

# **The Great Sermon**

by

Daniel J. Lewis

© Copyright 2000 by Diakonos, Inc.  
Troy, Michigan  
United States of America

## Preface

Mark Twain, while certainly not an evangelical Christian, offered one of the most potent observations about the teachings of Jesus. He said that it was not the things he did not understand about the teachings of Jesus that bothered him—it was those things he understood all too well! Many a Christian has held that same sentiment in his or her heart.

Of the many things Jesus taught, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel is the most complete and well-known collection. It is wide-ranging in its subject matter, covering the inner character of the children of God, the law of Moses, the essential character of religion and the choice every human must make when confronted with the truth.

A generation and more ago, it was popular for interpreters to isolate the Sermon on the Mount from the rest of Jesus' life. The Protestant liberal "lives of Jesus" school attempted to reconstruct Jesus into an ethical teacher who was divorced from his miraculous public ministry and his sacrificial death. In the end, as Albert Schweitzer so trenchantly observed, they all reconstructed Jesus into their own images. When they were done, Jesus looked just like they did. This penchant for remaking Jesus into one's own image—and especially, any interpretation of the Great Sermon that bypasses the first-century Jewish context and moves too quickly into contemporary application—is bound to distort the truth. Hopefully, this pitfall has been avoided in the present study. In making the most of Jewish historical studies as well as scholarship in both culture and linguistics, it is hoped that the present study, which attempts the bridge from first century Judaism into our contemporary situation, has not lost touch with Jesus in his own times. To this end I pray!

Preface.....	2
The Great Sermon .....	5
Is the Sermon Authentic?.....	5
How Was the Sermon Composed? .....	7
What Does the Teaching Mean?.....	8
The Beatitudes.....	10
The Poor in Spirit (5:3).....	12
The Mourners (5:4).....	12
The Meek (5:5).....	13
The Hungry and Thirsty (5:6).....	13
The Merciful (5:7).....	13
The Pure in Heart (5:8).....	14
The Peacemakers (5:9).....	15
The Persecuted (5:10-12).....	16
Salt and Light (5:13-16).....	17
Jesus and the Torah.....	18
Jesus' Continuity with the Torah (5:17-20).....	19
The Six Antitheses .....	20
The Commandment on Murder (5:21-26) .....	20
The Commandment on Adultery (5:27-30) .....	22
The Commandment on Divorce (5:31-32) .....	23
The Commandment on Oath-taking (5:33-37) .....	25
The Commandment on Retaliation (5:38-42).....	26
The Commandment on Love (5:43-48) .....	27
The Practice of Religion .....	29
Acts of Piety.....	30
Almsgiving (6:1-4).....	30
Prayer (6:5-8).....	32
The Great Prayer (6:9-15).....	33
The Lord's Prayer (My Translation).....	33
Matthew 6:9-13 .....	33
Luke 11:2-4.....	33
Fasting (6:16-18).....	36

Materialism .....	37
Faith or Material Security (6:19-24) .....	38
Faith or Anxiety (6:25-34) .....	39
Attitudes .....	41
Judgmentalism and Discretion (7:1-6) .....	41
Seeking God (7:7-11) .....	43
The Golden Rule (7:12) .....	45
The Two Ways .....	45
The Parable of the Narrow Gate and the Broad Road (7:13-14) .....	46
Two Trees and Their Fruit (7:15-23) .....	47
The Parable of the Two Houses (7:24-27) .....	49
Epilogue (7:28-29) .....	50

## **The Great Sermon**

Popularly known as “the sermon on the mount,” Jesus’ teaching on life in the kingdom of God has remained among the most well-known of his discourses by both Christians and non-Christians. It has been praised by Gandhi, repudiated by Nietzsche, agonized over by Tolstoy and regarded as a manifesto by Christians. Still, even among Christians there is not full agreement about how the teaching should be regarded. There is the critical question, “Is the sermon authentic?”, there is the literary question, “How was the sermon composed?”, and there are the hermeneutical and theological questions, “What does the teaching mean?” and “What role does the sermon play in the life of the church?”

### **Is the Sermon Authentic?**

The composition of the gospels repeatedly has been examined over the past couple centuries by literary critics. It has long been recognized that there are two versions of the sermon, one in Matthew (chapters 5-7) and one in Luke (6:17-49). The similarities are striking. Both begin with beatitudes or blessings, both urge that one must love one’s enemies, both condemn judgmentalism toward others, and both close with parables about the tree and its fruit and the wise and foolish builders. A closer look, however, reveals several differences between the two accounts. The settings are not the same (Matthew’s version is on a mountain, Luke’s is on a plain). Matthew’s version contains several lengthy sections not found in Luke (the sections on the Torah, advice on treasures in heaven, the appeal to ask, seek and knock). Luke has at least one major section not found in Matthew (the woes). Some sections in Matthew’s account are found elsewhere in Luke though not in this sermon (the Lord’s prayer, the teaching on divorce, the warning against worrying). Finally, some of the actual sayings that appear in both Matthew and Luke, while similar in subject matter, seem to diverge in essential meaning. Luke, for instance, reads, “Blessed are you poor” (second person), while Matthew reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (third person with the additional qualification “in spirit”).

Modern skeptics have raised doubts about whether or not the gospels contain the actual teachings of Jesus at all. Some suggest that while there may be a core of authentic teaching, the words of Jesus have been smithed by the early church in order to answer current needs, sometimes many decades after Jesus. More radical skeptics suggest that many of the sayings were never said by Jesus at all, but invented by the

early church.<sup>1</sup> The approach of a group like the so-called ‘Jesus Seminar’ has rated the sayings of Jesus in black, gray, pink and red, the latter being what they believe to be authentic to Jesus (and when they finished, not much of the gospels remain in red)!<sup>2</sup>

Against this trend, conservative Christians have never doubted the authenticity of the records about Jesus; the question was settled for them long ago in the canonization of the gospels. Still, due to the prevailing questions from the academy, they have been compelled to address these issues. Several conclusions of modern scholars are, in fact, acceptable to evangelicals. Yes, the gospels are in Greek even though Jesus probably spoke Aramaic (there is a case to be made that he may have known Greek as well, however). Also, the translation of his Aramaic sayings to Greek by the evangelists does not detract from their authenticity. Yes, it is at least possible that there is some literary dependency between Matthew, Mark and Luke (and the possibility of a so-called “Q” source cannot be discounted), but this “borrowing” does not endanger the authenticity of Jesus’ sayings. Yes, oral tradition played a significant role in early cultures, including the Jewish and early Christian culture, but there are significant reasons for believing that this was not a free-floating tradition. In the case of the gospels, this oral tradition was always subject to corroboration by eyewitnesses who had been there when Jesus spoke or acted. The gospels material was committed to writing not more than a generation after the events actually occurred, so the modern trend toward historical revisionism and reductionism says more about contemporary biases than it does about what Jesus actually said or did.<sup>3</sup> Yes, the sermons of Jesus, especially in Matthew, may be composites of sayings that he gave at various times or in longer forms, and the evangelists may have brought material together, abbreviated some material, and rearranged it according to their theological emphases.<sup>4</sup> Still, such editorial work, even if true, does not subtract from the gospels’ authenticity.

To be sure, there are legitimate issues to be addressed, such as, where did Jesus actually give such a sermon? Was it on a mountain (Mt. 5:1), in a plain (Lk. 6:17), on a plateau somewhat below the peak of a mountain (one attempt to harmonize the two passages), or on two different occasions (with the assumption that Jesus likely gave sermons with similar themes more than once). Beyond such

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, a current textbook says, “Did early Christians, besides altering and reapplying stories about and sayings of Jesus, also simply make up material and attribute it to him? The answer is ‘Yes’...”, E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Funk and R. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> This is the burden of N. T. Wright’s recent work, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> This approach is at least as old as John Calvin, cf. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 142-146.

technical questions, however, evangelical Christians remain confident that the gospels faithfully record the voice of Jesus. The gospels are true to history and true to him.

## How Was the Sermon Composed?

Though one angle of this question has already been raised in the preceding discussion, it merits further attention. In the first place, it has long been recognized that Matthew's Gospel comes to us with five discourses that punctuate the narrative.<sup>5</sup> Each discourse concludes with a standard formula, "And it happened when Jesus had finished..." The sermon on the mount is the first of the five.

### The Five Discourses in Matthew

- ♦ Matthew 5-7 (The "Sermon on the Mount")
- ♦ Matthew 10 (The Missionary Instructions to the Twelve)
- ♦ Matthew 13 (The Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven)
- ♦ Matthew 18 (The Teaching on Offense, Discipline and Forgiveness)
- ♦ Matthew 23-25 (The Fall of the Temple and the End of the Age)

Each of the five discourses features Jesus' teachings. They serve to suspend the action while offering lengthy monologues by Christ. In fact, the sermon on the mount is inserted after Jesus' public ministry had hardly begun. Each discourse follows a major theme, and each is presented as though it were given on a particular occasion. Were these actual "sermons" that Jesus delivered, each on a single occasion, or are they collections of Jesus' teachings brought together because of their similarity in content? Traditionally, most Christians have assumed the former, but more recently, most biblical scholars have assumed the latter. Strengthening the composite view is the fact that much of the material in the various single Matthean discourses is broken up into different settings in both Mark and Luke. To be sure, even if Matthew has brought together materials from different occasions into one setting, there is no reason to doubt that the core of the discourses may have been given on a single occasion before being supplemented with other similar material from Jesus' teachings on other occasions.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is not at all unlikely that Jesus taught the same themes on several occasions. Actually, it would be unusual if he had not done so, since his audiences changed regularly, given his travel itinerary in Galilee and Judea.

---

<sup>5</sup> A common interpretation is that Matthew deliberately tries to imitate the five books of Moses by this structure, thus portraying Jesus as the "New Moses," though such a literary theory may be overstated, cf. W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> R. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 156-165.

## What Does the Teaching Mean?

There is a difference between asking what some particular saying in the Sermon on the Mount may mean and what is the aim of the sermon as a whole. This latter question is directly related to the broader intent of Matthew's Gospel. It is generally accepted that Matthew's Gospel has significant Jewish features unique to it. For instance, it is especially concerned with the teaching of the Pharisees, one of the primary Jewish sects. Without explanation it includes Aramaic words and phrases, which presumes a Jewish readership. It traces the ancestry of Jesus directly to Abraham (unlike Luke, who traces Jesus' roots back to Adam). It refers to details of Jewish customs about meals, phylacteries, burial and sabbath which would be most understandable to a Jewish audience. R. T. France probably speaks for most scholars when he says, "It is not just a matter of a few incidental details, but of the whole tone of the gospel, which seems calculated to present Jesus in terms which a Jew would understand, however radical and objectionable he might have found some aspects of its teaching."<sup>7</sup> This Jewish-Christian character of the gospel is no more than comes down to us in the tradition of the ante-Nicene church.<sup>8</sup>

So, if the first gospel is so Jewish in character, how does this factor impact our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount? Several answers have been offered. One of the most extreme views was developed by dispensational theologians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They proposed that in Matthew Jesus offered the millennial kingdom to the Jews on the condition that they would accept his messiahship (e.g., Mt. 10:5-7; 15:24). Since the Jews as a whole rejected Jesus, the offer of the kingdom was withdrawn and postponed until after the church age, and the gentile church was the direct result of the Jewish rejection of this kingdom offer. In this scheme, the Sermon on the Mount is read as the requirements for entrance into the theocratic kingdom of God, which was then being offered to the Jews.<sup>9</sup> It has only academic relevance to the church, since it was not addressed to the church nor was it for the church. Few if any Christians outside the ranks of dispensationalism will concur with such a reading, however.

Some classical liberal scholars, like Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, have read the sermon as an interim ethic for an extreme circumstance. They suggest that Jesus was a visionary who anticipated the cataclysmic, imminent end of history. The unpractical idealism of the sermon, in their view, was not an ethic for every day,

---

<sup>7</sup> France, p.97.

<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest references is from Papias (about AD 140) that Matthew may have been composed first in Hebrew (or Aramaic), cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39.16. Irenaeus (d. AD 200) wrote that Matthew produced a gospel "among the Hebrews", cf. *Against Heresies*, III.1.1, while Origen (d. AD 254) wrote that Matthew was written for those who were Christian converts from Judaism, cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.25.4.

<sup>9</sup> J. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 446-466.



but rather, an extreme ethic for a moment of crisis, not unlike the imposition of martial law. It was never intended to be used by later generations.<sup>10</sup> Jesus, as it turns out, was badly mistaken in his apocalyptic expectation, and he died trying to force the wheel of history.<sup>11</sup> So, like extreme dispensationalism, the thoroughgoing eschatology of Schweitzer empties the sermon of contemporary authority other than that of a noble ideal.

Against both these extremes, the more common approach of Christians through the centuries has been that this sermon is directly relevant to contemporary Christian discipleship. Yet there is still considerable variance about how this may be so. Some see it as a collection of self-evident truisms, more or less common to all religious morality, and reasonably easy to follow. Others see it as an unattainable ideal that calls believers to a higher morality, one they admittedly will not be able to reach but should ever strive toward. Still others, like Leo Tolstoy, are caught up in the tension between what the sermon demands and the reality of their own mediocre lifestyles.<sup>12</sup> Medieval theologians often stressed the discontinuity between the sermon and the law of Moses, suggesting that Jesus was offering a new and higher law. The Reformers generally emphasized continuity between the sermon and Moses, stressing that Jesus was expounding the law of Moses as it ought to have been understood, not offering new legislation. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, urged that Jesus was actually abrogating the Mosaic legislation and replacing it with a new law. They opted for the most rigorous legalism and literalism in applying the sermon to Christian discipleship, forbidding all violence, all oath-taking, and never holding civil office as a magistrate or ruler.

Several important questions remain concerning the meaning of this sermon. While the approach in this study will be that the sermon certainly addresses the life of discipleship, that it is for contemporary Christians as well as ancient ones, that the Jewishness of the sermon (and of Matthew's Gospel as a whole) must be seen in a Jewish-Christian context so that the sermon is relevant whether or not one is Jewish, still there are issues and questions to keep in mind as one addresses the sermon. These questions will be addressed throughout the exegesis and commentary on the sermon.

---

<sup>10</sup> G. Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 739.

<sup>11</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 370-371.

<sup>12</sup> In his last great novel, *Resurrection*, Tolstoy puts his convictions on the lips of the prince that these were the new conditions of life that must be embraced, and at a personal level Tolstoy made a valiant effort to do so. He gave away his money, dressed as a peasant, repaired his own shoes, and worked in the fields. Of course, as Philip Yancey pointed out in *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Tolstoy's failure was most eloquently documented by his wife, who said, "...he never gave his wife a rest and never—in all these thirty-two years—gave his child a drink of water or spent five minutes by his bedside to give me a chance to rest a little from all my labors."

### Ongoing Interpretive Questions :

- ♦ Does Jesus simply clarify the Mosaic law or does he present new teaching for a new people?
- ♦ How does the sermon relate to Paul's gospel of grace, that is, does the sermon urge requirements in order for one to be saved or the call to discipleship after one has been saved?
- ♦ Are all parts of the sermon to be interpreted literally, or does Jesus use hyperbole as figures of speech?

### THE MESSIANIC PEOPLE

*I live...with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit... (Isa. 57:15)*

***Blessed are the poor in spirit... (Mt. 5:3)***

*I will guide and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. (Isa. 57:18b-19a)*

***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (Mt. 5:4)***

*This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit... (Isa. 66:2b)*

***Blessed are the meek... (Mt. 5:5)***

*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat... Why spend money on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. (Isa. 55:1-2)*

***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled. (Mt. 5:6)***

*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ...to share food with the hungry, to provide shelter, to clothe the naked... (Isa. 58:6-7)*

***Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (Mt. 5:7)***

## The Beatitudes

The Great Sermon begins with the famous beatitudes, eight blessings for eight spiritual qualities, and a ninth pronounced over those destined for suffering. The Greek expression *makarios* (= blessed), at the beginning of each pronouncement, has been a challenge to translators. It echoes the Septuagint, where it appears repeatedly

in the psalms to describe the person who is under the special favor of God. Some translations render it “happy” (so JB, TEV, Phillips), but such a rendering runs the risk of being too colloquial, and in any case, the issue is not one of emotion *per se*. The New English Bible’s “blest” is less archaic.

The spiritual qualities described in the beatitudes belong to the messianic age as described by the Hebrew prophets. If Jesus was announcing the inauguration of Yahweh’s kingdom, something Matthew insists upon (cf. 4:17, 23-25), what sort of instructions might he have been expected to give? Popular answers in first century Jewish Palestine were quite likely to include taking up arms, marching against the hated Romans, or intensifying the observance of the Torah, all of which were touted by the various groups of zealots, Essenes, Pharisees and others. That Jesus did not follow any of the popular ways is clear from even a cursory reading of the gospels. Instead, he reflected upon the message of the ancient prophets and their description of how the people of God were to be in the messianic age. The Jews of Jesus’ day longed for consolation, justice and mercy, but they longed for these things at the expense of their enemies. Such vengeance simply would not do. If Israel was to experience the kingdom of God, her citizens must embrace the ideals of the kingdom which called for a renewed heart, humility, gentleness and the willingness to accept persecution without recrimination. The beatitudes, then, offer striking parallelisms with the messianic vision of the prophets, and especially in the Book of Isaiah, these parallelisms are unmistakable.<sup>13</sup>

The setting for the sermon is on one of the Galilean hills surrounding the lake. Seeing the crowds, Jesus ascended the slope and sat down to teach. His words, however, were not addressed to the crowds at large, but to his disciples (5:1-2), though the crowds were privileged to listen in (cf. 7:28-29). In this way, Matthew demonstrated that the sermon was not intended as a universal ethic or a collection of timeless principles, but rather, a catechism for disciples—those deeply committed to learning from Jesus the way of life. The form of the sermon is poetical, pictorial and proverbial.<sup>14</sup> The poetic character is to be seen in its use of parallel structures typical of Hebrew poetry, including both synonymous parallelism (e.g., 7:6) and antithetic parallelism (e.g., 7:17), as well as rhythm and symmetry. The word pictures in the sermon (e.g., 5:18; 6:19; 7:3) are vivid and concrete. The proverbial character of the sermon is characterized by the use of hyperbole (e.g., 5:29-30) and an abundance of quotable phrases.

---

<sup>13</sup> Wright, pp. 279-292.

<sup>14</sup> A. Hunter, *A Pattern for Life: An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), pp. 18-23.

### **The Poor in Spirit (5:3)**

The more common use of the word “poor” concerned one’s economic condition, i.e., the “penniless poor.” One may also speak of the “powerless poor,” that is, those who have no effective status in society. Jesus, however, recommended those who were spiritually poor, those who recognize their spiritual emptiness and lack of spiritual resource. Such persons were not simply poor-spirited, but rather, were fully aware that their only hope was to cast themselves completely on God for their salvation. Such poverty was the sort described by the psalmist who cried out, “This poor man called, and Yahweh heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps. 34:6). It is in this sense that the proclaiming of the gospel has been described as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” To be poor in spirit, then, is to acknowledge one’s spiritual bankruptcy before God. It is to stand with bowed head beside the tax collector who prayed, “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13).<sup>15</sup>

To the poor in spirit belongs the kingdom of heaven. Matthew’s custom is to use the phrase “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God” (the latter which is found in the parallel passages of Mark and Luke).<sup>16</sup> This circumlocution is a Semitic idiom where the word “heavens” is a substitute for the divine name (e.g., Lk. 15:18), a practice common in Jewish rabbinic literature.<sup>17</sup> The kingdom of God/heaven is the prophetic hope for a new order, an order in which God would intervene in human history and reign over the earth. For Jesus, this rule of God was already being inaugurated (Mt. 4:17; Lk. 11:20), and those who were to receive it must do so out of a recognition of their own spiritual poverty (cf. Mk. 10:13-16). This quality contrasts sharply with conventional thinking. To be sure, Israel longed for the kingdom of God, worked for it, was even ready to fight for it, as the Jewish revolts in the 60s and 130s demonstrates. Rigorous legalists and cagey freedom fighters, each in their own way, were eager to see the kingdom established, but this was not the proper way.

### **The Mourners (5:4)**

The mourners are those to whom the evil of the times is always a continual grief. Among first century Jews, they were the people who awaited the consolation of Israel (cf. Lk. 2:25), those exhausted by the oppression of the Gentile overlords. Like the ancients who mourned in repentance over the failure of their nation (Psa.

---

<sup>15</sup> In other Jewish literature, the phrase “poor in spirit” seems also to refer to the faithful and persecuted people of God who will be vindicated (1 QM 14:7).

<sup>16</sup> Only Matthew uses the expression “kingdom of heaven” (34 times), though occasionally he, also, uses the parallel phrase “kingdom of God” (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43).

<sup>17</sup> G. Ladd, *ISBE* (1986) III.24.

56:8-9; Jer. 4:18-22; Eze. 9:4; Dan. 9:3ff.), those who grieve over the success of evil will be comforted by the victory of God when he establishes a new order.

### **The Meek (5:5)**

The way of meekness contrasts the way of power. Meekness, at least in modern parlance, often has a pejorative tone with the nuance of spinelessness, subservience or shame. Such a meaning is not at all what is in view here. Rather, the Greek word *praus* (= meekness), which occurs only three times in the New Testament (cf. Mt. 21:5; 1 Pet. 3:4), carries the nuance of gentleness or humility.<sup>18</sup> While the Jews' hope was that they would "inherit the earth" (e.g., Isa. 49:22-23; 54:1-3), Jesus said it would be the unassuming person who would be so blessed. In this beatitude, Jesus reaffirmed an ideal from Psalm 37:1-11, an ideal that left the question of final justice up to God. Trusting in God and refraining from anger and anxiety was the way "to inherit the earth and enjoy great peace" (Psa. 37:11).

### **The Hungry and Thirsty (5:6)**

The principle question is the meaning of the term "righteousness." Two possibilities exist, though they are not mutually exclusive. One is personal righteousness, that is, the intense desire to be clean before God or to be in a right relationship to God. In short, it is to be justified and forgiven. The other is social righteousness, the kind of justice for which the Torah and the prophets called. The prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, called for justice in the courts, liberation from oppression, freedom from exploitation, honesty in business practices and honor in personal and corporate relationships (Amos 2:6-8; 5:7, 10-15; Isa. 1:15-17, 23; 3:13-15; 5:8; Mic. 2:1-2; 3:1-3; 6:7-8; 7:2-3). It may well be that the two should not be divided, for surely the messianic hope was both personal and corporate. The metaphor of hunger and thirst would have been well understood among people who regularly lived near the ragged edge of deprivation. So, to those who desperately longed for peace with God and justice in the world, Jesus said they would be satisfied! The tone is very similar to the magnificat of Mary, whose exaltation of the messianic promise was that God "has filled the hungry with good things" (Lk. 1:53a; Psa. 107:9).

### **The Merciful (5:7)**

Mercy was not a significant part of the Jewish attitude toward Roman occupation. During the first century, several revolutionary movements came and went, the most well-known being those led by Simon bar-Giora (the First Jewish

---

<sup>18</sup> BAG, pp. 698-699.

Revolt in AD 66-70) and Simeon ben-Kosiba (the Second Jewish Revolt in AD 132-135). However a flurry of smaller revolts and incidents for the better part of a century and a half are documented by Flavius Josephus.<sup>19</sup> The New Testament alludes to some of these uprisings as well (cf. Acts 5:36-37). Many of the revolts were put down by the Roman army, and the Jewish perpetrators were regularly executed by crucifixion. The Jewish response to Roman occupation, then, was hardly mercy.

Jesus, however, challenged the Jewish attitude by urging compassion toward those in need. In the Bible mercy is directed toward pain, misery and distress. Mercy also may be understood in the sense of forgiveness of sins, and if the Jewish people were to receive the forgiveness of God, they must be willing to forgive others (cf. 6:14-15; 18:21-35). Mercy, in the ultimate sense, is what every person needs in the eschatological judgment. Later, Matthew will record Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats (Mt. 25:31-46), and mercy is the critical factor, since "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me!"

### **The Pure in Heart (5:8)**

In the Jewish context of Jesus' day, purity was one of the most important means of preparing for the inauguration of God as King. The Pharisees, for instance, hoped to purify Israel by calling the nation back to its true ancestral traditions, including the temple, whose leaders they believed to be dangerously corrupt. Again and again in the gospels, Jesus confronted the Pharisees' rigorous demands of Torah interpretation and observance. The Essenes, another sect, lived a life of strict isolation and purity, and many scholars believe the Essenes were the ones who established the Qumran community. Like the Pharisees, they believed the temple to be corrupt, and they developed an alternative system of purification to the temple through prayer, almsgiving, fasting and a community rule.<sup>20</sup> We also know that the maintenance of racial purity was a deeply held Jewish concern with careful criteria for classifying Jews into a hierarchy based on purity of descent.<sup>21</sup>

All these forms of purity were essentially external. Israel longed for a vision

---

<sup>19</sup> Other incidents include the revolution of Judas ben Hezekiah (40s BC), the Pharisees refusing to give oath to Caesar (c. 10 BC), the tearing down of the Roman eagle as incited by Judas and Matthias (4 BC), the passover revolt (4 BC), the riots during Pentecost (c. 4 BC), the messianic movements of Simon and Anthronges (4 BC), the census riots prompted by Judas the Galilean and Saddok the Pharisee (AD 6), the seven incidents during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate (AD 26-36), the crisis over Caesar Gaius' attempt to put a statue of himself in the temple (AD 40), the prophetic movement of Theudas (A.D. 40s), the crucifixions of Jacob and Simon (AD 46-8), the revolts under the procuratorship of Cumanus (AD 48-52), and the Sicarii brigands (late 50s early 60s), N. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 170-181.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *New Testament People of God*, pp. 185-209.

<sup>21</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 269ff.

of God, but Jesus asserted that purity of heart, not external purity, was what was needed. The ancient Hebrew poet had stated, “Who may ascend the hill of Yahweh? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...” (Psa. 24:3-4; cf. 51:10; 73:1). Jesus was especially aware that external purity easily degenerates into hypocrisy (cf. 23:25-28). What God wants is undivided loyalty—one who loves God with all his heart, soul and strength (cf. Dt. 6:5). Concerning this beatitude, Soren Kierkegaard wrote his work, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.<sup>22</sup> Seeing God, of course, is an eschatological category when God’s people shall “see his face” (Rev. 22:4). This “beatific vision” is living joyfully forever in the immediate presence of God.<sup>23</sup>

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession [the basic Lutheran confession of faith composed in AD 1530] similarly defines the Church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake.” If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our relationship with Christ and have ceased to follow him. But if we lose our lives in his service and carry our cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is to be ashamed of Christ and his cross and all the offense which the cross brings in its train.

Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact it is a joy and a token of his grace.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*  
*The Cost of Discipleship*

### **The Peacemakers (5:9)**

The Jewish national hope was that Israel would be vindicated as God’s special children, the “sons of God” (Deut. 14:1; 1:10). In fact, the community at Qumran believed the final conflict was at hand between the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness,” and they had planned a detailed campaign with standards for military organization, procedure and strategy.<sup>24</sup> The true sons of God, in this view, would be the victors in the last great battle. After centuries of oppression, they would be liberated. It became increasingly apparent to the Jews that their lot under Rome could only be changed by violent revolt. Hence, the foment of rebellion was never

<sup>22</sup> Trans. D. Steere (New York: Harper & Row, 1948).

<sup>23</sup> *EDT* (1984), pp. 130-131.

<sup>24</sup> T. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 383-423.

far beneath the surface, as mentioned earlier, and membership in God's special community would be demonstrated by those willing to forcibly resist Rome.

Armed resistance, Jesus said, was not the way to demonstrate that one was a child of God. Rather, peacemaking was the way. The state of peace implies reconciliation, and the picture Jesus offered is active, not passive. It is not simply peace-lovers who are exalted, but those who take initiative to reconcile two opposing parties.

### **The Persecuted (5:10-12)**

Persecution was a way of life for first century Jews in Palestine and elsewhere. The Romans held a hostile attitude toward the Jews' culture, and the insinuations of Tacitus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century may be taken as typical, who ridiculed Jews as worshipping an ass, keeping Sabbath because they were lazy, purveyors of hatred toward all non-Jews, and filled with lust.<sup>25</sup> In occupied Palestine, especially, persecution had a long history dating from the Syrian and Egyptian overlords following Alexander the Great, a history colorfully recounted in 1 and 2 Maccabees. By the time of Jesus, anti-Semitism was widespread. Within this matrix of anti-Semitism was the vibrant Jewish hope that the God of Israel would soon act to fulfill his covenant promises. The many Jewish revolts, both before and during the 1<sup>st</sup> century, testify to this messianic hope. The Roman response, of course, was violent suppression. In Galilee, where Judas raided the royal armory at Sepphoris only four miles from Nazareth in AD 6, Roman vengeance had been swift. Sepphoris had been burned to the ground, its citizens sold into slavery, and 2000 Jewish rebels crucified in lines along the public roads.<sup>26</sup> Pilate, on one occasion, sent troops to kill some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices in the temple, probably because he feared a riot (cf. Lk. 13:1). Beyond the killings, however, there was the daily oppression through taxation and government interference.

Still, as bad as such oppression had become, this persecution in itself would not merit the action of God to inaugurate his promised reign. The "kingdom" was for those persecuted for righteousness, not those persecuted for Jewishness. Here, "righteousness" is inextricably connected with following Jesus, for as Jesus explains in 5:11, it is persecution "because of me." It is false accusation and insult because one is steadfastly loyal to Jesus, who was the model for fulfilling all righteousness (cf. 3:15). Such righteousness is at a vastly higher level than the external efforts for purity among the popular Jewish sects (cf. 5:20). This kind of suffering puts one in the company of the prophets, who were ostracized, ridiculed and murdered. Yet it

---

<sup>25</sup> *Histories* 5, 2-13.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.9.



also puts one in the company of the joyous, who have been promised great return in heaven. The ancient Stoics suffered and clenched their teeth; the disciples of Jesus suffered with overflowing joy (cf. Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:12-16).

### **Salt and Light (5:13-16)**

By this time, it should be clear that the beatitudes are not a description of various kinds of disciples, but rather, a description of the multi-faceted graces to be lived out by every disciple. The beatitudes etch in sharp relief the difference between conventional religion and the way of Jesus. Especially, they heighten the inwardness of true discipleship, calling attention to motives and attitudes of the heart. The emphasis is on quality, and this quality moves from the inside out.

It is this quality of genuineness that marks the disciples of Jesus as different from the world even though they were in the world. Traditional Jewish metaphors by which Jews described themselves were that they were “salt” and “light.”<sup>27</sup> In the ancient Near East, salt had two primary functions: it was a seasoning for food and it was a preservative. With regard to food, salt was more than just flavor enhancement. Because of the hot, dry, windy climate, body salts (electrolytes) were quickly lost with perspiration and need to be replenished orally. Meat, on the other hand, was rubbed with salt to prevent spoilage. Clearly, Jesus used the common metaphor of salt to urge that his disciples needed to *be* the true Israel if they were to prevent utter decay. They were to live up to their calling as a nation of priests to the world (cf. Ex. 19:5-6). They were not to dilute their capacity for godly influence, the very influence described in the beatitudes.

Technically, salt is a very stable compound and does not deteriorate. However, the Jews derived their salt from the Dead Sea, and it was not generally pure, but contaminated with a variety of other minerals which looked like salt but did not have the beneficial qualities of salt.<sup>28</sup> Also, dishonest salt merchants were sometimes tempted to cut salt with gypsum to increase its quantity. In either case, such salt could very well “lose its saltiness,” rendering it unfit for use. So, also, if Jesus’ disciples compromised their character and inner quality as described in the beatitudes, they would dilute their influence.

The metaphor of light points to the same mission. In Galilee, some of the villages lay upon the mountain slopes to the east of the lake,<sup>29</sup> and they were quite visible in the daytime, due to their whitewashed walls, as well as easy to pinpoint at

---

<sup>27</sup> H. Betz, “Sermon on the Mount/Plain,” *ABD* 5.1106-1112.

<sup>28</sup> L. Herr, *ISBE* (1988), pp. IV.286-287.

<sup>29</sup> This was especially true of Hippos, one of the Decapolis cities clearly visible from the Capernaum area at night, cf. J. Rousseau and R. Arav, *Jesus & His World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 127.

night by cooking fires and lamps. Such cities, plainly visible to all, are what Jesus' followers should be like. They should be like lamps in the darkness, not hidden beneath meal tubs. (In any case, a lamp under a bowl, losing oxygen, would quickly go out.) Rather, a lamp should be placed prominently on a stand to be most effective. Similarly, Jesus' disciples should be light-givers by their good deeds. They must influence their culture by their goodness so that others, seeing their good works, might praise the heavenly Father.

## Jesus and the Torah

The four great symbols for the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish world view were the Torah, the temple, the land and the Jewish racial identity. In his public ministry, Jesus addressed all four, but the one most clearly in view in the Sermon on the Mount is the Torah. The Torah, the history and instruction given by God through Moses at Sinai (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), was the covenant charter for the people of Israel. It held priority over all other symbols, because all others symbols derived from it. In times of great distress, the Torah became, as it were, a moveable temple, a moveable land, and the authority behind racial identity. One group, the Pharisees, even seemed to have advocated that the study of the Torah could be a valid substitute for temple worship in times of distress or when the temple was not accessible, as in the case of diaspora Judaism. The rabbis said that where two or three gathered to study the Torah, the *shekinah* rested on them.<sup>30</sup>

Obedience to the 613 statutes of the Torah (the rabbinical calculation of 248 commands and 365 prohibitions) was necessary to Jewish life if one expected to see God reign as King. The Pharisees, in particular, were known for the rigor with which they followed the Torah, and not only the written Torah contained in the five books of Moses, but also the oral Torah, the collection of authoritative rabbinical interpretations that had accumulated through Torah study. Many of these latter requirements were held to be a "fence" around the Torah, that is, the logical extension and application of Torah statutes in such a way as to prevent anyone from accidentally breaching the code. The authority of the written Torah stood side by side with the authority of the oral Torah, and both were believed to have come from Moses himself.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, when Jesus began talking about the Torah, he was addressing the central structure of Jewish religious life. The repeating phrase, "you have heard that it was said" (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43), refers to the continual teaching from the Torah that was a regular part of the synagogue service each sabbath.

---

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 227-229.

<sup>31</sup> D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), pp. 63-69.

### Jesus' Continuity with the Torah (5:17-20)

The very first point Jesus makes is that he was in continuity with the Torah. It could hardly be otherwise, since he claimed to come from the giver of the Torah, Yahweh himself (cf. Jn. 4:37-47). The issue was not that the Torah is mistaken, outdated or irrelevant. Rather, the deeper meaning of the Torah had been missed in the confusing ramifications of oral tradition and rabbinical interpretation. Thus, Jesus declared unequivocally<sup>32</sup> that he was not abrogating the Torah nor the oracles of the prophets.<sup>33</sup> Rather, his mission was to see them filled out to their full meaning. The verb *pleroo* (= to fulfill) has a semantic range, and here it seems to refer to the crown and completion of what the Torah intended. Jesus' mission was that in his life he would actualize the will of God revealed in the Torah and the prophets.<sup>34</sup> Hence, earlier Jesus says to John at his baptism that he intends by this act "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15), that is, to fill to the measure by his obedience what God has willed. In fact, every element of the Torah<sup>35</sup> will endure as long as the heavens and earth endure.

Christian thinkers have long struggled with the seeming absolute longevity of the law, as stated here, and the tension this statement produces with other of Jesus' sayings, not to mention the teaching of St. Paul concerning Christians who are under grace, not under the Torah (e.g., Ro. 6:14-15). Elsewhere, Jesus seems to relax purity laws (Mt. 15:1-2) and sabbatical regulations (e.g., Mt. 12:1-12) while offering different rulings than the popular interpretations of Moses (e.g., Mt. 5:31; 19:7-9; Dt. 24:1-4). So, the suggestion is offered that some sort of Christian legalism has colored this saying of Jesus.<sup>36</sup>

Such a criticism is surely overstated. Jesus' claim to fulfill the law need not require its disappearance, and in any case, it has always been the Christian conclusion that the Torah as well as all the other parts of the Hebrew Bible are Christian Scripture. St. Paul seems to agree when he says, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Ro. 7:12). To be sure, Jesus takes issue

---

<sup>32</sup> The emphatic character of Jesus' declaration in 5:18 is clear from his use of the Hebrew "amen" to preface his statement. This use of "amen" (= certainly) at the beginning of a saying is without parallel in the whole of Jewish literature, where "amen" is used at the end of statements. Obviously, then, this peculiarity of Jesus' language marks off his saying as especially solemn and authoritative, cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 35-36.

<sup>33</sup> Some interpreters, by emphasizing the antitheses beginning in 5:21, have taken the position that Jesus was indeed canceling the ancient Torah and offering a new Torah in its place. This conclusion seems to be precisely what Jesus says he was *not* doing, cf. J. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978), p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> *TDNT* (1968) VI.294.

<sup>35</sup> The two words *iota* (= the letter "i" in Greek) and *keraiia* (= horn, hook) obviously refer to the smallest strokes in calligraphy. The Greek *iota* probably corresponds to the Hebrew *yodh*, while the *keraiia* possibly refers to the serifs or hooks on some letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>36</sup> T. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 135, 154; Hunter, p. 47.

with how the rabbis interpreted the Torah, and he (as well as Paul) affirmed the limitations of the Torah while still contending for the enduring value of the Torah. The Torah cannot be altered, but at the same time, it should not be applied in a way that distorts the purpose for which it was intended. A significant part of that purpose was its fulfillment in the messianic ministry of Jesus himself, as Jesus already stated. Jesus asserted that his messianic mission was in ultimate harmony with the Torah, that the scribes and Pharisees had it wrong, and that Israel must not be content to live with the religious experts' traditional but shallow reading of the Torah.

Hence, the commandments of the Torah<sup>37</sup> must be revered. To be flippant about even the least of the commandments, either by violating their spirit or by encouraging others to do so, will mean demotion in God's kingdom. The Pharisees and scribes, by their efforts to intensify the Torah, were in fact failing to revere its spirit (e.g., Mt. 23).<sup>38</sup> Their rigidity was as much a distortion as if they ignored the commandments. Greatness in God's kingdom would be credited to those who were deeply conscious of the spirit of the Torah, a righteousness that must be higher and deeper than the legalism of the professional theologians.

## **The Six Antitheses**

If Jesus stood in continuity rather than discontinuity with the Torah, it must still be said that he “deepens, completes and exposes the profoundest implications of the ancient directives.”<sup>39</sup> Six times he recalls the ancient commandments and the rabbinical repetitions, and six times he asserts the majestic contrast, “But I tell you...” This antithesis between what was said either in the repetition of the commandment or in rabbinical interpretation and what Jesus intends as the true meaning of the commandment assumes an authority much higher than that of the rabbis. The crowds who were listening in on Jesus' instruction to the disciples would later remark, “He taught as one who had authority” (7:29). Furthermore, if Jesus intended his followers to maintain a righteousness higher than the scribes and Pharisees, here he sets forth just what this higher level will mean. It cannot be simply a crass literalism or minimalism. Rather, it strikes for human motives that lie behind overt actions.

### **The Commandment on Murder (5:21-26)**

The sixth commandment in the decalog, a mere two words in the Hebrew text (*lo' tiretsah* = “Don't murder”), is a terse prohibition against vengeful life-taking

---

<sup>37</sup> Here, we follow the interpretation that “these commandments” refers to the Torah just mentioned and is not a preface to what Jesus will say later.

<sup>38</sup> For examples of Torah intensification among the Pharisees, see A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 213-226.

<sup>39</sup> Hunter, p. 48.

(Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). The verb is one of several in Hebrew that may be translated “to kill”. This one, however, implies the killing of humans, nor is it the same as the verb used for killing in war. Rather, it is a word used in the context of slaying a personal enemy. Murder was a capital offense, and various distinctions between it and involuntary manslaughter (cf. Ex. 21:12-14), assault and battery (Ex. 21:18-19) or accidental infanticide or abortion (cf. Ex. 21:22-25) were to be investigated by judicial trial. The expression “subject to judgment” implies execution for a capital crime. So much was generally well known among the Jews.

Jesus, then, extends the intent of the prohibition to include the hatred and anger that motivate murder, something no human court could ever judge. God, alone, can assess the human heart, and anger at one’s fellow<sup>40</sup> will also merit judgment—not the judgment of a human court, but the judgment of God. Such hatred was a violation of the intent of the Torah (cf. Lev. 19:17). Slander might be prosecutable before the Jewish ruling council,<sup>41</sup> but it is a much more serious offense before God, since it presumes to pass personal judgment, something only God can rightly do. The word *more* (= outcast, apostate) probably refers to the categorization of someone as a rebel against God,<sup>42</sup> and implicitly, it condemns. Jesus said that such condemnation would itself merit condemnation! It is equivalent to saying that the one who condemns another to hell might very well go there himself.<sup>43</sup> Once again, it is the deep inner motive that counts most. Of course, Jesus himself used the word *more* (= fool) to describe the Pharisees (cf. 23:17, 19), so the teaching here obviously refers to something deeper than simply assessing someone’s foolish behavior.

What God wants is reconciliation, not hatred. Anger and hatred against another person impair one’s relationship with God. It does no good to participate in temple worship by offering gifts to God if one refuses to set things right with one’s brother, especially if that brother has a just claim.<sup>44</sup> Better to interrupt the temple procedure, leaving the animal at the altar with the priest and the sacrifice unfinished, in order to effect reconciliation. Only then is it appropriate to offer the sacrifice. It should be remembered, of course, that Christians also “have an altar” (cf. Heb. 13:10), and

---

<sup>40</sup> The older English versions have the phrase “without a cause”, but the oldest and best manuscripts do not not.

<sup>41</sup> The Aramaic *reqa* (of which the Greek *raca* is a transliteration) is an expression of contempt more-or-less equivalent to “blockhead” or “emptyhead,” *ISBE* (1982) II.857.

<sup>42</sup> This assumes that the term refers to the Hebrew *moreh* (= outcast, apostate) rather than the Greek *more* (= fool, idiot), W. Albright and C. Mann, *Matthew [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) p. 61; R. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) pp. 68-69.

<sup>43</sup> The term *Gehenna* (the Aramaic expression derived from the Hebrew *ge hinnom*) refers to the valley of Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem that served as the city’s garbage dump. In other Jewish literature, *Gehenna* became a euphemism for the place of final judgment where God would consign the wicked, cf. *TDNT* (1964) I.657-658.

<sup>44</sup> The expression “has something against you” implies a just claim, cf. D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 122.

Jesus' words apply long after the destruction of the second temple!

As a second illustration, Jesus raises the circumstance of an unpaid debt. Don't wait for litigation; settle out of court! The situation assumes that the one of whom Jesus is talking has an unpaid debt or is guilty of some other offense toward which he was culpable under the law (i.e., Jesus is not talking about a false accusation). Even if one is on the way to a court hearing, better to settle while still on the road than risk the penalty of imprisonment.

Many interpreters understand Jesus' words to be a double entendre. He speaks not merely of civil cases, but of one's culpability before God. One of the familiar metaphors from the prophets was the *rib* lawsuit, in which God is depicted as taking his people to court and/or sitting in judgment over them or the nations at an assizes. (cf. Isa. 41; Hos. 4:1ff.; Jer. 2:9, 29, 34-35; 25:31). This metaphor was undoubtedly familiar to Jesus' audience, so his comments about settling quickly may have been aimed at one's relationship with God as much as one's relationship with others. Earlier, Jesus warned against breaking even the least of the commandments, and here he warns that if one has breached the Torah, he must settle matters quickly with God, else one will be imprisoned and "not get out until you have paid the last penny."<sup>45</sup>

It is worth noting that the two illustrations Jesus gives, the temple illustration and the lawsuit illustration, cover both a "brother" and an "enemy." Both cases call for immediate reconciliation.

### **The Commandment on Adultery (5:27-30)**

There is a marked similarity between Jesus' teaching on murder and his teaching on adultery (cf. Ex. 20:14, 17; Deut. 5:18, 21). Just as there is more than one way to commit murder, so there is more than one way to commit adultery. If anger and hatred lie behind murder, lust lies behind adultery. Once again, Jesus emphasizes that God is concerned with motives and thoughts, not just overt actions. At the same time, it is fair to point out that Jesus is not condemning the natural, normal desire that is part of human instinct and nature. The Greek idiom *blepo gynaike pros to epithymesai* (= seeing a woman with a view to desire) refers to a person's deliberate intent of looking so as to be stimulated sexually. Essentially, Jesus expressly forbids affection for the titillating seductiveness that pervades society.

In Jewish law, adultery was defined as sexual intercourse with the wife or the betrothed of a fellow Jew. Jesus intensifies the commandment to include any woman, and further, that the desire to possess is as adulterous as the act of possession. The fact that his teaching is in the context an ancient patriarchal culture should not blind

---

<sup>45</sup> Lit., *quandras*, the fourth part of an *as* and the smallest Roman coin, equal to two mites—an extremely small sum, cf. Hill, p. 122; France, p. 121.

us to the fact that in modern society his words would equally apply to a woman looking at a man with a view to possessing him. This sin is not for males only.

Jesus followed his Torah explanation with the hyperbole that it would be better to put out an eye or amputate a limb than allow one's bodily desires to lead him to hell.<sup>46</sup> While it is doubtful that Jesus intended for his followers to practice emasculation, he did intend them to root out of their lives anything that could make them fall. In a modern context, this must surely include books, periodicals, television programming, entertainment or even friendships that lead in the wrong direction.

### **The Commandment on Divorce (5:31-32)**

Jesus' next comments move beyond the decalogue, though they are certainly related to it. The commandment about adultery naturally leads to the issue of divorce, and Moses' ruling was a case law concerning remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4).<sup>47</sup> In the case of a divorce and remarriage, if the second marriage failed and a second divorce was granted, divorcees from the second marriage were forbidden to remarry their partners from the first marriage. This law does not stipulate the procedure for divorce, but it assumes such a procedure to be in place.<sup>48</sup> A certificate of divorce would normally free a divorced partner to be remarried, but in this case, not to the first marriage partner.

From this case law, the Jewish rabbis argued over the justifiable conditions for divorce, something the case law mentions but does not explain. The issue revolved around the expression *'erewath davar* (= an indecent thing). There were two schools of rabbinical opinion, one more stringent and the other more liberal. The more severe position, following Rabbi Shammai, defined the basis for divorce as sexual infidelity along the lines of Deuteronomy 22:13ff. The more relaxed interpretation, following Rabbi Hillel, defined the basis for divorce as more or less anything that might be offensive, whether sexual or not.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, both rabbinical interpretations assumed the legitimacy of divorce but disagreed on the conditions.

It was this assumption that divorce was an inherent right with which Jesus

---

<sup>46</sup> Most interpreters, though not all, recognize Jesus' words as an intentional overstatement to make a point. The 3<sup>rd</sup> century church father, Origen, castrated himself in order to be able to instruct female students without fear of scandal, cf. *EDT* (1984) 803. The Council of Nicea later forbade this practice, cf. Stott, p. 89. The reference to "hell" is again *gehenna*, as in 5:22.

<sup>47</sup> Many scholars recognize two kinds of laws in the Covenant Code, apodictic (absolute commands) and casuistic (case law). Apodictic laws are direct commands or prohibitions, such as one finds in the ten commandments. Casuistic laws, typical of the ancient Near East, are conditional, based on specific situations and usually framed with some sort of "if" clause, cf. Fensham, *ISBE* (1979) I.793.

<sup>48</sup> Divorce was certainly known in the ancient Near East, and non-biblical literature indicates that many nations contemporary to Israel practiced it. In the code of Hammurabi, for instance, divorce was permissible on grounds of childlessness and neglect of the home.

<sup>49</sup> F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), p. 57.

disagreed. Since a certificate of divorce in the Mosaic law assumed the right to remarry,<sup>50</sup> divorce, by definition, implied the possibility of a new marriage. At the same time, divorce could only be considered as breaking the divine ideal. One does not “tolerate” what is inherently right. Just because something is tolerated does not mean that it has divine approval as something good or desirable, and this is the point Jesus makes.

Jesus’ instruction, then, assumes that divorce is not good or desirable, even though it might be tolerated under Mosaic legislation. Elsewhere, he says that Moses only permitted a certificate of divorce “because your hearts were hard” (cf. Mk. 10:5). Nevertheless, the marriage ideal implicit within the creation account of man and woman was life-long union (cf. Mk. 10:6-9). In Matthew, Jesus offers an exception to this life-long union, and that exception is *me epi porneia* (= except for unchastity), an expression that includes such things as incest, fornication, homosexual behavior, prostitution and adultery (see also Mt. 19:9).<sup>51</sup> Such behavior violates the marriage ideal so severely that divorce, while always an evil, may be justifiable. In fact, Jesus seems to imply that such behavior annuls a marriage by creating a new sexual union.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, divorce for any other reason virtually compels the woman to commit adultery, since she would in most cases seek remarriage in order to survive.<sup>53</sup> Such a remarriage would mean that her new husband also committed adultery, something that was certainly a surprise to Jesus’ listeners, since under Jewish law a woman could commit adultery against her husband, but he could not commit adultery against her.<sup>54</sup>

Modern application of this teaching has been complex and debatable, to say the least. Nevertheless, some things are clear enough. First, Jesus clearly intended marriage to be “until death do us part” (cf. Mk. 10:9). Divorce along with remarriage is always an evil and a breaking of God’s ideal. It always merits mourning and repentance. Since the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount has been reconciliation, this instruction about divorce must surely aim at the same thing. Divorce and remarriage are sinful, but the larger failure is the hardness of human hearts that refuse to be reconciled. Separation without divorce is less offensive than

---

<sup>50</sup> Some have suggested that a certificate of divorce does not assume the intent to remarry, but this can hardly be the case. If there was no intent to remarry, then a certificate of divorce would be superfluous, and in any case, in ancient Near Eastern patriarchal society, a woman outside a marriage relationship would have a difficult time surviving. Murray is correct when he states that such a certificate was a protective instrument in the event the woman should marry again, cf. J. Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> G. Bromiley, *ISBE* (1979) I.977.

<sup>52</sup> France, p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> France, p. 123.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter, p. 53. Furthermore, under Jewish law a man was compelled to divorce his wife if he discovered fornication, either premarital or extramarital, cf. Hill, p. 125.



divorce and remarriage, but it hardly measures up to the ideal of reconciliation. Jesus' instruction is not aimed at delineating the reasons that might justify divorce, but rather, to emphasize that among his disciples there should be a basic disposition not to divorce, since God intends marriage to be a union for life.

### **The Commandment on Oath-taking (5:33-37)**

Oaths invoke God as witness as to the truthfulness of one's verbal statements. They were common in the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament. The basic oath formula for the Israelites was "as Yahweh lives", though there were several variations. All of them, however, used the name of Yahweh to invite divine retribution if one's word proved untrustworthy. Hence, one of the ten commandments forbade misusing the name of Yahweh (cf. Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11; cf. Lev. 19:12). In Mosaic law, oaths were required occasionally (e.g., Num. 5:19), and Yahweh himself swore by himself to confirm his covenant promises to the Patriarchs (e.g., Gen. 22:15-18; Ex. 6:8).

By the time of Jesus, oath-taking in contemporary Judaism had developed into a fine art of subtlety, especially among the common people. One of these subtleties was the circumlocution of the divine name. In order to avoid profaning God's name and so breaking the commandment, some Jews employed substitutes for Yahweh's name, such as, "by heaven" or "by earth" or "by Jerusalem" or "by my head". Such oaths were considered to be less binding than actually using Yahweh's name. This violation of the spirit of the Torah was recognized not only by Jesus, but also by the Essenes (who avoided oaths altogether) as well as some rabbis.<sup>55</sup> Some of the Pharisees, on the other hand, defended such sophistry (cf. Mt. 23:16-22).

Jesus points out that these circumlocutions, in fact, do not avoid transgressing the commandment, since God is implied as a witness in them all. It is not the precision of the formula but the intent of the heart that matters most. Therefore, oaths to reinforce the truthfulness of one's statements should be unnecessary, since they only imply the general tendency of men and women to be untruthful. A simple "yes" or a "no" should be enough.

Some Christians, such as the Anabaptists and the Quakers, have understood Jesus' statement, "Do not swear at all," as forbidding all oaths, even in a courtroom. It is doubtful that Jesus intended his statement in such a legalistic way, since in his own trial he did not object to being put on his oath (cf. Mt. 26:63-64). Also, one finds occasional oaths with the divine name in Paul's letters (2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20). In a courtroom, oaths are used precisely because men and women sometimes lie. Still, the

---

<sup>55</sup> D. Garland, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), pp. 577-578.

central issue is the moral value of telling the truth, and Jesus' teaching was later repeated by James (Jam. 5:12). If divorce was permitted because of the hardness of humans hearts, oaths were permitted because of the untruthfulness of human hearts. Ideally, neither were necessary or desirable.

### **The Commandment on Retaliation (5:38-42)**

The ancient rule about retaliation is the *lex talionis* (Ex. 21:23-25, 27; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). A version earlier than even the Torah is to be found in the Code of Hammurabi (*ca.* 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), where it reads, "If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye. If he has broken a(nother) seignior's bone, they shall break his bone. If a seignior has knocked out a tooth of the seignior of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth" (Hammurabi 196-197, 200).<sup>56</sup> This rule was intended to curtail unlimited blood revenge of the sort described in Genesis 4:23-24.<sup>57</sup>

Retaliation against the foreign occupation of the Romans was clearly advocated by the Jewish freedom fighters, one of whom became an apostle (cf. Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13). "Banditry" was alive and well, that is, opposition to the Roman government not sufficient to require a major military operation to put it down. Such banditry, a sort of Robin Hood opposition to Rome, was sometimes supported and aided by the local peasantry. It was often a first step toward violent revolt, and a considerable number of Jewish revolts against Rome, some major and some smaller, dot the history of the first century.<sup>58</sup> Beyond retaliation against Rome, of course, was retaliation against personal enemies in the ordinary context of life.

Yet Jesus urged non-retaliation. More than one interpreter has pointed out that this command refers to personal relationships, not the role of human government to restrain evil.<sup>59</sup> The term "evil" does not refer to the abstract principle of evil, but to persons who do evil.<sup>60</sup> Still, in a Jewish culture under Roman occupation, the instruction to abstain from retaliation must have been unwelcome.

Jesus offers four examples. First is non-retaliation in the face of contempt and the accusation of blasphemy. A blow to the right cheek assumes a blow with the back

---

<sup>56</sup> J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958) I.161.

<sup>57</sup> J. Hyatt, *Exodus [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 234.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, pp. 155-160; Wright, *The New Testament People of God*, pp. 170-181.

<sup>59</sup> Stott, pp. 104-105; Hunter, p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> The Greek text simply reads *poneros* (= evil) in the dative case, and this single word is followed by the KJV. Leo Tolstoy, among others, took this to mean that Christians should be totally passive in the face of evil, even to the point of dismantling the government, the army and the police. Most modern versions, however, regard the Greek construction as a substantive specifying an evil person (so NIV, RSV, NEB, TEV, JB, ASV, NASB, Phillips, Weymouth, Williams and even the NKJB).

of the hand (for right-handed persons). In the ancient Near East as well as today, this is a deep insult and often the accusation of heresy (cf. Acts 23:2; Mt. 27:67-68).<sup>61</sup> To such an affront, the disciples must not retaliate. Rather, they must be willing to suffer even further abuse. Second is the lawsuit in which the plaintiff threatens to confiscate one's *chiton*, the long, close-fitting undergarment in ancient Near Eastern dress. Instead of defending one's right, the disciple should simply offer to his accuser his *himation*, the more valuable outer garment. Third, if a Roman soldier commandeers one's services to carry his military pack for a mile, the disciple of Jesus should carry it yet another mile.<sup>62</sup> Finally, when someone asks for help, Jesus' disciples should not refuse to aid them. This latter, of course, was no more than the Torah itself required (cf. Deut. 15:7-8). Against the background of Jewish law, some scholars understand this final example to be an attack upon unscrupulous interest rates. Interest rates were extremely high (sometimes as much as 100% or even 200%), and with the unpredictability of drought, war, taxation, and so forth, paralyzing debt was not unusual.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Commandment on Love (5:43-48)**

The Torah commandment referred to here is: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD* (Lev. 19:18). This commandment said nothing about hating one's enemy, but the popular viewpoint was that one's "neighbor" was one's fellow Jew, while the Roman occupation was made up of pagan Gentiles who were under the curse of God, and thus, deserved to be hated. The Qumran *Manual of Discipline*, for instance, states that the community should "love all he [God] has chosen and hate all that he has rejected" and "love all the children of light...and hate all the children of darkness".<sup>64</sup> For Palestinian Jews, the very dust of a Gentile land was defiling and to be regarded like the pollution of the grave. Conversation with Gentiles, entry into a Gentile home, or food prepared by a Gentile was defiling. Anything a Gentile touched in a Jewish home was defiled, and a Jew was forbidden even to help a Gentile woman at the time of child birth.<sup>65</sup> Since the Torah said "love your neighbor," and this was taken to mean fellow Jews, the silence of the command about one's enemies was taken to mean that they deserved to be hated.

---

<sup>61</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), p. 28. This gesture was punishable under Jewish law by a heavy fine, Mishnah *BK* 8.6.

<sup>62</sup> The Romans allowed their soldiers to commandeer civilian labor in an occupied country, cf. France, p. 127.

<sup>63</sup> Albright and Mann, pp. 69-70. The *AB* dynamic equivalency translation of this verse reads, "Give to him who asks you for a loan, and do not refuse who is unable to pay interest."

<sup>64</sup> Gaster, p. 44 (1 QS i.3-4, 9-10).

<sup>65</sup> These are only a sampling of the various rules governing Jewish and Gentile contact, cf. A. Edersheim, pp. 14-29.

It should be kept in mind that the Hebrew verb *'ahav* (= to love) takes an object (i.e., "you shall love God", "Jacob loved Rachel", etc.). In the levitical command, there appears the preposition *l'* (= to), which means that the verb must be translated transitively (i.e., "you shall show love to..."). As such, the kind of love being described is more an action than a feeling. A similar use of the verb *'ahav* can be found in 1 Kings 5:1 (5:15, *MT*), where the text says, "Hiram always loved David" (RSV).<sup>66</sup> The meaning of love, then, can hardly be defined in a psychological way. It does not necessarily mean "to have deep feelings for" or "to feel emotion toward." It certainly is not an excuse for narcissism. Rather, it means "to show love to," "to help," "to be of use to," or "to be beneficial to." Perhaps a better translation capturing the nuance of this expression in Hebrew would be "You should be beneficial (or helpful) to your neighbor as you would be to yourself."<sup>67</sup>

"What is undivided love? Love which shows no special favor to those who love us in return. When we love those who love us, our brethren, our nation, our friends, yes, and even our own congregation, we are no better than the heathen and the publicans. Such love is ordinary and natural, and not distinctively Christian. We can love our kith and kin, our fellow-countrymen and our friends, whether we are Christian or not, and there is no need for Jesus to teach us that. But he takes that kind of love for granted, and in contrast asserts that we must love our enemies. Thus, he shows us what *he* means by love, and the attitude we must display towards it.

How then do Christians differ from the heathen? What does it really mean to be a Christian? Here we meet the word which controls the whole chapter, and sums up all we have heard so far. What makes the Christian different from other men is the "*peculiar*"...the "extraordinary," the "unusual," that which is not "a matter of course." This is the quality whereby the better righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It is "the more," the "beyond-all-that."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Jesus understood the intent of this commandment well, for he urged his disciples to actively seek the benefit of others. Of course, when he specified enemies, not just neighbors, he challenged the prevailing opinion, especially concerning the Roman occupation. Yet, as he pointed out, even God gives good things to both righteous and unrighteous people by sending life-giving sun and rain. This good intent, even to "enemies," was not foreign to the Torah.

Even the Torah urged generosity and kindness to aliens and sojourners (Ex. 23:4-5; cf. 12:49; Pro. 25:21). So, one's "neighbor" includes even one's "enemy," especially if that enemy has a deep need, since all fellow human beings are "sons of

<sup>66</sup> Lit., *Hiram was loving to David all the days*. One can also find this same sort of construction in 2 Chr. 19:2, where the preposition "to" is used with the verb love.

<sup>67</sup> A. Malamat, "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself," *BAR* (July/August 1990) 50-51.

God” in the sense that God created them all. Later, Jesus will enlarge on this principle in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). Good must be extended to persecutors, to those who do not love in return, to those with despised trades,<sup>68</sup> in short, to all other human beings. If Jesus’ followers wanted to be the true Israel, the true sons of the Father, then they must behave much differently than most people who only offered conventional niceties. Such love must express itself in deeds, words and prayers. The model for such love is not the conventional love of those who only reciprocate in kind, but the radical, indiscriminating and perfect love of God, who sends good to all, both the righteous and unrighteous.

The final summary, that the disciples must be perfect as the Father is perfect, aims at more than simply moral perfection. The word *teleios* means wholeness or completeness.<sup>69</sup> The disciples are to be complete as God is complete, their lives totally integrated into his will. The command to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect echoes the Levitical command, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2).

## **The Practice of Religion**

The Torah was the definitive legislation for the Jewish religion. Jesus boldly claimed to stand in continuity with the Torah, though certainly he was not in continuity with the popular interpretations of it. Repeatedly, he calls for a much higher and rigorous standard than was imagined by most of his contemporaries. In place of the traditional exegesis, he offers his own authoritative interpretation with the words, “You have heard what the Torah says, you have heard how the rabbis have interpreted it, but now hear what it really means!” His teachings are directed to his disciples rather than the crowds at large (even though the crowds listen in), for what he says is essentially to be received by those who already have made the commitment to follow him.

It logically follows, then, that if conventional Judaism, with its many expressions, was the manner of religious life accepted by the Jews at large, Jesus, with his more demanding interpretation of the Torah, should offer his own vision for the manner of religious life he expected. The remainder of the great sermon follows this aim.

---

<sup>68</sup> In addition to racial purity, vocation also served as a strong determinant of social status in the Jewish community. Despised trades were evaluated in the Mishnah, including camel-drivers, butchers, dung-collectors, tanners and blood-letters, to name a few. The last on the list was the tax collector, who was generally perceived to be a collaborator with the Romans. In fact, tax collectors, along with people of a few other despised trades, were not only hated, they were deprived of civil and political rights and ostracized from the community. They were on the same social footing as a Gentile slave, cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, pp. 311-312.

<sup>69</sup> BAG (1979) pp. 809.

The Jews' understanding of their relationship to God was that he was their heavenly Father. This familial paradigm began with the exodus, when Yahweh declared that he called Israel, his son, out of Egypt (Exod. 4:22-23). The same imagery rises in the prophets, when they treat Israel as a prodigal who, though nurtured from childhood, turned away from Yahweh (Hos. 11:1ff.; Isa. 1:2ff.; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19; 31:9; Mal. 2:10). The Jews fully appropriated this belief that God was their heavenly Father. He had given them the Torah by which to live. Jesus taught that if their interpretation of the Torah fell short, so also did their understanding of God as their divine Father. God was not some "faceless bureaucrat, to be bribed or wheedled into giving her what she wants."<sup>70</sup> So, following his new interpretation of the Torah Jesus offers a new vision for how life should be lived by God's children.

## Acts of Piety

The first part of this new vision concerned acts of piety. Piety is characteristic of religion in general, and Judaism was no exception. The three examples of piety Jesus raises, charity, prayer and fasting, are common to most religions. They are prominent in the Koran, for example, and they constitute three of the five pillars of Islam. Among the Jews, these three acts of personal piety were probably the most prominent in mainstream Judaism.<sup>71</sup>

### Almsgiving (6:1-4)

Of significance is the fact that in the Septuagint, the Hebrew word *tsedeqah* (= righteousness) is often translated by the Greek word *eleemosyne* (= alms, charitable giving). Hence, Jesus speaks of "acts of righteousness". Almsgiving, the offering of money or goods to the poor, was widely held to be a sacred religious duty. The community at Qumran, for instance, dedicated two days wages each month to a central fund for distribution to the poor.<sup>72</sup> The intertestamental literature even indicated that almsgiving could "atone for sin" (Sirach 3:30; cf. 29:12; Tobit 12:8-9, RSV).

Jesus did not discourage acts of charity to the poor. In fact, he sometimes challenged people to give with what must have seemed outrageous generosity (Mt. 19:21). However, such acts of charitable giving could become hypocritical, especially when they were performed publicly in order to impress others. Such ostentatious piety was not performed with the thought of helping another brother or sister who also was the child of the heavenly Father. Rather, it was self-serving, since

---

<sup>70</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 291.

<sup>71</sup> W. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University, 1963), pp. 307-315.

<sup>72</sup> G. Davies, *IDB* (1962) I.87.

the motive behind it was to call attention to oneself.<sup>73</sup> That some of the Jews performed their acts of charity “in the synagogues and on the streets”, places that were highly public, belied their motives. In so doing, they were making a public transaction. By their almsgiving, they purchased the adulation of others, and the irony of this commercial piety is apparent in Jesus’ use of the verb *apecho* (= to receive), a commercial word with the nuance of giving a sum in full and receiving a receipt for it.<sup>74</sup> Such people, Jesus said, indeed have been paid in full!

If the fixed time for them had come, he [the Pharisee] would stop short in the middle of the road, perhaps say one section of them, move on, again say another part, and so on, till, whatever else might be doubted, there could be no question of the conspicuousness of his devotions in market-place or corners of streets. There he would stand, as taught by the traditional law, would draw his feet together, compose his body and clothes, and bend so low “that every vertebra in his back would stand out separate,” or at least, till “the skin over his heart would fall into folds” (*Ber. 28b*). The workman would drop his tools, the burden-bearer his load; if a man had already one foot in the stirrup, he would withdraw it. The hour had come, and nothing could be suffered to interrupt or disturb him. The very salutation of a king, it was said, must remain unreturned; nay, the twisting of a serpent around one’s heel must remain unheeded. Nor was it merely the prescribed daily seasons of prayer which so claimed his devotions. On entering a village, and again on leaving it, he must say one or two benedictions; the same in passing through a fortress, in encountering any danger, in meeting with anything new, strange, beautiful or unexpected. And the longer he prayer the better.

Alfred Edersheim

*Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*

For Jesus’ disciples, acts of generosity should be performed privately, for only then could they be done in a way that truly honors God as the divine Father.<sup>75</sup> The “righteous acts” of Jesus’ followers must be at a higher level than what was conventional (cf. 5:20). The expression about not letting the left hand know what the right is doing probably stems from the fact that the right hand is the active hand, and as in the metaphor about blowing trumpets, this saying was probably intended to

<sup>73</sup> The picture of “blowing a trumpet” is probably metaphorical, since there is no clear evidence that this was literally performed, cf. France, p. 131. Some have suggested that perhaps there was a blowing of trumpets at the temple signaling the collection of alms for relief, cf. Hill, p. 133. Elton Trueblood is probably correct in listing this metaphor as one of Jesus’ intentionally humorous sayings, cf. *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: Harper, 1964), p. 127.

<sup>74</sup> BAG (1979) 84.

<sup>75</sup> It may be noted that such piety in private was also advocated by some of the rabbis in the Mishnah, who taught that “the giver ought not to know to whom he is giving, and the receiver ought not to know from whom he receives” (*Baba Bathra* 10b), cited by Hill, p.133.

bring a smile. When one gives in secret, he is truly giving in order to honor God, the divine Father of all, and the Father who knows what has been done in secret will give the reward. Such a reward is to be contrasted with wages. Hypocrites receive wages paid in full on earth; disciples receive a reward in heaven (cf. 5:12).<sup>76</sup>

### Prayer (6:5-8)

If almsgiving could be performed as an act of ostentatious piety, so also could prayer. The pious Jew had set times for daily prayer, morning, midday and afternoon. The daily *tefillah* (= prayer) consisted of a series of eighteen benedictions along with the *Shema* (recitation of Deut. 6:4-9; 11:3-21; Num. 15:36-41). Wherever he happened to be at the time of prayer, the pious Jew would automatically begin his devotional procedure. In the synagogue, there were two primary emphases, prayer and the study of Scripture. Prayers, once again, consisted of the recitation of the *Shema* and the eighteen benedictions. These were offered while standing; hence, they were called the *Amidah* (= standing).<sup>77</sup>

Of course, for the one who wanted to impress others with his piety, it was all too easy to be “caught” in a public place at the time of prayer or to make the most of synagogue opportunities in order to be highly visible. Such motives, according to Jesus, were hypocritical. As in almsgiving, the one who so prays has received his receipt for the transaction, since he is buying public adulation.

By contrast, Jesus taught that his disciples should pray privately. The “secret of religion is religion in secret.” Private devotion to God matters most. Only such devotion will the heavenly Father reward. The expression “go into your room, [and] close the door” reflects upon the ancient prayer of the believer who awaits the justice of God (cf. Isa. 26:20; cf. 1 Kg. 4:33).<sup>78</sup>

If the prayers of Jesus’ followers should not be like the Pharisees, they should not be like the pagans, either. The Gentiles, who were polytheistic, attempted to bombard the gods and goddesses with a multitude of titles and words, so much so that they ended up “babbling.”<sup>79</sup> The kind of prayer Jesus advocated for his followers

---

<sup>76</sup> The oldest textual witnesses to Matthew do not have the expression “openly” as it appears in the KJV and other older English versions, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (New York: UBS, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 445-446, 457-461.

<sup>78</sup> The *tameion* (= storage room) was usually without windows, probably capable of being locked, and doubtless the most private place in the home.

<sup>79</sup> The meaning of the word *battalogeseite* is uncertain, but it is possibly based on the Aramaic *battal* (= idle, useless) and serves as a coinage of onomatopoeia. Older English Versions translated the word as “babble overmuch” (William Tyndale) or “vain repetition” (KJV); however, the emphasis should be on the word “vain” not necessarily on “repetition”, cf. Tasker, p. 74. France is correct in pointing out that this expression does not forbid repetition *per se*, or for that matter, set forms of prayer, cf. France, p. 133.



was sincere and intelligible, not long and groveling. The heavenly Father knows the needs of his children before they pray. Prayer is neither a way of informing God of something he missed, nor a leverage against him through a marathon of words.

### **The Great Prayer (6:9-15)**

Commonly called “the Lord’s prayer,” the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is deceptively simple. It is short enough to be memorized by a child, yet profound enough to merit a wide range of interpretations. In the first place, it should be pointed out that Jesus seems to have given his disciples this prayer on more than one occasion. The parallel prayer in Luke falls in a different setting. The disciples asked Jesus about prayer as he finished his own prayers (Lk. 11:1). John the Baptizer had taught his followers to pray, so Jesus’ followers asked for the same sort of instruction. This prayer was Jesus’ response, and while not identical to the one in Matthew, it is essentially the same.

#### **The Lord’s Prayer (My Translation)**

##### **Matthew 6:9-13**

*Our Father, the one in the heavens,  
 Let your name be hallowed;  
 let your kingdom come,  
 let your will be done,  
 As in heaven, so on earth;  
 today, give us our daily bread,  
 and forgive us our debts as we  
 also forgave our debtors;  
 and do not bring us into temptation  
 but rescue us from the evil one.*

##### **Luke 11:2-4**

*Father,  
 let your name be hallowed;  
 let your kingdom come;  
 each day give us our bread for  
 tomorrow,  
 and forgive us our sins, for also  
 we, ourselves, forgive everyone  
 owing us;  
 and do not bring us into temptation.*

The structure of the prayer is important. The address is to God as Father. We should assume that underlying the Greek word “Father” in the gospels is the Aramaic word *Abba* (= papa, father), since Mark’s Gospel seems to suggest as much (cf. Mk. 14:36), and this Aramaic address for God was so used by the earliest Christians (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). After this intimate address comes two “thou” clauses, a statement of reverence and a petition for God’s rule to be established on earth to the

same degree as in heaven. The third section of the prayer consists of two “we” petitions, the first for sustenance and the second for forgiveness. Finally, the prayer concludes with a plea for protection from temptation and the evil one.

Beyond the mechanical structure, there is a priority of sequence to the prayer that should not be missed. First, God is revered before any thought is given to petition. Next, three of the petitions are for God’s glory, and they come prior to the petitions for our human needs. The priority is on world issues first, then personal ones. Martin Luther was quite correct in saying that if the prayer is prayed “backwards”, it becomes egocentric instead of theocentric. Those who pray for personal needs first “seek rather their own honour and glory and a name for themselves than the glory of God.” They want to live happy and please themselves, and even when they pray the first three petitions, they do so in a way that desires their own glory, their own kingdom, their own power and their own will.<sup>80</sup>

The careful observer will note that the prayer is composed in the plural. The first person pronouns describing the ones praying are “our”, “us” and “we”. This immediately suggests that the prayer was intended for the community, not merely the individual. Furthermore, as a communal prayer it suggests that it is to be prayed verbatim, that is, Jesus was not offering merely a structural model for prayer to be loosely followed (though he may have been doing that, too); rather, he was offering the very words that he intended his disciples to use. That this is so is reinforced by the introduction, “Therefore, thus pray you...” (6:9a), or in Luke, “When you pray, say...” (Lk. 11:2). The early church took this command seriously, so much so, that one of the earliest instructions late in the first century was that this prayer should be offered verbatim by Christians three times each day.<sup>81</sup> The early Christians also used the Lord’s prayer as part of their communal worship, especially at baptisms and the celebration of the Lord’s Table. The introductory words in the early Christian liturgy were, “We make bold to say...”, a formula suggesting that it was the privilege of sincere believers to use this prayer.<sup>82</sup>

That the Lord’s Prayer, and indeed the whole Sermon on the Mount, was for believing disciples is significant for another reason. The teaching that follows, that one’s forgiveness of sins by the heavenly Father is connected to one’s forgiveness of others (6:14-15),<sup>83</sup> must surely be understood in the context of believing disciples

---

<sup>80</sup> P. Watson, *Let God Be God!* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), pp. 39-41.

<sup>81</sup> *Didache* 8. (The dating of the *Didache* is debated, some putting it as early as A.D. 50-70, but most putting it somewhat later near the turn of the century. Still, it is the earliest church order outside the New Testament.)

<sup>82</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 82-85.

<sup>83</sup> It may be observed that Matthew’s word *opheilema* (= debt) was a common synonym for sin in Jewish parlance, while Luke, of course, uses the more direct word *harmartia* (= sin).

who already have accepted Christ as Messiah and Lord. The two verbal tenses in Matthew are instructive, the first a direct plea, “forgive us” (imperative), and the second a reference to what already has happened, “as we forgave” (aorist). This completed action (“we forgave”) points backward to a forgiveness that antedates the prayer, a forgiveness that presumes the discipleship of the one praying. This petition is not the prayer of sinners asking for salvation. It is the prayer of believers asking for continued grace and mercy. Otherwise, the whole redemptive work of the cross would be unnecessary if a person might simply be acquitted at the last judgment on the basis of their forgiveness of others. The issue here is that forgiveness is a way of life for believers. The legalist who only wants “just desserts” cancels for himself God’s continued grace and mercy by his unforgiving attitude toward others. The point, then, is not that forgiving others is the way to be saved. Rather, it is that forgiving others is necessary for believers if they wish to avoid the Father’s discipline. The same is true in Jesus’ later statement, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (7:1). Jesus does not advocate a loose tolerance or latitudinarianism, and the higher standards held up in the rest of the sermon should settle any such question. Rather, when believers withhold mercy from others because of their shortcomings, they guarantee the discipline of God for their own.

The plea for the coming of God’s kingdom, that is, his rule over the earth to the same degree as in the heavens, is at once oriented to both the present and the future. In the larger context of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom, the rule of God was not some vague petition that looked only to the distant future. God’s kingdom even then was breaking into the world in the person of Jesus himself (cf. Mt. 12:28; Lk. 17:20-21). Thus, this part of the prayer was directed more toward the completion of this work than its commencement. Especially, it called Jesus’ disciples not to mistake the rule of God for the patriotic call for Jewish freedom (or any other socio-political remedy). While the Jews were always on the verge of revolt against Rome to reestablish their political autonomy, such a vision was not the equivalent of God’s kingdom. This part of the prayer comes out of the depth of Jewish longing for the kingdom, but it reorients Jesus’ disciples to the more important issue, the rule of God. The real enemy was not Rome; the real enemy was the evil one! The prophetic vision of the kingdom of God was not confined to Palestine. It was that “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

It is in this context of first century Jewish patriotism that the temptation was most acute. The language “lead us not into temptation” appears in some ancient versions as “do not let us succumb to temptation.” A possible underlying Aramaic idiom might be, “Do not let us go under in temptation.” These expressions seem to capture the intent of the petition. The phrase, “lead us not,” should be read in a

permissive sense, that is, “do not let me fall victim...”<sup>84</sup> Certainly in light of James 1:13 we should not believe that God leads believers into temptation! Also, it may be that the word *peirasmon* should be rendered “testing” rather than “temptation,” thus removing any suggestion that God tempts people.<sup>85</sup> As in a number of versions (so NIV, JB, NEB, TEV, ASV, NAB, NKJB, Weymouth, RSVmg, NASBmg), the Greek genitive *tou ponerou* (= the evil) may be taken as a substantive (i.e., “the evil one”), referring to Satan.<sup>86</sup>

### **Fasting (6:16-18)**

The third act of personal piety in Jewish religion, in addition to almsgiving and prayer, was fasting. The practice of abstaining from food for a specific period of time has roots in the Torah. Moses fasted forty days when he ascended Sinai to receive the ten commandments (Exod. 34:29; Deut. 9:9, 18), and a national fast was observed by the Israelites each year in anticipation of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29; 23:29; Num. 29:7). In the history of Israel, fasts were generally observed as a response to national emergencies or distress (Judg. 20:26: 1; 2 Chr. 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Neh. 1:4; Est. 4:16; Jer. 36:9) or as an expression of repentance (1 Sam. 7:6) or mourning (2 Sam. 1:12; 12:21). After the fall of Judah to Babylon, four annual fasts were instituted to remember the horror of the loss of Jerusalem (Zec. 7:1-7; 8:19). Typical elements in fasting included abstinence from food, water and wine (Dan. 10:3; Jonah 3:5, 7-8), an exchange of normal clothing for rough clothing (Isa. 58:1-5; Joel 2:12-13), and the throwing of dust and ashes on one’s head (2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Macc. 3:47). The hair was left unkept and the body un bathed.<sup>87</sup> While the Bible does not offer any information about the origin of fasting, the biblical references to it indicate that it was practiced as an expression of grief, dire emergency, repentance or calamity. However, in intertestamental Judaism, fasting, along with prayer and almsgiving, became a means of earning merit with God (Tobit 12:8), and it is this later aspect which Jesus challenged. Strict Pharisees fasted twice a week (Lk. 18:12), and as Jesus indicated, they made sure by their pained expressions that it did not go unnoticed.

---

<sup>84</sup> Jeremias *New Testament Theology*, pp. 201-202; C. Smith, *IDB* (1962) III.157.

<sup>85</sup> R. T. France notes that in Matthew the verb *peirazo* always signifies testing, and the translation as “temptation” is misleading, *Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 96, 136.

<sup>86</sup> The final traditional clause, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.” (KJV), seems to be based on 1 Chr. 29:10-11 and appears in several forms in later manuscripts, i.e., “for thine is the power and the glory for ever and ever”, “for thine is the power forever and ever”, “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen.” However, the clause does not appear in the most important early manuscripts of Matthew or in any manuscripts of Luke, and most modern versions leave it out or include it as a textual note. It is likely that this clause was composed for liturgical use in the churches, and hence passed into the text as a scribal gloss.

<sup>87</sup> J. Rylaardsdam, *IDB* (1962) II.261.

As with almsgiving and prayer, Jesus taught that fasting for any audience other than God was hypocritical. Those who fast in order to impress others have, as before, been paid in full (cf. 6:2, 5). Rather, when fasting the disciple should appear as he would normally appear so that his discipline of fasting will not be obvious to anyone but the heavenly Father. God will see it, and God will reward it.

John the Baptist required his disciples to fast, but Jesus did not (Mt. 9:14//Lk. 5:33). Still, Jesus seems to assume his disciples eventually would continue the discipline of fasting from time to time, and the history of the early church bears out this fact (Mt. 9:15//Lk. 5:35; Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).<sup>88</sup> However, there is no indication in the New Testament that fasting should be used as spiritual leverage to move God.<sup>89</sup> The use of fasting as a way to gain power is entirely absent in the Bible. Rather, the prophets warn that the true fasting of which God approves is that which sacrifices personal comfort in order “...to loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free...to share your food with the hungry, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him...” (Isa. 58:1-9; cf. Zech. 7:4-10).

## Materialism

If Jesus intended to offer his disciples a new vision for life under the reign of God, the next part of his instruction concerns their relationship to material life. The ancient people of God were disciplined and tested in the desert so that they might learn that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). Here, Jesus applies this principle to life in the kingdom of God. If his previous teaching focused on the religious sphere, the teaching here focuses on the secular sphere. Jesus, of course, does not divide the religious from the secular, for life in both spheres must be lived equally under the fatherhood of God. In this teaching, Jesus talks about *two treasures* (heavenly and earthly), *two conditions* (light and darkness), *two masters* (God and money) and *two preoccupations* (God’s kingdom and our physical needs).

---

<sup>88</sup>When Jesus says that his disciples will “fast” after he has left them, however, he may not be referring to abstinence from food, but the abstinence of doing without his physical presence. If so, then this statement is metaphorical.

<sup>89</sup>It may be noted that a few passages in the later manuscripts of the New Testament contain the word “fasting” while the earliest manuscripts do not (Mt. 17:21//Mk. 9:29; 1 Cor. 7:6). Lacking early manuscript support, most versions do not contain the word in such verses, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp. 43, 101, 554. It is primarily in the KJV translation based on the *Textus Receptus*, “this kind [i.e., of demon] goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”, that some have constructed a theology of power attainable through fasting. Such a conclusion must be rejected.

### **Fasting in the Christian Church**

In general, the earliest Christian community did not emphasize fasting as obligatory, as is apparent from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, who do not cite any saying or action of Jesus in this regard. Jewish Christians, on the other hand, continued the Jewish tradition of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays until about the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, when Wednesdays and Fridays were observed (probably in reaction to the widening rift between Judaism and Christianity). By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, fasting came to be emphasized as a meritorious work, especially during Lent, and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century it was obligatory for the whole church. The Roman Church continued to add fast days to the Christian calendar, while the Protestants tended to return fasting to the sphere of voluntary piety. In more modern times, Pentecostal and charismatic Christians have emphasized fasting, along with prayer, as a means to deepen one's spiritual life and/or a way of obtaining God's favor.

R. D. Linder

*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*

### **Faith or Material Security (6:19-24)**

Concern with material security is one of the biggest threats to spiritual life. Jesus sharply contrasted two kinds of treasure. The word *thesauros* (= treasure) was commonly applied to all kinds of agricultural products (e.g., corn and wine), especially what could be stored or deposited. It was also used of storage chests, chambers, houses, granaries and the like.<sup>90</sup> Earthly treasure deteriorates and is always liable to theft. Heavenly treasure is permanent and secure. Earthly, material treasure is susceptible to moths and "eating".<sup>91</sup> Heavenly, spiritual treasure is imperishable (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4).

Archibald Hunter perceptively observes that Christ did not mean, "Exert yourselves to get in heaven the things you treasure here on earth." Rather, Jesus intended his disciples to delight in the things that were valuable to God.<sup>92</sup> It is unlikely that Jesus meant to contradict the wisdom of providing for one's family or even one's old age (cf. Pro. 6:6-11; 1 Tim. 5:8), nor is he saying that Christians should despise the earthly gifts of God (cf. 1 Cor. 9:4; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; 6:8). Rather, he emphasized, as he says elsewhere, that life is not about the abundance of possessions (Lk. 12:15-21). Paul's interpretation of Jesus' teaching is to the point when he writes, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to

<sup>90</sup>F. Hauck, *TDNT* (1965) III.136-138; J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), p. 291.

<sup>91</sup> The Greek term *brosis* (= eating) could apply to metals (hence, the rendering "rust", so NIV, KJV, NASB) or to cloth, woven garments or wood (hence, the translation "woodworm", so JB, RSVmg).

<sup>92</sup> Hunter, 80.

put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17).

So, what is treasure in heaven? Jesus did not specify, but surely he had in mind the very kinds of things he had been emphasizing all along: mercy, peace-making, purity, persecution for righteousness, truthfulness, love, charity, prayer and the like. We should reject, of course, the medieval notion that this treasure is some sort of “treasury of merits” from which others can draw if there is a surplus.<sup>93</sup> Jesus’ famous saying, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” draws a sharp line. If one’s treasure is in God’s kingdom, then the very center of one’s life will be there, too. If one’s treasure is earthly, then one will be preoccupied with material things.

The saying about the eye points toward two conditions. The metaphor describing the eye as the lamp of the body means that healthy eyesight is important for living a normal life. One’s eye is like a lamp that enables him to see the world. Blindness, however, means that one lives in the dark. This metaphor suggests a higher, spiritual meaning. In spiritual terms, the person with a “single eye” is one who shows undivided loyalty toward God and the things of God.<sup>94</sup> If what should be spiritual illumination becomes spiritual darkness, what a deep darkness it is! The implication, of course, is that to live for material things is a life of darkness, since such a life is not lived for God’s eternal kingdom.

Jesus concluded this section with the famous saying that one cannot be slave to two masters. Lordship cannot be divided! To even suggest such a thing in a society familiar with slavery was absurd. In the same way, a man cannot be slave to both God and money.<sup>95</sup> He can serve one or the other, but he cannot serve both.

### **Faith or Anxiety (6:25-34)**

Directly related to his teachings about material security are Jesus’ follow-up remarks about anxiety. It is apparent from his mention of birds and flowers that Jesus draws his illustrations from Galilean country life. Yet even Galilean life in the beauty of the lake region was not less stressful than our own. The constant threat of drought, oppression and war made anxiety about survival a real mental and emotional preoccupation. Jesus, of course, hardly intended to teach that work or planning for the future was without merit, for even he pointed out that no sane person begins a

---

<sup>93</sup> The Roman Catholic teaching is that the lives of the saints had such an overflow of good works beyond what was necessary to counterbalance their own shortcomings that this “treasury” is available to living Christians who might fall short, cf. N. Van Doornik et al., *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1956), pp. 290-291. This teaching rightly was condemned by Luther and the Protestants as directly conflicting with the biblical teaching of grace.

<sup>94</sup> The eye that is *haplous* (= single, simple, sincere, generous, healthy) is one that is totally devoted to the service of God.

<sup>95</sup> The Aramaic *mamona* (= possessions) or Mammon (KJV) refers to material wealth, especially money.

venture without first considering the cost, discipleship being no exception (cf. Lk. 14:25-33). Someone who, like himself, grew up in a carpenter's shop is not likely to denigrate work. Still, a nervous preoccupation with earthly life, food and clothing betrays that one is not fully trusting in the care of the heavenly Father. Even birds, who plan for the future by nesting, do not display the very human trait of nervous anxiety about their future. Lilies do so even less! They hardly worry about their clothes, yet they exude more splendor than Solomon! Worry will not add a single constructive thing to life.<sup>96</sup> Jesus' followers must entrust themselves and their futures to God, not frantically grasp for material things like the pagans. Anxiety is the antithesis of faith, and a preoccupation with securing earthly things dulls the spiritual senses toward heavenly ones!

Instead, the disciples must remember that none of their needs are hidden from the eye of their caring heavenly Father. The disciples must be a seeking community, but their search must be after the things that God values, such as, his sovereign rule and his righteousness. The mention of seeking God's kingdom recalls the similar line in the Lord's prayer (cf. 6:10a). Here, as elsewhere, it refers to God's sovereign rule, the prophetic promise of a new order in which God would intervene in human history and reign over the earth, a reign that already had been inaugurated in the coming of Jesus. The term "his righteousness" is less easy to interpret. On the one hand, it may refer to righteousness in the sense of salvation.<sup>97</sup> If so, it is God's righteousness bestowed as a gift (similar to the Pauline sense, cf. Rom. 1:17). On the other hand, it may refer to the kind of behavior for which God calls in the present life, a behavior that takes its values from the coming kingdom rather than the surrounding culture.<sup>98</sup> In this case, "his righteousness" refers to social justice (similar to the messages of social justice in the Old Testament prophets). In either case, it clearly is not a selfish seeking after material security. When one seeks the things that God values, the things that pertain to earthly life will all fall into place as well. Of course, Jesus' teaching had a particular meaning in light of the Jewish nationalism of his own times. Those who through a personal or national agenda sought a kingdom of land, political independence and ancestral rights were worshipping an idol god who could not deliver.<sup>99</sup>

The similarity between Jesus' teaching about a preoccupation with earthly

---

<sup>96</sup> The English versions vary in translating 6:27 due to the ambiguity of the word *helikian* (= span). Sometimes, the word means "life-span," and at other times it means a measurement of length. Even linear measurements can sometimes be applied to length of life as well as to height (Psa. 39:5). Hence, adding "one cubit" (about 18 inches) to one's "span" is sometimes taken as lengthening the life-span (so NIV, RSV, JB, TEV, ASV, NAB, NASB) and sometimes as adding to one's height (so KJV, RV, NEB, NKJB).

<sup>97</sup> Hunter, p. 85.

<sup>98</sup> France, p. 141.

<sup>99</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, p. 291.



security and Haggai's first oracle to the post-exilic community is striking. In Haggai's day, the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem were disillusioned and discouraged, leading them to give up on their mandate to rebuild the temple (Hag. 1:2). Consequently, they busied themselves by paneling their own homes and concentrating on their crops and clothes (Hag. 1:3-6). "You expected much," God said, "but...I blew it away. Why? Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house" (Hag. 3:7-9). However, if the post-exilic community would only seek God's purposes first (in this case, the reconstruction of the temple), he would see to it that their needs were met. They only needed to realize the profound truth of Yahweh's promise, "I am with you" (Hag. 1:13).

Jesus rounded off his teaching on materialism with the quips, "Do not be overconcerned about tomorrow, for tomorrow will do its own worrying. Today's misfortune is enough for today."<sup>100</sup> Both sayings are similar to rabbinical teachings,<sup>101</sup> and both point out the obvious but often ignored truth that tomorrow is completely outside our control today. Notice the contrast between our seeking God's kingdom and our concern for today's needs expressed here as well as in Jesus' great prayer (cf. 6:10-11). Jesus is clear, of course, that life will bring trouble. God's daily provision is not a guarantee that life will be trouble free. Still, there is no need to add tomorrow's troubles to today by needless anxiety.

## Attitudes

### Judgmentalism and Discretion (7:1-6)

There is a difference between a sense of judgment and judgmentalism. If his disciples were to live with the values of God's kingdom, Jesus said they must have the one but not the other. As before, the themes resident in the beatitudes are reinforced in the later teaching. Since life in the kingdom is to be characterized by mercy (cf. 5:7), judgmentalism is the sin that must be avoided.

Judgmentalism was a way of life for many Jews during the time of Jesus. Racial and social judgmentalism was the outgrowth of the rigorous maintenance of racial purity. Within the Jewish community, there were clear social strata based upon purity of descent. In addition, there were social stigmas attached to a whole series of despised trades. Samaritans, pagans and women formed a class even lower.

Beyond racial and social categories, Jewish religious sects, especially the Pharisees, also castigated those who did not follow their religious behavioral codes.

---

<sup>100</sup> Albright's translation in the *Anchor Bible*

<sup>101</sup> The rabbis taught, "Be not anxious for the morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth" and "there is enough trouble in its hour", cf. D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 145.

Repeatedly, Jesus was thrown into conflict with them because he fraternized with people of despised trades (Mt. 9:10-13) and allowed his disciples to breach sabbatical traditions (Mt. 12:1-14) and defilement regulations (Mt. 15:1-2). Once, Jesus commented on the attitude of triumphalism in the parable of the Pharisee who prayed about himself, “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Lk. 18:11). So, when Jesus demanded that his followers give up this human tendency toward judgmentalism, he was not addressing an irrelevant issue.

### **RACIAL AND SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION IN JESUS’ TIME**

Based on social discriminatory lists in the Jewish Mishnah, the categories of social discrimination can be outlined fairly well. Here is a sampling.

<b><u>Jewish Classes</u></b>	<b><u>Despised Trades</u></b>	<b><u>Others</u></b>
<i>Priests, Levites, full Israelites</i>	<i>Camel &amp; donkey drivers</i>	<i>Gentiles</i>
<i>Illegitimate children of priests, proselytes, freedmen</i>	<i>Sailors, carters, janitors</i>	<i>Slaves</i>
<i>Bastards, temple slaves, the fatherless &amp; foundlings</i>	<i>Weavers &amp; tailors</i>	<i>Samaritans</i>
<i>Eunuchs</i>	<i>Physicians &amp; blood-letters</i>	<i>Women</i>
	<i>Tanners, tax collectors</i>	

Joachim Jeremias  
*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*

Judgmentalism - the attitude of legalism - displaces God. If all judgment has been entrusted to God’s Son by the heavenly Father (Jn. 5:22), then human judgmentalism is arrogant and presumptuous (cf. 1 Cor. 4:3-5). Those who adopt such an attitude will be treated with the same rigor. Grammatically, it is unclear whether Jesus, when he says “you too will be judged”, has in mind the judgment of God or the judgment of others. Both are possible interpretations of the passive voice. On the one hand, Jesus may be saying that if one is judgmental, he invites God to be just as rigorous on him as he is on others. Alternatively, Jesus may be saying that those who practice judgmentalism are surely setting themselves up for equal

judgmentalism on the part other people.<sup>102</sup> In favor of the former is the similar saying on forgiveness just following the great prayer (cf. 6:14-15). As in the saying on forgiveness, Jesus is not addressing the subject of how to be saved, as though one could be exempt himself from God's judgment by simply refusing to condemn anyone else. Rather, Jesus is speaking to committed disciples about their attitudes toward others. Harshness toward others invites harshness from God.

To reinforce his point, Jesus once more resorted to humor with the splinter and plank analogy.<sup>103</sup> The ludicrous hyperbole of a man with a log or plank in his eye trying to perform optical surgery on someone else is intended to be uproariously funny, though it has a very serious point! Only hypocrites indulge in judgmentalism, for in passing judgment on the shortcomings of others, they ignore their own.<sup>104</sup>

That Jesus forbids his disciples to engage in judgmentalism does not mean that he intends them to suspend their powers of discretion, however. Dogs are still dogs, and pigs are still pigs. Both animals were proverbial as indiscriminating beasts (2 Pet. 2:22), and by analogy, they become symbolic epithets for indiscriminating people (cf. Phil. 3:2). In the present context, holy things and pearls represent the good things of the kingdom.<sup>105</sup> It is no use to give them to those who will not appreciate their value. Not only will they disregard them, they will turn viciously on the giver as well. In a similar way, Jesus himself spoke in parables so that those who were of a mind to reject his teaching were eliminated by their own spiritual stubbornness (Mt. 13:10-17).

### Seeking God (7:7-11)

Jesus' comments on his disciples' attitudes toward others naturally leads back to their attitude toward God. As always, the horizontal relationship is inextricably bound up with the vertical one. The verbs "seek", "knock" and "ask" are metaphors for prayer.<sup>106</sup> It may be noted that the verbal form is not only imperative, but iterative.<sup>107</sup> In contrast to the brevity of public prayer (cf. 6:7-8), private prayer

---

<sup>102</sup> The Lukan parallel links judgment, condemnation, forgiveness and generosity. Here, as well, the passive voice is ambiguous, and commentators vacillate between the two possibilities.

<sup>103</sup> The Greek words *karphos* (= speck, chip, small piece of straw, chaff, etc.) and *dokos* (= beam of wood) have been variously translated.

<sup>104</sup> Jesus may well have been acquainted with the stage, from which comes the Greek word *hypocrites* (= stage actor). Sepphoris, the Roman city just three miles from Nazareth, had a theater built in about 3 BC by Herod Antipas. Jesus repeatedly used the term *hypocrites* as a negative metaphor to describe those for whom religion is a pretense, cf. Richard Batey, "Sepphoris, an Urban Portrait of Jesus," *BAR* (May/June 1992), pp. 59-60.

<sup>105</sup> Attempts to define "holy things" and "pearls" more tightly are doubtful. An early Christian interpretation of this passage was that it referred to giving eucharist to the unbaptized (*Didache* 9), but the biblical context makes this interpretation questionable.

<sup>106</sup> "Knocking," for instance, is also a metaphor for prayer in rabbinic sayings, France, p. 144.

<sup>107</sup> The present imperative mood is progressive or durative, that is, it does not call for an action at a single time, but

should be an ongoing practice. The thought expressed by this mood is similar to Jesus' parable of the persistent widow, who continually appealed to the unjust judge so that he finally heard her case (cf. Lk. 18:1-8). The heavenly Father, of course, is not like an unjust judge who decides cases only grudgingly. Rather, the heavenly Father delights to give good things to his children. Similarly, Jesus' parable of the neighbor who wanted to borrow bread in the night, and by persistence finally received it, is followed immediately by the parallel saying, "So, ask, seek and knock" (Lk. 11:5-13). As before, the heavenly Father is not like some reluctant neighbor. Both parables are stories of contrast, not similarity. Both there and here, the critical phrase is the *a fortiori* expression, "How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" Even natural fathers, whose motives might be less than pure, are generous with their children when they ask for food. They do not give dangerous or vicious gifts. God, who is above evil, will certainly respond with good gifts to the petitions of his children. Above all, the greatest gifts he gives are spiritual. Where Matthew's gospel reads "good things," the parallel text in Luke specifically mentions the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 11:13), which in Luke refers to the messianic promise of the new order.

The good gifts God gives are those things necessary for natural and spiritual life. Earlier, in the great prayer, Jesus' taught the disciples to pray for "daily bread," that is, what was necessary for sustaining life (6:11). Later, he chided those who fret over food and clothing, stressing that the heavenly Father knows well the needs of his children (6:32). Here, in the illustration of children asking for bread or fish, Jesus uses the most common foods in Galilee, again the things necessary to sustain life. As such, he is not talking about luxuries or fancies, but rather, the good gifts that are necessary for life, both naturally and spiritually. The parallelism defines what sort of gifts are in view. Earthly parents, while generous to give their children the food they need, do not usually yield to childish whims and fancies. It follows that the heavenly Father knows what his children need, too, but he will not be bent into giving them inappropriate gifts, even if they ask for them. This truth is bluntly reaffirmed by James, when he says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (cf. Jam. 4:3). Thus, when Jesus urges his followers to "ask, seek and knock," he is not giving carte blanche for indiscriminate wheedling. Rather, he urges them to keep on praying for their daily needs, both natural and spiritual. Jesus himself provides the most striking example, when in Gethsemane he prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (cf. Mt. 26:42).

Furthermore, by urging his disciples to keep on asking, Jesus is not suggesting

---

rather, it is expressed in the English paraphrases, "Keep on asking...keep on seeking...keep on knocking", cf. E. Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1965), p. 262.

that they can badger God into responding to them. The point of asking repeatedly is not that God responds to pressure, but that his children need to constantly reaffirm their dependency on him. Constant prayer is not so much to inform God of our needs (he already knows them) nor to manipulate him into answering our requests (as the sovereign Lord, he is not open to manipulation). Rather, constant prayer reinforces for us our need to completely rely upon him! In fact, in the larger sense God gives the necessary gifts to sustain life whether or not we ask for them, and it matters not whether we are evil or good (cf. 5:45). Not to ask for such gifts, however, betrays a presumptuous arrogance toward God, as though we could very do without him. Such an attitude characterizes the unbeliever, not the disciple.

### **The Golden Rule (7:12)**

Jesus summarizes his teaching on attitudes, and indeed the entire sermon,<sup>108</sup> with what since the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been called “the golden rule” (7:12).<sup>109</sup> Treating others in the same way you want to be treated by them is the essence of the Law and the Prophets. The *Torah* and the *Nebiim* (Law and Prophets) were the two oldest sections of the Hebrew canon of Scripture, and Jesus often seems to use them as shorthand to refer to the Old Testament as a whole (cf. 5:17; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:29-31; 24:27). Thus, he says that the burden and theme of the entire Hebrew Scriptures are summed up in this simple rule, a rule that elsewhere he describes as loving one’s neighbor as oneself (cf. 5:44; 19:19; 22:39-40; Rom. 13:9; Lev. 19:18).

### **The Two Ways**

The conclusion to the great sermon comes in the form of three parables, each marking out the two choices before Jesus’ listeners. The metaphor of two paths is very old. Psalm 1, for instance, employs this metaphor, and Jeremiah’s oracle follows suit, when he says, “See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death” (Jer. 21:8; cf. Deut. 30:19). Here, the two paths emphasize a single theme, the choice leading to the way of destruction or the choice leading to the way of life.

In the context of extreme Jewish nationalism that was part of the fabric of Galilean culture, especially with its tendency toward armed resistance to Rome, Jesus’ great sermon offers another alternative. Zealotry, however intense and however motivated by the glories of a past theocracy, would not bring in God’s

---

<sup>108</sup> The expression “Law and Prophets” at the beginning of the sermon (5:17) and here at the end of the sermon (7:12) seem intended to embrace the whole.

<sup>109</sup> A similar saying appears in the teachings of Rabbi Hillel in the time of Jesus, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creatures” (*b. Sabb.* 31.a), and other similar forms appear in Greco-Roman, oriental and Jewish literature, cf. G. Stanton, “The Sermon on the Mount,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), p. 743.

kingdom. Rather, it would create a disaster, not merely of personal dimensions, but of national dimensions as well. God's kingdom was not for the revolutionary; it was for the poor, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted. Those who followed Christ's alternative, far from accepting the ideals of the freedom fighter, must give up murder, hatred, and retaliation. If a Roman soldier asked them to carry his military pack for a mile, they should offer to go yet another. The Jews' bitter hatred of the Romans must be set aside and replaced with love for the enemy. Concerns about securing one's own future through patriotic zeal must give way to absolute trust in the heavenly Father for survival. In the end, this alternative was like a narrow gate. While there were many false prophets calling for the Jews to rally their forces for resistance, the fruit of such efforts was rotten. Only one choice would lead to an enduring life, the choice of hearing Jesus' words and putting them into practice. This context, which surely must flavor the way Jesus' original audience heard his message, means that Jesus' teachings were subversive. It was a call to forsake the burning fever of nationalism for a higher cause, the cause of Jesus, God's Son, who called his fellow Jews to a different sort of kingdom. Later, at his trial, Jesus would say, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (Jn. 18:36).<sup>110</sup>

But does this context of Jewish nationalism exhaust the meaning of the great sermon and its closing parables? Most Christians have said, "No." Jesus does not simply offer an alternative to the Jews of Galilee for their own times, he also offers an alternative for all peoples of all times. Thus, the narrow gate versus the broad road, the good and bad trees, and the parable of the two houses points to the choice every man and woman must make. The person and message of Jesus is the watershed of eternity, and everyone who hears the message is confronted with the same choice. The choice is not merely a temporal one with temporal consequences, but an eternal one with eternal consequences. It is about "life" versus "destruction", *Gehenna* versus the kingdom of God, and the final decisions handed down at last judgment. The kind of path one chooses—the kind of house one builds—is of the highest possible import.

### **The Parable of the Narrow Gate and the Broad Road (7:13-14)**

This metaphor, which is the defining framework for John Bunyan's famous allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, employs a familiar analogy. Narrow gates, in

---

<sup>110</sup> This context of Jewish nationalism has been sharply brought to the forefront of gospels studies by N. T. Wright and others. However, unlike the scholars in the so-called Jesus Seminar, who are willing to sacrifice the theological meaning of Jesus for a psychological, sociological or philosophical agenda, Wright remains solidly anchored to orthodox Christian thought.

biblical times, were generally suited for the passage of persons in single file. In fortified cities prior to the time of the *pax Romana*, such narrow gates were easily defensible and sometimes camouflaged. The fact that such gates were narrow also meant they were not suitable for oxen or donkeys loaded with wares. Thus, when Jesus challenged his listeners to enter the narrow gate, he implied that they must enter as individuals, not become lost in the mass of the crowd. They would not be able to bring with them the cultural baggage of life. Rather, they must choose this narrow gate and the narrow road beyond because it leads to life, not because it was easy. Only a few folk find and choose this path. The broad road, on the other hand, will handle a throng. One need not be very intentional about such a path, for it is sufficient to allow the crowd to make the decision. Many folk travel this road. So, there are two gates, two roads, two destinations and two crowds. “Which will you choose?” Jesus asked.

Before assuming too quickly that this parable should be used to quantify the numbers of those who will populate heaven and hell, one should observe that in a parallel passage in Luke, Jesus refused to comment on such a conjecture. When asked, “Are only a few people going to be saved?”, he urged his listeners to make every effort to enter the narrow gate, but in the end, said that people would come from all directions to the eschatological banquet (Lk. 13:22-30). The emphasis is not on the final numbers but on the restrictions of the narrow path as opposed to the roominess of the wide path.<sup>111</sup>

### **Two Trees and Their Fruit (7:15-23)**

This illustration employs a mixed metaphor, the wolf in sheep’s clothing, the two vines and the two trees. In all cases, the metaphor warns against pseudo-leaders. The characterization of false voices as wolves goes back to Israel’s prophets. Ezekiel, the exiled priest in Babylon, preached against priests, princes and prophets who, like wolves, tore the skin from their own people (Ezek. 22:25-29). Zephaniah, somewhat earlier, used the same metaphor (Zeph. 3:1-4; cf. Acts 20:29). That such false prophets would come in the garb of sheep implies that their true nature is concealed.

It is this veiled character that leads to the second of the metaphors, the two vines. The real test of such prophets is to what end their urgings lead, hence, they are to be recognized by their fruit. While a cursory glance at grape vines and thorn bushes may not distinguish between them, a quick look at what they produce makes clear the difference. One produces grapes, the other thorns. A person will never pick figs from a thistle bush! Thorns and thistles, then, symbolize the real result of

---

<sup>111</sup> The descriptive Greek words are *stenos* (= narrow), *thlebo* (= to press upon, make narrow), *plateia* (= wide) and *eurychoros* (= spacious, broad).

### **Pseudo-Prophets Before the Time of Jesus**

The prototype for Jewish revolutionary patriotism, of course, was the Maccabean revolt in 164 B.C. After the Roman occupation in 63 B.C., this ideal was revived many times.

- ❑ Hezekiah, the zealot bandit (40s B.C.)
- ❑ Six thousand Pharisees who refused an oath to Caesar (c. 10 B.C.)
- ❑ Jewish patriots pulled down Herod's ornamental eagle from the temple gate (4 B.C.)
- ❑ Judas ben Hezekiah's revolt in Galilee (4 B.C.)
- ❑ Feast of Pentecost riots (4 B.C.)
- ❑ Messianic movement of Simon and Anthronges (4 B.C.)
- ❑ Judas the Galilean and the census riots (A.D. 6)
- ❑ Various incidents under the governorship of Pontius Pilate (mass protests and riots against Roman standards in Jerusalem, use of temple money to build an aqueduct, sending troops to kill Galileans while offering sacrifice at the temple, placing Roman votive shields in Jerusalem)

N. T. Wright,

*The New Testament and the People of God*

following false prophets. Such leaders offer no sustenance for life, only the pricking misery of shattered expectations.

So it is with trees and their fruit. Healthy trees bear healthy fruit, while sickly trees bear rotten fruit. Once again, there is a double-edge to Jesus' words. In a local context, Jesus' listeners must surely have recalled the many revolutionary voices of the past several decades, voices that incited zealotry but led to horrible consequences. At a higher level, however, Jesus may also have envisioned the false teachers of his church that surely he knew were coming.

All such trees and their fruit will be evaluated. Just as farmers prune and cut down unfruitful trees, throwing the dead branches into the fire, so false prophets also will be destroyed. Within history, they will be crushed by the Romans, who regularly crucified revolutionaries. Nor does Jesus' teaching apply only to patriotic revolutionaries. It also applies to anyone else who dares to speak in God's name. At the coming of God's kingdom, Jesus himself will be the final judge, as he implies by his use of the first person singular (7:22). The criteria for judgment will be the will of the Father. Prophecies, exorcisms and miracles, as spectacular as they may be, do not necessarily qualify as "good fruit." Rather, only those leaders who produce fruit in harmony with the Father's will can qualify. Here, of course, Jesus' teaching recalls the great prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (cf. 6:10). Those whose fruit is out of alignment with the Father's will, Jesus will reject (cf. Mt. 15:13). His words, "Away from me, you evildoers," is from Psalm 6:8.

The early church took seriously this teaching by Christ, for they were forced to



contend with false voices, too. Many if not most of Paul's letters contain lengthy sections addressing the danger of misdirected leaders, while the letters of John, James, Peter and Jude do the same. In the post-apostolic church, the danger remained. One of the earliest Christian compositions apart from the New Testament warns, "Yet not everyone that speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only if he have the ways of the Lord. From his ways therefore the false prophet and the prophet shall be recognized. And every prophet teaching the truth, if he does not what he teaches, is a false prophet."<sup>112</sup>

### **The Parable of the Two Houses (7:24-27)**

In the closing illustration Jesus offers the famous parable of the two builders. Houses, especially rural ones, were often built of mud bricks, so the stability of the ground for the building site was critical. Most structures were built on the slopes of the hills rather than in the valleys, since all arable land was reserved for crops. The wise builder chose a building site on stable ground, preferably on rock. Only a fool would build a house in the sand of a wadi, since sudden cloudbursts would turn the dry beds into violent streams. The downpour provided the test! The torrent of water would quickly erode the sand from under a house built in a wadi, and the whole structure would collapse. A house built on a rock, on the other hand, would survive.

In a preliminary sense, this illustration anticipates the horrible consequences of the Jewish revolutionary movement that would be crushed in the First Jewish Revolt of the late 60s. If the Galileans whom Jesus addressed could not be turned from their desperate attempts to free themselves from Roman occupation, they would be destroyed by the Roman war machine. In fact, Jesus predicted just such an end. The day would come in the lifetimes of most of those listening when Jerusalem (and Galilee) would be devastated and the temple would be torn down, stone by stone (cf. 24:2; Lk. 21:20-24). The day would arrive when the Jews would cry out to the mountains, "Fall on us!" (cf. Lk. 23:28-31).

However, the parable of the two houses surely has more in mind than a temporal lesson, especially following, as it does, on the statements about entering the kingdom of heaven and the reference to "that day," a clear allusion to the last judgment. Who will survive the last great test? Only the one who has built a life of obedience on Jesus' teachings! It is the one who hears Jesus' words and "puts them into practice" who is like the wise builder constructing a house on rock! Jesus' contemporaries, in urging an intensification of Torah observance, said that the one who knew and obeyed the Torah could not be moved.<sup>113</sup> By contrast, Jesus said,

---

<sup>112</sup> *Didache* 11.

<sup>113</sup> J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribners, 1966), 153.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice,” is building on solid rock.

### **Epilogue (7:28-29)**

The expression, “When Jesus had finished saying these things,” is a formal transition by Matthew back into the narrative of Jesus’ public ministry (see introductory comments on “How the Sermon was Composed”). Though the primary audience has been Jesus’ own disciples (cf. 5:1-2), the secondary audience was the crowds who listened in. They were incredulous in that Jesus presented himself as an authority in his own right. The more usual pattern of teaching from Jewish experts on the Torah was their quotation and reference to the traditional opinions of the rabbis. Jesus went far beyond the handed down traditions, and in a number of cases, he corrected or directly opposed the handed down traditions. He truly taught as “one who had authority!” He acknowledged, “You have heard it was said by the ancients,” but he also urged, “But I say to you!” Archibald Hunter has aptly stated, “The multitudes were astonished,’ and after nineteen hundred years we are astonished too.”<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> Hunter, p. 96.