

1-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Love, Mark (2008) ""But I Say to You. . .": Scripture and Mercy in Matthew," *Leaven*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 6. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss4/6>

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But I Say to You . . . : Scripture and Mercy in Matthew

MARK LOVE

The Stone-Campbell tradition is a scribal tradition. In other words, we are a people of the book. No authorization of practice in our congregations carries more weight than the phrase, "it is biblical." In our best moments, we have a vivid sense of the living voice of this book. That is, we do not simply cut and paste scripture from an ancient context onto our own, but we understand that the power of scripture lies in its ability to speak in a variety of ways into various contexts. Scripture continues to write itself onto our hearts even as we interpret it for new settings. In this sense we are scribes. We allow scripture to be written, or inscribed, onto our lives in an authoritative way.

This "inscribing" is a complicated matter. If we reflect on what we are doing when we claim scripture as authoritative, we realize that some texts seem to weigh more than others. Some commands shape our imaginations more than others. Some texts we accept as binding patterns or examples, while others we ignore. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are always negotiating between text and our current context. We are always asking, "Which of these words are we bound to today and in what ways?" My preference is that we be as conscious and deliberate about this as possible, even allowing for the fact that there are things we are not conscious of that are shaping the reading and interpreting of the text in powerful ways. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" might very well convey our approach to being a scribal people.

At this point we have a partner in the Gospel of Matthew. The church imagined in Matthew is a scribal community. It lives in relation to an authoritative text. Jesus is clear. He has not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Not one stroke of a letter of the law will pass away before it is completely accomplished. The way of Jesus is not a way around the demands of the law, but precisely a way through them to God and neighbor. To live in relation to Jesus is to live in relation to the book.

But just as with us, this claim to be a people of the book requires some clarification. After all, those who oppose Jesus in Matthew are also striving to be a people of the book. The almost singular description of those who oppose Jesus in Matthew is "the scribes and the Pharisees." These are an inscribing people as well, and their shortcomings in Matthew are not adequately captured by a word like "legalists." Like us, they are asking the hard questions: which of these biblical texts written a long time ago in a different context are binding on us today? In Matthew this is a question for a scribe. And Matthew is written in part to help the church identify "scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven" (13.52).

SCRIBAL LEADERSHIP

After finishing teaching parables on the kingdom of heaven, Jesus asks his disciples if they understand what he has taught them. "They answered, 'Yes.' And Jesus said to them, 'Therefore every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings from his treasure what is new and what is old'" (13.51–52). Jesus' description of this scribe gives insight both into the nature of leadership in Matthew, and a clue as to how leaders utilize scripture.

The summary statement in 13.51–52 stands at the very heart of the Gospel of Matthew both literally and figuratively. There are five teaching discourses in Matthew marked by the closing statement, “When Jesus finished saying these things . . .” (5.1–7.28; 10.1–11.1; 13.1–53; 18.1–19.1; 23.1–26.1). That there are five underlines the strong resonances drawn out in Matthew between Jesus and Moses. Jesus is one like Moses, but greater. He is the teacher of an eschatological Israel.¹

That there are five discourses may also indicate a formal structure, a relationship between them that emphasizes the outer terms (discourses one and five) and the middle term (discourse three). The correspondences between the Sermon on the Mount and the final discourse are striking. I will mention here only the relationship between the beatitudes in 5.1–12 and the woes in 23.13–36. By way of comparison, in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, beatitudes and woes are in the same passage (Luke 6.20–26). Jesus teaches, for example, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Having heard beatitudes from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, we might be waiting for the other shoe to drop at some point with woes. When they finally come in the final discourse, the structural parallels draw our interpretative eye backward. Both the first beatitude and woe deal with the kingdom of heaven. In both, the last saying deals with the persecution of prophets. And in both the middle term emphasizes mercy.

These are corresponding passages, and both help us determine what counts for leadership among those who follow Jesus. Both the Sermon on the Mount and the final discourse imagine a dual audience. Jesus is teaching both crowds and his disciples. In each of the five teaching passages, the twelve form an inner circle of instruction. Both David Rhoads and David Bartlett suggest that the twelve are transparent to leaders in the Matthean community.² That is, Matthew intends his readers to recognize their leaders in the figures of the disciples. While the demands of the kingdom of heaven are for all to hear and follow, these demands might be particularly helpful for the church in recognizing its leaders. In particular, we learn from the first and final discourse that those who are great in the kingdom of heaven practice what they teach (5.19–20; 23.2–3).

So, the first and final discourses give us some indication of the kind of leadership Matthew envisions. The middle discourse (Matt 13) adds to that picture. Kingdom scribes see treasure both in the old and the new. This seems to underscore Jesus’ insistence that he has not come to abolish the law, or the old, but to fulfill it. While there is something distinctly new about Jesus, it does not come at the total expense of the old. The followers of Jesus might expect that their way of life will look very different from the religious life they have known under the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, they will also notice continuities. The question for emerging Christian scribes might be, how does one determine what is treasure? Or, how does one hold together old and new?

YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID . . . BUT I SAY TO YOU . . .

It is tempting to read the series of sayings in Matthew 5.21–48 as a repudiation of the old. The formula, “you have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .” does suggest something of a preference for the new (*but* I say to you). This would stand against, however, Jesus’ advocacy of the law and the prophets in the verses immediately preceding these (5.17–19). This series of statements is intended instead to move along the path of fulfilling the law, pushing it to its completion or to its final purposes in relation to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. This insight is strengthened by Jesus’ summary statement at the conclusion of the section, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (5.48). I read the call here not to some perfect

1. Most Matthew scholars mark some type of relationship. A thorough exploration

of this relationship can be found in Dale Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

2. David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 79–98; David Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15–30.

performance of a new standard of measurement, but as a call to push beyond the letter to the fulfillment of God's intentions, to push the end of our lives toward the same end as God's.

These sayings relate to traditional material in different ways. There are cases where Jesus' "but I say to you . . ." contradicts the previous "you have heard it said . . ." For instance, Jesus' insistence that an evildoer is not to be resisted stands over against an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (5.38). And his command to love enemies contradicts the previous saying to "love your neighbor and hate your enemy" (5.43–44). There is new treasure here. The rest of the teaching in this section, however, falls more in the category of amplification or expansion of the intention of the saying. This is certainly true of the sayings related to murder and adultery. Jesus is pushing for a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, a righteousness that reveals the very nature of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' approach to scripture here is not without precedent within scripture itself.³ Newer texts make use of older texts in ways that both honor and mitigate what has been said previously. Being a scribal community, or a people of the book, does not mean treating all scripture equally, but learning to recognize the character and purposes of God to which the book points. Sometimes that means simply expanding the implications of a saying, and sometimes that means stating things in an entirely new way. Either way Jesus is intent on the fulfillment of scripture. He is a faithful interpreter of the book because he knows the character and purposes of God.

I DESIRE MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE

I want to return to Matthew 5.21–48—specifically, the saying about divorce in 5.31–32. Before we do that, however, I want to trace the theme of mercy in Matthew, which I see to be a hermeneutical key of sorts. I take 12.1–14, the story of the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath, to be a very significant text in understanding Matthew's intent. Part of this is due to the placement of the story. Matthew lifts this narrative out of the Markan order and surrounds it with material unique to Matthew's Gospel. Matthew places the great invitation ("Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens . . .") immediately in front of the story (11.28–30) and places a long summary with scriptural quotations at the conclusion of the story (12.15–20). These bookends emphasize the tender and compassionate nature of Jesus.

While Matthew changes the order, he follows the Markan account (Mark 2.23–28) nearly verbatim. There are, however, three significant departures. First, in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus responds to the criticism of the Pharisees by citing scripture. In Matthew, however, Jesus cites an additional passage concerning the guiltlessness of priests who break the Sabbath. Jesus is a person of the book. Second, only in Matthew are we told that the disciples are hungry. Third, Matthew includes Jesus telling the Pharisees that "if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (12.7). This quotation of Hosea 6.6 points us back to 9.10–13 (Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners), a story also told by Mark (2.15–17). Again, Matthew repeats Mark's version nearly verbatim with the exception of 9.13a, where Matthew includes, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" The double use of Hosea give us a clear indication that "mercy, not sacrifice" is a key to Jesus' understanding of the purposes of God and the interpretation of scripture. This also distinguishes Jesus from the scribes and the Pharisees.

This difference is dramatized in 12.1–13, a case study in binding and loosing. Both Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees are aware of scriptural precedents related to Sabbath keeping. The scribes and Pharisees appear to read the tradition to prohibit the disciples' Sabbath actions. Jesus, in contrast, reads scripture through the hunger of the disciples: mercy, not sacrifice.

We have already noticed that mercy occupies the middle term in both the beatitudes and woes. To deepen this observation, the middle beatitude is the only one where the reward matches the condition: "Blessed

3. See Jack Levison, "A Better Righteousness: the Character and Purpose of Matthew 5:21–48," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 12 (1982): 171–194.

are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (5.7). Similarly, the only conditional statement in the Lord’s Prayer is “forgive us our debts, because we forgive our debtors” (6.12). That mercy features prominently in the Lord’s Prayer is underscored by Jesus’ teaching immediately following: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you . . .” (6.14). The theme of mercy comes up in chapter 18, a chapter featuring binding and loosing. After describing a process oriented toward showing mercy to sinners, Peter asks, “How often should I forgive?” Jesus’ answer “seventy-seven times” indicates that forgiveness is unlimited (18.21–22). For good measure, Matthew adds Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant to this saying, a parable unique to this Gospel (18.23–35).

These examples from Matthew could be multiplied. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” seems critical to understanding how Jesus recognizes God within the pages of scripture. This hermeneutical key delivers to the Matthean church both scripture and knowledge of the God to whom scripture points. By taking on the merciful yoke of Jesus, this scribal community aligns its life with the full purposes of God pointed to in scripture. By understanding the way of mercy, scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven learn how to discover treasure in both the old and the new.

DIVORCE AND THE WAY OF MERCY

With the theme of mercy in view, I hope to place Jesus’ statements about divorce in 5.31–32 in a larger Matthean context. Reading on the surface, few contemporary readers would identify this text as a demonstration of mercy over sacrifice. If Jesus “looses” his disciples from Sabbath restriction in chapter 12, here he seems to be binding them to a more restrictive way of life.

Several attempts have been made to clarify the passage by a closer inspection of historical backgrounds. These attempts have pointed in several different directions, some more helpful than others.⁴ They have not delivered, however, a consensus.

We gain more, from my perspective, by reading more broadly in Matthew. Divorce appears again in 19.1–9, along with teaching about children and eunuchs, the story of the rich young ruler and the parable of the laborers in vineyard. Two refrains seem to capture how these stories are held together. The first is the incredulous reaction of the disciples to both Jesus’ teaching on marriage and the sending away of the rich young ruler. Upon hearing Jesus’ understandings of marriage, the disciples respond, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (19.10). In the same manner, when Jesus sends the young man away, the disciples “were greatly astounded and said, ‘Then who can be saved?’” (19.25).

Jesus is clearly confounding the disciples’ sense of how the world is ordered, which brings us to the second refrain. Jesus ends the story of the rich young ruler with the statement, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (19.30). This phrase appears again at the end of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. This parable strikes at our sense of justice. Those who come late to the vineyard are paid the same as those who arrived early. The punch line of the parable is, “So the last will be first and the first will be last” (20.16).

Jesus’ teaching on divorce in this text has to be seen in light of the challenge to both conventional expectations and of making the last, first. This is certainly the case with regard to children and eunuchs. Jesus raises their cultural standing. His teaching on divorce does the same for women. The questions posed to Jesus about divorce assume a male privilege. By affirming the original intent of marriage over a husband’s “rights” related to divorce, Jesus puts the last first and the first last. His more restrictive (more binding?) reading of scripture is the more merciful. The disciples perceive the social scandal of Jesus’ words. They ask

4. See for example, Joseph Fitzmyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad), 1981; David Janzen, “The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture,” *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000): 66-80; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998); Ben Witherington, “Matthew 5.32 and 19.9—Exception or Exceptional Situation?” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 571-76.

in essence, "If this is what marriage is about, what man would agree to marriage?" Matthew's answer to that question is Joseph.

The infancy story in Matthew is told with a focus on Joseph. Joseph, being a "righteous man" determines to respond to Mary's apparent adultery by putting her away quietly and writing her a certificate of divorce.⁵ Joseph's decision has the twin virtues of being in keeping with scripture and being merciful. He has already established himself as an exemplary figure in the world of Matthew's Gospel. Still, Joseph is pushed to a greater act of mercy—a "but I say to you" moment—by the angel who tells Joseph in a dream to overcome his fear and take Mary as his wife. We cannot appreciate fully the social implications of Joseph's decision to take Mary as his wife in an honor/shame world. In a difficult social circumstance, Joseph moves beyond even the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 to pursue the way of mercy. We might summarize the story of Joseph using the formula of Matthew 5.21–48 this way: You have heard it said you may write Mary a certificate of divorce, but I say to you do not be afraid to take her as your wife.

For Jesus, the way of mercy creates possibilities for righteousness that extend beyond the letter of scripture. In Neyrey's view, Jesus takes the issue of divorce out of the court of honor and shame and places it squarely within the framework of mercy.⁶ Any contemporary reading that emphasizes the letter of the text over mercy fails to appreciate the kind of scribal community that serves the purposes of the kingdom of heaven.

CONCLUSION

Matthew's Gospel is written to encourage a church to be confident in its identity as a people of the book. This scribal community is always negotiating text and context, finding treasure that is both old and new. This scribal community will not resort to proof-texting as a way of honoring the text. Instead, it will always interpret texts in light of the merciful character and purposes of God in the world. This approach may seem at times idiosyncratic. Sometimes this approach might seem more permissive than the words of the text, sometimes more restrictive. But it will always be merciful.

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5. Dale Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 163-172.

6. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 199-201.