

Kingdom Vision

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The **Story of God** Bible Commentary

SERMON ON
THE MOUNT |

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General Editors

CHAPTER 2

Matthew 5:3 – 12



LISTEN to the Story

¹His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them.¹
He said:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

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

¹¹“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

*Listening to the text in the Story: Leviticus 26–27; Deuteronomy 28;
Psalm 1; Isaiah 61.*

1. Translations are interesting here. A literal translation would be “And opening his mouth Jesus began to teach them.” The NIV, like the NRSV, simplifies by having only “he began to teach them,” dropping the apparently redundant “opening his mouth.” Older translations (KJV, ASV) and standard translations in other languages (French, German, Spanish) have “opening his mouth.” Tom

Beginning Jesus' greatest Sermon with a list of the good guys implies (and the parallel at Luke 6:20–26 makes it explicit) a corresponding list of bad guys. Matthew will provide for us in Matthew 23's "woe" sayings an alternative list of bad guys. Not only that, Jesus finds all the "wrong" people on God's side and all the "right" people against God. Dallas Willard calls this a list of "God-based inversion" and the "hopelessly blessables" and finds at work a "gospel for the silly world."² Such a list is the way both to get your audience's attention and to force introspection. Or as Tom Wright cleverly put it, Jesus here takes us through the sound barrier, where things begin to work backwards.³ Rosemary Dowsett observed that these blessings do not call attention to your typical manly characteristics but instead to those that in some cultures would be called "womanly."⁴ Those who first heard this list of the truly blessed by God immediately began to wonder about themselves by asking, "Am I in or out?" The Beatitudes are a radical manifesto of a kingdom way of life because Jesus reveals who is in and who is not.

Two mutations of Israel's story occur in the Beatitudes. First, Jesus joins the prophetic voices, like Isaiah, who contend that not all of Israel is on God's side and that the remnant, or the faithful, are the true Israel. Jesus redefines who the remnant are. Second, Jesus stands here at least as more than a prophet. Jesus is the Lord, and Jesus pronounces who is on God's side. The natural response to Jesus' list of the blessed is to ask, "Who does this man think he is?"

Listings like this at the time of Jesus had two basic orientations: one list rolled out the names of the saints, usually describing their behaviors, while another list focused on the characteristics of those who were observant of Torah and approved by God. For the first, I mention the list of noble ancestors in the Old Testament apocryphal book, Sirach 44; later in the New Testament we find a similar listing of saints in Hebrews 11. The other way of categorizing people, by characteristics of piety, can be found in later rabbinic texts, like *Mishnah 'Abot* 5:12:

Wright's new translation (KNT) offers a helpful translation: "He took a deep breath, and began his teaching." Another translation of the Beatitudes worthy of consideration is that of T. D. Howell, *The Matthean Beatitudes in Their Jewish Origins: A Literary and Speech Act Analysis* (Studies in Biblical Literature; New York: Lang, 2011), 181–82. Here are his principal findings: "spiritually destitute," "those who experience sorrow," "humbled while on earth," "longing for and needing what is right," "showing mercy," "hearts of devotion," "who make peace," and "treated badly because of associating with the right."

2. D. Willard, *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1998), 121–23.

3. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 1:35.

4. Dowsett, "Matthew," 525.

- A. There are four types of disciples:
- B. (1) quick to grasp, quick to forget—he loses what he gains
- C. (2) slow to grasp, slow to forget—what he loses he gains;
- D. (3) quick to grasp, slow to forget—a sage;
- E. (4) slow to grasp, quick to forget—a bad lot indeed.⁵

Jesus' list diverges from both of these lists and blesses the most unlikely of people. Instead of congratulating the Torah observant or the rigorously faithful or the heroic, he blesses the marginalized who stick with God through injustice.

Beginning with this list shapes the entire Sermon because it jolts us all into listening more attentively. We ask, "If these are the people who are in, what does that mean for me? If this is how the in-group lives, how should I live?" Jesus does not stand foursquare with the tradition of listing the saints, nor does he stand alongside the rabbis who saw humans through Torah observance. Instead, Jesus approached morals through the lens of *people who were (actually) living out the kingdom vision*. The Beatitudes, then, are a radical revisioning of the people of God. As Warren Carter frames it:

In the beatitudes, Jesus has the disciples imagine a different world, a different identity for themselves, a different set of practices, a different relationship to the status quo. Why imagine? Not because it is impossible. Not because it is escapist. Not because it is fantasy. But because it begins to counter patterns imbibed from the culture of the imperial world.⁶

EXPLAIN the Story

What the disciples hear in the list is a revolutionary new basis for approval. Jesus tells the world that this motley crew around him is the true people of God, those who will populate the kingdom and enjoy the bounty of that kingdom. Maybe it is because I am privileged in our world, but those chosen by Jesus for inclusion make me nod my head in approval of his list. But my nodding is short-lived because as we proceed through this Sermon we will all eventually shift from nodding to wondering, if not disapproving. As Lucy

5. For the Mishnah, see Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). A list is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls at 4Q525 2.2.1–6 (the blessing here is for faithfulness to the Torah as the community interpreted it).

6. Carter, *What Are They Saying*, 21. Along this line of thinking Charles Campbell likens the Sermon to "folly" and Jesus to a "jester," pushing forward the radicality of Jesus' alternative society; see C. Campbell, "The Folly of the Sermon on the Mount," in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines* (ed. D. Fleer and D. Bland; St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 59–68.

Lind Hogan once asked us to consider as we read this Sermon, “When did the nodding stop?”⁷

The Meaning of “Blessed”

The word “blessed” is a blessed problem. Translations have done their best to find the perfect English word to translate the underlying Greek word (*makarios*) or sometimes the hypothetical Hebrew or Aramaic word Jesus actually used (perhaps *'ašrē*, as in Ps 1:1; 32:1, or *bārûk*, as in Gen 14:19 or Deut 28:3). Furthermore, the entire history of the philosophy of the “good life” and the late modern theory of “happiness” is at work when one says, “Blessed are....” Thus, this swarm of connections leads us to consider Aristotle’s great Greek term *eudaimonia*, which means something like happiness or human flourishing, but it also prompts us to consider modern studies of what makes people happy.⁸

All of this gets bundled into the decision of which English word best translates the Greek word *makarios* (“blessed” in the NIV) now in the Beatitudes. An adventurous journey across the terrains of possible English words would be fun if this term were found in a subordinate clause in an otherwise insignificant verse in the Bible. But on this one word the entire passage stands and from this one word the whole list hangs. Get this word right, the rest falls into place; get it wrong, and the whole thing falls apart. We need to drill down to get it right.

The secret is to see this term in light of the Bible’s story about who is blessed and who is not. Once we get that story’s perspective, we are given parameters and content for understanding this term in this context, and once that happens we can examine the history of the quest for the good life and happiness. There are at least five major themes at work in this word “blessed.”

First, the one who is “blessed” is blessed *by the God of Israel*. The entire biblical Story is in some sense shaped by God’s watching over his elect people Israel, evaluating their covenant observance and either approving or disapproving of them in tangible ways. This theme has two primary points of origin: Leviticus 26–27 and Deuteronomy 28 as well as the Wisdom tradition, where it refers to a tangible, flourishing life rooted in common sense, hard work, and listening to one’s elders (Pss 1; 32:1–2; Prov 3:13; 8:32; 20:7; 28:20). The theme of God’s blessing on the obedient shapes the historical

7. L. L. Hogan, “You Be the Judge? Matthew 7:1–6,” in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines* (ed. D. Fleer and D. Bland; St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 152.

8. On the history of happiness, D. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006); I have an essay on happiness studies: “Happiness: Given, Lost, Regained,” *Books & Culture* (Nov/Dec, 2008): 44–46, online at: www.booksandculture.com/articles/2008/novdec/14.44.html.

books like Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah; it clearly reverberates throughout the prophets and in many ways gave rise to the sectarian movements at the time of Jesus, like the Pharisees and Essenes, who were seeking God's blessing.

Second, there is a clear *eschatological* focus in the word "blessed."⁹ If a focus of the Old Testament was on present-life blessings for Torah observance, there is another dimension that deconstructs injustice and sets the tone for Israel's hope: the future blessing of God in the kingdom when all things will be put right; no text in the Old Testament fits more here than Isaiah 61.¹⁰ This second dimension shapes the Beatitudes because Jesus' focus is on future blessing. The tense used in the promises for the blessing is often future, as in "they will be ..." in verses 4 – 9. Notably, the present tense of the first and eighth blessing (5:3, 8), where we find the identical promise ("theirs *is* the kingdom"), surrounds the future tenses, perhaps indicating the certainty of those future promises.¹¹ As Dale Allison correctly points out, "We have here [in the Beatitudes] not commonsense wisdom born of experience but eschatological promise which foresees the unprecedented: the evils of the present will be undone and the righteous will be confirmed with reward."¹² This blessing, while its focus is future, begins now (Matt 11:6; 13:16).

A third theme at work is *conditionality*: those blessed are marked by specific attributes or characteristics and those who are implicitly not blessed (the Bible's word is "cursed"; see Luke 6:20 – 26; cf. Deut 28) are marked by the absence of those characteristics and by the presence of the opposite characteristics. But a word of caution is in order: clearly these blessings of Jesus are not directed at ethical attributes, as if this is Jesus' version of Paul's fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22 – 23), nor is this a virtue list by which to measure our moral progress. Instead, these blessings are heaped on *people groups* who are otherwise rejected in society, which means the blessings console those whom many would consider hopeless.

Thus, the conditionality here is not to be seen as a covert command for something we are to do, as if those who want blessing need to work at poverty of spirit or meekness. We are not to go out and become poor or start mourning or

9. Tom Wright's "You're going to ..." and "You will ..." in his KNT gets at this eschatological dimension well.

10. Stassen, *Living the Sermon*, 41 – 62. Stassen makes the following alignments with Isaiah 61: Matt 5:3 (Isa 61:1); 5:4 (61:2); 5:5 (61:1, 7); 5:6 (61:3, 8, 11); 5:8 (61:1); 5:10 (61:1); 5:11 – 12 (61:10 – 11).

11. D. C. Allison Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (Companions to the New Testament; New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1999), 42.

12. Ibid.

get ourselves persecuted.¹³ Instead, Jesus here blesses people groups. The Beatitudes reveal that Jesus' ministry, as can be seen so clearly in Jesus' so-called inaugural sermon (Luke 4:16–30), focuses on the down-and-out and oppressed. Jesus is casting a vision so that his audience will come to know that things are not what they think they are. Instead, God's eyes are on all and God knows those who are living properly, regardless of their circumstances and conditions. The Beatitudes force the listener to *expand and contract who is in the kingdom of God*.

At the funeral of his father, Hauerwas preached a sermon on Revelation 7:9–17 and the Beatitudes of Matthew. He observed:

Too often those characteristics [of the Beatitudes] ... are turned into ideals we must strive to attain. As ideals, they can become formulas for power rather than descriptions of the kind of people characteristic of the new age brought by Christ.... Thus Jesus does not tell us that we should try to be poor in spirit, or meek, or peacemakers. He simply says that many who are called into the kingdom will find themselves so constituted.¹⁴

The “conditionality” of the Beatitudes is a reversal of typical conditions because it has the omniscience of God in knowing who is in and who is out.

Fourth, this list concerns the person’s *relational disposition*. It is easy to think of the “blessed” as those who are in proper relation to God alone. But what stands out in the Beatitudes is one’s relation to God as well as to self and others. When Matthew adds “in spirit” to “poor,” we find what we also find in the third blessing (“meek”): an inner disposition that relates to God and others because of a proper estimation of oneself. Furthermore, some blessings are for those who relate to others in a loving disposition: “mourn” and “merciful” and “peacemakers.” Others are concerned more directly with one’s relation to God: “hunger and thirst for righteousness” and “pure in heart” and probably those who are persecuted. But the blessed people are noted by godly, loving relations with God, self, and others.

A final theme: *reversal* or *contrast*. Here we beg the reader’s patience in appealing to the way Luke records the Beatitudes. Luke lists not only those who are blessed but also those who are cursed (Luke 6:20–26). Anytime someone blesses a group as Jesus does here, one is non-blessing others. Luke’s curse list is implicit in Matthew, but this contention gains support from the oddity of those who are blessed: it is unconventional to bless those who are persecuted or those who meek. It gains even more strength from the radical presence of Jesus’ unconventional ways of relating to “all the wrong people” (e.g., Matt 9:9–13)

13. Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 97–106, 114–25.

14. S. Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 38–39.

and for the sorts of people he included among the apostles (4:18–22; 10:1–4). What Jesus blesses is countercultural and revolutionary and so turns culture inside out and society upside down. This can be seen simply by comparing Matthew 5:3 – 12 with a conventional list in Sirach 14:20 – 27 and 25:7 – 11:

^{14:20}Happy is the person who meditates on wisdom
and reasons intelligently,

²¹who reflects in his heart on her ways
and ponders her secrets,

²²pursuing her like a hunter,
and lying in wait on her paths;

²³who peers through her windows
and listens at her doors;

²⁴who camps near her house
and fastens his tent peg to her walls;

²⁵who pitches his tent near her,
and so occupies an excellent lodging place;

²⁶who places his children under her shelter,
and lodges under her boughs;

²⁷who is sheltered by her from the heat,
and dwells in the midst of her glory.

^{25:7}I can think of nine whom I would call blessed,
and a tenth my tongue proclaims:

a man who can rejoice in his children;
a man who lives to see the downfall of his foes.

⁸Happy the man who lives with a sensible wife,
and the one who does not plow with ox and ass together.

Happy is the one who does not sin with the tongue,
and the one who has not served an inferior.

⁹Happy is the one who finds a friend,
and the one who speaks to attentive listeners.

¹⁰How great is the one who finds wisdom!
But none is superior to the one who fears the Lord.

¹¹Fear of the Lord surpasses everything;
to whom can we compare the one who has it?

Clearly, Jesus goes against the grain. Instead of blessing the one who pursues wisdom and reason and develops a reputation as a sage, and instead of blessing the one who has a good family, who observes the whole Torah, or the one who has all the right friends and develops a reputation as righteous or as a leader, Jesus blesses those whom no one else blessed. The genius of the

Beatitudes emerges from this contrastive stance: they are a countercultural revelation of the people of the kingdom.

If we add all this together, we get something like this: a “blessed” person is someone who, because of a heart for God, is promised and enjoys God’s favor regardless of that person’s status or countercultural condition.

This leads us back again to the translation issue: since no one English word will do the job in a completely adequate way, I prefer the word “blessed” because of its richer, covenantal, and theological contexts and because the only other real alternative, “happy” (CEB), often results in a focus on psychological happiness and gets associated easily with shallow discussions of happiness in contemporary culture and language.¹⁵ A fulsome translation would be “God’s favor is upon....”

One final observation about the word “blessed.” *Jesus is the one who says who is and who is not blessed.* Our customary belief in Jesus somehow leads us at times to miss such a basic point, but one cannot fail to see that Jesus here steps into the pages of Israel’s history as someone who speaks uniquely for God, and he does so with a truth claim so vital that one sees him as more than God’s prophet.

The Blessed Ones

There are two “versions” of the Beatitudes of Jesus, and most scholars think the two versions derive from the hypothetical early Christian source called Q. Listing the two versions of the Beatitudes reveals both similarities and dissimilarities. Here are the two lists, and we italicize the beatitudes found only in Matthew:

Matthew 5:3–12	Luke 6: 20–23
1. Poor in spirit	1. Poor
2. Mourn	3. Weep now
3. <i>Meek</i>	
4. Hunger/thirst for righteousness	2. Hunger now
5. <i>Merciful</i>	
6. <i>Pure in heart</i>	
7. <i>Peacemakers</i>	
8. <i>Persecuted for righteousness</i>	
9. Insulted, persecuted, false statements	4. Hated, excluded, rejected

15. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, famously translated the word “Congratulations!” and used that to define the blessing of salvation (pp. 109–11). “Joyful” is the proposal of Stassen, *Living the Sermon*, 39. Stott weighs in against translating the term with “happy,” in Stott, *Message*, 33. Also D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1993), 91; Keener (*Matthew*, 166) translates

Most notably, Luke has not only beatitudes but “woe” statements that match the beatitudes in reverse: rich, well fed, laugh, and speaking well of you. One cannot know for sure, but it is reasonable to think Matthew “collected” other beatitudes of Jesus and brought them together here. It also seems likely that Matthew has “airbrushed” some of the beatitudes, as can be seen in adding “in spirit” in #1 and “for righteousness” in #4, but in so doing he has clarified the original intent rather than leaving a beatitude or two open to misunderstanding.

It is risky to venture something new when it comes to organizing the Beatitudes, but I will try.¹⁶ They have no apparent logical or consecutive order, though a few scholars have done their best to convince others that there is an order; one of the more pastorally common suggestions is that they begin on our need of redemption.¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw instead a list of renunciations:¹⁸ the call of Jesus leads to a life of renunciation (v. 3), and this leads to renunciation of happiness and peace (v. 4), rights (v. 5), our own righteousness (v. 6), our own dignity (v. 7), our own good and evil (v. 8), and violence and strife (v. 9); and they finish with a renunciation summary (v. 10).

Another suggestion has come from Mark Allan Powell, who believes the first four beatitudes promise reversal for those who are unfortunate (vv. 3–6) while the second four promise eschatological rewards to the virtuous (vv. 7–10), with verses 11–12 functioning as a concluding comment. He believes the second four blessings are addressing those who show mercy to the unfortunate ones in the first four.¹⁹ A final suggestion is that the first four pertain to God and the second four to our relationship with others.²⁰ If I were to venture a suggestion here, it would be this: group the beatitudes into threes.²¹ Thus, three on the *humility* of the poor (“poor in spirit,” “mourn,” “meek”), three on those who pursue *justice* (“hunger and thirst . . . ,” “merciful,” “pure

“ultimately be well”; France, *Matthew*, 160–61. Also, D. L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 146–47.

16. The Beatitudes are read through four basic lenses: eschatological promises, entrance requirements, Wisdom tradition, and an epitome of Jesus’ ethics; for a sketch, see T. D. Howell, *Matthean Beatitudes*, 3–6. Our view sees the Beatitudes more ecclesially; that is, they focus on who constitutes the kingdom of God.

17. A good example is to see in them a “spiritual progression of relentless logic,” as can be seen in Stott, *Message*, 46.

18. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 101–9.

19. M. A. Powell, *God with Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 119–40.

20. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 54.

21. A humorous comment by J. Pelikan on Augustine’s lining of seven beatitudes with seven requests in the Lord’s Prayer, then multiplying them (to 49) and adding one (divine nature, after all) to get 50, for Pentecost ends with this: “Could it have been otherwise?” See Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric*, 63.

in heart”), and three on those who create *peace* (“peacemakers,” “persecuted . . .,” “insult you . . .”). Thus, the three central moral themes of the Beatitudes are humility (of the poor), justice, and peace.

More important than order we need to see this list in the context of Jesus’ major ethical idea. In another project of mine, a book called *The Jesus Creed*, I argued that Jesus understood the entire Torah through two basic commandments, to love God and to love others (Matt 22:34–40). When Jesus did this, he “amended” a standard Jewish moral creed called the *Shema*, “Hear,” which derives from Deuteronomy 6:4–9. The love-others commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18, which says “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Adding the two together permits his followers to understand God’s basic demands as love of God and love of others. I call this combination the *Jesus Creed*.

But there’s an element of ethics in the *Jesus Creed* that is sometimes overlooked. Love of neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 is rooted in proper love of self: “love your neighbor *as yourself*.” The Golden Rule, the other great reduction of the Torah by Jesus (Matt 7:12), also rings the bell of self-love: “So in everything, do to others *what you would have them do to you*, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” There is then, as many have seen, including New Testament ethicist Rudolf Schnackenburg,²² a threefold dimension to the essence of Jesus’ moral vision: love of God, love of self, love of others. If Jesus explicitly reduces the Torah to loving God and loving others as oneself, then every ethical statement of Jesus somehow needs to be connected to the double commandment of love. I want to use the threefold grid (love of God, self, and others) to examine the Beatitudes, partly as a test case and partly because I’m convinced this is one of the best ways to see into the essence of why Jesus blesses these people.

Space permits only a brief commentary on each beatitude, which will begin with a description of how to define each people group, a sketch of the evidence shaping our understanding, and then a sketch of the promise for each people group. Because the first beatitude has drawn so much discussion, I will treat it in more depth.

Three Blessings for the Humility of the Poor

#1. *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (5:3). The “poor in spirit” (for which Luke has only “poor,” Luke 6:20) describes an economically, physically impoverished, or oppressed person who not only recognizes her or his need but also trusts in God for full redemption.²³ This sort of person thus comprehends that he or

22. Schnackenburg, *All Things Are Possible*, 33–34.

23. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 67–72, though I disagree with him on the *Anawim* question (see below). For other definitions, see U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; trans.

she must be faithful in the midst of oppression and also form solidarity with other oppressed people. In other words, the poor in spirit love God enough to trust God, love the self aright, and love others enough to form alliances of hope, compassion, and justice. The antithesis of the “poor in spirit” is the rich oppressor; one hears this antagonism in James 1:9–11; 2:1–13; and 4:13–5:6. We need to remind ourselves that each beatitude is a reversal of cultural values: the self-dependent or wealthy oppressor is at odds with the economy of the kingdom.

Christian Bible readers have often gone to one extreme or the other with Matthew 5:3, seeing in this beatitude either little more than the oppressed poor or nothing besides spiritual dependence on God.²⁴ This dispute arises because of Luke’s version: “Blessed are you who are poor.” Luke can be read as reducing this beatitude to simple economics. The question then becomes whether Matthew has “spiritualized” the poverty to spiritual neediness/poverty alone,²⁵ or whether a straight line can be drawn from economic poverty to spiritual trust in God. The second view finds strong support elsewhere in Matthew (see 11:5; 19:21; 26:9, 11). So, rather than being forced to choose between economic or spiritual poverty, it is wisest to see here a both/and: both spiritually dependent and economically needy.²⁶ Moreover, the socioeconomic rootedness of the word “poor” (*ptōchos*) does not permit exclusively the spiritual poverty interpretation, and the “in spirit” demands that this be more than simple economic oppression.

This both/and interpretation makes sense in the Jewish context. Jesus has in mind the *Anawim*, a group of economically disadvantaged Jews (Ps 149:4; Isa 49:13; 61:1–2; 66:2).²⁷ Historians of Jewish history now mostly agree that the *Anawim* had three features: they were economically poor and yet trusted in God, they found their way to the temple as a meeting place, and they longed for the Messiah, who would finally bring justice. The archetype persons of the *Anawim* are Simeon in Luke 2:25–35 and Anna in 2:36–38, and I would add Jesus’ mother, Mary, whose *Anawim* hope we encounter in

J. E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 191–93; Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 45; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 91; Keener, *Matthew*, 168–69; France, *Matthew*, 165.

24. E.g., Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat* (Luther’s Works; ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 12. On Luther, see Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric*, 81–94. Emerging from this line of thinking some have seen “poor in spirit” as the fundamental virtue and then have even found development from the first beatitude to the ninth. See those cited by Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 45. Also Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

25. As does Stott, *Message*, 32, 39; Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 44.

26. Kopolyo, “Matthew,” 1118.

27. Careful study of the exile texts of Isaiah 40–66 could suggest that those blessed by Jesus are the economically challenged returning exiles of Isaiah now applied, in an end-of-exile manner, to his followers. On the *Anawim*, J. D. Pleins, “Poor, Poverty,” *ABD*, 5:411–13.

the Magnificat at Luke 1:46–55.²⁸ Roughly at the time of Jesus the Qumran community saw themselves as the “poor” who were trusting in God. A good example can be found in this fragment:

... [the] humble He has not spurned, and He has not overlooked the needy in trouble, He has kept his eyes on the weak, and paid attention to the cry of orphans for help. He has listened to their cry, and because of His abundant mercies, has shown favor to the meek. He has opened their eyes to see His ways and their ears to hear. (4Q434 f1i:2)

Our conclusion is that “poor in spirit” is a perfect blend of the economically destitute who nonetheless trust in God and put their hope for justice and the kingdom of God in God.

To “the poor in spirit” is promised “the kingdom of heaven.” This expression pulls together the entire hope of Israel’s Story for the messianic age. It involves a King (Messiah), a land, a holy, loving people (Israel), and a redemptive power that will create holiness, love, and peace. The “kingdom” describes the fullness of God’s blessing. Those who are poor now, who nonetheless trust in God and wait for God’s Messiah with faithfulness, are and will be the ones who populate God’s kingdom. That kingdom has already begun to make its presence felt from the days of John and Jesus (11:11–12; 12:28), but it still awaits a future glorious consummation (7:21; 8:11; 19:23–24; 26:29). Notably, Jesus will later say the rich struggle to enter the kingdom (19:23–24).²⁹

#2. *Blessed are those who mourn* (5:4). Those who “mourn” both grieve in their experiences of tragedy, injustice, and death, and reach out to others in grief and compassion when they experience injustice, sin, evil, tragedy, and death. In other words, they suffer and they love those who suffer. It is reasonable to think “those who mourn” are *Anawim*. But this kind of mourning is also directed at God in a kind of “How long, O Lord?” plaint that waits on God to act in justice. Once again Jesus is countercultural. Jesus has in mind those who respond to exile properly. Exile for the mourner didn’t mean adaptation, accommodation, activism, and apostasy but instead grief, faithfulness, suffering, and hope.

28. R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (ABRL; rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 350–55.

29. On kingdom, see G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). A shorter sketch can be found in G. E. Ladd and D. A. Hagner, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 42–132. The literature is enormous: J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 383–487; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christians Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Also D. C. Allison Jr., “Kingdom of God,” *EDEJ*, 860–61.

The meaning of this beatitude depends on what these blessed people are mourning about. Are they mourning for their loved ones? Israel's condition in exile or oppression? Injustices they have experienced? The lack of love, peace, holiness, and justice in the land? Or, as so many have claimed, are they mourning over their own sins? The answer to this set of questions is found by exploring the historical context.³⁰ We must begin with Isaiah 61:1 – 4 (in the context of the hope in chs. 40 – 66):

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called the oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations. (Isa 61:1 – 4, emphasis added; cf. Ps 126:2 – 6).

This text clearly suggests that the mourners are those who are grieved over both Israel's and their own exile, who are teamed with one another in grief, and who long for Israel's return, for the temple to be restored, and for God's favor to return on Israel. It is a longing for grace and justice and for kingdom, and at the same time a commitment to faithfulness and hope.

Jesus promises the mourners that God will comfort them by satisfying the longing of their hearts. Knowing God's faithfulness and final justice, and

30. Turner, *Matthew*, 150 – 51.

anchoring one's hope in what God will certainly do empower the "mourner" to carry on faithfully. One thinks of Paul in Romans 5:3 or 8:37–39 and of John in Revelation 21:4.

#3. *Blessed are the meek* (5:5). The "meek" are those who suffer and who have been humbled, and yet they do not seek revenge but God's glory and the welfare of others. In other words, they lovingly trust God and hope in God's timing and God's justice. An overemphasis in the first beatitude ("poor in spirit") on humility leads to a near synonym with the third beatitude, which is a solid clue to keep the economic dimension of the first. Perhaps it is easiest to define "meek" by saying Jesus was meek: "for I am *gentle* [same word as our beatitude] and humble³¹ in heart" (11:29). Moreover, in entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus fulfilled an Old Testament expectation of the meek king (21:5).

In addition, we must take into consideration what the meek are promised: they will inherit the Land (more below). Because meekness connects here to land inheritance, and because the Beatitudes are so inherently countercultural, we suggest that meekness is framed over against wrath, anger, violence, acquisitiveness, rapaciousness, theft, violent takeovers, and brutal reclamations of property. The meek are unlike the Zealots, who used violence to seize the land. The meek choose to absorb unjust conditions in a form of nonviolent, nonretaliatory resistance that creates a calm, countercultural community of love, justice, and peace.³²

The promise stands out: "for they will inherit the earth [Land]." Clearly the promise evokes both the land promise in Genesis 12 and the promises to the oppressed and waiting in Psalm 37:11 ("the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity"); 37:22 ("those the LORD blesses will inherit the land"); and 37:34 ("he will exalt you to inherit the land"). The Qumran community prized Psalm 37.³³ While it has been customary for Christians to see in the NIV's word "earth" a synonym for "world" now or in the new heavens and earth,³⁴ there is little likelihood that Jesus would have "world" in mind.³⁵ We must wrap our minds around the Bible's Story for the first-century Jew: those to whom Jesus spoke didn't care two figs for owning Italy or Gaul. They simply wanted shalom in the Land of Israel. The fundamental promise to

31. The Greek term behind "humble" here is *tapeinos*; behind "poor" in 5:3 it is *ptōchos*. Both words evoke the humble poor, the *Anawim*.

32. See Keener, *Matthew*, 168, for a full display of references. Also Powell, *God with Us*, 125–26.

33. See 4QpPs 37 [= 4Q171], and the pesher/comment on Ps 37:11 reads: "This refers to the company of the poor who endure the time of error but are delivered from all the snares of Belial. Afterwards they will enjoy all the [...] of the earth [Heb., *hā'āreṣ*, 'land'] and grow fat on every human [luxury]" (lines 8–11a).

34. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 56–58.

35. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 92; Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52. On land, B. H. Amaru, "Land, Concept of," *EDEJ*, 866–68.

Abraham, and a promise that shapes everything about exile and return and hope and promise (e.g., Deut 28) is dwelling in peace and holiness in the land God promised them. Or read Luke 1:67–79 to see that Zechariah’s idea of salvation is the elimination of enemies so Israel could dwell in the Land and worship in the temple in peace and holiness. This is the right context, so that this beatitude should be translated, “for they will inherit the Land.”

If we put these first three beatitudes together, we find Jesus blessing the oppressed and the poor for their powerful trust in God, their willingness to wait on God for justice and the kingdom, and for their devotion that runs so deep they mourn over the condition of Israel and implicate themselves in the causes of that condition. These are the sorts of people, not the typical ones, that are (and will be) in the kingdom.

Three Blessings on Those Who Pursue Righteousness and Justice

#4. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* (5:6). Those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who love God and God’s will (revealed in Torah as love and justice) with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Because they love God and others, they are willing to check their passions and will in order to do God’s will, to further God’s justice, and to express their longing that God act to establish his will and kingdom.³⁶ Their appetites, instead of being sated by the pleasures of food, sensualities, passions, and lusts, are satisfied only in communion with God, knowing and doing God’s will and seeking the welfare of others. One thinks of Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), but one also thinks of Abraham, who abandoned his home to strike out for God’s land; of Moses, who learned the hard way to be devoted to God; of Samson, whose erratic life embedded yearning for God’s will; and of the apostles Peter, Paul, and John, each of whom left a life to follow God’s way and will.

Once again, like the first beatitude, comparison with Luke’s version of this beatitude turns up significance: Luke has “who hunger now” (Luke 6:21), and Matthew edits this to “for righteousness.” Has Matthew spiritualized an originally socioeconomic issue? No.³⁷ Again, we are to think of the poor and hungry who are chasing not just food but even more God’s will being done on earth (as it is in heaven)—and their blessing is that they will be given that and more.³⁸

Everything hinges on the meaning of the word “righteousness.” We can only sketch some basics; I will begin with the two basic options for the

36. Powell, *God with Us*, 127.

37. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 93, sees the two accounts as nearly the same.

38. So Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 83–84, 87–88.

meaning of “righteousness.” The *behavior* view emphasizes the Jewish Torah context and sees in this word “conformity to God’s will as expressed in Torah and its interpretation,” or simply “covenant faithfulness.”³⁹ The *gift* view emphasizes God’s grace and salvation and understands “righteousness” as one’s “right standing before God [on the basis of Christ’s meritorious life, death, and resurrection].” The English word “righteousness” complicates things because it is used to translate a word that can mean either “just” (righteous behavior) or “justification” (declared righteous).

The Jewish context⁴⁰ prior to Paul overwhelmingly suggests the term meant “covenant faithfulness” or “Torah observant.” But Paul took all of this to a new level because he was involved in a completely different context, the Gentile mission. Paul shifted the focus of the term toward gift, toward “*declared* righteous [justified].” But with Jesus things are still pre-Pauline, and we would do well to remind ourselves of that. Instances in Matthew that almost certainly cannot mean “declared righteous” are 5:10, 20, 45; 6:1; 10:41; 13:17, 43, 49; 21:32; 23:28, 29, 35; 25:37, 46; 27:19. What clinches the case is that 5:10, which is to be read in conjunction with 5:6, cannot mean anything other than behavior that conforms to God’s will. A profound example of the “covenant faithfulness” sense of this term is Joseph, Jesus’ “father,” in 1:19, who, because he was *Torah observant/righteous*, chose to divorce Mary because he wanted to remain observant.

The moment one defines righteousness as conformity to Torah or to God’s Word in Scripture, three things happen. First, the scope of Scripture, especially as we find the prophetic texts, focuses our minds on big issues like justice, mercy, peace, faithfulness, worship, holiness, and love. Second, we are pushed into seeing how Jesus himself understood Torah observance, and here we think immediately of two texts, the Jesus Creed of 22:34–40 and the Golden Rule of 7:12, so that for Jesus a “righteous” person was someone who loved God and loved others as himself. Third, we are pressed into considering the antitheses of 5:17–48, where surpassing righteousness refers to kingdom behaviors.

To those who pursue righteousness Jesus promises “they will be filled,” and the word “filled” means “sated,” “slaked,” “bloated,” or “filled to overflowing.” The metaphor expresses absolute and utter satisfaction: they will find a kingdom society where love, peace, justice, and holiness shape the entirety of creation.

#5. *Blessed are the merciful* (5:7). The “merciful” are those who, because they do to others as they would want done to themselves and because they

39. E.g., Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 195–96; France, *Matthew*, 167–68; Turner, *Matthew*, 151. See the discussion in Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 63–65.

40. B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

have experienced God's merciful love, empathize and show compassion to others. Inherent in works of mercy is the self-denying virtue of entering into the injustices and tragedies experienced by others. Once again, Jesus is countercultural to some trends in his world: merciful people are like the good Samaritan, whose love interrupts his trip; like Jesus, who is constantly interrupted by those in need (9:13; 12:7; 15:21 – 28); or like Jesus in the (not canonical) incident with the woman caught in sin (John 7:53 – 8:11); and like James, the brother of Jesus, who sees the abusive treatment of the poor in the synagogue and speaks out on their behalf (Jas 2:1 – 13). Jesus was radical enough to suggest that mercy needed to be shown to enemies (Matt 5:43 – 48).

The fifth beatitude complements the fourth beatitude, and perhaps even helps clarify the fourth, when we consider *to whom* the merciful show compassion. The answer can be heard the moment we begin the question: *those in need, those suffering injustice, those who are poor, those who are oppressed, and those who have failed.* In addition, the word "merciful" does not describe the ubiquitous and shallow virtue of "niceness" or "tolerance" in Western culture, but concrete actions of love, compassion, and sympathetic grace to those who are oppressed or to those who have sinned (cf. Gal 6:1). The writer of Hebrews depicts Jesus' priestly relation to us in terms of mercy (Heb 2:17). James said the same thing in other words:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (Jas 2:12 – 13)

To the merciful is promised divine mercy at the judgment, that is, entrance into the kingdom. While this blessing creates disturbance for us at times about works righteousness, its design is to remind us that mercy is fundamental to a proper love of God and others (23:23; cf. 25:31 – 46).

#6. *Blessed are the pure in heart* (5:8). If our suggestion of grouping the beatitudes into threes holds, this blessing is connected to the previous two around the theme of pursuing God's will. The "pure" in heart know the temptation of externalism and the social honor that comes with being pure in hands, or in observance, or in reputation (15:1 – 20; 23:25 – 28).⁴¹ But the pure in heart see God as a person to be loved, so their first priority is God, and this love leads to loving others well. The best commentary on "pure in heart" is 6:1 – 18, where religious actions are done not for the praise of others but in order to engage with God, and 6:21, where the disciple is not shaped

41. France, *Matthew*, 168; Turner, *Matthew*, 152. See also Stott, *Message*, 49. Also, J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

by wealth or possessions. James reveals an almost uncanny connection to the Beatitudes without giving so much as a hint in James 3:17–18.

This blessing, as with the others, comes with a history. One thinks immediately of Psalm 24's profound questions: "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" And the answer? "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart" (24:3–4). It is hard not to think that Paul's spirit-flesh battle emerges out of such Jewish thinking (Gal 5:13–26). Purity of heart avoids double-mindedness (Jas 4:8).

Christian history shows an interest in the "beatific vision" when we read, "for they will see God" (5:8).⁴² Thus, Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God*, the finale to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Bunyan's pilgrim, who discovers the land beyond the Jordan in *Pilgrim's Progress*, are major examples. The Bible both affirms a beatific vision (see Job 19:26; Ps 11:7; 1 John 3:2; Rev 22:4) and yet seems to deny its genuine possibility (e.g., Exod 33:20; 1 Tim 6:16). There is an immensity and an unapproachability to God that prevents humans from ever gazing directly into the being of God, but we can see and admire a glory surrounding God as we engage in intoxicating, ecstatic worship (e.g., Exod 3:2; Isa 6:1–5; Dan 7:9–10).⁴³

Three Blessings on Those Who Create Peace

#7. *Blessed are the peacemakers* (5:9). The "peacemaker" is someone who is reconciled to God, knows God is for peace, and seeks reconciliation instead of strife and war.⁴⁴ Jewish expectations for the messianic kingdom were for peace; hence, a peacemaker is a kingdom person (Isa 9:5–6; Zech 9:9–10). That is, the Beatitudes look at people now through the lens of an Ethic from Beyond. Kingdom realities are now occurring through the peacemakers.⁴⁵

Once again, Jesus is countercultural for some. There was a surging development in the first century in the rise of vigilante-like zealotry into a full-blown movement of Zealots, who were a part of Jewish resistance movements.⁴⁶ This beatitude turns its focus on those who, instead of seeking justice through violence, which remained a Christian temptation (see Jas 1:19–20; 4:1–3),

42. Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 51–54; also see his *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 43–63, where he sketches seven elements in the history of interpretation: an embodied deity, a christological interpretation, a mystical encounter, a metaphor for insight, God in perfected creation, God in perfected self and neighbor, and a present and future experience.

43. "Anonymous" in the *Incomplete Work on Matthew*, Homily 9, understands this vision of God in two ways: the one who sees Jesus sees God and does good works, while in the kingdom God will be seen directly (see ACCS: *Matthew*, 87).

44. Kapolyo, "Matthew," 1119.

45. Augustine: "Thereby they themselves [peacemakers] become the kingdom of God" (see ACCS: *Matthew*, 88–89).

46. James S. McLaren, "Resistance Movements," *EDEJ*, 1135–40.

turn from retaliation to reconciliation. The zealotry threat was resisted by the rabbis: “Hillel says, ‘Be disciples of Aaron, “loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah” (*m. ’Abot* 1.12).⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer sketched what would in reality become his own virtue and fate: “But their peace will never be greater than when they encounter evil people in peace and are willing to suffer from them.”⁴⁸

Peacemaking is neither being “nice” (as defined today), nor is it “tolerance” (again as defined today); rather, it is an active entrance into the middle of warring parties for the purpose of creating reconciliation and peace.⁴⁹ But neither is it soft-pedaling around real but not identical differences—that is, between those who have experienced apartheid and those who inflicted apartheid, between those who split a church and those who choose to remain, between a husband and wife who are struggling to get along, between two colleagues at the office, or between parents and children who can’t seem to find enough common ground to trust one another. The peacemaker, as the person whom Jesus blesses, seeks to reconcile—not by pretending there are no differences or by suppressing differences, but by creating love of the other that transcends differences or that permits the people to join hands in spite of differences. Jesus will speak of reconciliation on other occasions, and these perhaps are the best commentary on “peacemakers” (5:21–26, 43–48; 6:14–15; 18:21–35). His framing of moral relations in terms of love (22:34–40) and servanthood (20:20–28) provide foundations for peacemaking.

Issues arise precisely because some Christians have taken these words so seriously. Two views deserve to be mentioned. First, does this beatitude teach pacifism or at least nonviolent resistance? This view has been attached to the Anabaptist tradition⁵⁰ and is sometimes accused of being utopian or unrealistic, but this is precisely the point: pacifism was the way of the earliest Christians—and participation in war was clearly frowned on by nearly all early Christians—because it was the way of Jesus, and the way of Jesus is the kingdom, realistic or not. The question for the pacifist is not, “Does it work in the world?” but “What does it mean to follow Jesus in this concrete situation?”

47. On the anti-Zealot perspective, see Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 94.

48. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 108. E. Bethge observed that Bonhoeffer was led into pacifist thinking through Jean Lasserre; see his *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography. Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 153–54. Bonhoeffer’s decision to cooperate with the resistance to Hitler seemingly strains themes in *Discipleship*.

49. Turner, *Matthew*, 152–53.

50. J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (2nd ed.; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2005); W. R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Second, there is another reading of these words of Jesus, that his words are about interpersonal relations and not international bodies; in other words, Christians shouldn't use violence in their personal life but they can participate in international/military violence (just war). This is the view of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. To this one can respond pointedly that what applies to each of us as a follower of Jesus *must also* apply to anything in which we participate if we are consistently following Jesus. Privatizing one's kingdom ethics is not the way of Jesus.

So what do we think? Regardless of our posture toward the state, the military, or other countries, the *goal* of the follower of Jesus is peace. But we are to admit that the *means* is not as clear. That is, while we should all desire peace, *how we get there* may differ. Some Christians think the best way to get there is through military strength sufficient enough to intimidate other countries into dropping their military plans, while others (I join them) think the way of Jesus requires us to drop our military intimidation and negotiate in love for justice and peace.⁵¹

Jesus promises peacemakers that they will be “called children [sons] of God” (5:9) at the final judgment. The word “son/sons” was used in the Jewish world to connect a person with an attribute⁵² or a person. Thus, a “son of God” here denotes someone who is on God’s side, implying that God is a God of peace (Rom 16:20).

Peacemaking and justice/righteousness, which follows in verse 10, belong together in the Jewish world of Jesus. What makes this connection secure are these kinds of texts:

Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other. (Ps 85:10)

Of the greatness of his government and *peace*
 there will be no end.

He will reign on David’s throne
 and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.

51. The best book I've read from the pacifist side is R. J. Sider, *Christ and Violence* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1979); the classic is J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). But one should not neglect A. Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (trans. M. H. Shank and M. E. Miller; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973). Options are discussed in R. G. Clouse et al., *War: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), and in A. F. Holmes, *War and Christian Ethics* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

52. See Matt 8:12; 9:15; 13:38; 23:31.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (Isa 9:7)

The fruit of that righteousness will be *peace*;
its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. (Isa 32:17,
emphasis added in the above)

#8 and #9. *Blessed are those who are persecuted ...* (5:10 – 12). Matthew doubles up on the theme of persecution. First, he has a blessing for those who are persecuted because they seek God's justice/righteousness (5:10). Second, Matthew then expands the eighth blessing by adding another blessing for the persecuted, this time spelling out the specifics in the direction of both verbal harassment and injustice, and no doubt again this suffering has to do with following and associating with Jesus: "because of me" (5:11; cf. 10:39; 16:25; 19:29; 24:9).⁵³ If verse 10 promises the "kingdom," verse 12a has "great is your reward."⁵⁴ The notion here is that one's eternal/kingdom state correlates with one's response to God in the present life. This isn't works righteousness but instead the moral call to responsibility in light of eternal correlation. Jesus later teaches that the disciple's reward far outstrips the correlation (cf. 20:1 – 16).

Blended together, the "persecuted" are those who seek God's will in spite of what others want, who love God so much they are faithful to God when oppressed, and who follow Jesus so unreservedly they suffer for him. Inherent in persecution, then, are both a love of God and a denial of self. The premier example, of course, is Jesus, and next to him is John the Baptist, but one also thinks of Jesus' words in 23:33 – 39 or those in Hebrews 11. If Jesus was reviled and then raised, so the disciple knows he or she will suffer the same fates (Matt 10:24 – 25).



LIVE the Story

Texts heavy with tradition and lit up with meaning for Christians of all times, like the Beatitudes, present their own challenges for the teacher. I suggest that we focus on the big ideas. Perhaps Bonhoeffer sets us on the proper

53. Matt 5:11 – 12 is not the same form as vv. 3 – 10. Not only is it "Blessed are you *when ...*" but the person changes from third person ("they") to second person ("you").

54. On reward in Matthew, see 5:46; 6:1, 2, 5, 16; 10:41 – 42; 20:1 – 16; 25:31 – 46. Recent scholarship has shown that Judaism shifted from conceptualizing sin as a burden to sin as indebtedness, which led in the centuries around Jesus to seeing good works in terms of credit. One should be wary, in other words, of inferring a works-based righteousness in Judaism on the basis of this shift from burden to debt. See G. A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

course: “Here at the end of the Beatitudes the question arises as to where in this world such a faith-community actually finds a place . . . at the cross. The faith-community of the blessed is the community of the Crucified. With him they lost everything, and with him they found everything.”⁵⁵

Happiness Deconstructed

The most important word in this text is “blessed,” and it needs to be discussed over against modernity’s pursuit of happiness. When the Continental Congress drafted the Declaration of Independence in June and July of 1776, the framers put into words what had been percolating in Europe for most of the century: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness*.” Most in the Western world believe that the pursuit of happiness is a right. But something has changed: more and more we think *being happy* is our right.

This leads to the question of what happiness means. Here one might toss in a hundred or so quotes, but eventually we will agree that “happiness” is about inner contentedness and material flourishing. That is, many today think it is a right not only to have life but to have a good life.⁵⁶ Here are several suggestions now about what happiness means.

1. Primarily happiness is understood as a subjective “feeling good about oneself and one’s life and one’s situation.”
2. Happiness has become both a right and achievable now.
3. The pursuit of happiness never ends; it is instead a “hedonic treadmill.” Once the center is pleasure or feeling good, that center becomes a source of unending demand for more and more.
4. Happiness research shows that it is largely the comparative that satisfies the subjective: that is, one becomes happy by comparing herself or himself with others who have less, and as long as one has more, one is happy. But those studies also show that diminishment in happiness enters once one has more than the necessities of life.
5. We also have learned that happiness is rooted in genetics: certain temperaments and dispositions are more capable of achieving this subjective sense of feeling good than are others: those who are sociable, active, stable, and conscientious tend to be more “happy.” Not only is happiness genetic, but it is connected to our life span:

55. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 109.

56. I rely here on the piece I wrote for *Books & Culture* (November/December 2008): “Happiness: Given, Lost, Regained.”

we reach the nadir of happiness at age 44 and after that it's a gentle stroll of increasing happiness all the way home.

6. Happiness can be generated falsely by the imagination. Our capacity to dream and to put things in the context of what we think our reality eventually will be creates greater chances of happiness, whether that imagined future ever occurs or not.

Here is my point. The term *happiness* today, because it rests on these kinds of observations, is not the best word for translating the Greek word *makarios* in the Beatitudes. The happiness of the Beatitudes is not about *feeling* good but about *being* good, and being good is defined by Jesus and shaped by one's relationship with God through him. Being blessed by Jesus may have nothing to do with one's observable condition in life and everything to do with whether one loves God, loves self, and loves others as the self. That, along with the behaviors that emerge out of that kind of love, makes one blessed.

A Revolution in Evaluation

Jesus here blesses three kinds of people:

- those who are the humble poor
- those who pursue righteousness and justice
- those who create peace

I wonder if we might examine once again the sort of people that measure up to our standards. How do we measure piety? How do we measure spirituality? How do we measure true Christianity? Jesus measures it by the standard of whether a person loves God, loves self, and loves others. He sees this in people who are the humble poor, who work for righteousness and justice, and who create reconciliation.

His standard and our standard are often at odds. In my experience in churches, I see these sorts of standards to measure followers:

- those who read their Bible and pray daily
- those who attend church regularly
- those who tithe
- those who know a lot about the Bible
- those who preach well
- those who exercise the spiritual gifts
- those who exercise the spiritual disciplines
- those who evangelize
- those who have great stories of conversion
- those who write books

- those who separate themselves from the world
- those who have succeeded in business
- those who run for public office
- those who serve in the military

Most of us would say apart from one or two of our quibbles, Christians do these things. But here's the problem: By what standard do we measure spirituality? By what we can see or by the inner qualities Jesus seems to be teaching? That is, do we see spirituality in those whose love for God and others has so worked into their inner fabric that they are humble in spite of their poverty and the suffering of injustice, that they are doing all they can to bring about justice in this world, and that they are seeking to reconcile those who are at odds? Are our standards those of Jesus?

The Beatitudes of Jesus are nothing short of a revolution of evaluation. We see in those whom Jesus blesses those who truly are the Jesus people of this world, and what he calls to our attention about them are not the sort of elements that often go into our evaluation methods.

Looking and Loving

In the Beatitudes the good life, the life that leads to blessing and to flourishing, is the life lived by looking constantly to God for both approval and sustenance, and a life lived before God as the judge and vindicator of God's true people. The Beatitudes provide a divine perspective on the true people of God, and Jesus is the Lord Messiah who declares who these people are.

Those who are on the scout for analogies of those blessed by Jesus will need to look into the cracks of culture and the corners of the church. As in Jesus' day, so in ours: Jesus was able to find those who had surrendered themselves to God because he wasn't in the flow of the powerful in his culture. Those who oppressed others surely thought they were justified and perhaps even had wisdom and Torah on their side, but Jesus saw things from a different angle. And it is that angle we need to have if we are to find the blessed in our culture. They are people whose fabric is the interweaving of love of God, love of others, and love of self. Time and time again we saw in the Beatitudes that Jesus' own hermeneutic of the Jesus Creed was at work under and behind the individuals whom Jesus blessed. Sometimes it is the simple person who loves her neighbor well, and other times it is the mother or father who has framed their life in a sacrificial way.

You know someone like this. As a child there was an old woman in our church whom we called Miss Meyers. She had to be ninety years old, though a preteen's judgment on age is hardly infallible. What I remember of Miss Meyers is that she was loving and was constantly serving others; she taught

us—her Sunday School kids—to love plants and to pray and love God and love others. She taught us the Bible as if it were alive, which it was for her. I remember to this day that she could grow a cactus in her home. As one who had only read about a cactus in schoolbook descriptions about desert places, I marveled at her abilities. What I recall is her gentle nature when it came to plants. So she cut off a bit, gave it to me, and told me how to care for it, which I didn't do well because I wanted to care for it more than it needed. (That is, I wanted to water it because the sandy grit she planted it in was too dry—it wasn't.) In the annals of Freeport, Illinois' list of great Christians Miss Meyers may not be mentioned, but she was one whom Jesus blessed and she blessed us.

The Beatitudes teach us to look to Jesus not only as the one who thunders “Blessed!” before those who needed to hear it, but also as the one who embodied each beatitude in singular form. If the Story of the Bible teaches us anything, it teaches us to see the Story of Israel coming to completion and fulfillment in Jesus. The one who is blessed by God is Jesus, and those whom he blesses are those who take on his ways, his manners, and his love and extend it to others. Jesus was poor and humble; Jesus burned up his days pursuing righteousness and justice; and Jesus created God's peace everywhere he went. But paradoxically his kind of love is so sacrificial it cost him his life, so that learning to read the Beatitudes in their Jewish context must give way to reading them in the context of the Crucified.

The Christian and Law

It is hard not to point a finger at Martin Luther for creating a counterforce between law and gospel. In fact, contrasting the two—one to condemn and one to bring grace—is at the heart of the Lutheran dialectic, or how the Lutheran is taught to read the Bible. Nothing can be achieved by obedience to the law; all that can be achieved is achieved in Christ. The Reformed, those who follow from Calvin, involved themselves in a more nuanced way in the issue of how the law and the gospel are related. A good example of this approach is found in a statement by John Stott: “the law sends us to Christ to be justified, and Christ sends us back to the law to be sanctified.”⁵⁷ There is considerable debate over this issue among evangelicals today.⁵⁸

This problem is created by tidy systematic formulas, and I appreciate the nuances and discussions and light that systematarians sometime shed, but in this case something has gone terribly wrong. The immediate problem is that the debate often assumes that law demands performance while the gospel

57. Stott, *Message*, 36.

58. W. G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

expects only faith. Beside the importance of what the New Perspective on Paul brings to this discussion, not the least of which is a radical reshaping of how Judaism worked as a religion and that “works of the law” are not just Torah but the special laws that separated the Jew from the Gentile, the contrast Paul makes between works of the law and faith does not result in the latter not having law or performance. After all, in one of his quintessential statements in Ephesians 2:8–10, Paul overtly argues Christians are created by God “to do good works” (which is performance by any other name).

As one sympathetic to the Anabaptists I believe in salvation by faith and not by works, and to their credit the Anabaptists have always taught the demand of discipleship in a way more emphatically central than most. Radical distinctions, often made by major theologians in the Protestant traditions, between justification and sanctification are unwise because they are not grounded in the Bible. The Torah is God’s revelation to God’s people and to be read as God’s gracious demand. God graciously reveals what God wants, but God unfolds that demand over time so that it is completely revealed only in Christ; God graciously provides the power for us to do what Jesus teaches as we live in the Spirit in the light of the coming kingdom; and God graciously demands how God wants us to live in the Sermon and in the ethical exhortations of the New Testament.

In other words, in Jesus’ demand to live righteously, which runs through the Sermon, we see an Ethic from Above, from Below, and from Beyond—but it is an ethic his followers are to perform. The best way to preach the Sermon is to preach what it is: a demand on the disciple.

Matthew 5:38 – 42



LISTEN to the Story

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Listen to the text in the Story: Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–20;
Deuteronomy 19:21; Obadiah 15.

Where to begin? With justice. Justice is the core of the world’s system of appropriate and justifiable relations among people. Behind every attempt to define justice is a standard. In the United States that standard is the US Constitution, in England it is the Magna Carta, in Germany it is the *Grundgesetz*. A society’s legal standard creates a certain kind of society: the Germans call their society a *Rechtsstaat*—a society ruled by law. The same applies to England and to the United States, where we say we have the “rule of law.” “Justice,” then, is used for *conditions* and *behaviors* that conform to the standards or the laws at work in a particular society.

But where do we get the standard so a society can be ruled by law? There is a social history and a theological answer. The social history answer is that, say, the USA got its laws from England, not to neglect important voices like those of Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison; and England got its laws from Europe, and Europe from Rome and Greece. This will lead us to admit that all of the Western countries owe their basic legal systems to early codes like the *Nomos* of Solon and *The Digest of Justinian*. The prominent laws of a given society are the laws that have worked well in this history, and they are more or less the *will of a society or the will of its lawmakers*.¹

1. For an informed and jaunty sketch of this history, see W. I. Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Ancient Israelites had the Torah of Moses, but with one major difference from our law codes: it was claimed that the Torah of Moses had a divine origin. This claim transformed Israel's sense of justice because it became conditions and behaviors that conformed *to the will of God*. While the social history answer seeks to explain a given set of laws in light of its predecessors, a theological approach finds divine revelation. That revelation is expressed in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and those laws were then worked out in rulings down the ages in Judaism in what was eventually called *halakhot*. So the Story of Israel, within which one can find the central role of the "story of the Torah," has its own story of how justice is formed and reformed, shaped and reshaped. In other words, the Torah story is one of formation and adaptation, and these adaptations (later rulings of interpretation) were sometimes perceived as divine.

In both the social and theological worlds, a staple of law is *commensurable punishment*. Punishments are to be equal to the crime. In Latin this is called *lex talionis*, or the law of retribution. A fundamental expression of this is found in Exodus 21:23–25:

But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

This *lex talionis* is expressed more theoretically in Leviticus 24:19–20:

Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be *injured in the same manner*: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. *The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.*

A third expression in Deuteronomy 19:21 is much like Exodus 21 but a bit more succinct:

Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

The impact of these three expressions of law is clear: justice requires retribution. Notice the words "show *no* pity," and "if there is ... you *are* to take ...," and "*anyone* who injures ... *is* to be injured...." But retribution is limited, but equal to, the original injury. This principle of equal retribution curbs violence and prevents vengeance from spinning out of control.

A good example of reckless violence in the Bible is Lamech in Genesis 4:23–24. Samson in Judges 16:28 relishes victory over his enemy when he transforms blindness into the death of many. But settling on the Old Testament as offering the *lex talionis* only to restrict revenge misses a major theme: retribution is *demanded* in these texts. The *lex talionis* leads to two funda-

mentals of law: required retribution and equal retribution. By making it law, punishment is moved out of the private sphere into the sphere of the public forum. For Israel, behind the *lex talionis* stands a God who himself takes vengeance (cf. Ezek 16:59; Obad 15).

Jesus steps into this legal history.² What he teaches in this fifth antithesis is both a revelation of God's intent and a "constitution" for the kingdom society. This text is a Messianic Ethic for the messianic community and an Ethic from Beyond. Instead of the requirement of retribution, Jesus reveals that grace, love, and forgiveness can reverse the dangers of retribution and, even more, create an alternative society.

EXPLAIN the Story

Unlike the previous two antitheses, where Jesus summarized one or more passages, this time he simply quotes Scripture. Still, there is no way to know which text he is quoting because the same precise words are found at Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; and Deuteronomy 19:21, and we will also need to take looks at texts like Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21:28–32; Leviticus 19:18; Numbers 35:31–32; Deuteronomy 25:11–12; 32:35; Judges 1:6–7; 2 Samuel 4:9–12; 1 Kings 20:39, 42; Esther 7:10; Job 2:4; Psalms 9–10; Proverbs 20:22; 24:29; 25:21–22; and Daniel 6:19–24. Jesus quotes the Torah and then counters an understanding of Torah with his own kingdom ethics, his Ethic from Beyond. Anyone who heard Jesus would have asked, "Who does he think he is?" That is, we see again his Messianic Ethic.

Lex Talionis

Israel's law on retaliation included both capital punishment ("life for life") and corporal punishment ("tooth for tooth"). It is not entirely clear if ancient Israelites distinguished manslaughter (unintentional) from murder (intentional) as carefully as we do in Western law (cf. Exod 21:18–19; Num 35:22–23; Deut 19:5). The principle here is not just "life" but the taking of a "human life," and it required the retribution of capital sentence. The death of another person's animal only required a commensurate animal's life (cf. Lev 24:17–21). As well, a feature of Israel's *talion* law is that it is egalitarian: man or woman, young or old, rich or poor—each is subject to retribution while some Mesopotamian cultures scaled the retribution according to one's status.³

The requirement of equal retribution was at times transformed into

2. J. F. Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism and the Exhortation of Jesus in Matthew 5.38–42* (JSNTMS 281; London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005).

3. W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 228.

financial compensation. At Numbers 35:31 we read, “Do not accept a ransom [a fine] for the life of a murderer.” The prohibition of a “ransom” for the taking of a life implies that a ransom was paid for other crimes. Fines are clearly taught by later rabbis for at least the “tooth for a tooth” law. Thus, *Mishnah Baba Qamma* 8:1 says: “He who injures his fellow is liable to [compensate] him on five counts: injury, pain, medical costs, loss of income, and indignity.” This leads to how much one is worth, and here is the ruling: “If one has blinded his eye, cut off his hand, broken his leg, they regard him as a slave up for sale in the market and make an estimate of how much he was worth beforehand [when whole], and how much he is now worth.” The *lex talionis* is still required but converted into financial value. The potentially barbaric nature of the *talion* led many to convert punishment into fines. But rendering the retribution into financial compensation does not go as far as Jesus went.

Jesus’ Kingdom Vision: Nonresistant Love

The *lex talionis* was not just about curbing violence; it was an emphatic requirement of justice. Deuteronomy 19:21 says, “Show no pity.” The “no pity” clause is not just for cases of murder but for the entire system: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” A crime required a just retribution.

There is no way around explaining what Jesus is saying in our text: *Jesus overtly ends the Mosaic command to “show no pity” in the appropriation of the lex talionis and in its place orders his followers to be merciful.* Jesus’ words take the *lex talionis* to a different place: that law was concerned with the requirement of equal retribution while Jesus undermines the requirement and reshapes how his followers are to respond to perpetrators. Jesus’ words are: “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” Or, as Tom Wright has it, “don’t use violence to resist evil!” (KNT). Bonhoeffer draws us to Jesus’ kingdom society: “Jesus releases his community from the political and legal order, from the national form of the people of Israel, and makes it into what it truly is, namely, the community of the faithful that is not bound by political or national ties.”⁴

Jesus uses a term that indicates “nonresistance” (*antistēnai*), but the specifics of this word take on concrete variations in the lines that follow and caution us to build our beliefs on the specifics instead of on our philosophy. His examples reveal that “do not resist” is as much a positive action of love as it is a negative posture. It could be translated, “Be ready for an act of grace.” Jesus’ words also “resist” Moses’ words: the older framework was one of resisting injustice by requiring equal retribution, but Jesus denounces resistance. It is too easy to stand up and give a big clap for Jesus and his innovation. The

4. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 132.

facts are that Jesus is not alone in his Jewish world in this teaching, and there are precedents in the Old Testament itself (Lev 19:18; Prov 20:22; 24:29). He is, then, drawing on a latent theme in the Bible and in his Jewish world, and there are similar ideas in the wider Mediterranean world.⁵

It is not clear *why* Jesus teaches this. It may be that he saw the *lex talionis* as a permission granted because of the sinfulness of Israel. Such an approach is not consciously expressed here, as it is in the divorce teaching of Jesus, but by implication has something to commend it. Jesus is teaching a kingdom ethic, and the kingdom will not trade in retribution because people will live justly, lovingly, and peacefully with one another. Bringing that kingdom reality into the present is what the kingdom ethic of Jesus is all about. Hence, one could infer from his Ethic from Beyond that the entire legal apparatus was only a permission from God rather than the intent of God for his true people. I'm inclined to accept this interpretation but not to grant it logical priority. In addition to this reading, is there not an inkling of resignation here, as if Jesus were saying, "Look, guys, you can do nothing about it so you might as well go limp in the face of their power"? And neither does Jesus seem to be using this as a strategy, as if he were saying, "The really good way to get their goat or to get them on our side is to cooperate."

Rather, Jesus' ethic here, like so much of his Messianic Ethic, is shaped by the Jesus Creed of loving God and loving others. Those who love will love even those who dish out injustices. A person shaped by the Jesus Creed responds to injustice not with retaliation and vengeance but with grace, compassion, and abundant mercy in such a way that it reverses injustice. In other words, Jesus' followers dwell in an alternative society that protests systemic injustice and embodies an alternative love-shaped justice. No one said this better than Bonhoeffer, whose final end embodied it: "Evil will become powerless when it finds no opposing object, no resistance, but, instead, is willingly borne and suffered. Evil meets an opponent for which it is not a match."⁶

Jesus defines the one who treats others unjustly with this expression: "an evil person." The word used here (*ponēros*) is the same word used in 5:37: "from the evil one." Whether or not that text or this text is referring to the Evil One, i.e., Satan (cf. 12:45; 13:19), is less important than seeing the character of those who deal in injustice (20:15). He refers to those who sin (7:11; 12:34–35; 13:38; 15:19), who break shalom, who are unloving, and who violate the codes of the Torah.⁷ But this term "evil" could be a code word for those who "belong to the other group," those who don't follow Jesus or who are

5. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 273 nn. 26–29.

6. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 133.

7. France, *Matthew*, 220.

Gentiles (cf. 5:45; 7:17–18; 13:49; 18:32; 22:10; 25:26). Thus, though perhaps a little on the speculative side, the term could be referring to “Romans.”

But Jesus’ point is not so much to *label* the other person as “evil” but to reveal to his followers that messianic people respond to the “other” with nonresistant, life-transforming love. In fact, Jesus prepares for the next antithesis by showing that in his Ethic from Beyond, the “evil person” becomes the “neighbor.”

Examples of Jesus’ Kingdom Vision of Nonresistance

Jesus’ four examples of how to behave “nonresistantly” to “evil” persons emerge from the concrete experience of subjection to Rome. The four examples, and they may be in descending order of severity of offense, concern being insulted, being sued in court, being conscripted to support the Roman military, and being asked to help others with money.⁸ In each instance Jesus advocates grace beyond retribution and expectation. He does not advocate passivity but active generosity that deconstructs the system because of the presence of the kingdom. Surrendering one’s rights for the good of the other manifests the Jesus Creed and its variant, the Golden Rule of 7:12.

Reading this antithesis in light of the Story of God in the Bible, with its concentration on Jesus as the center of the Story, cannot help but find parallels in Isaiah 50’s servant description.⁹ Most notably, Isaiah 50:6–8:

I offered my back to those who beat me,
 my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
 I did not hide my face
 from mocking and spitting.
 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
 I will not be disgraced.
 Therefore have I set my face like flint,
 and I know I will not be put to shame.
 He who vindicates me is near.
 Who then will bring charges against me?
 Let us face each other!
 Who is my accuser?
 Let him confront me!

8. Hence, Guelich’s translation, “*You shall not oppose an evil person in court,*” while contextually sensitive, misses the concreteness of Jesus’ own illustrations. See his *Sermon on the Mount*, 219–20. To keep this “in court” theme, he presses 5:38–39 into the mold of Deut 19:16–21 (unsuccessfully). One is hard-pressed to get each of the concrete instances of nonresistance into a courtroom setting, and it might be argued that only one of them plausibly belongs in that context—“if anyone wants to sue you . . .”—and Jesus contends to act before that even happens. The Q parallel in Luke 6:29–30 is even less courtroomish, and the order varies slightly.

9. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:544.

“If anyone slaps you . . .”: For a person to be slapped on the right cheek apparently assumes being hit by a person facing them with a backhanded slap (or a left-handed person striking a person with an open hand). The backhanded slap is a gross insult to the dignity of a person. This principle of the later rabbinic rulings probably reflects the social customs at work in first-century Galilee, and here is the principle: “Everything is in accord with one’s station [status].” This means, “if he smacked him, he pays him *two* hundred zuz.” But, the text continues, “if it is with the back of the hand, he pays him *four* hundred zuz” (*Mishnah Baba Qamma* 8:6, italics added). Instead of striking back, which would be both justifiable and equal retribution and a part of Moses’ “no mercy” law, Jesus creates an almost laughable scene of grace: “turn to them the other cheek also.” This is how Jesus did respond (Matt 26:67).

“If anyone wants to sue you . . .”: Jesus subverts and parodies a legal setting and a social custom. Males wore two levels of clothing: an outer cloak and an inner garment, roughly a coat and shirt. In the event someone seeks to sue a follower of Jesus in court, and the reasons aren’t stated, and they sue for one’s shirt (undergarment), Jesus urges his followers to go further and give them the robe as well. But the social custom is more particular here, as it was in the previous example: a person’s robe was used both as a cover and a sleeping blanket, but it was prohibited to take such from an Israelite for any length of time (cf. Exod 22:26–27; Deut 24:12–13). So the person suing goes for what is legal (a shirt), but Jesus goes further by urging his followers to relinquish their rights to a robe. This would deprive the person of standard comforts and provision. What Jesus says, at face value, is to strip in front of the person as a means of exhibiting radical distance from social custom. Jesus experienced this too (cf. Matt 27:35).

“If anyone forces you to go one mile . . .”: Once again, a social custom is at work. Roman soldiers had the legal rights to requisition occupied people into compulsory work to aid the Roman military. So we are to imagine a Roman soldier approaching one of Jesus’ followers, demanding transportation for a mile; Jesus’ radical go-beyond-their-expectations response is to help for a second mile. This approach to a Roman demand, so unlike the violent-minded Zealots, subverts the powerful. This may all have been parodied later by Jesus when he entered Jerusalem on a mule with his followers throwing down their robes—all of this mocking the Roman victory march.¹⁰

“The one who asks you . . .”: Jesus urges his followers to give to those beggars who ask for something, and there is no indication here of exacting payment back or even at interest.

10. An instance connected to Jesus is Matt 27:32; Mark 15:21.

“The one who wants to borrow from you . . .”: Once again, in parallel fashion, Jesus urges his followers not to demand back what one loans to another. The operative category is avoiding the world of the court and of retribution or payment for offenses. Jesus subverts that system by creating a system of grace, compassion, and love because he seeks to create a culture of generosity. He operates in a kingdom world and reveals an Ethic from Beyond.



LIVE the Story

Our antithesis on the *lex talionis* is a watershed when it comes to how to live out the Sermon on the Mount. Luther contended famously that the problem here is the failure to “to distinguish properly between the secular and the spiritual, between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world.”¹¹ Some of the saddest lines I have ever read by a Christian, let alone one of Luther’s status, are these:

[In speaking of “holy martyrs” . . .] When they were called to arms even by infidel emperors and lords, they went to war. In all good conscience they slashed and killed, in this respect there was no difference between Christians and heathen. Yet they did not sin against this text. For they were not doing this as Christians, for their own persons, but as obedient members and subjects, under obligation to a secular person and authority. But in areas where you are free and without any obligation to such a secular authority, you have a different rule, since you are a different person.¹²

Utter nonsense. Another Lutheran responds: “But this distinction between a private person and bearer of an office as normative for my behavior is foreign to Jesus. . . . ‘Private’ and ‘official’ spheres are all completely subject to Jesus’ command. The word of Jesus claimed them undividedly.” Is this realistic? Of course Jesus knows the reality of sin and “Jesus calls evil evil and that is just why he speaks to his disciples in this way.”¹³ This command, as Bonhoeffer routinely observes, is anchored in the cross that Jesus himself bore. This is why Bonhoeffer can also say, “Only those who there, in the cross of Jesus, find faith in the victory over evil can obey his command.”¹⁴

One of the main thrusts of the ethic of Jesus is the radicalization of an ethic so that we live consistently, from the so-called “private” to the “public” spheres. There is for Jesus no distinction between a secular life and spiritual

11. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 105.

12. Ibid., 110.

13. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 134–35.

14. Ibid., 136.

life: we are always to follow him. His ethic is an Ethic from Beyond. But others, in words not so wrongheaded as Luther's, have continued Luther's personal vs. public or spiritual vs. secular distinction when it comes to ethics.¹⁵

Thus, Peter Craigie, himself a Mennonite, writes: “Contrast the different spirit in the . . . teaching of Jesus, *though the context there has to do with personal behavior and attitudes and not with the courts of law.*”¹⁶ Oddly, the *lex talionis* antithesis is a public (not private) framework, and that is what Jesus is stopping. Although he is exploring rather than expressing his view dogmatically, Dale Allison approaches this Lutheran view when he says Jesus is “speaking about interpersonal relations and declaring that it is illegitimate for his followers to apply the *lex talionis* to their private problems.”¹⁷ And I would add: “and to their public problems as well.” Along the same line Charles Quarles can somehow manage to convince himself of this: “No evidence suggests that Jesus intended to contradict the *lex talionis* of the Mosaic law.”¹⁸ Let the word be as rugged as it really is; its ruggedness carries its rhetorical power to call his disciples into the kingdom where retaliation will end.

The question that confronts any serious reading of the Sermon on the Mount is this: Would Jesus have seen a difference between a kingdom ethic for his followers in their so-called private life but a different ethic in public? I doubt it. Why? Because Jesus' Messianic Ethic, an ethic for his community of followers, is an Ethic from Above and Beyond. The question every reader of the Sermon must ask is this: *Does that world begin now, or does it begin now in private but not in public, or does it begin now for his followers in both private and to the degree possible in the public realm as well?*

Show No Mercy

Perhaps the most neglected element in interpreting this text is what is said in Deuteronomy 19:21: “*Show no pity:* life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (italics added). The judicial posture in the Torah for the *lex talionis* was this: retribution was not an option. Israelites soon converted the equal retribution dimension of this law into financial fines, but justice was *required*, and the requirement was “show no pity” even if the punishment was converted into economic value. What a person has done wrong needs to be undone by doing that same wrong back to them in order to balance the social scale of justice.

But Jesus' posture is the opposite, and it cannot be seen as a form of

15. Calvin's form of the two-realms thinking (Christ vs. Caesar) is not as severe as Luther's; see Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 1:193–95; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 131–32; Turner, *Matthew*, 174.

16. P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 270 n. 21.

17. Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 93.

18. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 146.

exaggeration. His revolutionary preface, in effect, to the *lex talionis* was: “Show mercy.” While he doesn’t say this explicitly when he quotes the Old Testament, his own words that form the antithesis are clearly a variant of “show mercy”: “Do not resist an evil person.” Instead of prosecution and instead of exacting retribution to redress the imbalance of justice, Jesus forms another way: *show mercy and unravel the system of retribution that pervades our society.*

The Orthodox Jewish commentator on the Sermon on the Mount, Pinchas Lapide, toward the end of his book that develops what he calls a theo-politics of loving small steps, finds in these words of Jesus six pillars that can help each of us reshape our culture from hate toward love: (1) Jesus is a realist who knows a world of evil; (2) Jesus has a faith that humans can change; (3) Jesus humanizes haters and their hatred; (4) Jesus calls us to imitate God; (5) Jesus knows this is a battle to fight; and (6) this theo-politics moves in small steps:

Away from conflict, toward empathy;

Away from confrontation, toward cooperation;

Away from dogmatic monologue, toward a dialogue of equals.¹⁹

Going even further, Glen Stassen, ethics professor at Fuller Seminary, proposes ten steps in just peacemaking. They are worth proposing here because they show how the ethic of Jesus can foster peace on a global scale: (1) support nonviolent action; (2) take independent initiatives to reduce threat; (3) use cooperative conflict resolution; (4) acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice; seek repentance and forgiveness; (5) promote democracy, human rights, and religious liberty; (6) foster just and sustainable economic development; (7) work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system; (8) strengthen the United Nations and international organizations; (9) reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade; (10) encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.²⁰

Pacifism?

It is hard for me to square any Christian military posture toward “our enemies”—the kind of label unworthy for the follower of Jesus—with what Jesus both performed in his last week and what he teaches here (as well as at Matt 26:52). Prior to Constantine, apart from a few exceptions, Christians refused to participate in the military.²¹ No theologian or leader supported participation in the military. Their nonparticipation was no ethic of resigna-

19. Lapide, *Sermon on the Mount*, 127.

20. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 170–73.

21. For an excellent sourcebook, see R. J. Sider, ed., *The Early Church on Killing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

tion to Rome's might but an ethic of resistance in the form of creating an alternative political society, the church. Beside their obvious denunciation of the pervasive presence of idols and false religions in that military, the earliest followers of Jesus did not enter the military because they believably thought Jesus meant business in the passage under discussion. The issue for the pre-Constantine church was killing those made in God's image.

They would have known that Jesus' posture was the exact opposite of the Zealots, who believed God's will for the Land could come through violence. Jesus spoke both into that viewpoint and against it when he summoned his followers to be peacemakers (5:9).²² The apostles tell us how Jesus' words were understood, and they read Jesus' words in a much more literal way than do many today. Thus, 1 Peter 2:21 reveals a radical nonviolent form of resistance: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." And Paul in Romans 12:21 speaks about the outcome of such a posture toward those who act unjustly: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

One of the themes of the Sermon is refusing complicity with a system that assumes corruption. Jesus urges his followers to end their complicity. So the "just-war theory" breaks down the words of Jesus because it too is a blatant compromise and is overtly complicit in the ways of violence. Both Augustine and Calvin, who each helped shape the just-war theory, admitted that Jesus is against revenge at the *personal* level. That admission undermines their just-war theory. Jesus knows of no distinction between what he wants his followers to do and what society should do. Society may be corrupt, but his posture is to resist corruption by forming an alternative kingdom community rather than become complicit in our fallen world. Jesus' Messianic Ethic from Beyond may create ambivalence and even a feeling of anarchy over against the state, but the response of the followers of Jesus to such is not to capitulate or to moderate but to follow the Crucified One.

Pacifism isn't quietism or withdrawal or inactivity, and it isn't simple submission. Pacifism's root is connected to the peacemaking beatitude, rooted in love and expressed when the follower of Jesus actively *seeks* peace. Pacifism isn't a lack of interest or noninvolvement, but the hard work of seeking peace. Pacifism is nonviolent resistance, not nonresistance. What Jesus teaches his followers to do illustrates the sort of pacifism he advocates: turn the other cheek, surrender even more clothing, go the extra mile, lend and do

22. See the comments and bibliography at 5:9. Also Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 277–78, who mentions the Waldensians, St. Francis, the followers of Wycliffe, Erasmus, the Anabaptists, Quakers, Tolstoy, Albert Schweitzer, and the now-growing Christian pacifists. He observes that "they are in agreement with the overwhelming witness of the ancient church."

not charge interest or require a payment back. Hardly the stuff of the inactive. These acts subvert the Roman system.

The dominating idea here is that following Jesus matters above everything else. My own posture is one of pacifism, and here is the logic that I find compelling:

I cannot kill a non-Christian, for whom Christ has died and to whom I am called to preach the gospel, for the state; that would be rendering to Caesar what is God's and deconstruct the kingdom mission.

I cannot kill a fellow Christian for the state; that would be rendering to Caesar what is God's. My first allegiance is to the King and to his kingdom people.

I am called to cooperate with the state to the degree it is consistent with the kingdom; I cannot in good conscience cooperate with the state when it is inconsistent with the kingdom; that would be to render to Caesar what is God's.

I cannot ask in the first instance if this is practicable. I am to ask in the first instance what it means to follow Jesus.

The Jesus Creed, which forms the bedrock for Jesus' statement about the *lex talionis*, is radical beyond calculation: it calls us to love both the neighbor and the enemy. Love or violence are the two options.

The cross reveals how God himself deals with injustice and violence; by absorbing and bearing it away, the sin is removed and the mask of injustice stripped away to reveal injustice. It was through the cross that Jesus was vindicated in resurrection and exaltation, and that same promise is given to his followers in Mark 8:34–9:1.

What Happens with Virtue Ethics?

One's posture when it comes to the way Jesus did ethics matters immensely in reading the Sermon. In particular, while not as bald-faced as one finds in Luther, virtue ethicists ground Jesus' Sermon in character formation. In other words, sometimes what Jesus *says* is not what we are to *do*; rather, he is casting forth a moral vision, using what Talbert calls a “verbal icon” through which we are to see the world differently by becoming new people. I agree: the issue is which virtue is being formed.

Our passage then becomes a classic location for virtue ethics and the Anabaptist or kingdom vision to part ways. “There may be occasions when love of one's neighbor trumps one's commitment to non-retaliation,” Talbert observes.²³ When? “Confronted by an evildoer, the disciple, whose character

23. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 92.

incorporates both love of the neighbor and non-retaliation but privileges the former as more basic, would likely respond if necessary to defend, protect, and vindicate the neighbor.” He then asks what Jesus would have taught had the good Samaritan come upon the traveling man as he was being beaten and robbed. Would he have refrained from violence, or would he have taken physical steps to stop the violence? Talbert contends confidently, on the basis of virtue ethics, that Jesus would have cuffed the men, chased them away, and tended to the abused man. Talbert observes that it is from such considerations that the just-war theory emerges.

This is a species of mitigating the words of Jesus, for the kingdom character of the Crucified/Resurrected One knew a different way. I contend that it is hard to know how to respond when what Jesus says is not what is to be done, but instead *what Jesus would have said* or *what Jesus means on the basis of a hierarchy of values*, values that are not mentioned in this text. Now we cannot expect Jesus to construct a casuistry of options and actions, but the point of Jesus here is to *avoid violence, absorb injustice, and live in light of what the kingdom is like* in spite of what the world is like now. Had Jesus followed Talbert’s advice, he would have encouraged Peter to use the sword in Gethsemane. He didn’t, and so we shouldn’t.

What about the Old Testament and War?

Let us ask ourselves this question in a more pointed way: Was *Jesus* not aware of the Old Testament war and *lex talionis* narratives when he said what he said in this (and the next) text? Indeed he was, which again is precisely the point: he did, and he still said what he said. Yes, one can justify war by appealing to the Old Testament. It’s all set out in gory detail with divine justification. But this begs the question of how to read the Bible.

What the Bible’s Story does is this: it takes us from Moses to Christ and says, “Now, follow Jesus.” It doesn’t place Christ as an equal alongside Moses or Elijah, which was Peter’s temptation in Matthew 17. No, it says, “Listen to him!” Jesus is the one to whom we listen, and that means the *lex talionis* at work in the Torah and which prompted Israel’s wars has been set into a new cruciform reality. The wars of Israel say nothing to the follower of Jesus about how to deal with enemies. Again, “Listen to him” are the words of the Father to Peter and to us.

Maddeningly Impractical

Pacifists have been criticized as maddeningly impractical. “How,” many ask, “can such a posture by followers of Jesus be realistic in our world?” Some have quipped in clever rhetoric that the problem with Tolstoy’s and Ghandi’s

idealism was not that they didn't live it out but that they didn't live in the 1930s and 1940s in Germany. I find the quip disrespectful of the radical lifestyle of each. Both would have been executed by Hitler, which is just the point. Unrealistic? The early Bonhoeffer talks back: "It is the great mistake of a false Protestant ethic to assume that loving Christ can be the same as loving one's native country, or friendship or profession, that the better righteousness and *justitia civilis* are the same."²⁴

Realism reveals the problem: Why would a follower of Jesus be driven by what is "realistic"? Luther drove this viewpoint to an absurdity when he said, "Personal safety and private property would be impossible, and finally the social order would collapse."²⁵ Perhaps collapsing the system was inherent to the kingdom vision Jesus had! But by driving these texts over the wedge of the public vs. the private or Christ vs. Caesar, Luther doesn't solve this problem he finds. The impracticality of these verses is not resolved in the Lutheran false dichotomy of Caesar vs. Christ. In fact, discipleship is crushed.

The words of Jesus stand up on the page of the Bible we are reading. They stare at us in their rugged vision. The end of the Sermon makes it clear that Jesus expects his followers to take up his words and live them out regardless of the cost. I know of no alternative. Take them or leave them, is what I say to myself.

I've been asked time and time again these two questions: Do you think the entire country should demilitarize? (What the country does is the country's business. As a citizen I advocate following Jesus.) What about a person who invades your home? (I'd use force to the point of not murdering him.) These two questions get wrapped up in this question: Isn't this incredibly naïve or maddeningly impractical? No and Yes. No, this is not naïve. This is kingdom behavior in the here and now. Yes, this is impractical because Jesus doesn't spell things out. Perhaps that is Jesus' point. Dale Allison's expression emerges once again: Jesus summons us here to live in our world with the kingdom's "moral imagination." Those expressions of Allison's are not so much impractical as they are countercultural. And that, reader, is the point of the Sermon on the Mount over and over. The kingdom is amazingly practical.

Amazingly Practical

Perhaps you have a story to tell of resisting violence with grace or mercy or love or kindness. Those who have experienced such do have a story to tell. One of the most active nonviolent resisters today is a young man in Western Australia named Jarrod McKenna, and he wrote the following story in

24. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 144.

25. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 107.

response to a question I asked him: “How did you get to where you are today in your commitment to nonviolent resistance?” If this story doesn’t show the power of creative nonviolent resistance, I don’t know what does.²⁶

MUGGED by Jesus

By Jarrod McKenna

I was eighteen. It was my first year in University, studying Fine Arts. I was coming back on the train and I had been reading Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. I got off at Warwick train station. I was walking over the overpass bridge away from the train station and in my typical ADD dreamland state, I thought of Dr. King’s talk of the non-violent resistance of the early Christians. I had hardly noticed the big guy in a dark tracksuit with his sleeves rolled up walking toward me.

Still a couple of meters off, he loudly grunted something at me. I missed what he said. A little shocked to have Jarrod’s dream world interrupted, I quickly tried to piece together what he had said ... I definitely heard the word “money.” Thinking he asked for a few bucks to catch the train, I got my wallet out.

Bad move.

Lunging at me with his fist clenched and other hand reaching for something in his pocket, he yelled, “Give me your money!” (He actually said a sentence along these lines only with words you can’t say in front of your mum in the mix.) At that point a number of things went through my head (including some other words you can’t say in front of your mum).

A number of things flashed through my head that years later Walter Wink would put into words for me with such clarity:

The Split option. [Flight] The only thing about running was that I was wearing my backpack with all my art equipment in it. If I ran, this would make my getaway at best a fast waddle. Not to mention ... he’s huge! (Not hard compared to my towering 5.7 ft stature).

The Hit option. [Fight] Only (as I mentioned earlier) ... he’s huge! Maybe I could get one cheap shot and if he wants to have kids, he’ll have to adopt. More likely, I take a shot at him, then he’s unaffected, like a machine in a Terminator movie, then transforms me into a red puddle formerly known as Jarrod.

26. Jarrod sent this to me 2/23/2011. I have slightly reduced it with Jarrod’s permission.

I joke about it now, but there was nothing funny at the time. If you've ever been mugged or held up or threatened violently, you know the shock can be numbing. What next flashed through my head short-circuited my panic and crazy split-second plans of "split" or "hit." The words of Jesus that Martin Luther King Jr. had been experimenting with: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you...."

The flash of those words in my imagination felt like warm oil over my head with a tangible sense of this is how God has related to me. For the first time in the situation I felt grounded. I had already gotten out my wallet, so I reached in and gave him what I had, which was only ten dollars; you'd think he'd have known better than to choose an art student as his victim.

I'm still not sure why, but I didn't simply hand over the money, I stuck out my hand and said, "I'm Jarrod."

Wide-eyed and with mouth open, he grabbed my hand and grunted, "James!"

Surprised and confused I said, "No, Jarrod."

To which he with a surprise to match mine said, "No. I'm James."

"Oh," I said.

There was an awkward pause. This was by far the weirdest passing of the peace I'd been involved with.

I noticed his arm. The bruising ran all along it, interrupted only by the scarring that rivaled a pincushion. James's arm was offered to me like an icon in an Orthodox worship service to contemplate the depth of his pain and all the desperate attempts to escape it. He couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me. The next thing that hit me was the stench. Like stale urine mixed with cigarettes. As we stood on the bridge suspended above the freeway, James launched into his life story at a pace to rival the cars passing below.

His words seemed to overtake each other, then cut each other off. He said he was sorry to be doing this to me, that he was in a bad way. He'd been doing really well, he was on the naltrexene program and getting off the stuff, but then his mum kicked him out of home again and now he was back on the streets.

I asked him to come back to my house and eat and have a shower, get a change of clothes. I'd try to find him a new place to stay.

Another awkward pause.

Then, through the middle of us both on the bridge darted a young woman in another black tracksuit, with a bag under her arm, yelling,

“Go! Go! We gotta go!” At the time I didn’t know if she’d been hassled by security guards at the train station or if she had stolen the bag, but it was clear that she knew James and she wanted to get out of there, fast.

“Wait, James, before you go . . .” I shuffled in my backpack past my art gear and textbooks to reach in and grab the little New Testament I always carried with me. “It’s got my name and number in it if you ever change your mind about a place to stay.”

For the first time since I was staring at this big guy’s fist, it got ugly again. James got right up in my face and started yelling:

“What do I want a Bible for—I’m going to hell!”

His face contorted with an anger that had an intensity that explained his arm. Without even thinking, I found myself saying, “James, we’re all going to hell. That’s why Jesus came.” Now, I know that statement rates low on the theological “wow” scale (and maybe embarrassingly high on the theological cringe factor), but it’s what I said. What happened next, I think, was one of the weirdest experiences of my life. This big guy who, only moments earlier was ready to beat me up (if not worse), just started crying. I’m not talking one tear sad movie crying. He burst out crying. Like a little kid does. Suddenly this pain that was so visible in his anger, on his scarred arms and in his situation, seemed to burst like a floodgate at the news of God’s love for him.

As this big guy stood there crying, I honestly didn’t know what to do. In the same way that my response had put him off balance, James’s tears now totally threw me. I just stood there while his head hung, his shoulders heaved and he wept.

James didn’t say anything more to me. He snorted to try to stop the snot and tears, and then he grabbed the Bible and started running.

After a few paces he turned, looked me in the eye, waved the Bible at me and nodded. Then he kept running.

I stood a long moment on the bridge, stunned. Then I picked up my bag, a bit dazed and continued along the overpass. As I neared the end of the bridge I saw [his female accomplice] jump into an already crowded beaten up maroon VK Holden Commodore sedan. As she got in she yelled over the music to the others, “I got a bag.”

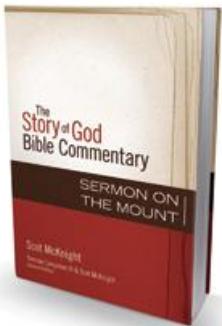
James run up and as he got in the car he yelled over the music, “I . . . I got a Bible!?!?” They piled in and drove off, and I walked right past my bus stop.

I just kept walking.

James taught me that there is nothing that shows the world what

God is like more clearly than when we love our enemies. Despite the reality that throughout the New Testament the cross is not only how God saves us, it is how we witness to that salvation. I'm aware that "enemy love" still scandalizes many a fundamentalist and liberal alike. Who wants a Savior who loves the enemies we want to kill? Who wants to witness to the God whose love falls like rain on the just and the unjust alike? Who wants a God who longs to heal those who have hurt us so they hurt no more? Who wants a Christ who comes to us in the pain we want to run from?

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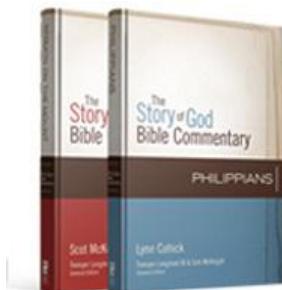
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The Story of God Bible Commentary Series

The Word of God may not change, but culture does. Think of what we have seen in the last twenty years: we now communicate predominantly through the internet and email; we read our news on iPads and computers; we can talk on the phone to our friends while we are driving, while we are playing golf, while we are taking long walks; and we can get in touch with others from the middle of nowhere. We carry in our hands small devices that connect us to the world and to a myriad of sources of information. Churches have changed; the “Nones” are rising in numbers and volume, and atheists are bold to assert their views in public forums. The days of home Bible studies are waning, there is a marked rise in activist missional groups in churches, and pastors are more and more preaching topical sermons, some of which are not directly connected to the Bible. Divorce rates are not going down, marriages are more stressed, rearing children is more demanding, and civil unions and same-sex marriages are knocking at the door of the church.

Progress can be found in many directions. While church attendance numbers are waning in Europe and North America, churches are growing in the South and the East. More and more women are finding a voice in churches; the plea of the former generation of leaders that Christians be concerned not just with evangelism but with justice is being answered today in new and vigorous ways. Resources for studying the Bible are more available today than ever before, and preachers and pastors are meeting the challenge of speaking a sure Word of God into shifting cultures.

Readers of the Bible change, too. These cultural shifts, our own personal developments, the progress in intellectual questions, as well as growth in biblical studies and theology and discoveries of new texts and new paradigms for understanding the contexts of the Bible—each of these elements works on an interpreter so that the person who reads the Bible today asks different questions from different angles.

Culture shifts, but the Word of God remains. That is why we as editors of The Story of God Bible Commentary series, a commentary based on the New International Version 2011 (NIV 2011), are excited to participate in this new series of commentaries on the Bible. This series is designed to address this generation with the same Word of God. We are asking the authors to explain

what the Bible says to the sorts of readers who pick up commentaries so they can understand not only what Scripture says but what it means for today. The Bible does not change, but relating it to our culture changes constantly and in differing ways in different contexts.

When we, the New Testament editors, sat down in prayer and discussion to choose authors for this series, we realized we had found fertile ground. Our list of potential authors staggered in length and quality. We wanted the authors to be exceptional scholars, faithful Christians, committed evangelicals, and theologically diverse, and we wanted this series to represent the changing face of both American and world evangelicalism: ethnic and gender diversity. I believe this series has a wider diversity of authors than any commentary series in evangelical history.

The title of this series, emphasizing as it does the “Story” of the Bible, reveals the intent of the series. We want to explain each passage of the Bible in light of the Bible’s grand Story. The Bible’s grand Story, of course, connects this series to the classic expression *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith,” which was the Bible’s story coming to fulfillment in Jesus as the Messiah, Lord, and Savior of all. In brief, we see the narrative built around the following biblical themes: creation and fall, covenant and redemption, law and prophets, and especially God charge to humans as his image-bearers to rule under God. The theme of God as King and God’s kingdom guides us to see the importance of Israel’s kings as they come to fulfillment in Jesus, Lord and King over all, and the direction of history toward the new heavens and new earth, where God will be all in all. With these guiding themes, each passage is examined from three angles.

Listen to the Story. We believe that if the Bible is God speaking, then the most important posture of the Christian before the Bible is to listen. So our first section cites the text of Scripture and lists a selection of important biblical and sometimes noncanonical parallels; then each author introduces that passage. The introductions to the passages sometimes open up discussion to the theme of the passage while other times they tie this passage to its context in the specific book. But since the focus of this series is the Story of God in the Bible, the introduction leads the reader into reading this text in light of the Bible’s Story.

Explain the Story. The authors follow up listening to the text by explaining each passage in light of the Bible’s grand Story. This is not an academic series, so the footnotes are limited to the kinds of texts typical Bible readers and preachers readily will have on hand. Authors are given the freedom to explain the text as they read it, though you should not be surprised to find occasional listings of other options for reading the text. Authors explore

biblical backgrounds, historical context, cultural codes, and theological interpretations. Authors engage in word studies and interpret unique phrases and clauses as they attempt to build a sound and living reading of the text in light of the Story of God in the Bible.

Authors will not shy away from problems in the texts. Whether one is examining the meaning of “perfect” in Matthew 5:48, the problems with Christology in the hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, the challenge of understanding Paul in light of the swirling debates about the old, new, and post-new perspectives, the endless debates about eschatology, or the vagaries of atonement theories, the authors will dive in, discuss evidence, and do their best to sort out a reasonable and living reading of those issues for the church today.

Live the Story. Reading the Bible is not just about discovering what it meant back then; the intent of *The Story of God Bible Commentary* series is to probe how this text might be lived out today as that story continues to march on in the life of the church. At times our authors will tell stories about what this looks like; at other times they may offer some suggestions for living it out; but always you will discover the struggle involved as we seek to live out the Bible’s grand Story in our world.

We are not offering suggestions for “application” so much as digging deeper; we are concerned in this section with seeking out how this text, in light of the Story of God in the Bible, compels us to live in our world so that our own story lines up with the Bible’s Story.

SCOT MCKNIGHT, general editor New Testament

LYNN COHICK, JOEL WILLITTS, and MICHAEL BIRD, editors

The Sermon on the Mount is not a statement to be treated in a cavalier fashion—by saying that this or that isn't right or that here we find an inconsistency.

Its validity depends on its being obeyed.

This is not a statement that we can freely choose to take or leave.

It is a compelling, lordly statement.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

What Jesus teaches in the sayings collected in the Sermon on the Mount

*is not a complete regulation of the life of the disciples,
and it is not intended to be;*

*rather, what is taught here is symptoms, signs, examples,
of what it means when the kingdom of God breaks into
the world which is still under sin, death, and the devil.*

*You yourselves should be signs of the coming kingdom of God,
signs that something has already happened.*

JOACHIM JEREMIAS

*A man comes forth in Israel to make today's prophetic vision
tomorrow's agenda;*

*one for whom the teachings of Mount Sinai do not suffice
because he wishes to penetrate beyond to the original divine intent;
one who, despite war and tyranny, dares to pursue
the biblical love of neighbor to its ultimate consequence
in order to brand all our souls with an ideal of human possibility
that no longer allows us to be content with the threadbare,
run-of-the-mill persons we are
but need not be.*

PINCHAS LAPIDE

*[Jesus'] life is but a commentary on the sermon,
and the sermon is the exemplification of his life.*

STANLEY HAUERWAS

*The Sermon on the Mount has a strange way of making us
better people or better liars.*

DEAN SMITH

The Story of God Bible Commentary Series Endorsements

“Getting a story is about more than merely enjoying it. It means hearing it, understanding it, and above all, being impacted by it. This commentary series hopes that its readers not only hear and understand the story, but are impacted by it to live in as Christian a way as possible. The editors and contributors set that table very well and open up the biblical story in ways that move us to act with sensitivity and understanding. That makes hearing the story as these authors tell it well worth the time. Well done.”

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Senior Pastor

North Point Ministries

“I’m a storyteller. Through writing and speaking I talk and teach about understanding the Story of God throughout Scripture and about letting God reveal more of His story as I live it out. Thus I am thrilled to have a commentary series based on the Story of God—a commentary that helps me to Listen to the Story, that Explains the Story, and then encourages me to probe how to Live the Story. A perfect tool for helping every follower of Jesus to walk in the story that God is writing for them.”

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Author, Speaker, Encourager

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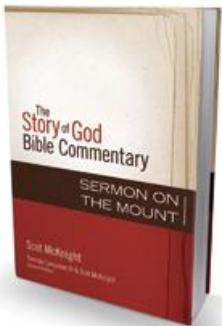
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