (Zech. 1:1) but who lived at a time when the Temple was being rebuilt or just rebuilt. The incident seems clearly to refer to "Zechariah, son of Jehoida" in Chronicles (there are 32 or so Zechariah's in the Old Testament). The answer may lie in the conventions of naming. In Ezra 6:14 the prophet Zechariah is called the son of "Iddo." So, it may be the Chronicler's Zechariah's father had two names as well. The parallel in Luke 11:51 does not mention the ancestor of Zechariah.

⁸³¹ Nolland, *Matthew*: "The dying words of the priest Zechariah in 2 Ch. 24:22 ('May Yahweh hear and avenge') make a good fit for Mt. 23 and match the blood of Abel crying out from the ground (Gn. 4:10). If the right Zechariah has been identified, then the Gospel tradition is probably the earliest indication that, as was true later, 2 Chronicles was placed last in the Hebrew Bible." (p. 947).

Jesus leaving the Temple is a sign of that departure.

A decisive turn in affairs is signaled by these woes and lamentation. From now Jerusalem will not see him until it says: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (as they had once done, 21:9). This is a foreshadowing of the coming of the Son of Man in the fulness of the Kingdom. The acknowledgement will happen when every nation and tongue will confess his true status. This points to the taking away of the Kingdom and its being given to other “tenants” (21:43) until such time as the second coming occurs and even Israel acknowledges its Messiah. When this greeting of the Lord is uttered in faith, people see Jesus.⁸³²

(2) Judgment of Jerusalem and the Coming of Christ (24:1–25:46)

The judgment that Jesus foretells for the Pharisees and scribes as religious leaders and upon Jerusalem itself, provokes the disciples to ask him to explain when the things he has been talking about will happen. What can a disciple look for as signs of his coming and the end of the age? Jesus responds with apocalyptic language that has stimulated all sorts of interpretations and speculations. The ticking of the cosmic clock and the accompanying portents and signs have been fertile fields for all sorts of imaginative and strange scenarios. This is one of those sections of Scripture that require enormous amounts of humility because of its difficulty. If there are any passages that challenge the notion of the perspicuity of Scripture, they are the apocalyptic texts.

The destruction of the nation of Israel and its central shrine in Jerusalem happened due to people being misled by a religious leadership who were fundamentally flawed. Jesus’ words that begin the Olivet Discourse are pertinent: “See to it that no one misleads (deceives) you” (24:4). Yet over the centuries many have been misled – predicting the end of the age on a given date based on reading the “signs of the times” and seeing themselves as the true remnant in the midst of unfaithfulness: selling all and traipsing to hill tops in white smocks only to be disappointed.

Yet, while many things are rather opaque and difficult, there are somethings crystal clear:

“Jesus uses apocalyptic but teaches compassion. The discourse opens with the disciples talking about the splendor of sacred buildings (24:1–2) and closes with Jesus speaking of the unsurpassed splendor and holiness of compassion toward the little ones (25:31–46).”⁸³³

⁸³² Barth, *CD Vol. IV.2*. “But now the shadow was only that of the event in which Jerusalem had opposed to the gathering of Jesus the oldest and thickest and most impregnable of all its walls—its own unwillingness: ‘Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee.’ ... Everything was at stake. It was a matter of life and death. ... What else is Mt. 23 but one long description of this wall, which was not merely there as an immovable barrier, but from which Jesus Himself would necessarily be subjected to severe and pitiless attack unless it could be shattered by Him, by the kingdom of God which had drawn ominously near in Him, as by an earthquake? ... What was all the paganism of Greece and Rome compared with this! For here it took the form of the most exquisite and exclusive piety, and yet a piety which was only too ready to expand (v. 13f.). Here it took the form of a historically grounded and most carefully constructed ritualism (v. 16f.). Here it took the form of a supreme casuistry (v. 23f.). Here it took the form of pride in a great past, of carefully keeping the tombs of prophets and other righteous men to whom it was worthwhile to appeal (v. 27f.). All this—and therefore world-empire in what was inwardly its most glorious form—was at stake when Jesus came up against it. And it had either to be destroyed and abandoned, or defended at all costs. Against it Jesus Himself could only pronounce a woe if He was to say anything at all.” (pp. 261-262)

⁸³³ Smith, *Matthew* (pp. 280–281).

Whatever we draw from this discourse, we can be sure that exercising the main things (justice, mercy, faithfulness) needs to remain central. Spending enormous effort and time to parse every tick of the cosmic clock before the final coming of Jesus to consummate history is not the essential task. It is becoming to the sorts of disciples that Jesus portrays as “sheep” at the final judgment. No matter how many different ways we may interpret this prophetic text, we can be sure all things must be folded into the great commandment of love of God and neighbor. The only durable and final thing is the work of love in the human community. This discourse aims to create spiritual endurance, not apocalyptic visionaries or magnificent prophetic charts.

If we get obsessed eschatologically, we can be sure we have been misled. There are few things as fascinating as prophecy – or as problematic. Being ready is the task, not predicting the day or hour. Being ready means learning to live the life of justice, mercy and faithfulness – now and every day of our lives. We are future-oriented and would like to be in on what is coming so we can plan for it successfully. If we could predict the stock market, we would all be millionaires in little time. The presence of horoscopes, seances, tarot cards, and fortune-tellers testifies to the desire to know these things. Matthew Henry has wise words on this account:

“It is observable, that what Christ here saith to his disciples tends more to engage their caution than to satisfy their curiosity; more to prepare them for the events that should happen than to give them a distinct idea of the events themselves.”⁸³⁴

(3) Signs and Times of the Temple’s Destruction and of Christ’s return (24:1-35)

This section of the discourse starts with the disciples pointing out the Temple buildings to Jesus. It was a most impressive building complex, one of the most awesome structures in the ancient world. His response stuns them: this magnificent Herodian Temple will be utterly destroyed.⁸³⁵ The architecture and engineering wonder of it was not what impressed him. Rather what he saw was what went on inside the Temple.

The disciples had his shocking words to mull over as they continued to walk away from the Temple to the Mount of Olives, from which they could look down and see all the Temple buildings. Jesus has turned his back on the Temple and will not return to it as its Messiah. Once he sat down on the Mount, they pose their question: when and what sign will point to this horrendous doom on the Temple and his coming and the end of the age?⁸³⁶ It seems they thought

⁸³⁴ Henry, *Commentary* (p. 1738).

⁸³⁵ One of the arguments for this being a prophecy before the event is that Jesus’ words were not literally and precisely fulfilled when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. The contemporary wailing wall remains, stone upon stone. If it had been written after the fact (after AD 70) as a projection back into the mouth of Jesus, one wonders why Matthew did not then conform it to the more precise facts on the ground. Jesus’ words were hyperbole, pointing to the thorough destruction that ended all Temple activity in the complex of Herod’s buildings.

⁸³⁶ Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*: “Obviously Matthew 24 is not a detailed blueprint (cf. the chronological imprecision). Interest is elsewhere—(i) in supplying the true ending of the Messiah’s story so that the whole can be rightly grasped; (ii) in foretelling and therefore making bearable Christian suffering; (iii) in nurturing hope by showing how a good future can issue from an evil present; and (iv) in encouraging battle against moral languor.” (p. 328).

of the two as one event – the destruction of the Temple would coincide with his “coming” and the “end of this age.”⁸³⁷

(a) The “signs” that are not the sign. (24:1-14)

False messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, persecutions, apostasy, and false prophets – these were expected signs of the end.⁸³⁸ Though these were common expectations, disciples should not mislead. They are all things that will be occurring but none of them is a “sign” of the end of the age. In the midst of the ordinary chaos of history and rise (and fall) of these sorts of events, the disciples are given instruction on how to respond:

A. Don’t be deceived. Many will come and trick many (vs. 4). Disciples need to be level-headed, sober-minded, clearly focused on the main things. These may be highly gifted teachers, teaching the “deep” things, the secrets known only to the elite, prophetic prognosticators who can parse the ticking of the cosmic clock. They come from within the Christian movement, “in the name of Jesus,” even claiming to be the “coming” of the Messiah. This is a command for theological sanity, not to be tricked by pseudo-prophets or Messianic figures, even those claiming to be doing it in Jesus’ name. Later Jesus will elaborate: these tricksters will even do signs and wonders (23:23-25) so as to mislead even the elect. Neither the “many” nor miracles are a sign of truth. But they are not the sign of the end of all things.

B. Don’t be fearful. The unfolding of history brings many terrors, especially in the form of wars. The predicted destruction of the Temple was part of a horrific time of Roman reduction of the Jewish nation as a whole.⁸³⁹ Disciples need not allow the coming terrifying events to paralyze them with fear. Fear mongers know how to push our buttons and manipulate so we engage in conduct that diverts us from the main things. As Calvin puts it:

“For all these things must take place. He adds this, not for the purpose of assigning a reason, but of warning them that none of these things happened accidentally, or without the providence of God, that they may not uselessly kick against the spur; for nothing has a more powerful efficacy to bring us into subjection, than when we acknowledge that those things which appear to be confused are regulated by the good pleasure of God.”⁸⁴⁰

Wars and rumors of wars are only the beginning of terrifying things: famines and earthquakes will also shake the foundations of human endurance. “But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs” (vs. 8). What follows adds to the burden of terror: the draconian hatred and persecution, even to death, of Christians because of their identification with Jesus. Those not tricked will be trapped by their profession of faith. They will be pressurized by their fellow

⁸³⁷ Matthew alone of the Gospel writers uses the term *parousia* (παρουσία) and only in this chapter (vs. 3, 27, 37, 39). The later writers of the New Testament pick it up as the designation of the second coming. Matthew is also alone in using the phrase “end of the age” (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος – 13:39-40, 49; 28:20).

⁸³⁸ Zech. 11:10; 1 Enoch 99.4; Jub. 23.13, 22–23; Sib. Or. 3.695ff.; 2 Esdr. 6:13–16, 9:3, 13:31; 2 Baruch 27.

⁸³⁹ France, *Matthew*: “Jesus’ prediction of the physical destruction of the temple plays a significant role in the story of his trial and death: it will be used against him in 26:61 and as a taunt when he is on the cross (27:40). It remained a central charge against Jesus and his movement (Acts 6:13–14).” (p. 888)

⁸⁴⁰ Calvin, *Harmony* (Vol. 3, pp. 121–122).

citizens who will cause them great suffering. Even fellow believers will turn against them. External persecution leads to internal turmoil. Many will not endure but fall away from the faith. Deadly fear is highly motivating. But these too are not the signs of the end.

In the wake of such developments, false prophets will appear who will lead many astray. In times of chaos and crisis, charismatic figures appear, offering hope in hopeless times, an answer to the confused and strife-filled context. They offer various “solutions” to the meaning of these tribulations and how to deal with them.

These pressures, threats and confusions will have an effect on many: their love for neighbor will cool as they hunker down in self-protective modes. They will begin to live outside the law of love, no longer disciplined by the commands or loyalty to the community of the King. Embracing some of the false escapism teachings of the pseudo-prophets, they will turn away from the word of truth. Tribulation causes them to fall away (like the seed sown on shallow ground – 13:20-21 – and the other soils – 13:1-7, 19-22). In the world there will be more and more evil manifested by lawless living.

In response to these damaging distractions and dangers, Jesus has indicated what needs to mark the authentic disciple. As Dale Bruner summarizes it:

“Loss of faith is the peril under the Great Heresies (vv. 4–5), loss of poise the danger during the Great Troubles (vv. 6–8), loss of hope the threat of the Great Persecutions (v. 9), and loss of loyalty endangers the church in the Great Apostasy (vv. 10–11). But the last enemy of the church, under the shadow of the Great Freeze of Lawlessness (v. 12), is the loss of love: love of enemies (5:38–48), love of one another (chap. 18), and love of the Lord God (22:37–38). Don’t be tricked (keep the faith); don’t be terrified (keep your hope); but finally, don’t hate (keep love). Faith, hope, and love. Jesus’ Sermon on the End of the World is simply Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount under pressure.”⁸⁴¹

In addition, there is a very real word of hope: “but whoever stands firm in the end will be saved” (vs. 13). Despite all the pitfalls and abandonments by many, there are persons who endure to the end, as did Jesus himself. The word of the Kingdom will fall also on good soil and will bring forth its fruit.

Yet none of these prior things are signs of the end. They are ongoing realities, found in all generations. But there is one thing that is a sign: the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world. How this will happen is not described. Nor are we given a metric to determine when it has been completed. In some ways the early Christians may have thought it was fulfilled in their day. Today we can document how many languages and places where such proclamation still needs to occur. The universal mission to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom is the one universal thing that will occur before the universally experienced return of Christ.

All speculation aside, this permanent task is given to all Christians under all circumstances: to give testimony to all peoples in all generations. Serving Christ faithfully in the midst of bad things, until he comes again, is the unchanging mandate. Telling the good news in the midst of the bad news is the marvelous task given to the church. The sign of a persevering Church is mission. Yet it must not be an excuse for slacking off hope in Jesus’ return. Even if we do not

⁸⁴¹ Bruner, *Churchbook* (p. 488).

know when this sign will be completed, we live always on the edge of his any-time coming. It is near. We may not know how near, but we need to live as though it might be this year, this month, this week, this day.

❖ Discipleship: Falling Away

History has shown that tilting the “advantages” one way or the other creates incentives for people to leave the faith. The Muslims did it with the tax on Christians in North Africa. Mixed faith marriages also can be a reason for people to switch faith. The threat of being shamed is also a motive for hiding one’s faith commitment or feigning another. Severe persecution has been a reason. What do we make of the possibility of falling away? Is it a real threat to real disciples?

This is not the only place in the New Testament where such a warning is registered (Matt. 13:1-9; Heb. 2:1-4; 3:12-14; 5:11-14; 10:26; 2 Peter 2:20-22; 2 Jn. 7-9). The alternatives on the matter are often spoken of as binary: eternal security or internal insecurity (“once saved, always saved”). This seems to be a theological ball kicked from one end of the field to the other.

It is the case that both strands (assurance and warning) are in the Bible. The warnings are clear: one can taste of the power of the age to come and yet fall away from it. One can receive the word of the Kingdom with joy only to have it wither away into unfruitfulness. It appears that people can, at one time, embrace and testify to the saving grace in their lives, only later to repudiate and walk away from it. Certainly, we all have experiential evidence of such people. Were they saved in the first place only to lose that salvation? Or were they never saved, only dabbling in the font of salvation, but never drinking deeply of its healing powers?

The old saying captures the dilemma: Arminians know they are saved but are afraid they cannot hang onto it while Calvinists know they cannot lose their salvation but are afraid they do not have it. Ironically, both seem to come to the same point: the evidence for salvation is the changed character – sanctification. The problem is reconciling passages that warn of divine judgment for the people of God with passages of unconditional assurance.

The Roman Catholic answer seems to be that assurance is not possible. If salvation is a lifetime process, then it may not be successfully completed. It is even a process that continues after death in purgatory. Canon 15 of the Council of Trent was clear: “If any one saith, that a man, who is born again and justified, is bound of faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; let him be anathema.”

The Reformed seem to argue that assurance is the essence of faith. Apostasy is not possible. This knowledge and assurance are part of salvation itself. As Calvin says:

“We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁴²

The Lutheran and Arminian view seems to be apostasy is possible, either in the form of the non-elect believers or the non-persevering believers falling away. This takes the warnings about falling away with dead seriousness, no matter one’s past baptism, knowledge or profession.

Whatever theological stream one comes from on the broader issue, this passage is sobering.

⁸⁴² John Calvin and Henry Beveridge (1845), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society. (p. 104).

It contains a warning of coming dire conflicts, the tremendous pressures disciples will find themselves in, and the terrible temptations that will confront them. The weakness of the flesh should not be underestimated nor the self-confidence one is a true disciple overestimated. Jesus' words need to be taken with utmost seriousness: "the one who endures to the end, he will be saved." (24:13). If we do not hear that, we are no longer listening. If we sink into complacency about our salvation, we may well find our self where pride often does: on the edge of a fall.

(b) Destruction of the Temple and the end for Jerusalem (24:15-28)

Having described the perils of this age and exhorted the disciples to accept them and live well despite their pressures, Jesus also counsels them to escape from them where possible. They are to be realistic in their assessment of their context and its actual potentials. His words are not to be taken as a counsel to seek martyrdom in imitation of his.

This section narrows the focus from the end of the age, with its great tribulation (θλίψις) and deceiving prophets, to the end of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is a move from the big picture to a focus on one event that's coming soon. Citing Daniel (8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) as the background for his statements, Jesus describes a coming event that will answer their question about the Temple's destruction. (Let the reader take note: this is an indication that Daniel is to be understood in order to understand these words.)

A terrible sacrilege will issue in utter destruction and great tribulation. Luke 21:20 sees that as the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies (in his day, the Romans): "but when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know the desolation has come near." Such an event happened, just as Daniel's reference to the "abomination of desolation" happened under Antiochus Epiphanes. In seeking to understand this prophecy we need at least to say: it happened again in A.D. 70.⁸⁴³ What relevance or reference to a future event beyond that is another question.

For these early disciples the advice is: flee! This is not the time to stand your ground and endure. Like Lot's fleeing the destruction of Sodom, disciples are to do the same. No turning back. Wherever one is when this begins, get up and run, unencumbered. The prayer for this event not to be in winter is due to rain. That brings great difficulties for travel. For it not to be on a Sabbath may refer to scruples about observing the Sabbath prohibition of travel or on the fact that the city gates would be closed and stores shuttered, making it difficult to flee. A flight on such a day might even antagonize Jewish neighbors and stimulate action to hinder flight or even bring persecution.

Having described the terrible trials that will mark the destruction of the Temple, Jesus comments on the seductive falsehoods that will arise. This repeats the warnings about false prophets already made (24:4-5, 10-11). There is no promise in this context of salvation from tribulation. There is even an indication that such great tribulation will not happen on such a scale again (implying more to come).⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴³ Keener, *Matthew* "People could leave Jerusalem safely until the spring of A.D. 68 (Jos. War 4.377-80; 410; Lane 1974a: 468). Later deserters to the Romans, suspected of having swallowed jewels to escape with them, were often cut open by Syrian auxiliaries (Jos. War 5.550-52); once the city fell, many captured Jerusalemites died entertaining Gentiles in the games (Jos. War 7.23-24, 37-40)." (pp. 578-579). The carnage of the Jewish War (A.D. 66-73) was about 1.1 million killed and 100,000 carried off into slavery.

⁸⁴⁴ Note Paul and Barnabas' words of encouragement to the Christians in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch: "Through many tribulations (θλίψις) it is necessary for us to enter into the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The clearest falsehoods will be people thinking they are or have found the Messiah – that Jesus' parousia (coming) has happened and they know who, where and when. Some of these false prophets will do signs and wonders to dazzle and attract followers, unlike Jesus who would not do them to prove he was Messiah and often told people to keep silent about the miracle that had happened. Signs and wonders are not clear-cut. Two sorts of tests have been given in Scripture: the moral test (the conduct of the prophet) and the doctrinal test (the teaching of the prophet).⁸⁴⁵ Do they do the will of God in their lives? Does their teaching lead people into discipleship of Jesus as Lord or to serving some other god or power? We are not to be taken in by impressive, gifted people, even miracle workers, if they stray from the strait and narrow path.

Jesus indicates there will be no ambiguity about his coming again. It will be as obvious as the flash of lightning that lights the night sky. Everyone will see it. No secret coming to a special few. Jesus' coming will be visually obvious. No need for private visions to the select few who will mediate that knowledge to others.

(c) The end of the Temple and the Triumph of the Son of Man (24:29-31)

This part of Jesus' answer is a reason for seeing the great tribulation of the Roman destruction of the Jewish nation and Jerusalem as a prelude, not as a completion of signs.⁸⁴⁶ The dramatic visibility of his coming is found in the convulsions of nature and "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven." This will be an event of great power and glory, with angels accompanying. All the peoples of the earth will weep, some from fear and others from joy. It will never be a secret event, known only to the initiated.

All the verbs are descriptive futures (no imperatives). Nothing in this paragraph suggests the rapture with believers caught up in the air to meet their Lord. The real challenge is the "immediately after." If the conquest of the Romans and their destruction of the Temple was foreshadowed by his prophecy, how is it that "immediately after" those events these cosmic upheavals did not happen? The problem is reinforced by verses 33-34 ("when you see these things, you know that it is near" and "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.") Yet many generations have come and gone and Jesus has not returned.

One solution is to say all this is in the past. "Those days" focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple only. That happened. The "coming" of Jesus was coming in judgment to Jerusalem to level it.⁸⁴⁷ But this has difficulty with the language about the visible, universal appearance of Jesus and the angels in the clouds. The response is that the language about the heavens is not to be taken literally. It is language derived from apocalyptic imagery and does not mean to point to literal physical events. Yet this view essentially says there is no answer to the disciples' question about the end of the age.

Another solution is to say some sort of mistake has been made here.⁸⁴⁸ Either Jesus was

⁸⁴⁵ Matt. 7:21-23; Deuteronomy 13:1-3.

⁸⁴⁶ Wright, N.T. (2004) "The main subject remains the fate of the Temple in Jerusalem—and of Jesus' followers in the time leading up to the Temple's demise." *Mark for Everyone*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. (p. 178).

⁸⁴⁷ This is "preterism" – what has already taken place. An example of this is R.C. Sproul (1998). *The Last Days according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker). Also N.T. Wright. *Matthew Chapters 16-28* (p. 124)

⁸⁴⁸ Hagner, *Matthew* in his section "Excursus: Imminence, Delay, and Matthew's ἐνθὺς" (p. 711ff) argues that Matthew, writing before A.D. 70 and the destruction of the Temple, added the "immediately"

mistaken in his predictions of the immanent return after A.D. 70 or Matthew has messed up the chronology. Concluding Jesus and the early church were mistaken in teaching that his return would be within Apostolic time has consequences. It leads to seeing the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as irrelevant to current life since it was an interim short-term ethic designed for the believers who would last only one generation. Instead, what “came” was the Church and a couple thousand years of Church history.

Other solutions take a different way of “solving” this. Some say “those days” refers to the entire period of time that extends from Jesus’ day to ours. The suffering and catastrophes portrayed refer both to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (24:15-22) as well as the sufferings entailed more generally through this period of time (24:9-11). The shaking of the powers of heaven are references to the overthrow of pagan powers, especially political powers.

Others refer “those days” to the days just before the return of Christ (particularly 24:9, 21). The terrible tribulations of war, false prophecies, apostasy, persecution, and the great abomination happen first. Then the heavenly chaos. In this latter view the signs in the heavens are not just metaphorical but literal physical events that will happen then. Since these unusual sky events have not happened, we are still awaiting these future events and the second coming.

In whatever manner we peer through this dark glass of prophecy, what is clear is that the end will happen someday. History will be consummated with the return of Jesus whose angels will gather his elect from all corners of the earth and history. There is no secret “gathering” by rapture of the true disciples. It is part of the visible, cosmic, public return of Christ.

More important than parsing these events and relating them to contemporary events (or arguing over the different schemes) is living out the sorts of attitudes and actions the rest of the discourse lays out for all disciples. What is certain in the text is the end of history with Christ’s return and the necessity in the meantime for disciples to live well, with lives of justice, mercy and faithfulness.

❖ Discipleship: The Second Coming

How are we to live in the light of the “immanence” of the second coming? Or is “immanence” the wrong picture of the uncertainty under which we live? Jesus’ answer to his disciples is not focused on the “immanence” of his appearing or return but on the disciple being prepared in the face of not knowing.

Life will go on as usual in this era, as it did in the time of Noah. We should live well and wisely, seeking the peace and flourishing of the societies of which we are a part. The imperative is “Therefore keep watch, because you do **not** know on what day your Lord will come.” (Matt. 24:42) The “watch” refers to the watches of the night.⁸⁴⁹ Perhaps this is an anticipation of Gethsemane, where Jesus asks his disciples to stay awake within him as he prays, and they all fall asleep. The picture of that evening and morning portrays the danger to the patience and vigilance of disciples in the longer watches of history.

Throughout history, unfortunately, zealous disciples have contravened this clear insistence that the return of the Lord is unknowable to followers of Christ. Predicting the date has been

(εὐθὺς) because he thought the second coming would happen right after that event, though Jesus did not so couple the two events that closely.

⁸⁴⁹ Evening (ὀψέ), midnight (μεσονύκτιον), the “cock crow” (ἀλεκτοροφωνία) and dawn (πρωΐ).

done many times, with disastrous results. It is not our duty to do so or to listen to those who believe they have cracked the “secret” code and can tell us exactly the day and the hour.

In addition, this is not a counsel that subverts “making disciples” into “making converts.” Some have taken this in such a way that the task of evangelism displaces the follow-on to a person’s initial response to the call of Jesus into his community. The thought is: if Jesus might come tomorrow, the most important, the sole thing I should be doing is sharing the good news of Jesus. It undermines the longer term tasks of instruction in the faith, scholarly endeavor to create better understandings of Scripture – or the tasks of months in courts seeking to improve justice or bring clean water and health care to those without it.

Nor is it a counsel that should be ignored, as if the gap in time that has occurred means we have plenty of time to get around, someday, somehow, to the task of making new disciples. Now is the day of salvation. Whatever our calling, we each have a “parish” where we intersect with fellow humans, believers and nonbelievers, those with passionate ideologies or completely indifferent to religious ideas and practices. We are called to make disciples wherever we find ourselves. We need to be ready for Christ’s coming. We need to help others be ready as well.

This age will continue to have Christians who face as deadly and difficult times as did those Jews and Christians did when Rome destroyed much of Palestine and the Temple. Nevertheless, we are not counselled to live in excitement or anxiety, however long the time of waiting.

“We too are called to be faithful, to hold on and not be alarmed. We too may be called to live through troubled times and to last out to the end. We too may see the destruction of cherished and beautiful symbols. Our calling then is to hold on to Jesus himself, to continue to trust him, to believe that the one who was vindicated by God in the first century will one day be vindicated before the whole world. We too are called to live with the birth pangs of God’s new age, and to trust that in his good time the new world will be born.”⁸⁵⁰

(d) Summary (24:32-35)

The parable of the fig tree is cautionary. Given the numerous false deadlines given out through church history, it is a caution not always followed. The fig tree is one of the early plants to bud, giving a “signal” that summer is not far off. The sorts of things previously described are indicators that they are about to happen. They are knocking at the gate and will be soon let in. Referring to the first century destruction of Jerusalem and all the associated tribulations, Jesus indicates that it will happen before his contemporary generation will pass away. In just such a time it happened.

The certainty of these things happening is emphasized by indicating his words are more secure than the continuance of the universe. Even if they were to pass away, his words would remain. This serves as the bridge to the remaining ethical or practical parts of this discourse. While there have been imperatives (don’t be deceived, don’t fear, don’t fall away), the following material is what a proper response to the information about the end of the age and the destruction of the Temple entails.

⁸⁵⁰ Wright, *Matthew Part 2* (p. 115).

(4) The Day and the hour are unknown: vigilant readiness is essential (24:36-25:46)

Much of Matthew 24 is focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem and how the signs for its end are not the same for the coming of the son of man and the end of all things. Intermixed with it is a characterization of what sorts of “signs” will be happening throughout history. Now Jesus gives answers that focus on the second part of the disciple’s question: “what will be the sign of your coming and the end of all things?” The events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem will take place during their generation’s life time. But no such predictable timeline can be given for this second part of their question.

(a) The great surprise: the day & hour—unknown and unknowable (24:36-42)

Once the preliminary signs have taken place, the appearing of Jesus could happen at any time. The signs included not simply the destruction of the Temple with the suffering and persecution but the gospel witness to the whole world. What is certain is this: the end of the age and the final appearing of Jesus is not predictable. While the imminent destruction of the Temple could be foreseen, the coming of the Son of Man cannot be. Not the angels in heaven or the Son knows the day and hour. Only the Father. What is required is persistent and consistent readiness for that event.

When it happens, it will be in ordinary times. People will be getting on with the ordinary affairs of life – productive work, marriage, domestic labor. It will seem as though the days and months simply are rolling on with no appointment with the end of time. Disciples must keep watch since none of them knows when the Lord will return. The parables are clues about what “watching” means. It turns out to be an active engagement, not a passive waiting; outward steps not simply an inward orientation. It means being ready at all times, not just some anticipated or predicted arrival time.

(b) Two Parables: The householder and thief; the faithful and unfaithful servants (24:43-51)

The first picture is of a homeowner who is threatened with robbery. If he knew the day and hour on which the thieves might show up, he would relax until that time. Then he and his friends would arm themselves just before that event and be vigilant. But this will not work with the appearance of the Son of Man. The timing of that cannot be known. Watching is taking steps to keep the house secure and safe from the thieves and robbers, whenever they might show up.

The second picture is of a master who delegates the oversight of his household to a slave as he leaves on some errand or journey.⁸⁵¹ The slave’s duties are to give the other slaves their meals on time. If he does just that, when the master returns, he will make him chief steward over all his possessions. But if the master delays the return and that slave decides to eat and drink, make

⁸⁵¹ Osborne, *Matthew*: “The number of slaves ... a person owned was a sign of status in the ancient world. Slaves were often highly educated and were doctors, teachers, accountants, and workers for every function in a home. Wealthy homes would have dozens of slaves (one senator had 400), some whose job was little more than doing the mistress’s hair or folding napkins for dinner parties. Slaves were allowed to own property, earn wages, and even purchase their freedom.” (p. 909). See also: Bartchy, Scott (1973). *First-Century Slavery and I Corinthians 7:21*. (Chico, Scholars Press); Bradley, Keith (1994). *Slavery and Society at Rome*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press); Kyrtatas, Dimitris J. (1987). *The Social Structure of Early Christian Communities*. (New York, Verso).

merry, and abuse his fellow-slaves, he will be caught short and face the wrath of his master when he suddenly shows up. Watching involves taking care of others in the household, tending to their needs rather than intimidating or dominating them in order to render one's life more comfortable.

The point is it the "showing up" will be unannounced and sudden. Whether it results in reward or punishment depends on the responsible slave's conduct in the meantime. The appearance will be a great separation, a great judgment, a disastrous end for some who were not faithful and ready. As N.T. Wright portrays it:

"You can tidy a house in a few minutes, if you put your mind to it. But you can't reverse the direction of a whole life, a whole culture. By the time the ring on the doorbell happens it's too late. That's what this passage, and the next one, are about."⁸⁵²

The point of this and the following parables is that the great emergency is coming. His death, resurrection and, within a generation, the massive laying waste to Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple will happen. But the timing of the later events is unknown.

Even today we live in times of crisis and disruption. When the Great Disruption will occur is unknown. In the meantime, the direction of our lives and our larger culture needs to be oriented to justice, mercy and faithfulness. The difference between the two trajectories portrayed is between wisdom and folly. In the thousands of small decisions, words spoken, relationships enacted, we embody either loyalty and faithfulness to the ways of God or a foolish forgetfulness and selfishness. What we treasure is where our hearts and actions will be. What matters is being prepared whether it comes in a week or a hundred years.

(c) The Parable of the Ten virgins (25:1-13)⁸⁵³

In this parable the theme of wisdom comes to the forefront. The wedding described follows ancient custom (and some modern) where the bridegroom with his entourage would come to the bride's home to take her from her parent's house to his own. This was the first night of a seven-day wedding celebration. The maidens would go out to meet them. The theme is the unexpected delay of the bridegroom and the preparedness of the bridesmaids for such a contingency.

The reason for the delay is not given. But it was lengthy enough that the bridesmaids all nod off.⁸⁵⁴ In this picture sleep is not the problem. It is what has been anticipated and prepared for. Five had brought extra oil with them, just in case. When they are awoken, they trim their torches and try to light them. Those with extra or reserve oil succeed. The others do not.

There are details that are beside the main point. The wise bridesmaids do not share because they are convinced there is not enough extra to go around. This is not a parable about the virtue of sharing. The fate of the foolish bridesmaids is not due to the miserliness of the wise. The foolish run off at this last minute to buy oil. Nor is it a parable about the delay. It is about the preparation for the coming of the bridegroom.

Then the five wise virgins honor the bridegroom by escorting him and the bride, lighting the way through the village to his home for the banquet. They go in with the bride and groom. When the foolish bridesmaids arrive, having secured the extra oil for their torches, they are excluded. That part of the wedding festivities is done. The door is shut. In our calculus this

⁸⁵² Wright, *Matthew 16-28* (pp. 125–126).

⁸⁵³ All five discourses end with a focus on judgment. Matthew 25 is particularly vivid and lengthy.

⁸⁵⁴ The verb is νυστάζω. In this case an ingressive aorist: ἐνύσταξαν "began to nod."

seems harsh and doesn't fit the ordinary sequence of such an event. But the point of the parable is not about ordinary affairs. It is about the surprising reversal of expectations and finality of decisions made prior to the main event.⁸⁵⁵

There are echoes in this to other sayings of Jesus: not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter into the Kingdom of God (Matt. 7:21-23); "one will be taken and one left" (24:40-41); not all who are called are chosen (22:14). People do not enter the Kingdom of God on their own terms, but on God's. The words of the groom echo those of the Sermon on the Mount: "I tell you the truth, I do not know you." (cf. 7:23).

The life of readiness, of obedience, of justice, mercy and faithfulness – that is what keeps us ready for the unknowable time when history will reach its consummation. At that time, we each will be responsible for our own life trajectory and priorities. We cannot blame others. We cannot ask for the "transfer" of wisdom and merits from another.

There are two ways and we must be on the narrow way if we are to enter the Kingdom (Matt. 7:13). If we presume that it is God's business to forgive so we can live profligately, indifferent or forgetful of his call to justice, mercy and faithfulness, we place ourselves firmly on the broad way that leads to eternal judgment. The experience of Israel with exile is a flashing red light of warning: God's people are not exempt from judgment. The Church is under the same danger whenever it is indifferent or complicit in the works of injustice, exploitation, oppression, and disobedience.

Watching involves showing up with sufficient oil to last through all stretches of life. Taking personal responsibility is essential. There is no more looking to the support and comfort of others; no prayers to the saints or counting on the faith or merits of others to carry you through. The unblest assurance that the virgins have ("we have lamps") is not enough. Making a "half-decision" for Christ will not do. Reserve oil seems to refer to the quality of life that flows from a living faith. The faithful virgins have tended to the central thing they have responsibility: being ready in any case to escort the bridegroom.

(d) *The Parable of the Talents* (25:14-30)

This parable portrays the accountability of the disciples. It begins with a gifting by the Master. Then his departure. Each servant is given a very large amount of assets (a talent of silver was enough to hire one hundred day laborers for a full year).⁸⁵⁶ One is given five, another two and a last servant is given one talent. All alike are his servants, equally and fully belonging to the

⁸⁵⁵ Snodgrass, *Intent*: "At the heart of the Christian faith is the expectation that one day God will set things right—that the kingdom will come and that Jesus will be vindicated and his dream put into effect. Living as a wise human means being prepared for God's reign. Readiness is an attitude, a commitment, and a lifestyle. It means living in ways that comport with the character of the kingdom and being faithful at all times." (p. 518).

⁸⁵⁶ Snodgrass, *Intent*: "The definition we know of 'talent' referring to human ability was derived from this parable, and, even though people interpreted 'talent' in connection with ability much earlier, this use of the word did not emerge until the fifteenth century. For modern readers this meaning is at least distracting and potentially misleading. A talent in the ancient world was a monetary weight of approximately 60 to 90 pounds. (There was significant variation in different times and locales.) Depending on the metal in question, the value of a talent was equivalent to 6000 days' wages for a day laborer (roughly twenty years' work), so the man given five talents was given an enormous sum." (p. 528).

Master. But each is given a different service to perform, each according to his abilities.⁸⁵⁷ None were given more than they could handle.

It needs to be clear that the “talents” are a deposit of a sum of money and have nothing to do with abilities. The amount entrusted are sized according to the abilities of the servant. But the parable is not focused on abilities, but the opportunities given to a person whatever their abilities and the responsibility to make the most of them. The accountability centers on what the disciple does with what is entrusted to him or her.

In this case what watching means is engaging in the tasks given to disciples in the interim between the first and second coming of Christ. It is receiving salvation and the message of the kingdom as a trust.⁸⁵⁸ The one servant condemned finds a bad fate falling on him due to his uselessness to the Master’s purposes. The question for the disciple when Christ returns is not, did he get the date right, but what did he do.⁸⁵⁹ If the five foolish virgins failed because they thought the task was easy, the useless servant failed because he thought the task was too hard. So, he took no risk or action to increase the talent of money. It wasn’t that he did what was wrong. It was he did nothing and blamed the Master for what he did not do. Feeling fear, he was paralyzed and did nothing. He played it safe, or so he thought. Yet Christ leaves none of his disciples idle.⁸⁶⁰

These parables all indicate that the delay is not a meaningless or perverse interval. It is a window of opportunity for each disciple to take good care of fellow disciples, insure they have reserves of “oil” that will last a full lifetime, and make the most of the opportunities given to be and to make disciples by living lives of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Disciples are not called to do great things – just the work Jesus gives to us to do. Great things may happen but that is not the point. Work as simple as doing justice to all, to the weak and the powerful, the friend and the foe; showing mercy to the deserving and the undeserving; and being faithful to the Master who one day will return and demand an accounting. Irresponsibility, whether passive or active, will not be tolerated.

(e) The Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46)

If the parables are sobering warnings about the consequences of not being ready for the unexpected coming of Jesus, this narrative is about the event of coming when accountability will be given. The scene of the final judgment is the last picture Jesus gives in his teaching. Just as the Sermon on the Mount ends with two warnings and two fates, so the Olivet discourse has four warning and climaxes with two final fates possible.

There is a progression in seriousness: the virgins are shut out of the banquet; the wicked, lazy slave is cast into darkness; those who neglect to welcome and care for Jesus’ brothers and sisters

⁸⁵⁷ ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν δύναμιν

⁸⁵⁸ Snodgrass, *Intent*: “The theme of faithfulness must be brought directly into relation with Jesus’ teaching about the present and future kingdom. Knowledge of God’s reign and salvation brings with it added responsibility. To accept the kingdom and its salvation is to accept a trust.” (p. 542).

⁸⁵⁹ Snodgrass, *Intent*: “Matthew’s intent with the parable is clear. He understood the parable as an exhortation for followers of Jesus to be faithful in their obedience until his return. Little evidence exists that this parable addresses the issue of the delay of the parousia, but it should be considered as evidence for an expected interval when Jesus would no longer be with his disciples.” (pp. 534–535).

⁸⁶⁰ “When Christ returns, he will not ask if one had the date right but ‘What have you been doing?’” Garland, *Matthew*, p. 246.

are cursed with eternal damnation. In all cases the issue is not wrong-doing done but right-doing not done.

Protestants have struggled with this passage since it seems to support a notion of eternal life being dependent on acts of kindness and mercy. Already, Jesus has clearly said “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.” (Matt. 16:27) The stress in the four preceding parables has been on what the householder, the in-charge slave, the ten virgins and the three slaves with talents have done (or left undone). It should be no surprise that this stress is continued. The criterion of judgment is what disciples have done. In fact, the focus of this paragraph is on the norm of judgment, not its details.⁸⁶¹

The judgment is focused on those who are professed and actual followers of the Messiah but seems to encompass all people (all nations).⁸⁶² The four parables leading up to this final teaching all focus on the reality that being part of the Christian movement is not a sufficient free pass. Just as there are wise builders who build on a foundation of rock, so there are authentic disciples who live according to justice, mercy and faithfulness. Just as there are foolish builders who build on sand, so there are apparent disciples who build on sand, saying “Lord, lord” but not obeying what he has commanded. On this account there is no “easy believism” to combine with “eternal security” and come up with some alternative salvation that does not lead to a changed life and changed conduct. The good deeds are not the cause of salvation but the evidence of its reality.⁸⁶³ A right relationship with the righteous God leads to right deeds.

⁸⁶¹ “What is decisive in judgment, therefore, is not the quality of the tree but the fruit it bears (7:15–20), not hearing the words but doing (7:24–27), not the lamps but the oil (25:1–13), not receiving talents but realizing profit (25:14–30).” Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 289.

⁸⁶² Note also that, if all humanity is in view, then the question is legitimately raised: are there those not of Israel or the Church without explicit faith who wind up on the right hand of the Judge? France, *Matthew*: “The eschatological tone of the whole pericope indicates that this judgment is universal, including both professing disciples and other people without distinction.” (p. 961). Some use this text to advance an undogmatic “practical Christianity” where belief and faith matter not: only the love of neighbor and acts of kindness. But that ignores all the other texts where Jesus underlines the importance of faith. It seems to reduce the gospel to ethics and cut its connection to other christological and soteriological texts. Cf. John R. Donahue, S.J., “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics” in *Theological Studies* 47 (1986). “The ethic proposed is a Christian ethic—in other terms, an ethic of discipleship. It draws its strength not simply from a humanitarian compassion for those in need, but from a sense that, like the first disciples, Christians are to hear again the call ‘follow me’ and are to be caught up in the mission of Jesus.” (p. 30)

⁸⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*: “The statement that ‘God will render to every man according to his works’ [Rom. 2:6] is explained with little difficulty. For the expression indicates an order of sequence rather than the cause.” III.18.1 (p. 821). Calvin takes “for” (25:35) as consecutive. Roman Catholic exegetes take it as causal, *because* of one’s works. Calvin, *Harmony Vol. III*: “If Christ were now speaking of the cause of our salvation, the Papists could not be blamed for inferring that we merit eternal life by good works; but as Christ had no other design than to exhort his people to holy and upright conduct, it is improper to conclude from his words what is the value of the merits of works. With regard to the stress which they lay on the word *for*, as if it pointed out the *cause*, it is a weak argument; for we know that, when eternal life is promised to the righteous, the word *for* does not always denote a cause, but rather the order of procedure. But we have another reply to offer, which is still more clear; for we do not deny that a reward is promised to good works, but maintain that it is a reward of grace, because it depends on adoption.” (p. 178).

In this case the picture is sheep and goats, but the point is the same. Salvation is the free gift of God. But embracing that gift and being saved means real deliverance and healing. If salvation is genuine, it leads to a life marked by justice, mercy and faithfulness. A good tree brings forth good fruit. Good deeds are evidence of a right relationship with God. No sheep will be left among the goats – and no goat among the sheep. There will be a total division. The DNA of the spiritual source of one's life will show itself.

The picture is of Jesus in glory, sitting in judgment over all the nations after the gospel has been proclaimed among all nations.⁸⁶⁴ This is the Great Disruption to the ordinary flow of human history. It is the final judgment: no second chances, no excuses, no escape. Time for human choice and decision is over. Now a decision will be made over the choices already made in a lifetime. While other texts portray this event as the great reconciliation and unification of all things (Ephesians, Colossians), this text dramatizes the Great Divorce. There is no reconciliation without passing through judgment.

Those who have welcomed God's presence and allowed it to transform them into embodiments of justice, mercy and faithfulness will be welcomed into the home of Justice, Mercy and Faithfulness. Those who have lived with very different priorities, saying in effect 'my will, not thine, be done,' will be granted that fate and be excluded from the place where only the will of God is done. If the meanings of many symbols and pictures of the things leading up to this coming of Jesus and the last judgment are unclear, this ending of the Olivet discourse is not. The apocalyptic language is difficult. The message of the goats and sheep is not. The meaning of "watching" and "being ready" for that coming is encapsulated in this discourse: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (25:40) The norm of judgment is how Jesus' brothers and sisters were treated in their need and desperate circumstances. Their treatment is taken as a token of the treatment of Jesus.

One view takes this as an indication that what counts is helping anyone in need. The "least of my brothers or sisters" is anyone in dire need. The love of God finds its manifestation in love of neighbor. Nothing else is needed. Christ is present in the oppressed and downtrodden (the theme of liberation theology). Salvation is contingent on reaching out to help the needy. Where love is found, God is present. This text frees Jesus from a particularism that would limit him to a specific historic religion (Paul Tillich). The Enlightenment saw the essence of religion to be found in reason and love, free from the dogmatism of positive religion. A generalized humanitarianism that we find in many religious ethics is what is being propagated.

While this theme of caring for the poor is a clear, consistent and major theme in Jesus as well as the Old Testament, the point of this text does not boil down to this way of taking it as the exclusive, final word on qualifications for the kingdom. It does not talk about needy people in general but the brothers and sisters of Jesus. Jesus remains at the center of this account. The notion that this is about a general benevolent ethical humanism that cares for the needy is a modern notion. Still, blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Even the good Samaritan's care for an unknown unfortunate is exemplary for all disciples of Christ.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶⁴ This foreshadows the great commission (Matt. 28:19) πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (all the nations).

⁸⁶⁵ Barth, *CD Vol. 3.2*: "But where is He hidden now? With God, at the right hand of the Father? in His Word and sacraments? in the mystery of His Spirit, which bloweth where it listeth? All this is true enough, but it is presupposed in this parable, and the further point is made, on which everything depends,

Another view takes the dispensational bypass: this is about the time between the rapture and focuses on the great tribulation. Millennial fates hang in the balance in terms of how people line up with the anti-Christ in the persecution of the Jews. But there is no indication of this being limited to a specific dispensation or being just about treatment of the Jews or Jewish Christians.

A third major view (traditional) is that this has to do with the treatment of Jesus' disciples as they engage in mission, evangelism and disciple-making of all nations. Previously Jesus noted that those who give even a cup of cold water to "the little ones" will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42). Those who receive his sent-ones, receive him (10:40). Acts of "mercy" to those who belong to the extended spiritual family of Jesus are especially noted. The life of justice, mercy and faithfulness finds expression in how even the "least" among them is received and cared for.

This last view fits well with the notion that the whole of the peoples of the earth are in view. How the messengers and message of God's rightful rule over all things are treated is the norm of judgment. That there may be "anonymous" Christians is not ruled. Those who lived before Christ or beyond the proclamation of the gospel after Christ are accountable for the light they had, not the light they did not have. The "Jobs" and "Abrahams" of this world could not call on the name of Jesus, but they could know the living God and Creator. They too could learn to love God and their neighbor. God has not left himself without witness to any who have lived.

Some modern disciples are troubled by what seem to them "extreme" measures taken in judgment.⁸⁶⁶ There is debate, even among theologically conservative Christians, as to how to take "eternal punishment" or "hell-fire."⁸⁶⁷ The center of the concern is to reconcile what we know of the character of God with what God does with humans after death. The struggle many have is over two issues: (1) Will not all God created be "saved" in the end? How can it be that the love of God will not finally triumph and all things be reconciled? (2) What is the meaning of the metaphors portraying eternal exclusion from God's presence? Is this everlasting torment or is it pointing toward annihilation (the complete perishing out of existence of those excluded)?

Both are difficult questions.⁸⁶⁸ Those who espouse a universalist theory of salvation have to face the uncomfortable reality that the Gospels portray Jesus as indicating very serious, eternal losses for some. Whatever we make of the images and language of "eternal," the consequences portrayed cannot simply be taken as some sort of word game to scare people into good conduct.

that He is no less present, though hidden, in all who are now hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and in prison. Wherever in this present time between the resurrection and the parousia one of these is waiting for help (for food, drink, lodging, clothes, a visit, assistance), Jesus Himself is waiting. Wherever help is granted or denied, it is granted or denied to Jesus Himself. For these are the least of His brethren. They represent the world for which He died and rose again, with which He has made Himself supremely one, and declared Himself in solidarity. It is for them that He sits at the right hand of the Father, so that no one can know Him in His majesty, or honour and love Him as the Son of God, unless he shows concern for these least of His brethren." (pp. 507–508).

⁸⁶⁶ "Eternal punishment" in the New Testament (κόλασιν αἰώνιον) appears only here in Matthew. "Eternal life" (ζωὴν αἰώνιον) also appears in 19:16, 29. The two destinies are antithetical, similar to the LXX of Daniel 12:2-3 and appear several times in Matthew (7:14, 18:8). See also 5:22, 10:28, 18:9 ("hell").

⁸⁶⁷ Stephen Williams, "The Question of Hell and Salvation: Is There a Fourth View?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no. 2 (2006): 263-283.

⁸⁶⁸ Wright, N. T. (2007) *Surprised by Hope*. London: S.P.C.K. (pp. 177-198) rejects both dogmatic universalism and everlasting torment. But he does argue that Jesus agreed with the first-century Jewish perception that there would be people who rejected God and will be rejected by God.

Matthew 25:31-46 Judgment: the sheep and the goats

Dogmatic universalism faces the difficulty of seeming to contradict the very nature of love. Love cannot be coerced or compelled to surrender.⁸⁶⁹ It is difficult to imagine the obstinacy of a permanent holdout against the love of God, so wonderful is that love. Yet it is hard to imagine how the deeply ingrained self-absorbed narcissism and life-long hardening of the heart suddenly and willingly chooses to yield control of a life to God. A stubborn self-will has become such a central part of their identity that it would appear to contradict everything they are. Having spent a life fleeing God, we are to suppose they now will wake up a different person than they have been and find attractive the very things they had determined were repulsive.⁸⁷⁰

Those who espouse annihilation face their own problems as well. The same terminology for “eternal” life is used for “eternal” punishment. If the one denotes duration but the other doesn’t, what then do we make of it? Or have we absorbed only one way of thinking about time that is inadequate. The consistent “end” of the story of our universe is a new heavens and a new earth, with humans inhabiting resurrected bodies that know no disease or death. This seems to point to space-time of some sort. To be embodied is to be in some sort of time or duration.

What of those angels and humans who have given their full allegiance and worship to that which is not God? The imagery of banishment from the presence of God, outer darkness, the flames of Gehenna, the bottomless abyss, the second death – all point to a most undesirable fate. Whatever it means and however we line out the metaphors for “eternal punishment” we need to do justice to the God who is the just Judge of all. The horrors of our world call out for accountability and rectification. There is much to be explored here. I will let N.T. Wright (in the spirit of C. S. Lewis) have the final comment on this complex issue. He suggests we reflect what we worship, increasingly being made over in the image of power, sex, money or other forms of idolatry:

My suggestion is that it is possible for human beings so to continue down this road [of idolatry], so to refuse all whisperings of good news, all glimmers of the true light, all promptings to turn and go the other way, all signposts to the love of God, that after death they become at last, by their own effective choice, beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all. With the death of that body in which they inhabited God’s good world, in which the flickering flame of goodness had not been completely snuffed out, they pass simultaneously not only beyond hope but also beyond pity. There is no concentration camp in the beautiful countryside, no torture chamber in the palace of delight. Those

⁸⁶⁹ C.S. Lewis (1946) *The Great Divorce*. New York: HarperOne: ““‘I hardly know, Sir. What some people say on Earth is that the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved.’ ‘Ye see it does not.’ ‘I feel in a way that it ought to.’ ‘That sounds very merciful: but see what lurks behind it.’ ‘What?’ ‘The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven.’” (p. 135)

⁸⁷⁰ Karl Barth (1933) *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edition. London: Oxford University Press: “The confusion avenges itself and becomes its own punishment. The forgetting of the true God is already the breaking loose of His wrath against those who forget Him (i.18). The enterprise of setting up the ‘No-God’ is avenged by its success.... Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire.” (p. 51)

creatures that still exist in an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense, can no longer excite, in themselves or others, the natural sympathy some feel even for the hardened criminal.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁷¹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (p. 195). For more on this topic: Anthony C. Thiselton (2012) *Life after Death: A New Approach to the Last Things*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans; Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson (2000) *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Edward William Fudge (2011). *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, Third Edition. Eugene, OR: Cascade Book; Kim Papaioannou (2013) *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus: Gehenna, Hades, the Abyss, the Outer Darkness Where There Is Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications; Preston M. Sprinkle, ed. (2016). *Four views on Hell*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.



VII: Conclusion: Passion, resurrection, and commission (26:1-28:20)

A. Passion and crucifixion (26:1-27:66)

The first 25 chapters build up to the climax. Already three times, Jesus has predicted his demise and resurrection in Matthew. Each is more specific: the first simply predicts death and resurrection; the second, betrayal; and the third, the involvement of Gentiles in his crucifixion. Now he tells them, it is coming in two days. At the end of the Olivet discourse, he underlines the path forward. It is not the rise to power of a messianic King leading a revolution against the Roman oppressor. It is suffering and death. Three events prepare for its occurrence: the plot to betray, the anointing for death and the actual betrayal.

What is striking is the juxtaposition. The Judge of all nations will first be judged by them. The righteous one will suffer at the hands of the unrighteous. The very ones who have traveled and ministered with him will abandon him and one will betray him. Yet God's hand is in it all.

(1) The plot against Jesus (26:1-5)

The marker that divides this from the discourse is an ending found in all the major teaching sections of Matthew with one change: "when he finished all these sayings" (7:28, 11:1; 13:53; 19:1).⁸⁷² It is no longer time for more extended teaching. All five of his public teachings are done. At this point everything those words have foreshadowed will now be displayed by what is done. What the Passover foreshadowed in one location, at one time, will now be enacted in one place, by one person, for all time and all persons. Jesus saves people from their sins. His blood is applied over the doorway of every disciple of his. As Calvin puts it:

"therefore [God] determined that his Son should be sacrificed on the very day of the Passover, that the ancient figure might give place to the only sacrifice of eternal redemption."⁸⁷³

Jesus accomplishes several things by this statement. He clarifies that his apocalyptic scenes of judgment and triumph are not what is coming in the immediate days. He also indicates that his death is voluntary, foreseen, necessary. The disciples need not be surprised or discouraged. This is all part of God's plan of salvation.

Before we hear of the plot of the powerful religious elite, we hear the purposeful plan of the Son of Man.⁸⁷⁴ This will not be the misadventures of fate or fortune, running amok in violent random acts of stupidity. To be sure, the repeated phrase "will be handed over" (παράδιδόται) is echoed nineteen times in this passion story. Jesus is being "handed over" or "surrendered" to

⁸⁷² πάντας τοὺς λόγους τούτους

⁸⁷³ Calvin, J., *Harmony* Vol. 3 (p. 186).

⁸⁷⁴ France, *Matthew*: "After two days' probably means 'the day after tomorrow,' but it remains unclear on which day these words are understood to have been spoken, depending on whether 'the Passover' here refers to Nisan 14, when the lambs were killed in the afternoon ready for that evening's Passover meal, or to Nisan 15, the 'day' on which that meal was held (after sunset when the new day had begun)." (p. 970).

the power of others. The verb is passive. It is what is done to Jesus. The agents are various humans. But the initiative is divine. Their ignorance and denial of who Jesus is becomes the very means by which God will honor his Son and carry out his plan. Though their purpose is to thwart Jesus and his message, their actions will actually be central to its accomplishment.

The human agents who plot the death are determined in their commitment. In their eyes, Jesus is no prophet from God. His actions and words have challenged their power and legitimacy. The dramatic reception at his arrival and then his stellar debates in the Temple were emphatic indications of what sort of popular uprising he might produce. For them, it is a political necessity to be rid of him and the danger he poses. Yet there are difficulties to be navigated.

It is Passover week. Pilgrims from all over in large crowds are present, some of whom hailed Jesus. To have judicial proceedings leading to crucifixion and a dead body was iffy at this time. An execution by the Romans would remind one and all who the dominant oppressor was. A dead body in the city would be ritually polluting during this high festival. So, the plan to deal with him would have to be finessed very carefully without any missteps. Their plot is to seize Jesus “by stealth and kill him.”⁸⁷⁵

The cast of characters plotting included the chief priests and the elders, gathered at the house of a former high priest, Caiaphas. Their initial timing seemed to be aimed at post-Passover. But when Judas opens the door to an earlier possibility, they will seize it. They had not been able to deal with Jesus by persuasion or intimidation. As a consequence, they now reach for the sword.

(2) Jesus anointed for death at Bethany (26:6-13)

The story of his anointing directly contrasts the unnamed woman with Judas. With the inner circle of disciples still confused and unwilling to accept Jesus’ words about betrayal, suffering and crucifixion, this unnamed woman intuitively the appropriate response: anoint Jesus. Whether she knew this was in preparation for his death or simply an extreme honoring of him, we do not know. Her example is formative for how Jesus should be treated: not as a rival who is feared and hated and thus to be killed, nor as a close friend whom one can betray.

It happens at the house of Simon the Leper.⁸⁷⁶ The status of Simon is unclear. Is this one whom Jesus had formerly healed and has been rendered ritually clean, or is this another time Jesus crosses the strict purity line? We are not told. There is no indication of concern by the disciples that this would render them unclean on the eve of Passover. So, this might be a nickname (the Leper) to identify this exact Simon as the one known later to disciples among all the other disciples named Simon.

The disciples’ objection is a good one: this extravagant, expensive act would better have been turned to the relief of the poor. The poor are always with us. Their fate at our hands has been already singled out as a criterion of readiness to enter to the Kingdom. This was a chance to implement Jesus’ own words: to care for the poor and marginalized by using this expensive

⁸⁷⁵ “stealth” translates δόλος, a word meaning deceit, cunning, treachery.

⁸⁷⁶ This is a separate event, not to be confused with Luke 7:36-50, an anointing that takes place at Simon’s house in Galilee (the anointing of Jesus’ feet). “Simon” is one of the commonest names of first century Palestine. The account of Jesus’ feet being anointed by Mary in Bethany before the Triumphal entrance in John 12:1-11 seems to be the same event as that in Mark and Matthew but described with differing details. Matthew often works topically and likely places this here as a contrast to the leadership and to Judas. But this is a complicated issue and beyond full rationale for any conclusion here.

asset to help them. Yet their picking at the unnamed woman's good deed expressed their confusion about the significance of the week they were in. There is a difference between constant duties and critical moments that elicit extravagant, out of the ordinary acts.

Jesus, anointed by the Spirit at the beginning of his ministry, celebrates this anointing as something pointing to his death. The time to honor him is short; the time to care for the poor has the rest of human history. Whatever motivated this woman's devotion and sacrifice, Jesus uses it as another indication of his impending death. Too often our actions are motivated by one reason and Jesus breathes a different meaning into them. Inadequate or confused motives do not disqualify beautiful and appropriate actions performed at the right time.

Jesus promises that her act will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world. She used expensive perfume or perfumed oil in an alabaster container. It was an extravagant, uncalculating love that was poured out on his head. Far beyond what would be done to honor a guest at a special meal. We do not know her name, but all over the world people know her love. The fragrance of her act reaches to our day.

We should note that Jesus was among the "poor." This act of the woman is pouring out significant resources on a poor man.

"The church's wealth, the precious ointment poured by this woman on Jesus, is never wasted on the poor.

No doubt such an account of the church's wealth can be an invitation to self-deception and a justification of injustice. Yet 'the poor you always have with you' is not a description to legitimate a lack of concern for the poor, but rather a description of a faithful church. This woman, this unnamed woman, has done for Jesus what the church must always be for the world—precious ointment poured lavishly on the poor."⁸⁷⁷

(3) Judas agrees to betray Jesus (26:14-16)

The contrast between this disciple and the unnamed woman is stark. She sacrifices what could have been her main emergency asset, worth a year's wages for a day laborer. Judas seeks out the religious elite to enrich himself with 30 pieces of silver.⁸⁷⁸ Money is often a decisive indicator of what is in a person's heart. For betrayal to happen there has to be something very powerful at work. It is no wonder Jesus labeled money as a powerful master that cannot be served alongside God. Still, it came as a surprise to all the other disciples. They had lived and ate together over several years. Judas kept the common purse so was trusted with money. At the last supper they were dumbfounded by the notion that one of them would betray Jesus and had no idea who it might be.

From this distance and from what we are told in the narrative we can't tell the motives that stirred up this darkness in Judas. One notion is that he was disgusted at the waste of the perfumed

⁸⁷⁷ Hauerwas, *Matthew* (p. 215).

⁸⁷⁸ This is the price paid to the owner of a slave gored by an ox (Exod. 21:32). Jesus' life is being valued at the minimum value of a slave. Still it is about three to four months wages for a day laborer, a tidy but not substantial sum. Nolland, *Matthew*: "At Mt. 21:5 Matthew linked Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to the arrival of a royal figure in Zc. 9:9. Here again Zechariah proves useful, as οἱ δὲ ἔστησαν αὐτῷ τριάκοντα ἀργύρια ('they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him') echoes the language of 11:12." (p. 1059)

oil, a full year's worth of value. Though the fact that he did not bargain for more may indicate a deeper motive. Some have speculated that he was profoundly disillusioned by all the talk of suffering and death instead of triumphant overthrow of the Romans. Instead of spending time on the plan to seize Jerusalem with the help of the crowds, Jesus is talking rubbish. Instead of triumph he has even warned them that they might lose their lives as well. It is clear after the events unfolded, Judas has regrets, returning to the Temple and throwing the money back at his co-conspirators and then committing suicide.⁸⁷⁹

Whatever were the motives, greed, ambition, lust all played a role. The religious elite recognize the opportunity to take Jesus privately, without inciting a riot from the pilgrims in the city. The "opportune time" they seek will be provided by one of Jesus' inner circle. Jesus is looking for the time set by God ("my time" 26:18) rather than the "good time" Judas seeks a "good time" in order to cash in on him.

Lest we miss ourselves in this story, we must remember that all the rest of the twelve disciples will abandon Jesus when they suspect their lives are at risk with his. Judas is not simply useful as a cipher for other people. We should see ourselves in his action as well as in those of Peter and the ten others, fleeing from the cross of Jesus. This is as much about us engaging Jesus' teaching when we face danger and threat as it is about Judas.

What is also significant is that the last supper is bracketed with premonitions of betrayal by one disciple (26:20-25) and desertion by all the rest and denial three times by one (26:30-35). Jesus is aware of all this and yet both hosts and serves the Passover meal.

(4) The last supper (26:17-30)

The first day of unleavened bread is the beginning of the eight-day celebration of Passover.⁸⁸⁰ Jesus manages the steps and places that will unfold. He directs the disciples to make the feast for Passover ready by finding a certain (unnamed) man and completing arrangements. Despite the rather cryptic instructions the disciples display full obedience. Given the possibility that this is a day early for the Passover meal proper, the disciples may have been in on the unusual,

⁸⁷⁹ Keener, *Matthew*: "Like another disciple of old (2 Kings 5:26-27), Judas abandoned his spiritual birthright for better material conditions, and in saving his own life lost it for eternity (Mt 16:24-27; 27:1-10)." (p. 621)

⁸⁸⁰ There is a widely recognized difficulty in harmonizing the Matthew with John's Gospel on the chronology of the last Supper. Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 3*: "Whether the last supper of Jesus was or was not a passover celebration is a vexed matter to which we cannot contribute in this context. Jn 13:1-4; 18:28; and 19:14 appear to assume it was not; and certain features in the synoptics themselves have been thought incongruent with Mt 26:17-19 par. and rather in harmony with John. But whatever the historical fact, Matthew's point of view is clear: the last supper was passover." (p. 456). Witherington, *Matthew*, has another suggestion: "The Jewish way, of course, was to reckon a day from sundown to sundown, the Roman way from midnight to midnight. By the Roman way of thinking, the first day of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15) and the day of the slaughter of the lambs (Nisan 14) were one and the same, for the former began on the evening of the latter." (p. 481). For a summary of the different arguments and solutions see Carson, *Matthew* pp. 593-596; and Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* who finds Carson's reasoning "Herculean," pp. 763-764. It may be that we have an imprecise, popular equation of the feast with the Passover (such as we do when we celebrate "Christmas," even if we do it on Christmas eve) – see France, *Matthew*, pp. 981-83.

clandestine arrangements.⁸⁸¹ Some have suggested that the location was one Jesus had used before, the home of a beloved disciple living in Jerusalem. The secrecy may have been to ensure that the arrest did not take place while that meal was happening or to protect the owner of the home from later reprisals when persecution breaks out.

There is a striking difference in their response to Jesus telling them that one of them would betray him. Several say: "It is not I, is it Lord?" When Judas responds, his words are: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" The slight difference in title opens the window on a difference of relationship. Disciples not only take Jesus as a great teacher (Rabbi) but as their Master (Lord). Jesus' response to Judas uses the same words given to the high priest (26:64) and Pilate (27:11): "You have said it." It is an affirmation. Yet it is also a double-edged sword: this betrayal and death will take place as it has been written without excuse for the one who will hand him over to the powers that be.

The meal, taken with the disciples, included a sacrificed lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs and four cups of wine, during each of which a portion of Exodus 6 would be read as well as singing parts of Psalm 113-14 before the meal and 115-118 at its end. It was a commemoration of God's miraculous deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus takes these well-known elements and gives them new meaning and a new deliverance to commemorate. The bread: my body broken; the wine, my blood and life poured out for you all.⁸⁸² The deliverance this time is from a harder taskmaster than Pharaoh. Sin (and all its powers) are being deprived of its captives.

All of this was encoding a set of actions and setting as symbols of everything he had said in words about being handed over. The new freedom of the disciples was coming at the bitter experience of the Lord's suffering and death. The very element that is polluting in the Old Covenant, blood, becomes in the New the very means of purification from all sin. In this case the blood is like that of the covenant sacrifice whose blood sealed the covenant (Exod. 24:4-8; Zech. 9:11; Jer. 34:18; Genesis 15:17-21). Its purpose and outcome are the forgiveness of sin.⁸⁸³

But the larger horizon is another meal, a banquet in the fully realized Kingdom of God. This Passover meal is the last one Jesus will take part in before that greater meal when there will be no bitter herbs, no sacrificial lamb or unleavened bread of bitterness. But not before he must drink the bitterest of cups so that his body and blood could become the powerful means by which sins are forgiven and erased.

⁸⁸¹ Mark's account suggests a predetermined arrangement in Jerusalem, knowing that a plot was afoot: "So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.'" (14:13-15)

⁸⁸² Note there is no reinterpretation of the lamb or the bitter herbs.

⁸⁸³ Barth, *CD*. Vol. V.1: "From what is said about the removing, the taking away, the judging, the destroying of sin which takes place in the death of Christ, the purging of it accomplished in the blood of Christ, it is clear that the forgiveness of sins, whether mentioned in connexion with this death or otherwise, cannot mean anything less radical than that. ἄφεσις, ἀφιέναι, χαρίζεσθαι [forgiveness, forgiving, being gracious] is a releasing of man from a legal relationship fatal to him, from an intolerable commitment which he has accepted, from an imprisonment in which he finds himself. And it is not something which comes accidentally or arbitrarily but in the strictest necessity, not partially but totally, not conditionally but unconditionally, not provisionally but definitively." (p. 256)

(5) Jesus predicts Peter's denials (26:31-35)

Too often we are unaware of not only our strengths but our weaknesses. Only when times of stress and pressure come do we realize how unrealistic we are about ourselves. Peter had little idea at the beginning of this evening what his capacity for cowardice was. Big, strong, impetuous Peter would be reduced to a weak, lying, weeping fool before the dawn of the next day. Nor did the other ten disciples remaining with him upon leaving the upper room.

But Jesus knew all the disciples and Peter's character and heart better than they did. All would abandon him in his greatest hour of need. But Peter took the lead in affirming it would not happen – not even if all the other disciples deserted Jesus. He was the “rock” and would stand tall, stand firm with Jesus to the end. As the events Jesus predicted began to happen his initial response was to pull a sword and start swinging. It was his last act of courage. He was sorely mistaken in the end. He would fall away, not once but by denying Jesus three times before the morning dawned.⁸⁸⁴ After the resurrection the disciples were fearful, hiding (John 20:9).

Jesus points this out as fulfilling Scripture (Zech. 13:7). This was not to excuse their cowardly actions and words, but to indicate the unfolding was according to Scripture. The last word in this sorry tale would not be scattering and disaster, but a uniting and restoration. There will be a reunion in Galilee of the Gentiles, where the worldwide mission will begin.

(6) The garden of Gethsemane (26:36-46)

Crossing the Kidron valley, Jesus and the eleven went to an olive garden with its press, a place where he had met with disciples before (John 18:2; Luke 21:37). It was likely a grove where pilgrims slept during the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. Leaving eight disciples at the entrance area, he takes the three fishermen-disciples, Peter with James and John (sons of Zebedee), further into the grove to watch and pray with him. He does not go into his “prayer closet” alone but brings three of his closest disciples with him to support him in his anguish.

He had taught his disciples to pray: “lead us not into temptation (trial)” and now finds himself facing a great test. He went alone into the wilderness to face the testings of the Evil One. But this time he wants three with him as he faces the coming suffering and death. He takes the two who claimed to be able to drink the same cup as him (Matt. 20:20-28) and the self-confident Peter. He takes the same three who were on the Mount of Transfiguration with him, who had seen his glory. Yet, none of them can even manage to stay awake and pray with him.

The words of Jesus' prayer echo the Lord's prayer. They also echo the words of the Olivet Discourse.⁸⁸⁵ He asks that they be alert and watch with him, the very things the householder and the virgins needed to do. It applies to all of us even now as Blaise Pascal put it: “Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. We must not sleep during that time.”⁸⁸⁶ Yet they learned enough of what he prayed to have this event recorded in the Gospels.

On display is the humanity of Christ. The suffering ahead repels Jesus. He seeks the will of God in his desperate sorrow. Prayer is important in all circumstances but especially in the face of the deepest, darkest tests of our faith. He prayed at length and fervently. We are given only a

⁸⁸⁴Luke 22:31-34 puts this conversation in the upper room before they left for the Mount of Olives.

⁸⁸⁵ Especially “be awake” or “watch” - γρηγορεῖτε; 24:42-43, 25:13

⁸⁸⁶ Pascal, Blaise (1910). *The Harvard Classics 48: Blaise Pascal: Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works*. (New York: P. F. Collier & Son) p. 180. *Pensees*, #553.

small window into his wrestling in the Garden. Three times he is portrayed as coming back to see his companions only to find them asleep.⁸⁸⁷

Three times: he asks, he seeks, he knocks, and, in the end, he has his answer. In so doing he teaches us to pray as well. He shows us we are never alone in our prayers. Jesus is there, praying with us. In our anguish and ordinariness, Jesus stays alert and awake with us (unlike these three apostles).⁸⁸⁸ Even when the worst we can imagine for ourselves is coming to pass, prayer is the appropriate response. As is reaching out for the support of those close to us.

James, John and Peter were little support. The grief and emotion of the day and night weighed heavily on their eyes, however much they might have wished to stay awake. Jesus was with them, but they were barely with him. In suffering so much depends upon how we face the suffering. Only so much as we share in the sufferings of Christ can we be grasped by the enormity of the world's dire condition and the drastic measures needed to rectify it. The time for this is limited as it was for the inner three disciples. Their spirits were revved up and intentions engaged, but their physical selves were weary. The flesh won the 'stay alert or sleep' option.

At the end of this time we have either an ironic command or a question (26:45).⁸⁸⁹ As a command Jesus tells them to sleep and rest since they have missed the opportunity to pray and watch with him. As a question it may express some surprise or consternation: "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?" In any case the time for prayer or sleep has passed. The betrayer and the strong arresting arm of the religious elite has arrived at the gate of the garden. Jesus commands them to get up and together go to meet the large crowd and authorities who have come to arrest him. Not having prayed with him, they are unprepared for what is to come.

(7) Jesus arrested (26:47-56)

Suddenly the events Jesus foretold are upon them. Judas is identified first – "one of the twelve." With him a large crowd with swords and wooden clubs, coming from the high priests and the elders of the people. These may well be a group of the Temple guard with representatives of the Temple leadership with them.

The arresting developments begin with a gesture of friendship: a kiss. Judas greets Jesus as a Rabbi, not as Lord. Jesus sees straight through his intent. Yet he calls him friend (ἑταῖρος). Is this ironic? Or is Jesus seeking to appeal one last time to Judas' conscience? In any case, Jesus

⁸⁸⁷ The contrast with the calm Socrates living out his principles, downing the draft of hemlock, could not be starker. Jesus is no less self-consistent, but he is neither Platonic nor Stoic, as though pain and delight have some equivalency for the enlightened. His horror at what is coming is a loud "yes" to life, showing that suffering and death are definitive enemies of human existence. Encircled by the forces of death, he cries out in anguish. Luz, *Matthew 21-28* notes the intensity of Jesus' horrified reaction: "Περίλυτος already has a superlative meaning: 'exceedingly sorrowful.' It is made even more intense with the addition of 'unto death' (ἕως θανάτου)." (p. 395)

⁸⁸⁸ Bengel, J.A. (1860) comments on this text: "In ver. 38 He says—γρηγορεῖτε μετ' Ἐμοῦ, Watch with Me; in ver. 41—γρηγορεῖτε καὶ προσεύχεσθε, watch and pray: but He nowhere says, Pray with Me. The disciples could not join (on an equality) with Him in prayer. There is One Son: one Mediator." But surely this is an over-reaction to prayer to the saints. The implication is that they would be in prayer with him, at the same time, in the same place, facing the same coming challenges unfolding in different ways for each of them. *Gnomon of the New Testament*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), Vol. 1, p. 459.

⁸⁸⁹ The two verbs βαρέω 'to sleep' and ἀναπαύομαι 'to rest' are either indicative verbs in a question or imperative verbs in a command.

consents to the action triggered by the signal of the kiss. In all the events that unfold, Jesus displays a sense that he is living out a role written down and destined by the Prophets of long ago. None of this surprises him.

It is not clear whether to take Jesus' response to Judas as an implied command ('do what you came to do'), a question with irony ('are you here to do this?') or a statement ('I know why you have come').⁸⁹⁰ Perhaps it is deliberately incomplete, allowing Judas to take it as he might. In any case the arrest is quick and decisive.

But Peter is having none of it.⁸⁹¹ Courageous Peter is going to fight to protect his Lord. He draws his sword and hacks away. Does this express his claim that he would never abandon his Lord but would even die with him? Or is it also an indication of the inability to understand Jesus as a suffering Messiah rather than the Messianic Warrior to deliver Israel? Did he think this could even be the first blow in a battle when the twelve legions of angels Jesus could invoke would descend and begin the final vanquishing of evil? In any case, his blow lands on a slave of the High Priest.⁸⁹²

Jesus puts an immediate stop to it. Lest others of the twelve draw their sword, Jesus orders Peter to put his up. Violence tends to destroy those who use it. It is no better to resist persecution by violence than to initiate violence by betrayal. Drawing the sword was dangerous for Peter since it might rebound upon him in this situation. Jesus also trusts God's ability to protect and deliver. The use of the sword was unnecessary. Jesus could call down about 72,000 (12 legions) of angels if what was necessary was his defense.

But most fundamentally, he knows the path Judas is sending him on and the religious elite are arranging is God's will, already written down in Scripture. The sword's use in this event is mistaken. Jesus is cooperating with this travesty of justice willingly. It may appear that he is simply tossed about by the whims of corrupt forces of history and society. But it is far from the case. It is more important for the Scriptures and the drama of salvation to be fulfilled than to avoid excruciating suffering.

Having faced down his disciples' potential to resist, he reminds the armed crowd and representatives of the High Priest and elders of the people that he is no armed insurrectionist or bandit (ληστής). He sat teaching peaceably in the Temple for several days and they did not arrest him. Yet now they come by stealth as though he were such a danger. There is more bandit in them than in Jesus. Yet, this whole drama taking place is unfolding just as Scripture had foretold.

At this his disciples all flee. The "hour" has come. Jesus is now completely isolated, abandoned by even his closest and most consistent followers.

❖ Discipleship and Violence

The proverbial saying, "all who take the sword will die by the sword," has been taken as one of the foundations of pacifism. There is a Scriptural thread that resonates with this (Gen. 4:14; 9:6; Exod. 21:12; Prov. 22:8; Eccl. 10:8; Isa. 50:11; Hos. 10:1). Christians have differed on

⁸⁹⁰ ἐφ' ὃ πάρει. This is an aposiopesis where the speech is suddenly broken off and the sentence is incomplete. What is left incomplete has to be completed and can be done in several ways. Only the context can suggest how and even the context is not decisive in this case since several completions make sense.

⁸⁹¹ Matthew leaves Peter's name out of this. But the Gospel parallels tells us who this was.

⁸⁹² Only Luke tells us of the healing of the slave by Jesus in this scene.

the force of this proverb.

(1) Some see it as a universal banning of the use of coercion or violence by all Christ followers. Violence only engenders further violence. To avoid a spiral of violence, Christians must eschew violence of any sort. They are to love their enemies and turn the other cheek, not hate their enemies or draw the other sword. They are not to take public offices that involve or require the use of coercion (magistrates, police, the military) or participate in social institutions that are based on coercion (such as slavery).

(2) Others see this saying as a contextual expression of when such response to deathly persecution is inappropriate. It is the time for bold witness, not violent resistance. The sword has a proper place in civic society, protecting the innocent and restraining evil. But it is not the tool for propagating the faith. It has always been a mistake when the Church has invoked the power of the state to enforce compliance with its beliefs and practices. The “sword” the Church bears is the word of God, not the sharp steel of the police or military. There are no jails in the basements of Church buildings for a reason. But there are jails in the civic arena and police and military forces to provide a context of stability, order and peace within which ordinary human life can advance. Christians can participate in roles that require the use of coercion or deadly violence while avoiding the corruption or misuse of such powers to oppress the innocent.

(8) Hearing before the Sanhedrin (26:57-68)

Jesus is taken before the dominant civil-religious power of his day in Judea. For the Sanhedrin to meet in official order, a third of the seventy-one members had to assemble. We are not told how many came together, only that it apparently had a quorum with the High Priest presiding, with the scribes and elders present. This appears to be a pre-trial hearing rather than a formal trial. Its purpose was to find sufficient legal rationale to deliver Jesus to Pilate who could pronounce a death sentence.

The scene is a classic example of miscommunication. The words are in the same language, but the meanings communicated came from two different worldviews. The realpolitik of a Hebrew power structure dominated by the Roman was in full display. The High Priest is concerned that the “peace” be kept lest the Romans wrest the remaining vestiges of power and privilege away from the Jerusalem elite. The economy and privileges of the Temple were at stake. Trouble makers and threats to that power needed to be prevented.

The “politics” of the Kingdom of God preoccupied Jesus as the messianic Prophet. He was concerned with the poor, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing – the shalom and flourishing of all of life that come when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. People were encountering God’s power outside the bounds of the Temple in dramatic fashion that no longer was true in the Temple.

Despite the plans and plots that had been underway for some time, the hearing appears to have been lengthy and difficult. A number of witnesses were paraded and heard, but their testimony was not credible. This alone indicates the intent of the hearing was not justice or determination of the truth. Its agenda was to secure the death of Jesus by any means. Knowing this and the very different views of God and the Temple, Jesus remained silent. The Temple powers and Jesus held not simply incompatible views but mutually incomprehensible ones.

Finally, they find several witnesses who agreed in detail about Jesus’ words to destroy this

“temple” and he could rebuild it in three days.⁸⁹³ If Jesus had spoken of the destruction of the Temple, then he was a danger to the public order. But the silence of Jesus was problematic. Given all the testimony that caused some sort of unease among the Sanhedrin, even these two witnesses who agreed might not be enough by itself to create the consensus for the next step. They needed some response from the defendant.

The High Priest then forces the issue by a solemn command, demanding that Jesus take an oath by invoking “the living God” to respond to these accusations as to whether he is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus’ response repeats the affirmative but somewhat ambiguous “you said it.”⁸⁹⁴ This “yes” can taken to mean that he is what the High Priest says he is but not necessarily with the same meaning the High Priest gives to those words. Or it can simply affirm what the High Priest said and that he already knows the answer is yes, even if he does not believe Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the Prophets and Moses.⁸⁹⁵

Jesus then speaks unambiguously: “From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (26:64; a quotation from Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13). This claim goes far beyond what the High Priest might have meant by the status titles he used. This was a Messianic claim beyond what the High Priest might have thought. If his first words were ambiguous, these were not.

This seals his fate. For a High Priest to hear these words within his worldview was to hear blasphemy. These words are wildly extravagant claims. His tearing of his garment foreshadows the tearing of the veil in the Temple. While it signaled the High Priest and Sanhedrin’s final verdict, it also was the first step in the tearing away of the Kingdom from Israel and giving of it to a new entity made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Blasphemy was punished by death. What the Sanhedrin considered blasphemous was ironically the truth.

The Sanhedrin no longer needs suborned or mistaken witnesses. Jesus’ own words convict him. So, they agree: he is worthy of death. His claim to divine prerogatives is sufficient testimony. The High Priest has successfully navigated the politics of the Sanhedrin. They proceed to dismiss his claims, to denigrate and show contempt for his fake status claims. They taunt, spit on him and slap him to demonstrate his powerlessness and lack of prophetic gifts. Humiliating, degrading, belittling and stripping a victim of his humanity is the first step in denial that murdering another human is a horrendous misdeed.

❖ Discipleship and Anti-Semitism II

There is a most unfortunate thread in Church history whereby this hearing before the Jewish elite leaders of their day is considered to taint the whole of Judaism. In the persons of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jews of subsequent centuries are made to be guilty of Jesus’ blood whenever they refuse to convert. Since the holocaust of the 20th century, the long and bloody history of persecution and pogroms of Jews with the complicity and even initiative of Christians and others has received the overdue attention it deserves. The Christian disciple cannot forget

⁸⁹³Matthew does not record this saying directly (John 2:19-21). But he does suggest an anti-Temple stance and prophecies about the destruction of the Temple (Matt. 23:38; 24:2; 12:5; 21:12-13).

⁸⁹⁴Matthew uses the same words of response by Jesus to Judas, the High Priest and Pilate (26:25, 64; 27:11).

⁸⁹⁵This simple answer may be Jesus’ way of not “swearing an oath” (Matt. 5:33-37) but to simply answer with yes or no. Mark’s gospel records the answer more directly as “I am” (14:62).

they are “reformed Jews” and follow a Jewish Savior. There is no room for any anti-Semitic attitude or action.⁸⁹⁶

This history is so shameful and deadly that it has complicated a number of important matters:

(1) The status of Jews within the Kingdom of God.

Modern pluralism results in some Christian denominations and theologies to completely reverse their status from the so-called enemies of Christ to the brothers and sisters of Christ. Evangelizing Jews is arrogant, oppressive, mistaken, offensive. The Jewish people are as much a part of the covenant of God as those who are Christ followers. We are all children of Abraham, the children of God. To repair dreadful past sin, they repudiate any evangelism of Jews.

(2) The status of Jewish practices within the Church of God.

Others acknowledge the importance of continuing the mission of the early Church in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and the necessity to embrace him as the coming Lord and Judge of the world. The early centuries of the Church saw a reversal from the book of Acts. There the apostolic Church was initially dominated by Jewish followers of Christ. The twelve Apostles were all Jewish. They continued to practice Jewish Torah observances while exempting their Gentile Christ-followers from many of those customs. But soon the Gentile dominance became an exclusion of Jewish customs altogether. Any Jewish convert had, in essence, to become a Gentile in religious and practical observances. The modern Messianic Judaism movement has reinstated what was true in the Apostolic era: a cultural form of Christianity that is Jewish in observances.

(3) The status of the Gospels in propagating anti-Semitism.

There are a number of scholars who conclude that the accounts of the Gospels are not based on eye-witness accounts but are fictive. They are later constructions by Christian communities that were engaged in a very contentious and difficult separation from Judaism. Accounts such as this hearing before the Sanhedrin as well as the polemics found on Jesus’ lips are not historically based but later situational responses to draw clear and strong boundaries between these early Christians and Jews of their day. They smear and denigrate the Jews in order to generate greater solidarity within the Christian communities and thus prevent reversions. These dark threads in the foundational documents of the Christian movement need to be challenged and rejected as incompatible with the love and justice of Jesus himself.

Without doubt, anti-Semitism is also anti-Christian. Christians are “reformed Jews” in the sense that they share the Hebrew Scriptures with Jews and follow a Jewish messiah as their Lord and Savior. Anti-Semitism cannot be propagated without it being enacted upon Jesus as well. The charge that the Gospels are anti-Semitic has been chewed over by many scholars. Several

⁸⁹⁶ To better understand the style and function of some of the rhetoric moderns have mistakenly supposed was anti-Jewish, see Luke T. Johnson. (1989). “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and Conventions of Ancient Rhetoric” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108, 419–441. Also Nolland, J. (2008). “The Gospel of Matthew and Anti-Semitism” in D. M. Gurtner and J. Nolland (Eds.), *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company. (pp. 154–169). “But anti-Semitism as classically understood is something that, while the church has been far from free of it, the Gospel of Matthew does not, so far as I can see, fall into.” (p. 169).

key points are important:

(a) Three of the four Gospel writers were Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. Many of the New Testament documents were written with a heavily Jewish audience in mind. The texts considered anti-Semitic actually are part of an inter-Jewish debate about the authentic beliefs and practices of the Jewish faith.⁸⁹⁷ The Christian movement claimed Jesus as the Jewish messiah and son of God who had come to save his people and the world. There were a number of different articulations of Jewish faith alongside the Christian one. The debate wasn't anti-Semitic or a form of anti-Judaism but concerned the boundaries of the covenant people of God. Many of the modern concerns are legitimately about subsequent post-apostolic developments (though there is surprisingly little anti-Jewish polemic in second century writings) but are anachronistic when applied to the New Testament.

(b) As to Matthew: the strong words of Matthew 23 against the practices of the Pharisees and 27:25 where the people accept the blood-guilt for Jesus' crucifixion need to be weighed in terms of their meaning in context and not subsequent misuse. James D. G. Dunn offers a careful examination of the issue and, for Matthew concludes:

"Matthew still speaks as an 'insider' [to the Jewish identity] and is attempting to portray a Jesus who would be attractive to others who also considered themselves 'insiders'. In other words, once again we seem to find ourselves confronted with the situation where the narrowing channels of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity respectively were still in competition for the head waters flowing from the broader channels of second temple Judaism. In which case, once again, the charge of anti-semitism or anti-Judaism against Matthew has either to be dismissed or to be so redefined within its historical context as to lose most of its potential as justification for the anti-semitism of later centuries. And, once again, it is more a matter of continuity than discontinuity, of Israel's special place in the purposes of God reaffirmed as well as redefined."⁸⁹⁸

(9) Peter's Denials (26:69-75)

During the hearing at Caiaphas' house, Peter is seated with the servants of the High Priest and others in the inner courtyard. He was present to see the outcome. Why is he here? Is it dogged loyalty, trying to live out his claim that others might flee and abandon Jesus, but not him? Was this a sort of wounded pride that his sword swinging in the Garden had not been enough to save his Master? Does this also indicate his unhearing the words of warning that this time of trial and suffering was imminent, and Peter was foolish to walk into the very den of lions about to tear

⁸⁹⁷ N. T. Wright: "It is sometimes suggested that views of this sort are in some way anti-Jewish. This misses the whole point. One of the noblest and most deep-rooted traditions in Judaism is that of critique from within. The Pharisees were deeply critical of most of their Jewish contemporaries. The Essenes regarded all Jews except themselves as heading for judgment; they had transferred to themselves all the promises of vindication and salvation, while they heaped anathemas on everyone else, not least the Pharisees. That did not make the Pharisees, or the Essenes, anti-Jewish." In *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (1999). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (pp. 51–52).

⁸⁹⁸ Dunn, James D. G. (2006). *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Second Edition). London: SCM Press. (pp. 205–206).

Jesus apart? We don't know his motives, however mixed or pure they might have been.

Present in urban Jerusalem were those who could recognize the north Galilee country accents of a fisherman. Peter sits up most of the night and as time goes on his accent gives him away. Three little questions about his identity from servant girls are enough to deflate Peter's determination. Deny, deny, deny: an oath and calling down curses on himself is followed by a wave of bitter tears. He has less insight into his weaknesses than Jesus does. Suddenly realizing it, he is broken-hearted.

It is those tears that set Peter apart from Judas in the next paragraph. Matthew portrays the denials as if they were a pilgrimage: in the courtyard, then twice at the gate (ready for a quick escape?) and then he finally leaves to the outside. Each denial takes him physically and verbally further from Jesus; each more emphatic.⁸⁹⁹ While Peter is distancing himself by denying Jesus, Jesus is engaged in affirming his true identity.

There is a world of difference between repentance and remorse (or between the remorse that renews or the kind that ruins). Peter's self-recognition as a coward in the face of the prospect of sharing the same deathly fate as Jesus shatter his egoism. He has done exactly what Jesus said he would. The crow of the cock is nature's recognition of this betrayal. Yet the outcome of his realization of his weakness brings about repentance. What we wonder is how remorse (which he must have felt) is transformed into repentance. In the case of Judas, the suicide is indication of remorse leading to death rather than renewed life. The remorse never reaches far enough to produce repentance, unlike Peter.

Still, it is on this note that Peter is left in Matthew's Gospel. This is his last mention by name (though he will be one of the eleven at the end of the Gospel). We learn more of his story in the other Gospels and Acts. Matthew leaves him with the echoes of his betrayal clanging loudly over his character.

(10) The money of betrayal and Judas' suicide (27:1-10)

In time, we reach early Friday morning. The first event is the final plan as to what to do with Jesus. It may be that others of the Sanhedrin arrive at this time. How to bring about his death is the issue.⁹⁰⁰ It seems under procedures of this day that a second meeting of the Sanhedrin needed to happen to affirm any capital decision, though this is not certain. As a result, these leaders of Israel bind Jesus to be handed over to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. These custodians of the Temple, of the heart of the worship of God, of the city of God, are busy watching after their own political and economic fortunes. They have no eyes to see or ears to hear the reality that stands in front of them. But they are well aware of the corrupt procedure they are following.

⁸⁹⁹Witherington, *Matthew*: "Peter is using the technical form [*Hakam*] for a legal denial of something (see *m. Sabb. VIII.3*). Possibly Peter used the Galilean Hebrew *hakam* instead of the Judean *yada* when he said he did not know Jesus, and so he was recognized as Galilean both by his accent and his choice of words." (p. 501)

⁹⁰⁰It may also be the case that capital-case decisions could only be pronounced in the daylight. So, the coming of the dawn might have been what they were awaiting. In addition, Roman administration also tended to do its business in the morning hours. Pilate was a resented military prefect of Judea (*praefectus Iudaeae*), a low-ranking governor in charge from 26-36 A.D. He came from the equestrian rank and served as the fifth prefect of Judea.

There are only two accounts of Judas killing himself (the other is in Acts 1:15-20).⁹⁰¹ Judas must have been present at the hearing and its outcome. What was he thinking? That Jesus would be as successful in answering this highest court as he had been in responding to his interlocutors on so many earlier occasions? Or that Jesus would call down the twelve legions of angels to cleanse Jerusalem of this corrupt leadership? But neither was the outcome. Why he is struck so powerfully with regret and despair is not clear. But he realizes the consequence of his betrayal is the clear prospect of the death of his innocent Master. Whatever his motives, he realizes his complicity in the blood-guilt of Jesus impending death. But he never approaches Jesus to seek forgiveness.

His actions look like “repentance.” He repudiates his role in this affair; he does not sugar-coat it but states the seriousness of his deed (he does not trivialize it or rationalize it as an error or mistake). But the Temple leadership reject his change of mind and regret. The very priests who were commissioned to mediate between God and sinners, to offer guilt-removing sacrifices, refuse any action in the face of Judas’ anguish: “What is that to us? That’s **your** responsibility” (27:4).⁹⁰² Judas takes the 30 pieces of silver and seems to have thrown them into the inner sanctuary of the Temple, returning them to their source. He then goes out and hangs himself.⁹⁰³

The Temple leadership suddenly remembers some of its scruples about purity. Having suborned witnesses to give false testimony, having physically struck and mocked an innocent and bound him over to the Roman governor for capital punishment, these leaders suddenly are concerned that this “blood money” is impure and would violate the Torah if put in the treasury. Like Judas, they seek to get rid of this money by handing it over to someone else. With it they buy a field as a burial place for impure foreigners (how thoughtful!). Hence its title: “the Field of Blood.” This end of the Judas story is wrapped up with a quote from the prophets:⁹⁰⁴

“Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:
‘They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the
people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the
Lord commanded me.’” (vs. 9-10)

All of these events unfold according to a plan and purpose larger and longer term than all but one of the immediate actors realized.

❖ Discipleship and Suicide

Many Christians have thought of suicide as “the unforgivable sin.” This stems from the

⁹⁰¹For a detailed account suggesting how to reconcile the two accounts, see Keener, Craig S. (2012–2013). *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary Vol. 1 & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28*, Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic). Pp. 761–765.

⁹⁰²In the Torah (Deut. 19:16-21) bearing false witness against an innocent means you are to be given the penalty under the law which you sought for the innocent. Additionally, Deut. 27:25 says: “Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.” Judas would have known these texts.

⁹⁰³This story of betrayal and hanging echoes Ahithophel and King David (2 Samuel 17:23). Ahithophel betrayed King David and committed suicide by hanging himself. The same term for “hanging” is used here as in the Septuagint version of 2 Samuel: ἀπήγξατο. (LXX: καὶ ἐνετείλατο τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀπήγξατο καὶ ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἐτάφη ἐν τῷ τάφῳ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ.)

⁹⁰⁴Matthew follows a pattern of combining words from two or more prophets and then references only the most prominent book. This quote combines Zechariah 11:11-13 and Jeremiah 32:6-14.

Church tradition that one must confess all one's sins and have them absolved before death as well as from the idea that murder is the worst sin to be committed against God and neighbor. Self-murder has no remedy under these notions.

Judas' primary sin was not suicide but participation in the corrupt process leading to the judicial killing of Jesus. Still, we dare not speak too lightly of the seriousness of suicide. The gloom and doom of depression and despair are only too real and motivate too many to a "solution" that is worse than the ill they feel so deeply in front or behind them. The great antidote to suicide is the gracious forgiveness and favor of God in Christ.

Judas poses for us the question: how does life, even the life of a religious person, wind up where the best solution seems to be suicide? This is not an abstract or theoretical problem. Suicide is a major problem in so-called modern, industrial Western societies, even among the religious. It is the third leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19 and the second among college students. It is a major cause of death among the elderly when they find pain and loneliness as well as the burden they cause to others too difficult to live with. Many of us have had friends or family members take their lives and know the shock, the depression and anguish of living with the memory that leaves. A few years back, one of my wife's cousins, a Christian who was a young man in his 20s, who had joined the Church by affirming his faith in Christ only five months earlier, committed suicide. It was like being hit with a lightning bolt.

We are told by the high priests of numbers in Washington that some 30,000 Americans will officially be registered as suicides this year — and probably 2-3 times that many will actually take their own lives. We may not like to face this reality, but for many people, life seems to pin them into a place where they would rather die than continue to live.

The Bible tells us of a number who prayed for death: Moses felt the over-powering burden of leading the complaining Israelites and prayed: "I am not able to carry all this people alone...kill me at once..." (Num. 11:14,15). Elijah, after the defeat of the prophets of Baal, was sought by Queen Jezebel. He was so desperate and depressed that he sat down under a tree and said: "O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers" (I Kings 19:4). Jonah was so angry at God when God did not judge and destroy Nineveh, that he said; "O Lord, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3). Even some of the great leaders of God's people, even prophets of God who work miracles grow so distressed at times that they wish for death.

What do we learn from Judas' suicide?

1. First: that suicide is best understood as an escape from rather than a going toward. Most people who seek to end it all are in the grip of despair, of an unendurable anguish or physical pain. It is not so much a choice of death, as a choosing to end what seems an unending, unbearable despondency. Like one trapped in a burning building, the person sees suicide as a quick, effective way to stop the slow torture they currently experience as life.

2. Second: suicide does not avoid or escape all the consequences the victim seeks to avoid. Judas is remembered through the millennia because of what he did and what it led to. He left a legacy for all the generations to remember: one of the twelve Apostles died at his own hand.

We cannot follow the person who takes his or her life into the presence of God. Suicide is an escape from certain unbearable circumstances of this present life. But in that moment, it is also, whether the victim knows it or not, the first step in the life to come. What does one

say to the Giver of life in that encounter? Having run away from life, how do you now stand in the presence of the Creator of life? It is not at all clear that suicide is a successful escape.

3. Third: the Bible does not pass judgment. It is striking, isn't it, that we have no words of censure, no recoiling in horror at the few times suicide is recorded in the Bible. The tragedy is recorded but where there is censure it is not for the suicide, but the sins done before that event. Suicide occurs so seldom because the people of God in the Old and New Testaments saw life as a sacred loan, a gift from God that was to be treasured, even in very trying and difficult situations. There is no cult of suicide as there has been in Japan's history.⁹⁰⁵ People are not glorified for ending life this way. But neither are they condemned.

There have been many in the Church who have thought suicide was the unforgiveable sin (based on the false notion that since you could not confess this sin before you died, you died with an unforgiven sin). It needs to be underlined once and for all: the unforgiveable sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit, the resisting of God's claim to your life, body, and soul. It is never described as suicide.

One can understand why the suicides that are in the Bible (Saul, Ahithophel, Judas) happen, because we understand the sins they had committed in all the days prior. We are not even surprised at the act of Judas in the New Testament. This is not to say we can have the same clarity about our friends and contemporaries. People take their lives more frequently and for more complex reasons today. But as Christians and as a Church, we are not to pass judgment. Rather we need to do as did the valiant men of Jabesh-Gilead did with Saul's body: to arise and care for the tragic victim and to grieve seven days or more for a world that makes people no longer want to see the light of the sun (I Sam. 30:11-13).

Despair and despondency are things that come in like a dark fog. They come to all of us at one time or another. The temptation of suicide is like the eclipse of the sun. It lasts for but a fleeting moment when compared with the months and years of sunlight. The contrast between Peter, who also walked away from Jesus for a time and Judas is striking. Peter found that, putting his hand and destiny into the care and control of Jesus, his night of the soul, his eclipse of the sun, could be endured. He had betrayed Jesus but found his way back. Walking with Christ in life is not like receiving a vaccination that promises future immunity against a certain disease. If anything, we are told in plain language that following Christ will mean many trials and sorrows, some of them brought on by our own folly and sin.

(11) Jesus before Pilate (27:11-26)

Finally, we are at the place and in front of the person who can bring the plans of the Temple leadership to pass. Pontius Pilate cannot avoid dealing with Jesus because of the weight of the governing elite who have presented and accused him. His troubled tenure and unpopularity likely put him in a delicate situation.

In Matthew, the account is brief and to the point. Pilate asks one question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds as he has previously to the High Priest and Judas: "You have said

⁹⁰⁵*Seppuku* used a short sword for self-disembowelment. It was practiced mainly by samurai (warriors) to avoid dishonor, such as after defeat in battle or as an act of protest against the government. *Kamikaze* (the wind of god) was the flying of a plane full of explosives into the enemy during World War II. Japan has had a traditional tolerant attitude toward suicide though that has changed in recent years. At present Japan is fifth and the USA tenth in the rate of suicide among wealthy OECD countries.

it.” It is an affirmative. But beyond that, Jesus is silent in face of the accusations made against him. It is most unsettling to Pilate (he was “greatly amazed”) since the normal actions of a prisoner under the threat of capital punishment is denying, groveling, pleading for mercy – anything except calm silence. But it seems to have impressed him favorably. Jesus was letting the accusers entangle themselves in the inconsistent charges and witnesses.

Where the custom to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd during Passover came from is unknown.⁹⁰⁶ Some speculate that Pilate instituted it as a way of mollifying the Jews after his serious and unpopular mistakes (using Temple funds for a Roman aqueduct and the killing of innocent and unarmed civilians among others). In any case, there is a very well known (possibly, notorious) insurrectionist, Jesus Barabbas, being held on charges.⁹⁰⁷ Perhaps thinking they would pick the infamous Jesus instead of the obviously innocent Jesus, Pilate gives them a choice. Pilate knew it was due to elite envy that Jesus, called the Messiah, stood before him.

While sitting on the judgment seat, he receives a message from his wife.⁹⁰⁸ She had a disturbing dream and advised her husband to have anything to do with “that innocent (righteous)⁹⁰⁹ man.” She confirms Pilate’s own conclusion about the guilt of Jesus. Yet her distress holds little weight in the face of the crowd and Temple leadership baying for Barabbas rather than Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate does press the case for releasing Jesus to no avail. He is servant to the expedient and fearful of a riot breaking out. Besides, the determination of the Temple leadership was set – and they swayed the opinion of the crowd present in this hearing.

In the choosing of Jesus Barabbas (lit. ‘a son of the father’) instead of the Son of the Father, a notorious Jesus, the irony is compounded. The true King of the Jews is mocked and scourged as if he were a fake king. The insurrectionist who could not save Israel is chosen instead of the one who came to save Israel from its sins.

Pilate’s famous washing of his hands and claiming innocence for what is about to happen is political theater. Only on his command could this death happen. Blaming the death on the Temple leadership (who also engage in political theater with their “his blood be on us and our children”) is no exoneration of Pilate. Nor is it likely these elite felt they were putting themselves under the curse of killing an innocent man. This is a cynical move to insure a desired outcome. Ironically, the guilt fell on them as much as on Pilate or the crowd who shouted for his death.

Nor is it the case that they could transfer the guilt to other generations (“our children”). This is pure, cynical politics in pursuit of eliminating what they saw as a threat to their power and wealth. We call it propaganda in the service of power, something we see all the time in the

⁹⁰⁶“Roman law allowed two types of amnesty—*abolitio*, acquittal before trial (a δέσμιον was a ‘prisoner’ who had been arrested but not yet condemned by trial), and *indulgentia*, acquittal after conviction—Pilate had the authority for this type of amnesty.” Osborne, *Matthew* (p. 1017)

⁹⁰⁷δέσμιον ἐπίσημον.

⁹⁰⁸Matthew has abbreviated the hearing. After the first phase of receiving the prisoner and hearing the charges and witnesses as well as the defense of the accused, the Roman governor would retire to consult with his advisors. Matthew also does not include the hearing before Herod Antipas (which may have been facilitated easily if the hearing before Pilate was in Herod the Great’s palace on the Western side of Jerusalem). Later, he would come out to the judgment seat to render the verdict. Matthew passes over it with “so after they had gathered...” (27:17). This hearing before Pilate would have started early in the morning. By the time the more private consultations were done, it would have been later, and more people gathered before the judgment seat which was set in public.

⁹⁰⁹τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ

modern world. Less than 40 years would pass before the prophecies of Jesus about the Temple and Jerusalem would come to pass. The Temple elite's cooperation with Roman rule and the politics of power would finally lead to the very thing they sought to avoid by this act. They lost their wealth and power when Titus and his army destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Using political charges rather than religious (blasphemy) was designed to produce crucifixion by the Romans. The purpose seems to have been another part of the intent to discredit this one as a false prophet and messianic pretender. The one who is "hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23). Once Pilate pronounced the verdict Jesus' fate was sealed. Pilate released Barabbas and had Jesus flogged and handed over to the Roman detachment for crucifixion. Two others will join him in this terrible fate.

❖ Discipleship: The Church and the Jews

The history of the Church's relationship to Jews is very chequered, to put it mildly. Pogroms, ghettoizing, banning from certain professions, persecutions – all of these have been part of the horrendous mistreatment of Jews sanctioned at times by Church officials. Matthew 27:25 has been used as a cornerstone to policies and practices of isolating and demeaning Jews who continue in their faith rather than convert to Christian faith. They are accused of being "Christ killers" to this very day. Just as Jesus was handed over to a terrible fate, Jews have been considered deserving of similar treatment for their continued refusal to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and King of the universe.

In modern times, "Christian" nations such as the US severely restricted the immigration of threatened, dispossessed and persecuted European Jews from Germany in the years leading up to World War II.⁹¹⁰ Once the war broke out in 1941, such immigration stopped. Subsequently, the reaction to the 20th century's holocaust by the Nazis has been both commendable and misshapen. It has caused a deep rethinking and repentance for the ways Christian thought, theology and practices have fed and justified the mistreatment of Jews. At the same time, it has led to a questioning of ministries seeking to lead Jews to become followers of their Messiah. Some Christian denominations have withdrawn support for any evangelism of Jews.

The early post-apostolic Church writers for the most part saw Matthew's reciting of the words of the Temple leaders and the crowd as being fulfilled in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and Herod's Temple. But there was more than enough seeing the "his blood be upon us and our children" as permanent, reaching down to contemporary Jews to feed what became a virulent virus in the Church. Yet some in the post-Apostolic Church started the blame-game with its profoundly negative effects by the way they pinned guilt on all Jews in all generations:

Jerome: "This imprecation upon the Jews continues until the present day. The Lord's blood will not be removed from them."⁹¹¹

⁹¹⁰In the USA, the racist Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 (which remained law until 1965) structured immigration quotas based on national origin. While it favored northern and western Europe (and virtually banned Asian and African peoples), the limits on Germany was only 25,957 USA visas annually. There was no provision for refugees. It was an indirect contributor to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews who could have been saved.

⁹¹¹Jerome. (2008). *Commentary on Matthew*. (Vol. 117) (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press) p. 313.

Cyril of Alexandria: “He sought out the offenders and submitted them to punishment, decreeing the destruction of the whole of Judea on one day when they paraded him before Pilate and cried, ‘His blood be upon us and upon our children.’ Even if the effects of divine wrath did not immediately befall them, even if the penalty was not sought without delay, nevertheless the just sentence from God took effect on them, destruction gripping the land of the Jews, as I said.”⁹¹²

Even some later, popular commentators are tainted with the same sentiment:

Bengel: “An argument against the Jews why they are at present in exile, although that exile is somewhat less severe than formerly...”⁹¹³

Matthew Henry: “How righteous God was, in his retribution according to this imprecation; they said, His blood be on us, and on our children; and God said Amen to it, so shall thy doom be; as they loved cursing, so it came upon them. The wretched remains of that abandoned people feel it to this day; from the time they imprecated this blood upon them, they were followed with one judgment after another, till they were quite laid waste...”⁹¹⁴

These are the mild versions of this sentiment. But they are both exegetically and ethically incorrect. The hands that were dipped into the blood of Jesus included Gentiles as well as Jews, men and women, elite and commoners. What nailed Jesus to the cross was not simply the hands of the Roman soldiers, brought there by the political interplay of Temple and Jerusalem elite versus the Roman rulers. The guilty are not limited to these first century actors. There is a deeper answer when one asks: “Who bears blood guilt for the judicial murder of Jesus?”

The answer rings back through the centuries: all those who have abandoned or betrayed their friend, all who have been envious of the success others and sought to pull them down by word or deed, all who have allowed fear to stop them from doing what is right, all who caved into the lobbying and pressure of others even when they know it is wrong, all who take bribes, all who have made money or power their god – all of these were present in the death of Jesus.

The sins of us all are what nailed him to the cross and kept him there to his death. We are the guilty, male and female, elite and commoner, Jew and Gentile, educated and illiterate, religious and nonreligious. All of us nailed him to the cross and shed his blood. It was for our sins that he suffered and died. When we point the finger at another (the Jew), there are four fingers pointing back at us. We are the Christ-killers. All of us. As Helmut Thielicke puts it:

“...can there be any harsher judgment than that of the Cross of Golgotha, surrounded not only by the hangman’s myrmidons and the masses roused to the pitch of sadism, but also by the best and most moral examples of humanity? And yet all of them together constitute a chorus, giving appalling expression to megalomania, their vanity, and their bad conscience. The fact is that we are all represented in

⁹¹²Cyril of Alexandria. (2012). *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*. (Vol. 124) (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press). p. 124.

⁹¹³Bengel, J. A. (1860). *Gnomon of the New Testament*. (Vol. 1). (Edinburgh: T&T Clark). p. 475.

⁹¹⁴Henry, *Commentary* p. 1766.

that furious mob around the Cross. ‘Mine, mine was the transgression,
But thine the deadly pain.’”⁹¹⁵

(12) Jesus and Pilate’s Soldiers (27:27-31)

This scene takes place in the courtyard of the official residence of the Roman governor. Most see this as within the precincts of Herod’s palace. The cohort would be a tenth of a legion, mostly from non-Jewish Syro-Palestinian auxiliaries. Taking off his clothes, they put a red-purple (scarlet) Roman soldier’s robe on him as part of a mocking of him as King of the Jews. Perhaps this suggests, as King of the Jews, he must command his “legions” (of which there are none) against the Roman occupiers.⁹¹⁶

The crown of thorns does duty as a royal diadem. A reed serves as a kingly scepter. Bowing down and hailing him as “king” and striking the head repeatedly and spitting on him are meant to demean him. It was a sadistic means of demonstrating that he was anything but a king: with spit clinging to him and blood running down his face and back. This burlesque starts with psychological degradation and ends with physical torture. It is entertainment for soldiers who distance themselves from the victim.

At the end they remove the military mantle and clothe him with his own garments.⁹¹⁷ Then they start the journey to a place outside the city boundaries.

(13) Jesus Crucified (27:32-37)

Along the way they meet Simon of Cyrene and press him into carrying the cross. The scourging (from which victims could die) apparently left Jesus too weak to carry the crossbeam or patibulum. Arriving at the “place of the skull” (Golgotha), they offered him a drink, either to emphasize the bitterness of what he is about to undergo or to dull the pain. Jesus refused. The bitter wine might also make the task of the soldiers easier, if it drugged the victim, making him more compliant to the painful process.⁹¹⁸ Then they did the grisly deed: nailing him to a cross above which was fixed a sign with the charge against him: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”⁹¹⁹

It was “business as usual.” Just another bad actor being put to death as charged. They had stripped him of clothing as part of the crucifixion and then they cast lots to see which of his garments would go to which of them. Watching insured none of his followers came to take him

⁹¹⁵ Thielicke, *Sermon*. Kindle, loc. 138-9.

⁹¹⁶ France, *Matthew*: “At this time Judea was no longer under a Herodian king but ruled directly by Rome through a prefect. Any suggestion of a Jewish ‘king’ could only mean trouble with the Roman government, and the more so if that king were a Galilean (from the province which was still under Herodian rule) attempting to impose his authority on the southern province. The title ‘king of the Jew’ will be used against Jesus at his trial (27:11, 27:37), and this incident [the triumphal entrance] has given strong grounds for attributing this ambition to him.” (p. 781).

⁹¹⁷ Normal practice would be to lead the victim naked to the site of crucifixion. In Judea it may be a concession to Jewish sensibilities to clothe the victim.

⁹¹⁸ Mark 15:23 mentions myrrh as the substance mixed in the wine. Matthew’s reference to “gall” may just be a reference to some substance that tastes bitter. Dioscorides Padanius mentions that myrrh has narcotic properties (*Materia Medica* I. lxiv. 3)

⁹¹⁹ We learn from John 19:20 that this indictment was in three languages (Aramaic, Latin and Greek). This may explain some of the differences in the wording noted by the Gospels (Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

down alive from the cross. Throughout this account there are allusions to Old Testament texts.⁹²⁰

(14) Jesus mocked (27:38-44)

Two rebel bandits were crucified with him, one on either side. The symbolism and association may well have been to identify Jesus with these two resisters of Roman domination, suggesting all were cut from the same cloth. All three are getting the wages of their sins against Rome. Two bandits are stationed like advisors, on the right and left, of the “king.”

Those curious who came to view these torturous deaths mocked Jesus, playing on the indictment above his head. If he is a “king,” then prove it by descending from the cross. Only then will they believe he has such a status. Or certainly, as the “son of God,” God will deliver him.⁹²¹ The words repeat the temptation in the wilderness: “if you are the Son of God...” Even the criminals on either side also insulted him. This time he does not answer the challenges and temptations by quoting Scripture. He is silent.

Matthew underlines the nearly universal abandonment and rejection of Jesus. He also reminds us of the reality that this King could have come down from the cross, as exalted a personage as he was. What held him to the cross was not the nails, but the love God had for the world. Yet since he does not come down, he is seen by the mockers as another impotent criminal of no account.

The ridicule and insults ironically speak the truth: he does trust in God, he could come down from the cross, he is the King of Israel, he will save others and he will be saved from death by the resurrection. All the mocking will be turned on its head.

(15) The death of Jesus and accompanying miracles (27:45-56)

Matthew’s Gospel opens with miracles surrounding the birth. In his account of the death, Matthew surrounds it with more miracles than the other Gospels. There are four: darkness of the sky, the tearing of the veil in the Temple, the earthquake, and the raising to life of many who had died. It climaxes with the confession of the Centurion and those with him: “Surely he was the Son of God.”

⁹²⁰ Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 3* (pp. 608-609) notes:

“Although the OT is not formally introduced, its presence is recurrent:

34, wine mingled with gall: allusion to Ps 69:21

35, division of garments: borrowing from Ps 22:18

38, death between robbers: possible allusion to Isa 53:12

39, passersby wag their heads: compare Ps 22:7; Lam 2:15

39–40, mockery: borrowing from Ps 22:7 (cf. 109:25)

43, mockery: borrowing from Ps 22:9

44, mockery: possible borrowing from Ps 22:7 or 69:9

45, darkness at noon: allusion to Amos 8:9

46, cry from the cross: borrowing from Ps 22:1

48, vinegar to drink: allusion to Ps 69:21

51–53, earthquake and resurrection: use of Ezek 37; Zech 14:4–5”

⁹²¹ This whole narrative is seen by Muslims as a corruption of reality. First, Jesus was not the son of God. God has no “sons.” Second, as an exalted Prophet of God, such suffering, humiliation, and death is unworthy and would not be permitted by God for one of His chosen. In their view Jesus was raised bodily into heaven, not crucified.

Matthew also notes that the mockers are not the only ones present. Many women were there, watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the Mother of Zebedee's sons. Is it from them that many of these details of the crucifixion come?

From about noon to 3 pm, a darkness fell over the land. In the face of the mockers and their insults, nature gives voice to a very different understanding of what is going on. This could not have been an eclipse since the Passover took place at a full moon. What the specific means in nature were that brought this about is unknown. What we know from Jesus' last words is that during the time the sun's light was darkened, the sunlight of God's love was also obscured. The first responders to Jesus' suffering and death are from nature.

There is virtually no description of the personal experience of Jesus on the cross until the last few minutes. Jesus' cry of dereliction expressed his deepest loss: the abandonment by God. Forsaken by all his companions and disciples, by the Israeli religious leaders, by the governing authority who should have protected him, he is forsaken even by God. What is happening is what Jesus foretold: he is giving his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).

Matthew leaves these last words in Hebrew: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')" (27:47). The bystanders mishear Jesus, thinking at last, he is calling upon Elijah, the prophet who is to precede the Messiah – maybe he will come and remove Jesus from the cross (Mal. 4:5). In his weakened state, near death, he may well have slurred or stammered these words, making it hard to hear exactly what he said (a quote from Psalm 22:1).⁹²² Upon hearing these words (and perhaps the way they were said) one bystander concludes he needs a pain killer or thirst quencher to help him out. But the others want to leave him alone and see whether Elijah shows up. But he utters a loud cry and gives up the spirit.

At that moment there was a second witness from nature: an earthquake shaking Jerusalem. The inner curtain of the Temple tore in two from top to bottom and rocks split and tombs opened up. Matthew alone tells us many of those bodies from the tombs were "raised to life." Many appeared to others in Jerusalem. This appears to be a surrounding "first fruits" of Jesus coming resurrection. Nothing more is told of them so it may be the case that they were subsequently lifted into heaven. Already, God is making all things new through the work of Jesus on the cross. This is signaled by the cosmic signs (darkness, earthquake), the religious (rending of the curtain in the Temple) and eschatological (resurrection of bodies).

The splitting of the curtain is an accompanying eschatological sign as well. Just what it means has been given various answers. Some consider it a sign that Gentiles and non-priestly people will have direct access to God. This builds on the fact that the first accurate description of Jesus' identity after his death is from Gentiles. In this reading it is the outer curtain separating the Court of Israel from the Court of Gentiles.⁹²³ Others see it as another sign of the judgment

⁹²²"Arguably, this remarkable psalm could simply reflect the hyperbolic language of David in dire straits. However, it contains an astonishing number of close parallels to the events of Jesus' crucifixion: a cry of abandonment (22:1–2), despising and mocking (22:6–7), the taunt that the Lord should deliver the one who trusts in him (22:8), a near-death experience described as being poured out like water with all his bones out of joint, his heart melted like wax, and his strength dissipated (22:14–15). Furthermore, he is surrounded by wicked onlookers (22:16a) who pierce his hands and feet (22:16b) and divide his garments by lot (22:18)." Blomberg, Craig L. (2007). "Matthew" in Beale, G. K., & Carson, D. A. (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic) p. 99.

⁹²³See Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 421; Carter, *Matthew*, p. 536.

that is coming upon a corrupted Temple system.⁹²⁴ In this interpretation the curtain split was the inner separating the holy of holies from the rest of the inner sanctuary. The splitting of this separating curtain is a sign of the Spirit leaving the Temple. Others see it as a vindication of Jesus' claim that a greater than the Temple is here (Matt. 12:6).⁹²⁵

(16) The burial and guarding of Jesus' body (27:57-66)

We now are introduced to an extraordinary rich and powerful man: Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who had become a disciple (similar to Nicodemus, John 3:1-15). His status gave him entrance to Pilate. His request to claim the corpse of Jesus was quickly granted.⁹²⁶

Joseph wrapped the body in clean linen and placed it in a newly hewn tomb meant for his own burial. He would have been laid on a shelf or ledge inside. Later, when the flesh had decayed (1-3 years later), mourners would come back to collect the bones and fold them into a bone-box, an ossuary. A large stone was rolled over the entrance.⁹²⁷ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (not the mother of Jesus) had gone with the body and were sitting opposite the Tomb when this

⁹²⁴“Painter makes the interesting point that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the heavens are rent and the Spirit comes down upon Jesus. Here there is just about the opposite, for Jesus cries out that he is God-forsaken, and the temple veil is rent with the Spirit of God leaving the premises and thereby dooming it. *t. Levi 10:3* supports the suggestion that we should see this as an apocalyptic judgment sign against the temple authorities. Also favoring this interpretation is the fact that the same verb *eschisthēsan*, ‘to split open,’ is used to describe the rocks being split open as to describe what happened to the temple veil. Earthquakes are an important apocalyptic sign in this Gospel (cf. 24:7; 28:2), and so is the splitting open of the curtain.” Witherington, *Matthew*, p. 521.

⁹²⁵ Unlike the resuscitation of Lazarus (John 11:11-45), this appears to be a resurrection. But it is not clear. The Greek seems best to read the event as happening later since these “saints” do not enter the city until “after his resurrection” (μ ἂ ἦν ἔγ ρ ιν ὃ οὔ). We are not told who they were other than holy ones. Many have seen this as indication they were spiritual heroes from the Old Testament days: e.g. Gundry, *Matthew* (p. 576): “Since Ezekiel and Daniel do not restrict the resurrection to a few select saints, Matthew probably describes the resurrection of all the OT saints.” But it may equally be argued they were recent saints, known to those to whom they appeared. Witherington, *Matthew*, sees this as a resuscitation like Lazarus: “If we are to see this as a historical event, we must conclude that these people went on to die again, and so though they were raised, they did not receive an immortal resurrection body as Jesus did.” (p. 522). What is clear is the association of Jesus' death with triumph over death. Matthew does little to give us answers to many questions that vex us. The theological point is clear. It need not lead us to over speculate, as if we could at this distance, determine its un-historicity (as a number do, taking it to be historical fiction/legend while theologically “true,” including, e.g., Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, pp. 850-52).

⁹²⁶ Normally bodies of the crucified were left on the cross to disintegrate or thrown on the ground for carrion to eat. “But Jewish piety objected to any body being left unburied (Deut 21:22–23), and so there was provision there for the burial of those executed (Josephus, War 4.317) in a common burial plot rather than in a family tomb. To provide proper burial for someone otherwise unprovided for was a valued act of charity (Tob 1:16–18); cf. the provision for the burial of ‘strangers’ in 27:7. But the provision of a new, rock-cut tomb for Jesus was quite exceptional, and indicates that Joseph was motivated by more than conventional piety. It is, like the act of the woman who anointed Jesus in 26:6–13, a quite extravagant act of devotion.” France, *Matthew* (p. 1088).

⁹²⁷ These are large, up to slightly more than 6 feet in diameter. The weight of the stone was meant to be a deterrent to any who might want to get in to rob the tomb. They also prevented dogs and other carrion from entering and eating the body.

was done but likely did not stay since the Sabbath would start soon and they could return later.

What is shocking to anyone in that day and context is no family members of Jesus honored him as was the custom. Traditional images of Mary taking her son down from the cross or holding him across her lap have no basis in Scripture. One of the main family responsibilities was to give a close member an honorable burial. Why are they absent at this point? Is it that Jesus' death was such a shameful event for them? If they earlier thought Jesus to be "mad," perhaps this is still in their minds. Or do they fear some retribution might fall on them from the Temple elite if they identify themselves as his kin? Or were these Galileans simply without the necessary resources given what, for them, would have been a most unexpected death? Or did they see that the disciple Joseph took care of the initial preparations and what would happen after that would depend?

All the details seem to be preparation for the main event: resurrection. If Jesus was not dead, then resurrection is not what happened. But here we have a variety of actors dealing with the body of Jesus, witnessing what happened to his body. Since it was a new tomb, there were no other bodies in it. In addition, the note about the guarding of the Tomb also insured that no one could remove the body and then pretend Jesus was alive somewhere else.⁹²⁸ The seal would be a rope securing the stone to the rock face with a wax seal. Remaining intact would assure nothing had disturbed the tomb or body.

None of this proves the resurrection or removes all reasonable doubt. The Temple elite consider Jesus as a deceiver, a charlatan, misleading the crowds. His first deception was to claim messianic status. But they also remember his other claim: to rise from the dead.⁹²⁹ It motivates their final actions. They have been hell bent on finishing what they started so this whole Jesus-movement would stay buried with him in a tomb.

Matthew recites all this to ensure that any questions about what happened would have to confront the possibility of resurrection. It could not be a spiriting away of the body by zealous disciples or a false death, only the swooning of pain counteracted by the coolness of the Tomb.

⁹²⁸One detail is not fully clear. The Greek is: "Ἐχετε κουστωδία· ὑπάγετε ἀσφαλίσασθε ὡς οἴδατε (Matt. 27:65). If Ἐχετε is taken as indicative, it is translated as: "You have a guard [already] of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." (NRS) In this case it suggests the guards are Temple guards under the Temple authorities. (See Carson, *Matthew*, p. 655; Talbert, *Matthew*, p. 311; France, *Matthew*, pp. 1094-95 deals with most of the objections to this view). If Ἐχετε is taken as imperative, then it is translated as: "Take a guard. Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." (TNIV) This suggest the guards are Roman and provided by Pilate. (See Davies, *Matthew Vol. 3*, p. 655; Osborne, *Matthew*, p. 1061; Carter, *Matthew*, p.540; Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 425). One might expect, since this was the Sabbath, that the Chief Priests and Pharisees might not want to send their Jewish Temple guard to do this work and requested and got Roman soldiers. In addition, the word for guard, κουστωδία, is a Latin loanword and the term for these soldiers is the normal one for Romans: στρατιῶται (Matt. 28:11-12, 14). Yet when things go awry, the soldiers report to the Temple leadership, not to Pilate, suggesting Jewish guards. The most we can say is that the argument for either conclusion is closely balanced.

⁹²⁹The only mention in the Sanhedrin hearing was about destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days. This information about resurrection after three days may have come from Judas in his briefing of the Temple leaders about Jesus. Or alternatively, some Pharisees may have remembered Jesus words of response to their demand for a sign: that only the sign of Jonah would be given – the Son of Man would be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Matt. 12:38). Somehow, they had heard this claim and wanted to bury it.

If the body was gone – how, why, where? Matthew gives answers to such questions.

B. Resurrection and Commission (28:1-20)

(1) The Women and Guards at the Tomb with an Angel (28:1-10)

None of the Gospel accounts recounts the resurrection directly. Matthew indicates an aftershock hit when the Angel descended. The angel rolled the large stone open and sat on it. It terrified the guards so bright was its appearance. The women, who were last at the cross are now first at the tomb. They had come at the dawn of the first day to see the place where Jesus was laid and to provide more perfumes and final touches to Jesus' burial.⁹³⁰ The angel's appearance would have been terrifying to them as well but the angel simply calms them: "Do not be afraid...Come and see the place where he used to lay."

The message is simple: "he was raised" (passive: ἡγέρθη). How it happened is not explained. It is simply announced. This is just as he said would take place. They can see the place where he lay. Then they are commissioned to tell this to the Apostles and disciples. The opening of the tomb was not to let Jesus out, but to let witnesses in to see the body was gone. Matthew focuses also on the order to return to Galilee where he will meet them. Before the women leave, they encounter Jesus and worship him, confirming the angel's message. Jesus also repeats: "Do not be afraid."

❖ Discipleship: The Significance of Women

One of the notes of authenticity of the resurrection accounts is that women are its first witnesses. We moderns may not feel the weight of that but in an age when women were generally regarded as unreliable witnesses, this honor given to them is significant. In that day, if one were constructing a fictional narrative out of thin air, using women as primary and initial witnesses to this event would be a bad choice. It is another mark of the authenticity of the account.

In this case there is an implicit comparison with the male disciples, none of whom are present initially. We need to note as well that, in such politically fraught situations, women could often go about without being challenged. Women were given significant responsibilities for caring for the corpses of both women and men alike. Consequently, there would be no surprise when women show up at the tomb to carry out some of the normal tasks people expected would happen. We cannot read too much into this event.

At the same time, in Matthew, women frame the larger life of Jesus, present in his genealogy and birth and as primary witnesses to his death and resurrection. Many have noted the relative status given to women in the New Testament, showing a freedom in the community of the King from cultural biases. Too often contemporary biases about women have been read back into the texts of the Bible, downplaying or even ignoring those texts that are "exceptional." The clear trajectory of the Bible is found in the slow but steady subverting of socio-cultural restrictions that have little to do with the "violations" of cultural norms about women found in the first century.

⁹³⁰Note that the command to "look" (ἰδοὺ) is repeated six times in Matthew 28. What is unseen is the actual resurrection. The emphasis is on eyewitness experience. People will testify to what they have seen. What is given is not enough to remove the doubts of skeptics. Yet we live by faith, not *blind* faith. The so-called "leap of faith" is a walk across a bridge whose slats are the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' contemporaries.

(2) The Temple Leadership concoct an explanation (28:11-15)

This account of the bribing of the soldiers who reported back to the chief priests signals the conflict over the interpretation of what happened at the tomb of Jesus began early. The soldiers seem to have recovered their senses after the women left and return into the city. They are the second group of witnesses to the resurrection (though like the others, they probably only saw the earthquake, the rolled back stone and broken seal, the Angel and the empty tomb).

Why they reported to the Chief Priests is not clear. If they are Roman soldiers this would not seem natural, but perhaps they do so because they were delegated this duty under the Temple leadership's supervision. They are told to say what they were sent to guard against unfortunately happened. While they were asleep, the disciples stole his body. If the tale gets back to Pilate that they slept on duty, the Chief Priests will keep them out of trouble.

On the other hand, if they were Temple guard, they would not need to report back to Pilate. The story would circulate largely among the Jewish population. But if it came to Pilate's attention, the Chief Priests would deal with him (perhaps with another large sum).

This stolen corpse theory brings to a climax the portrait Matthew paints of the Temple leadership, in this case the Chief Priests and elders. Soldiers come with a testimony to the resurrection, and the Chief Priests bribe them with a large amount of money to say otherwise. To the very end of this biography, the religious elite are characterized as corrupt and venal. The soldiers, having sought to prevent the resurrection, now are made the principals in seeking to make it unbelievable.⁹³¹

Their story is hardly credible. If they were soundly asleep, how did they know who came, opened the grave and stole the body? Why would they not have heard the sound of the huge stone being rolled from the entrance?

❖ Discipleship: The Resurrection and Faith

Through history there have been a variety of ways of interpreting the Gospel accounts of the resurrection and a number of theories of what happened that explain it away. This account of the Temple leadership bribing the guards is only the first in a long line.

1. Discrepancies in the Gospel accounts. The accounts of the empty tomb vary in length and are a mixture of agreement and independence. Some take that to indicate, whatever historical kernel there may be, many of the details are fictitious.⁹³² Others see the discrepancies as

⁹³¹This notion is still circulated in different forms. Most famously by Hugh J. Schonfield in *The Passover Plot*, Special 40th Edition (Disinformation Books, 2004). Schonfield seeks to present historical evidence suggesting that Jesus was no more than mortal, a young genius who believed himself to be the Messiah and brilliantly planned his entire ministry to correspond with Old Testament prophecies. Jesus planned to be crucified and had himself drugged with fortified wine. The plan was to be rescued from the tomb in drugged state by Joseph of Arimathea and revived. Then he was to make appearances to the disciples as if resurrected but the spear thrust of the Roman soldier foiled all this. When the disciples moved to body to revive it, they failed and buried him elsewhere. There is no evidence for this account.

⁹³²Hare, *Matthew*: "It must be conceded from the outset that, conceived as a matter to be submitted to a jury, the case is seriously flawed. The discrepancies in the story as submitted by the four Evangelists are substantial. ...Variations in other stories about Jesus demonstrate that early Christians were not terribly concerned about accuracy of detail." p. 328.

indication of genuine eyewitness and credible testimony that can be reconciled. The differences are differences of reporting the same event.

- (a) When did it happen?⁹³³
- (b) Who was there and arrived first?
- (c) How many angels were present?

2. Faith and history. Christian faith is irredeemably historical. It is grounded in space-time events such as the Exodus, the establishment of the nation of Israel, the exile of Israel and Judea, the birth, life and ministry, death and resurrection of the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, the birth and growth of the Church in the Roman Empire. If these things are simply sacred fiction or unhistorical myths and legends, then the Christian claims to truth fall to the ground. At the minimum, if they are not real events in space-time, then the notion that God interacts with us individually or as communities in history, in space-time, has no grounding. It all becomes a “just so” story without any strong rationale for why we should prefer it to other “just so” fairy tales. Why is this “just so” story the truth, the “true” myth, theologically astute but historical fiction?

This does not mean that everyone is going to find the case for the historical reliability of the witnesses to these events compelling. Some believe the only real “knowledge” is that which can be demonstrated by strictly “scientific” methods, that is, the methods used by the “hard” sciences (controlled experiments; empirically confirmed, multiply attested hypotheses that are confirmed by tangible evidence). All else is “opinion.” Some believe the “historical methods” applied to the ancient texts of Judaism and Christianity, lead to the conclusion that they are legendary accumulations of oral traditions that tell us little about historical events (even though there may be a historical event around which the barnacles of myth, exaggeration, bias have gathered).

In the face of such skepticism, those who do credit these accounts as historically reliable are not simply making a “leap” of faith. Nor does working with the evidence that can be fairly gleaned from these ancient documents exclude faith. Historical argument is not an enemy of faith (indeed, all forms of critical reasoning take certain principles for granted, that is, on faith). Historical inquiry may not be able to usher us into the empty tomb and provide irrefutable and tangible evidence for the resurrection, but it can help us sort the legendary and fictive from the historical and actual. Most denial of the resurrection of Jesus is grounded in philosophical, worldview objections, not well-established historical argumentation dealing fairly with all the evidence we do have. Nor is this the place to make that argument. Such arguments can be found

⁹³³Gundry, *Matthew* takes the time to be Saturday evening: “Therefore whether ὀψέ is an adverb or a preposition, Matthew is pointing to Saturday evening, as Mark 16:1 seems to do, not to Sunday morning. In the next phrase, then, ἐπιφωσκούση refers to the onset of evening (as it undoubtedly does in Luke 23:54) rather than to the dawn (as it usually does).” p. 585. Most commentators and translators agree with Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 3* “Probably the English translations are correct: ὀψέ is an improper preposition meaning ‘after’ (a rare meaning otherwise unattested in the NT). The women, having observed the Sabbath and waited until the following dawn, set forth to visit the tomb on the first day of the week. Mark and Luke and John (but not the Gospel of Peter) all place the visit at Sunday dawn; so, we incline to think this circumstance was a firm part of the Jesus tradition.” pp. 663-64.

in a number of works.⁹³⁴

3. The resurrection and life in Christ. This event is made foundational in the Epistles of the New Testament. If it did not happen, if it does not have continuing effects, then the Christian disciple is not only hopeless but helpless. It is the power of the resurrection that brings new life to all who are “dead in their sins.” It is the power of the resurrection that enables us to hear and obey “all things Jesus has commanded.”

(3) The Appearance in Galilee and Great Commission (28:16-20)

This short paragraph is the culmination of Matthew’s Gospel, the point toward which all else builds. Having instructed and modeled the life of the disciple who will live out the life of the Kingdom of heaven, Jesus sends them out to make disciples. They have more than enough for that task. This gospel of the Kingdom is not meant for the selected few but for people from all nations and tongues.

Those who are authentic disciples, who build their lives and relationships on the firm foundation of Jesus’ words, are commissioned to repeat what Jesus has done with them with an expanded horizon: make disciples from all the nations of the earth. No longer are they limited to the children of Israel. No longer are they to live within the boundaries of a single people’s customs and culture. The Kingdom of heaven reaches out to all.

What may have been hidden and poorly understood is now clear: all the things Jesus said and taught about his death and resurrection happened. Still some doubted. Yet this set of events is the seal and testament that the rest of the things he said about living in the light of the already present and coming Kingdom are authentic and realistic.

Each of the five major discourses provides additional guidance and direction for living well in a world that is disordered, among people who are ill-behaved, for a purpose and destiny that God will bring about. Things will never be the same. Whatever plans and hopes the disciples had at one time, they are now given a greater plan and destiny: make disciples of all the nations. Such disciples are to be taught to live by all that Jesus commanded.

This is not a task they are sent out on their own to do. No matter how long, how far, how difficult carrying out the task may be, Jesus will be right there, alongside them. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given into His hands. His presence is the presence of the Kingdom of heaven, here, now, through all the days until the end of this age. It surrounds us all and will

⁹³⁴For example: Wright, N. T. (2003) *Christian Origins and the Question of God: Vol 3 the Resurrection of the Son of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press); Licona, Michael R. (2010) *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press); Blomberg, Craig L. (2007). *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press); Blomberg, Craig L. (2001) *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press); Bauckham, Richard. (2006). *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Keener, Craig S. (2009) *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Keener, Craig S., and Edward T. Wright. (2016). *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biography?* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press); Keener, Craig S. (2019). *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Evans, C. Stephen (1996). *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Evans, Craig A. (2006) *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospel*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press); Witherington, Ben III. (1995). *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press).

support his disciples who are making disciples. If they build their lives on the firm foundation of what he has taught them, they will endure and flourish, even in the midst of persecution or martyrdom.

The text assumes that the disciples will go. The imperative of making disciples is keyed to that going. It will involve “baptizing” them in the triune name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and “instructing” them to observe what Jesus had commanded his disciples (that is, what we find centrally in the five discourses).

Several critical questions surround this conclusion to Matthew’s gospel:

1. Setting on a mountain: is this another indication that a greater than Moses is here?⁹³⁵ Throughout Matthew there are echoes and allusions that portray Jesus as a new Moses. The structure of the book with its five major discourses echoes the Pentateuch. The mountain scenes are equally suggestive as is this final scene on the “mount of commission” sending the disciple into all the world. This culminates the parallels:

“Just as Moses, at the close of his life, commissioned Joshua both to go into the land peopled by foreign nations and to observe all the commandments in the law, and then further promised his successor God’s abiding presence, so similarly Jesus: at the end of his earthly ministry he told his disciples to go into all the world and to teach the observance of all the commandments of the new Moses, and then further promised his assisting presence.”⁹³⁶

2. How to translate and understand “all nations.” Is this better translated “gentiles” or does it have the Jewish diaspora in view as well? The question cannot be simply answered lexically since the Greek word is used to signal both “nations” and “gentiles.” It is clear from the early history of the church in Acts and the Epistles that the Jesus movement encompassed Jew and Gentile and saw its mission as uniting the two in one new body that worshipped Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, as Lord and God. So, to some extent, either translation works.

In Matthew 10 the disciples were sent out to the children of Israel. Here that scope is expanded to the Gentiles as well. What they were initiating in Matthew 10 they now extend more fully geographically and temporally. The addition of baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is new. This ritual of initiation into the community of the King is for all peoples of all cultures and religions. It does not rescind the earlier commissioning. The mission of the church will be to Jew and Gentile alike.

3. Discipleship: what is the force of the main imperative (“make disciples”)? Given all that precedes this in Matthew, it is a holistic task. The “greater righteousness” of the Sermon on the Mount cannot be portioned into the “spiritual” vs. the “material” or the “personal” vs. the “social” as though the kingdom of heaven encompasses only the individual soul and the life after death. The whole of a disciple’s life is encompassed in the rule of Christ over heaven *and* earth. The false dichotomy between the good news and good deeds, evangelism and social action, personal salvation and societal transformation is transcended.

This is the heart of Matthew’s Gospel. “Disciple” is the sort of person Matthew writes for. As

⁹³⁵ Such parallels begin with the birth narrative: Talbert, *Matthew* (pp. 37-38) but are found throughout Matthew: e.g., Allison, Dale C. (1993) *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*. Minneapolis: Fortress; Davies, *Matthew Vol. 1* (pp. 190-195, 423-424).

⁹³⁶ Davies, *Matthew, Vol. 3* (p. 680).

compared with the other Gospels, “disciple” occurs 73 times (vs. 46 in Mark; 37 in Luke). The related verb “to make disciples” occurs only four times in the New Testament, three of them in Matthew and not in the other Gospels. The essential task means initiating people into a new community of faith that is well instructed in the way of life of the King.

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