

## **THE LAW IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: MATT 5:17-48**

STEPHEN WESTERHOLM  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1

“This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath”: so runs one assessment of Jesus in John's Gospel (9:16). It is decidedly not the view of the evangelist, for whom the contrary claim--that Jesus is "the one God sent" (3:34)--is a fundamental and recurrent theme. We may well find it strange, in view of the obvious logic behind the opponents' charge (God gave the Sabbath; Jesus does not keep it; therefore Jesus cannot represent God) that John would even permit its expression: why, we may wonder, would John make his own task more difficult by noting plausible grounds on which it might well be doubted, and has by many been doubted, that Jesus came "from God"?

John's response to the charge, a fascinating subject in itself,<sup>1</sup> cannot be explored here. We should note, however, that the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels repeatedly invites the same easy dismissal as that uttered by "some Pharisees" in John 9:16: clearly it was too common a perception, too vital an element in Jesus' story, for the evangelists to pass it by. Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew in particular feels the urgency of responding to the issue. Jesus' relation to Moses and the

<sup>1</sup> In fact, no direct answer to the opponents' charge is given; its refutation is rather worked out in an implicit way in the narrative of the Gospel. In the immediate context we see how the opponents' logic, when pressed to its end, leads to the absurd conclusion that the healing of a blind man is the work of a sinner (9:24-33); clearly, John suggests, what Jesus did must be construed differently, as a work of God (9:3, 33). In the context of the Gospel as a whole, we may note the insistence throughout that what Jesus does--even on the Sabbath--is God's work (e.g., 5:16-18), while the would-be "disciples of Moses" who criticize him (9:28-29) evidence no real loyalty to their supposed teacher or to God (e.g., 5:39-47; 7:19-24).

Mosaic law is the focus of attention in Matt 5:17-48, and the occasion for this extended treatment implicit in the introductory verse is clearly the same perception as that we encountered in John. Something there was about Jesus' words and deeds which could be construed as a setting aside of the Law;<sup>2</sup> but that, Matthew wants us to know, is a misconception. Jesus represents, not the Law's abrogation, but its "fulfillment" (5:17). This bold claim, in apparent defiance of the simple facts, is defended and developed in the verses that follow. But before we examine the argument, the framework necessary for its intelligibility and force must be summarized briefly.

*The Larger Context: The Dawn of God's "Rule"*

Important though the discussion of Jesus' relationship to Moses may be for Matthew, it does not introduce the Sermon on the Mount; nor, indeed, does the Sermon mark the start of Jesus' public activity in Matthew's Gospel--and for good reason. To ask whether Jesus sets aside or affirms the Mosaic code is tantamount to assessing new wine from the perspective of what it does to old wineskins: there is point to the inquiry, but it will hardly lead to an appreciation of the taste of new wine. Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' public career begins with the proclamation of the kingdom (4:17; 5:3): something new, the truly decisive stage in the history of God's dealings with his people, has begun. That history is a long one (cf. Matt 1:1-17!), but its movement was ever forward, its mood till now anticipatory. Now the culmination of the activity of the "law and the prophets," the yearning of "many prophets and righteous people," is being realized (5:17; 13:17). The decisive revelation must not be thought to lie in the past. Where Sinai is construed as the crucial revelation, the criterion by which all that is "new" must be judged (cf. John 9:29), departures from its standards inevitably appear as transgressions if not apostasy. But Matthew will not allow the premise. And when the old revelation is interpreted in the light of a new and decisive stage in salvation history, whatever tensions between the two may arise must be attributed to the partial nature of past revelation and its transcendence in the new.

From Matthew's perspective, then, the starting point of any discussion of Jesus' relationship with "Moses" must be an understanding of Jesus' role in the dawning "kingdom of heaven," God's "reign" or

<sup>2</sup> "Or the prophets," as Matt 5:17 goes on to say. That Jesus represents the "fulfillment" of the prophetic Scriptures is of course an important Matthean theme as well; but it is not the theme of our study here, nor, indeed, does it figure in the immediate sequel in Matthew, where the law (5:18) and its commands (5:19, 21, 27, etc.) are the issue.

"rule."<sup>3</sup> What is meant by the latter phrase? Among Jesus' contemporaries, it was used in at least the following three ways.

(1) God's "rule" may refer simply to his control over the events and people of history; in this sense the divine "rule" is seen as a present and eternal reality, whether human beings acknowledge it or not. The exercise of this "rule" is well illustrated in Daniel 4 where Nebuchadnezzar successively has power, is deposed, and is restored to his throne, all by the decree of God.

(2) At the same time, however, the chapter illustrates the present limitations on God's "rule," since it is not till the final stage that the pagan king recognizes and submits to the sovereignty of the Most High. Accordingly, God's "rule" may be spoken of in a more limited sense as confined to those who submit to him, those to whom he has revealed his ways and who strive to abide by them. Ideally, this included all God's people: Israel was his "kingdom" (Exod 19:3-8; 1 Chr 28:5). In fact--and by definition--reprobate Jews as well as the vast hordes of "God-less" Gentiles were excluded.

(3) But, alas, there were more people like the early Nebuchadnezzar who knew not God than there were like the later Nebuchadnezzar who had learned to worship him; lamentably, too, the means by which the change in Nebuchadnezzar was brought about did not commend itself as the solution on a larger scale. There was something not right, something ultimately dissatisfactory and intolerable, about a world which was made, sustained, and "ruled" by God, but which nonetheless failed to acknowledge its Creator or give him his due. That a dramatic transformation of present conditions was called for and awaited was a staple element in the faith of many 1st-century Jews. Some, no doubt, were content to be discontent with pagan domination over Israel and longed for nothing more than a turning of the tables. But for others, Israel's subservience to the empires of this world was but one symptom of the evilness of the age. Tyranny and injustice would surely not be allowed to prevail forever in God's world; inevitably, and appropriately, the establishment of righteousness would be accompanied by the filling of the earth with "the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). That day would mark the dawn of God's "rule" in its third and future sense, a "rule" over subjects who owned and obeyed the God of Israel, a "rule" from which the wicked would by definition be banished, while the vindicated righteous would feast at a table spread by God.

<sup>3</sup> On βασιλεία as "reign," see G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902) 91-96; for "heaven" as a circumlocution for "God," see Matt 21:25; Luke 15:18.

Readers familiar with the NT will recognize that the basic pattern of belief summarized above is abundantly attested in the Gospels. Here we must be content to underline briefly three aspects of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom.

(1) In all current understandings of the coming kingdom of God, those participating in the divine rule would be the righteous; the wicked would be excluded. Distinctive of Jesus' proclamation, however, is the concern whether an eternal consignment of men and women on that basis would leave God with any subjects to rule, with any guests for his feast. The concern is most evident in the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1-14), but implicit throughout. The summons to the kingdom is extended to notorious sinners, partly in the conviction that a loving, compassionate God is not willing to give up his claim on any potential subjects, but partly also in the conviction that such "sinners" were scarcely further from the kingdom than the ostensibly "righteous." Pious the latter might be, and rigorously attentive to the most picayune details of God's law. But too often the zeal of the pious, the Matthean Jesus proclaims, did not extend to the weightier concerns of the divine will (23:23); its manifest motivation was too often the securing of human praise (6:1-18; 23:5-7); its judgment of those who failed to measure up to its standards ran counter to divine priorities (9:13; 12:7). Hence even the "righteousness" of the "righteous" was inadequate for admission to the kingdom (5:20), though, disastrously, it was sufficient to blind many to their need for repentance: as a result "tax collectors and harlots are going into the kingdom of God before you" (21:28-32).

(2) If the Jesus of the Gospels betrays an unusual sense that fit subjects for God's kingdom were not to be found even among God's people, it is also true that he is not content merely to announce the imminent coming of the kingdom. People needed to be made righteous, not simply identified as such. Jesus is portrayed in Matthew as fulfilling that task in at least three ways: (a) he summons his listeners, "sinners" and (ostensibly) "righteous" alike, to turn from their self-serving sin to a life of radical faith in God and obedience to him; (b) he offers divine love and forgiveness to all who will receive it--again, "sinners" and "righteous" alike--though it can only be enjoyed by those whose lives are thus transformed to radical faith and obedience; and (c) finally, since the sin of even those who claim to be God's people is perceived as universal, deep-rooted, and corrupting, and since God's forgiveness of, and triumph over, all that is evil can never be reduced to a mere overlooking of human wickedness, Jesus offers his own life to atone for human sins (1:21; 20:28; 26:28), thus enabling people who fall far short of God's demands to participate, purged of their sins, in the kingdom of heaven.

(3) Inasmuch as Jesus' life and death are the divine means by which a people fit for the kingdom is brought into being, his coming represents the decisive stage in salvation history, the very dawning (though not yet the final consummation) of God's "rule" in its third and future sense. To humans created by God but captives of evil and the Evil One, he brings divine deliverance (cf. Matt 12:28-29) and the present joyous assurance of a part in the blessed age to come (Matt 5:3-12; 13:44-46).

We may now return to the question with which we began. When Jesus' relationship with the Mosaic law is seen in the light of the dawning of the kingdom, apparent departures from the standards of the law can no longer be construed simply as transgressions. In fact, Matt 5:17 insists, Jesus did not "set aside" the law. The point of the denial is at least twofold: Jesus must not be thought to have discounted or ignored either the law's claim to be divine or the requirements of righteousness which it embodied. Against the first misconception, the Gospel insists (as we have noted) that Jesus represents rather the culmination, the "fulfillment," of the sacred history begun in the "law and the prophets." Against the second, the Gospel insists that the kingdom righteousness which Jesus proclaims does not fall short of the demands of Moses, nor lead to indifference toward its requirements (cf. Matt 5:19!); rather it transcends them, a more perfect embodiment of the divine will.<sup>4</sup> The latter claim is then illustrated with the six antitheses which comprise the remainder of the chapter.

#### *The Immediate Context: The Sermon on the Mount*

Few texts have proven more controversial than the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount. A number of problems in their interpretation would, however, be avoided if the following basic principles about the sermon were kept in view.

(1) The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is essentially Jesus' expectations of how his followers are to behave. *Negatively*, this means that the sermon is not intended as a blueprint for reforming the laws or institutions of earthly society. It is assumed throughout that Jesus' true followers are and will remain a minority on earth, subject to persecution (5:10-12) and abuse (5:39-40), living alongside scribes and Pharisees, tax collectors and Gentiles, self-servers of both

<sup>4</sup>That πληρῶσαι ("fulfill") includes this element of transcendence is rightly insisted upon by W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 486-87; cf. also 507-9. Such an understanding is required when we interpret (as Matthew intended) 5:17 and 21-47 in the light of each other, as we shall see below.

crass and pious hue. That, in this age, Caesar must be given his due, and that, for earthly society, the possibility of divorce represents a necessary concession to human sinfulness are both allowed elsewhere in the Gospel (22:21; 19:8). Jesus' expectations in the Sermon on the Mount are directed not to those who are at home in this world,<sup>5</sup> but to those who are to stand out from the world as its "salt" and "light" (5:13-16); those who, through knowing the heavenly Father, will transcend the norms of human behavior (5:44-48; 6:1, 8, 32). To be sure, there is a measure of righteousness even in this age. Scribes and Pharisees avoid murder and adultery and give alms to the poor; tax collectors and Gentiles love those who love them. But the Sermon on the Mount defines the "surpassing" righteousness of those who would inherit the kingdom of God (5:20).

Positively, it is clear that Matthew does expect Jesus' followers to live by the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon spells out how their righteousness is to go beyond that of others. When, toward the conclusion of the sermon, Jesus insists that those who merely call him Lord will not enter the kingdom, but only those who actually do the will of the Father (7:21-23), the exposition of the divine will in the immediately preceding chapters is surely in view. Similarly, the sermon ends with a parable which depicts those who heed and obey Jesus' words as the wise who build "on a rock," whereas those who fail to heed them, like the foolish who build on sand, do so to their own ruin (7:24-27). If further confirmation is needed, the Gospel as a whole concludes with the instructions of the resurrected Jesus by which his disciples are themselves to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them, and to teach them "to observe all that I have commanded you" (28:19-20). The Sermon on the Mount is surely a substantial part of the teaching that is to be passed on and obeyed.

(2) Obedience to what Jesus commands is, then, expected (by both Jesus and Matthew!) of Jesus' followers. Still, just as Jesus conveys the message of the kingdom's coming largely in parables, so the requirements of the kingdom are often expressed in dramatic, poetic form, where the expectation is rather that disciples will show and act in accordance with the attitude illustrated in Jesus' command than

<sup>5</sup> This claim by itself is misleading, since Jesus' summons to the kingdom and its righteousness is directed to all (at least ultimately, as Matt 28:19-20 makes clear; Matthew does see Jesus himself as active at a stage in salvation history when the message was directed to all Jews). The point here is that the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount can only be practiced (as we shall see) in the context of a positive response to the proclamation of the kingdom--and not everyone so responds. Hence, though the summons is addressed to all (Matt 4:17), Jesus' account of the righteousness which is to characterize his followers (Matthew 5-7) is directed specially to them.

that they will literally comply with its wording.<sup>6</sup> Literalists will miss the point of Matt 6:6 if they refuse to pray anywhere but in their rooms. They will be hard put to know how they can keep one hand from being aware of what the other is doing, or what logs are to be removed from their eyes. And their self-congratulation that at least they have never thrown pearls to pigs will be premature. Jesus' ethical teaching is at the opposite extreme from the halachic efforts of "scribes and Pharisees," where maximum concreteness and comprehensiveness in the definition of the divine requirements were sought; it is not for that reason less serious, as any sensitive reader of the Sermon on the Mount will attest.

(3) The form taken by Jesus' ethical teaching (point 2 above) corresponds to the audience for which it is intended (point 1 above). Society as we know it needs specific rules. Ideally, such rules act as a restraint on evil and serve to inculcate virtuous behavior; society is the better where its laws are good and wise. The risk in a theocracy is that a body of such laws will be confused with an exhaustive statement of the divine will; that compliance with concrete, practicable rules will be interpreted as the essence of the righteousness required by God: hypocrisy (outward compliance without inner devotion), self-righteousness, pride, and contempt for those less obviously "righteous" are attendant perils.

In fact, true goodness, though it will express itself in ways no law would condemn (Gal 5:23), is not the same thing as careful compliance with rules.<sup>7</sup> Labored compliance, while a vast improvement over unprincipled living, falls far short of the spontaneous selflessness and concern for others, the uncalculating generosity and kindness, the unstinted love of God and all his creatures which God desires to flow from his children. Goodness in this sense is related to joy, thankfulness, and appreciativeness--though none of these qualities necessarily accompany the most fervent strivings for self-discipline and moral virtue. Such is the goodness of Eden, the fruit of genuine, unselfconscious delight in the goodness of God and his creation. It is, alas, also a goodness which in the Genesis account was forfeited when humankind chose to seek its own path, its own pleasures, and its own good rather than accept a role in a creation steered by the goodness of God. The early Christians, convinced that God had found it necessary to intervene in human history in an awesome way, could only conclude that sinful humanity cannot of its own produce the goodness God

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) 46-63.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Knox, *The Ethic of Jesus in the Teaching of the Church* (New York: Abingdon, 1961) 103-8; also his moving portrayal of the difference between a servant's and a son's obedience, 82-86.

desires--not even with the assistance of the divine law. A "tree" must be "good" before its "fruit" can be acknowledged as such (Matt 7:17). In Paul's terms, such goodness can only be the product of a life transformed and empowered by the divine Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). In Matthew's terms, it is the righteousness of the "new age" inaugurated by Jesus, a righteousness springing from a radical reorientation toward God brought about with the experience of the power and goodness of his kingdom.

In short, the Sermon on the Mount does not prescribe in a concrete, comprehensive way the behavior expected of God's children, for such behavior is neither reducible to, nor the straightforward result of compliance with, a corpus of rules. Rather the Sermon on the Mount provides illustrations of the kind of attitude and action which will-and must-characterize those who thrill in what it means to be children of a benevolent heavenly Father.

(4) The orientation which, according to the Sermon on the Mount, is to be displayed in the behavior of Jesus' followers may perhaps best be summarized in the following two points: absolute, unwavering trust in God's goodness; and absolute, wholehearted, loving devotion to him. Such a way of life is of course not only audaciously simple; it is desperately naive and foolishly impractical--unless the presence of God's rule, care, and goodness are as real and reliable as Jesus obviously believed they were. Note also that where the essence of this ethic is seen as love for God and trust in him, it is clear both that these are indeed essential requirements of God's children (can people really be living as God's children without showing love and trust toward him?) and that they cannot be fulfilled by mere compliance with rules. To be sure, many deeds done by a loving, trusting child can be imitated by outsiders to the family. But just as romantic love cannot simply be summoned up by a decision of the lover, but must be a response to the perceived loveliness of the beloved,<sup>8</sup> so childlike love and trust, and the radical expressions of such an orientation demanded by Jesus, can only be a response to the sensed goodness and sufficiency of the Father. Herein lies part of the explanation

<sup>8</sup> The parallel may be pursued further. Though at times the lover may act in ways taught quite spontaneously by "love" itself, and though (ideally, of course) all the lover's actions are motivated by love, nonetheless cultural expectations, the guidance of experienced friends, and even the counsels of books of etiquette will play their role in shaping (though they can never themselves create) the expressions of love. Similarly, the expressions of Christian love are "shaped" by the moral expectations of the believing community, the guidance of its leaders, the counsels of its Scriptures: the spontaneity of love is by no means the sole determinant of Christian behavior. To judge by the response of readers, my *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) did not sufficiently emphasize this latter aspect.



why early Christian writers repeatedly feel constrained to insist that Christian virtue is not the virtue of Christians, but is the work of God living "in" and "through" them;<sup>9</sup> herein lies as well part of the explanation why the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, when detached from its character as response and from the underlying vision of the kingdom of God, inevitably appears unachievable.

(5) But it is only part of the latter explanation, for it remains the case, as Matthew well knew, that followers of Jesus themselves do not measure up to the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. After all, Jesus' disciples are hardly models of goodness and loyalty in the pages of the first Gospel; and it is not for nothing that a petition for forgiveness is included in the disciples' prayer. What Matthew's Gospel does not tolerate--and it is here at one with all the writings of the NT--is moral indifference, the complacency which supposes that because one belongs to a believing community, divine favor is guaranteed regardless of one's behavior.<sup>10</sup> The Sermon on the Mount is only one of many solemn warnings against such an attitude.

(6) Finally, it may be asked whether, since sin undoubtedly remained a reality in the Matthean community, that fact itself discredits Matthew's talk of "new age righteousness" and the demand that followers of Jesus must show a righteousness beyond that of "scribes and Pharisees"--just as Paul's ethic of the Spirit is sometimes thought to be discredited by the moral failings of believers in his churches. Where is the moral superiority which ought to distinguish the "children of God"? As often, an illustration best serves to convey the answer which, I believe, Matthew (and Paul) would give.

A father with carpentry skills decides to build a shed. The task presents an opportunity to spend some "quality time" with his eight-year-old twin boys and perhaps to teach them a thing or two about carpentry. He invites their participation. Both are excited, but, though Johnny agrees to help, Jimmy decides he would rather build a shed on his own. They set to work. Tommy, the boys' friend, drops by and is immediately impressed by Jimmy's activities, hammering and sawing all on his own, with what appears to Tommy to be considerable skill. Johnny, by comparison, appears positively awkward and quite unproductive in all he does--bringing a hammer to his dad; driving in nails with his dad's hand also on the hammer; occasionally attempting a few strokes on his own, but as often as not having his father pull out

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the fine discussion in D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) 114-17.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Knox, *Ethic*, 73-75, 87-88, who notes that the reception of forgiveness itself implies the acknowledgment, not the neglect, of one's obligation.

and straighten the nails he has hit. Tommy can only conclude that Jimmy is much the better carpenter.

But Johnny and his dad produce a shed, and a fine one at that (his father is a good carpenter as well as a devoted dad). Jimmy produces a mess. The fact is, Jimmy and Johnny are both a decade or more away from being able to build a shed. Still, Johnny has now had a "part" in the making of one and, for all his awkwardness and misguided strokes, learned something about carpentry in the process. Jimmy got nowhere and learned nothing (beyond, one would hope, his own limitations).

Doubtless Matthew and Paul saw God's righteousness and goodness as lying as far beyond human capacities as the building of a shed is beyond the skills of an eight-year-old. External observers may be impressed by any number of virtuous deeds on the part of "Jimmy's" kin; but, from this perspective, they amount to little. Human virtue unaided will never take on the character of divine goodness. The latter can only be produced by "cooperation" with God. Matthew and Paul saw followers of Jesus as Johnny's kin, and their assurance that God's righteousness would result from such "Johnnies'" endeavors had nothing to do with virtues they perceived in God's little "helpers." Where a child is eager and willing to help, a competent dad will see to it that the job gets done.

### *The Moral Vision of the Antitheses*

We turn now to the antitheses themselves. A full-scale exegetical treatment cannot be provided here. Our more limited purpose will be to show how each of the antitheses illustrates both the moral vision and the relation to the Mosaic law sketched above.

(1) (5:21-26) The law prohibits murder--and even the minimally virtuous will attempt to comply. That community living requires respect for the life of others is apparent to all. It is equally apparent that no earthly society can impose sanctions on every outburst of anger or expression of contempt. But the love which God's children must show their Creator-Father and all his creatures is violated no less by angry assertions of self-will and scorn than by murder itself. In poetic, dramatic terms, Jesus shows the moral equivalence (5:22).

It is sometimes said that Matt 5:22 is a radical interpretation of the law in 5:21, that Jesus merely draws out the implications already inherent in the law's prohibition of murder. But, apart from the fact that there are later antitheses which cannot possibly be construed as interpretations of the thesis quoted from the law (5:31-32, 33-37, 38-42,43-48), it is apparent already in 5:21-22 that Jesus' words are to be understood as an authoritative declaration to contemporary hearers ("But I say to you. . .") in contrast with what was long ago "said to the

men of old": the very formulation suggests a counterthesis rather than a mere explanation in v 22.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, v 22 does not "set aside" v 21; murder remains wrong. But Jesus' demand goes beyond what the law of an earthly society can reasonably condemn to proscribe behavior incompatible with the goodness required of God's children. The law is not abolished; it is transcended.

(2) (5:27-30) The prosperity of earthly societies depends in no small measure on the preservation of good order and the honoring by its citizens of all their commitments. Hence societies have every reason to promote fidelity and stability in their families (a consideration to which modern laws are at times strangely oblivious). The Mosaic law carries that principle to the point of prohibiting adultery and imposing sanctions on transgressors.

On the other hand, looks of lust are hardly the stuff of legislation. Still, since they mean the regarding of others solely as opportunities for one's own gratification, they offend no less than adultery the love which respects and delights in the "otherness" of others while seeking their good. Again, the goodness of such love transcends without dismissing the law.

(3) (5:31-32) Human nature being what it is, promises are not always kept, peaceful--or even tolerable--coexistence proves not always possible, marriages fail. The wise law of earthly societies, while anxious to discourage, will nonetheless provide for the orderly dissolution of marriage.

But such laws cannot be the standard of God's children. For them, marriage is not an arrangement of human convenience to be maintained only as long as the self-interests of both parties are perceived to overlap, but a divine institution whose very breath is the commitment and self-sacrifice of love. Marriage is seen as serving both to provide for the bearing and training of the next generation in the stable context of a family whose members are committed to each other, and to woo human beings from their self-preoccupation and self-love to occupation with the concerns and good of their spouses and offspring. On the other hand, divorce represents (in most cases) the rejection of such other-centeredness for the sordid pursuit of self-interest. Hence, where marriage is entered, lifelong, loving commitment to one's spouse must always be the resolve of the children of God--a resolve which temptations, frustrations, and hardships serve only to stiffen. And though Christian leaders (beginning at least with Paul<sup>12</sup>) have justifiably

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 506, 508.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 7:10-16. Matthew's exceptive clause ("except for unchastity," 5:32) is of course itself an adaptation of the ideal to a concrete situation. Matt 5:31-32 insists that remarriage after a divorce involves adultery. This can only mean that, in God's eyes, the

wrestled with the problems of counseling, and applying this ideal, in less than ideal situations, the moral vision of the Sermon on the Mount is lost when casuistry and compromise displace the celebration of the ideal in the proclamation and moral education of the church.

(4) (5:33-37) As in the case of divorce, oaths represent society's inevitable compromises with human sin, the tolerance of the lesser, to avoid the consequences of the greater, evil. "All men are liars," but at least when testifying in court, or making solemn resolutions, they must be given strong incentives to speak the truth; hence the place for oaths. Such oaths remain a sorry compromise, both in that they imply that times and occasions determine the priority of truth, and in that they represent presumptuous demands of creatures that the Creator serve as guarantor of their claims. Children of God, whose fundamental orientation is to please God, will be anxious not to succumb to the temptation either to protect selfish interests by uttering untruths or to use their Father's name in any presumptuous way. Again, their behavior represents not the setting aside of the law's command, but its transcendence.

(5) (5:38-42) The human desire for revenge is moderated in the law by the principle of fairness: recompense may match, but must not exceed, the initial injury. Earthly society cannot survive without its institutions of justice.

Still, "fair" though it may seem, we all recognize that such a principle of justice cannot and should not be applied in all situations. The rule of "eye-for-an-eye" does not, for example, prevail in the home. "Normal" parents (may their tribe increase!) make considerable sacrifices for their children; often they put up with considerable abuse. They discipline, to be sure; but the point in their discipline is not that parents must be allowed "just revenge" or that they should "stick up for their rights." They are not even thinking about their "rights" at such times. When they function as they should, the good of their children is their goal.

Jesus' point should be clear. The heavenly Father loves his children (in this context his "children" means all his creatures) infinitely more than human parents love theirs. And, of course, he does not treat his children on the basis of the "eye-for-an-eye" principle any more

human institution of divorce effects nothing, that the first marriage remains in place, and, hence, that entrance into a second relationship (even after a divorce) involves unfaithfulness to the first. The text insists that responsibility for such sins of adultery rests with the man who initiates the divorce (Jewish law did not permit women to do so)--with one clear exception (hence the "exceptive clause"): the man is not, of course, to be considered responsible for his wife's adultery *after* the divorce when it was her own adultery prior to the divorce which occasioned the split.

than they do. God puts up with an incredible amount of abuse from his children; he pours out his bounty upon them with no thought of equal return. Followers of Jesus are to do likewise. The principles of justice in the old age are no adequate guide for the behavior of those who would inherit the new. When wronged, Jesus' followers insist neither on their "rights" nor on revenge; nor are they content simply to bear the abuse. They respond (as Jesus' dramatic pictures in 5:39-42 illustrate) with positive actions determined by a genuine concern for the good of those who wrong them. In Paul's terms, they "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21)--just as God overcomes human evil with his redemptive goodness. Once again, the requirements of the law are abundantly transcended by the love which is to characterize God's children.

(6) (5:43-47) Finally, while normal human love includes an element of reciprocity which makes its extension to enemies preposterous, God's goodness is not so circumscribed. Similarly, the love of those steered by God's love will transcend the limits of human benevolence to include all of God's creatures.

God's children are thus to reflect the perfection of their Father's goodness (5:48). That they repeatedly fall short of this standard hardly means that they can (or that Jesus should) modify the definition of goodness,<sup>13</sup> any more than it follows that God should adjust his character by bringing it more in line with human limitations and sin! Goodness remains goodness, God remains God, while his love sustains his children in their weakness and pardons their failings. But the pardonable failings do not include, in Matthew's Gospel, indifference toward Jesus' summons to the righteousness of the kingdom. Those who pay no heed to his words are not recognized by the Matthean Jesus as his own (7:21-23).

### *Conclusions*

The law, for Matthew, prescribed righteousness in an age of anticipation. To say that Jesus "sets it aside" is to ignore the positive, divine role which the Matthean Jesus assigns the law (and the prophets) and to suggest that righteousness is for him less than a fundamental concern; neither is the case. On the other hand, the Matthean Jesus does not simply restate the requirements of the law, for its demands do not adequately correspond to the goodness of God; some of its provisions are limited by what is legally enforceable, whereas others indulge aspects of human sin in an attempt to limit sin's consequences. Jesus'

<sup>13</sup> Again, see the fine discussion in Knox, *Ethic*, 50-52.

commands transcend the law by prescribing (in a necessarily illustrative, not casuistic or comprehensive way) the goodness of God as the standard for his children. Theirs is to be the perfect love and trust of children, responding to the love and goodness of their Father. The repeated failings in this life of those who respond are met with the love and forgiveness of God, offered in Christ. Still, according to the Sermon on the Mount, response is essential if Jesus' hearers are to enter God's kingdom: for how can the new age be one of goodness, how can it rise about the self-seeking viciousness of the present age, unless its members are those who have delighted in, submitted to, been transformed by, and come to reflect the goodness of the heavenly Father? Divine goodness, the Gospel insists, has spared no cost--not even, beyond all human comprehension and imagining, the cost of the cross of Jesus--to include all creation in its sphere. But can divine goodness itself admit to its realm those who want no part of--divine goodness?

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The Criswell College;

4010 Gaston Ave.

Dallas, TX 75246

[www.criswell.edu](http://www.criswell.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)

The sermon on the mount/. MATT, v.-vii. With a Paraphrase. By J. Alexander Fiddlay, M.A. LONDON : THE EPWORTH PRESS.Â Why do you take so much notice of the splinter in your brother-man's eye, i6 THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. 4 Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me cast out the mote out of thine eye ; and lo, the beam is in thine own eye ? 5 Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye ; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. 6 f Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you.