

# Recovering the Way of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount

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In the Gospel of John, chapters 14:26 and 15:26, Jesus promises that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name, and the Holy Spirit will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you, and He will bear witness to me. That means the Holy Spirit will surely teach us the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount--the biggest section in the New Testament of what Jesus said to us. Murray Dempster makes the point especially clearly: "Luke made it clear in his prologue in the Acts that because of the transference of the Spirit the church continued to do and teach those things which Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1). What needs to be underscored is that the message of the kingdom of God was the focal point of all those things that Jesus began to do and teach" (Dempster, Klaus, and Petersen, 23; see also Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern," 149). And Gordon Fee hammers it home with his thoroughly faithful and accurate biblical scholarship: "The universal witness of the Synoptic tradition is that the absolutely central theme of Jesus' mission and message was 'the good news of the kingdom of God'" (in *Ibid.*, 8). The ethics of the kingdom of God is set forth most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. Each of the beatitudes announces a blessing of participation in the kingdom of God. The Lord's Prayer prays for the kingdom to come. The kingdom is mentioned explicitly nine times in the Sermon. And I hope to show that each of the main teachings is a pointer to the way of deliverance that we are given when the kingdom breaks into our midst.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives us The Great Commission: "As you go, therefore, make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to practice all the commands that I have given you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matt 28:19-20). The way of discipleship and the commands of Jesus are most explicitly taught in the Sermon on the Mount. The way we are to make disciples of all peoples is to teach them the practices taught mostly in the Sermon on the Mount (Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 214). The Sermon on the Mount echoes throughout the Gospel of Luke, as well as in Paul's letters and the rest of the New Testament (Davies, *Setting*). In the first three centuries of the church, no other biblical passage was referred to as often as the Sermon on the Mount (Kissinger, 6). Pentecostalism is a movement of restoration of New Testament faith and practice. Therefore it is the inherent logic of Pentecostalism to pray for the help of the Holy Spirit in recovering the Sermon on the Mount for our practice. I do so pray.

## How the Tradition of Dualism and Evasion Developed

We see the centrality of the Sermon on the Mount clearly in one of the first Christian writers after the New Testament, Justin Martyr. In about 157 A.D, Justin wrote his *First Apology*. When he presents what Christians stand for, he quotes almost the whole Sermon on the Mount. He could not be clearer that he expects Christians to do these practices. He emphasizes what Jesus emphasized: "Not every one who saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven.... By their works ye shall know them. And every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire." He says Christians do carry out Jesus' teachings, and this bears clear witness to the power of the teachings to transform the way people live: "And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years; and I boast that I could produce such from every race of men. For what shall I say, too, of the countless multitude of those who have reformed intemperate habits, and learned these things?" (Justin Martyr, *Apology*, 167-8). But then a crack appears, a hint of greater diversions yet to come in subsequent church history. Justin has addressed his *Apology* to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his son, trying to get their favor. Therefore, immediately after presenting these teachings from Jesus' way, he then quotes Jesus' teaching in Matt 22:17ff.: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And he interprets it dualistically: "Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men...." Thus he limits Christian independence from the Emperor to how we worship. Clearly Jesus' way as taught in the Sermon on the Mount concerns much more than our worship. He has just quoted its teachings on what we do with sexual relations, marriage, truth telling, loving enemies, prayer, investing our money, judging others, and where we place our trust. Yet here Justin introduces an incipient dualism for the purpose of not offending the Emperor. He is "apologizing" to the Emperor--trying to persuade the Emperor to be kind to Christians. In order to be subservient to the powers and authorities, he compartmentalizes or splits up Christian responsibility so that our *worship* belongs to God, while in *other things* we do what the earthly ruler says. That gives the Emperor a blank check in matters outside of worship. It gives much more than Jesus would. Think a moment. For Jesus, what belonged to God? ....

*Everything.*

Jesus was a Jew, not a dualist. He knew God is Lord over everything. His teaching in Matt 22 is an ironic Hebrew parallelism (Bornkamm, *Jesus*, 121-4). The second member of the parallelism, "Render to God *the things that are God's*," means "render *everything* to God." It gives an ironic twist to the first half of the teaching: God has sovereignty over Caesar; we render to Caesar only what fits God's will. But Justin was a Gentile, not a Jew, and a disciple of Socrates and Plato before his conversion, used to a dualism in which the spiritual was split off from the earthly. In Platonic thought, God was outside the cave in which we live, in the eternal realm, not the earthly realm. Wanting to please the Emperor, Justin here, perhaps unintentionally, gives the Emperor authority over everything but the spiritual realm of worship.

Justin's order of teaching is the opposite of Jesus'. Having said a little coin can go to Caesar, *Jesus* climaxes his teaching by saying, in effect, "but God is Lord of everything." Having quoted Jesus' way in the Sermon on the Mount, *Justin* climaxes his teaching by saying, in effect, "but Caesar is Lord in everything but worship." It is this incipient Platonic dualism, combined with the desire to please the powers and authorities of this world--whether they be political rulers, concentrations of wealth, racist power structures, or habits, customs, and self-interested practices--that creates in subsequent church history the devilish dualism in which whole swaths of life are moved out from under God's authority and placed under the authorities of this world. And then the way of Jesus gets fenced in to apply only to one narrowly limited realm--worship, or inner attitudes, or individual relations. Surely Justin, a

sincere Christian, did not intend to follow in subsequent church history through this seemingly small, innocent crack in our responsibility to God. But it did follow.

When Constantine became the first Christian Emperor (306-337), the church downplayed whatever might suggest criticism of Constantine's way of ruling.

The disabling and ultimately tragic development is that the focus soon shifts from Jesus and the particular way he incarnated with his community, the way of his God, to the metaphysical relationship of the individual figure, Jesus, to the church's God, now become also the empire's God.... So one searches in vain in the classic creeds, those pure distillations of the faith, for anything at all about Jesus as the way in any moral sense, or of his community's way (Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments*, 138-40).

Then came the Middle Ages and illiteracy. The people could not read about Jesus' teaching or Jesus' way (in the Latin). They were told to let the clergy and the hierarchy tell them what they needed to believe. You can see the bypassing of Jesus' teachings graphically if you go to the Medieval Art Museum in New York City, *The Cloisters*. The beautiful paintings and sculptures there depict only two themes: 1) Mary and the baby Jesus, and 2) Jesus on the cross; nothing from what happened after Jesus' birth and before his death. It is like the Apostle's Creed: ...born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried....? The Sermon on the Mount and all of Jesus' prophetic teachings are hiding, unseen and unheard, behind that comma that zips him from his birth by Mary to his suffering under Pilate, as if he taught nothing, healed no one, fed no one, preached no kingdom of God.

The theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (*The Way of Jesus Christ*, 150), offers a constructive suggestion to fill this empty hole:

We cannot close this chapter on the messianic mission of Jesus Christ without offering a suggestion for an addition to these two ancient creeds of the church.... After ?born of the Virgin Mary? or ?and was made man? [in the Nicene Creed], we should add something along the following lines:

Baptized by John the Baptist,

filled with the Holy Spirit:

to preach the kingdom of God to the poor,

to heal the sick,

to receive those who have been cast out,

to revive Israel for the salvation of the nations, and

to have mercy upon all people.

In the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther criticized the Medieval church for its dualism that split humankind into a class of monks and clergy--for whom the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount were commands--and the rest of us--for whom they were only optional advice if you wanted to be perfect. Luther insisted the teachings were for all Christians. But then he adopted something like Justin Martyr's Platonic dualism. The Sermon is for every Christian in our inner attitudes, but the outer self that has responsibilities to other persons should obey the authorities in the world and not the commands of the Sermon (Luther, ?Secular Authority,? 364ff.). Like Justin, Luther was concerned with a ruler. His Prince, Frederick, was defending him and his Reformation against the Pope, who would have had him arrested for undermining the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Prince Frederick sat on his throne to Luther's right as Luther preached, observing what Luther would say. Luther wanted an ethic that said the Sermon is for everyone, but that would not undermine the authority and power of Frederick.

The church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, shows that Luther's two-realms dualism was a departure from the great preacher of the early Greek church, John Chrysostom, and the great preacher of the Roman church, St. Augustine (*Divine Rhetoric*, 145ff.). Chrysostom and Augustine taught that the commands of the Sermon were God's will for everyone--for disciples first, and through them, for all humankind; and were to be carried out in practice. Luther limited it to Christians in their inner lives, not for all humankind or the outer life (Pelikan 79f., 106f., 110-114, 119, 123). The result was secularism: people were taught that the gospel has nothing concrete to say about how we live our lives in the public realm, except that our inner motive should be love. Having a motive of love, however, can be shaped into all kinds of ethics, especially when the secular ruler defines our actions in the public realm. Consequentially the realm of religious faith gets reduced to shrinkingly narrower parts of our lives. And lay people see the gospel as less and less relevant to their lives. Secularism in Germany means only 5% of Lutherans are in church on an average Sunday morning.

The Bible, throughout its pages, teaches that there is only one God who is Lord of all of life, and never splits life into one realm ruled by a secular ruler and the other ruled by God. Present-day Lutheran scholars, and many Lutheran pastors, are critical of the two-realms split and seek to correct it. (A brief history of interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount by an excellent Lutheran New Testament scholar is Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 218-223. See also Baumann, Kissinger, and McArthur.)

During the Reformation, John Calvin taught the sovereignty of God over all of life, and developed a covenant ethic for life in the world that continues to be helpful today (See Anderson and Guernsey, *Mount, Mouw, Smedes, Stackhouse, and Farley*, in the bibliography below). He saw the Sermon on the Mount as Christ's interpretation of the Old Testament, not a contradiction of the Old Testament. He was practical-minded, and he interpreted the Sermon as giving practical guidance, and as intended to be obeyed. His practical emphases did sometimes reduce the Sermon to what he saw in the Old Testament, however, or to what he thought he could expect Christians to do. And he skipped over Jesus' teaching in Matt 7 that we are not only to hear these words, but *do* them (Calvin, *Harmony*, 164-232).

The Anabaptists in the Reformation insisted on discipleship as following Jesus concretely, and they did teach the Sermon on the Mount more concretely as authoritative for the whole life of Christians (outer as well as inner). But most of them did not see how they could expect the Sermon to apply to the kingdom of the world, and so they developed a ?two-kingdoms ethic? in which they did not think the Sermon applied to non-Christians, and they did not develop an ethic for the outer kingdom. Menno Simons, however, clearly saw Christ as Lord over earthly rulers, and did not hesitate to call rulers to do justice and act according to God's will as revealed in the prophets and in Jesus. Present-day Anabaptist scholars are also emphasizing that Jesus Christ is Lord over all of life, and not only the church (Driedger and Kraybill, 73, 79, 90, 119ff., 175f., 241).

The leaders of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, in their resolution of 1917 declaring they could not participate in warmaking, declared, ?The laws of the Kingdom, laid down by our elder brother, Jesus Christ in His Sermon the Mount, have been unqualifiedly adopted, consequently the movement has found itself opposed to the spilling of the blood of any man, or of offering

resistance to any aggression. Every branch of the movement, whether in the United States, Canada, Great Britain or Germany, has held to this principle. (Dempster, "Reassessing," 24). But we have lacked a constructive ethic of peacemaking, based on the way of deliverance in the breakthrough of Jesus' kingdom ethic, that can give us guidance in the midst of the complex realities of this world. Therefore the early Pentecostal commitment was not grounded articulately enough, and has since been compromised, accommodated to the world, and overlooked. (It is to overcome this lack that I worked to develop the new just peacemaking theory, that is receiving increasing support, in *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), and *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices to Abolish War* (Pilgrim Press, 1998)).

The tradition of evasion continues, surprisingly, in textbooks in Christian ethics. Among all the textbooks I have surveyed, I can find only two that learn *anything* constructive from the Sermon on the Mount--and they devote only a page or two to the Sermon. When the way Christian ethics is taught and practiced conveys the understanding that the Sermon on the Mount does not contribute to Christian ethics, it conveys that Christian ethics is based on something other than following the witness of the Holy Spirit to what Jesus taught. It tends to result in a legalistic moralism that adopts authoritarian ideologies from the culture; or else in a culture-accommodating liberalism, permissivism, and self-seeking individualism. (Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, which is a New Testament ethics rather than a Christian ethics textbook, does somewhat better.)

Why this evasion? What went wrong?

**The Sermon on the Mount is not "High Ideals," It is "Transforming Initiatives?"**

A key step in the accommodation to the secular powers and ideologies is to teach that the Sermon is hard teachings, ideals too high for us to reach up to, impossible for practical living. Once that step is taken, then it is easier to argue that we need some other ethics that we can practice--which almost always turns out to be an ethic that accepts the authority of some secular power or ideology.

Thus a tradition has developed that the pattern of the Sermon is *antitheses*, in which Jesus commands that we have no anger, no lust, no divorce, no oaths, no resistance of evil, no asserting of any rights. Then people realize that they cannot avoid ever being angry, etc. So they say these are hard teachings, high ideals, very strenuous. They praise them for being so idealistic, but conclude they cannot follow them in practice and instead adopt another ethic that comes from somewhere else. They compartmentalize Jesus' teachings as meant for attitudes but not actions, or for repentance but not obedience, or for another future dispensation when we will not be sinful but not the present time, or merely as illustrations of a general principle like love but not meant to be followed in particular. It is revealing to observe what they do when they come to Jesus' teachings in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount that say as clearly as possible that these teachings are meant to be done: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven.... Every one then who hears these words of mine and *does them* will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.... And every one who hears these words of mine and *does not do them* will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand... (Matt 7:19-21 and 24-27). When they come upon these words, they usually simply skip over them, or interpret them to mean something else. Or they do not come upon the words, because they skip over the whole Sermon on the Mount in their Christian ethics textbooks or their sermons. The result is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace": People congratulate themselves that they are forgiven, without repenting; that God is on their side without their following the way of God as revealed in Jesus; that they are Christians without it making much difference in their way of life (Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 40 and 45ff.). And the result plays into the hands of secular interests that do not want the way of Jesus to interfere with their practices. Morality becomes secularized. Jesus gets marginalized or compartmentalized. The church becomes vague and abstract. It gets co-opted by a secular political party and/or economic interest.

Here I want to present what for me is an exciting gift or discovery that rescues the Sermon from the *antitheses* interpretations as perfectionistic prohibitions. It is deceptively simple. But it makes a huge difference in how the Sermon of the Mount is interpreted. It is the discovery that the pattern of the Sermon is not twofold antitheses, but *threefold transforming initiatives*.

The easiest way to see it is to begin with Jesus' first major teaching of the way he calls us to follow, Matt 5:21-26. The tradition of antitheses has seen the teaching as following a twofold, or dyadic, pattern:

Traditional Righteousness	Jesus' Teaching
Matt 5:21 You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment" (author's translations in this chapter to follow the Greek verb forms more closely).	5:22-26 But I say to you that every one being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire. (Illustration: So if you are offering your gift at the altar....)

Seeing it this way naturally places the emphasis on "Jesus' teaching." And, since it is clear that Jesus does give commands in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching here is interpreted as a command not to be angry and not to call anyone a fool. But since we cannot avoid being angry, if we are truthful about ourselves, Jesus must not mean what he seems to have said. So it is a hard teaching, a high ideal, an impossible demand.

This is a misinterpretation. Jesus in fact gives no command not to be angry or not to call anyone a fool. In the Greek of the New Testament, "Being angry" in verse 22 is not a command, but a participle, an ongoing action. It is a diagnosis of a vicious cycle that we often get stuck in: being angry, insulting one another. It is simply realistic. We do get angry, we do insult one another, and it does lead to trouble. As New Testament scholar Dale Allison points out, early Christian tradition did not clearly know an injunction against all anger: Eph. 4:26 says "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." In Mark 1:41 the original text may have had Jesus "moved with anger," and Mark 3:5 explicitly says Jesus was angry. Matt 21:12-17 and Matt 23 show Jesus angry, and in 23:17 Jesus calls his opponents fools, against the reading of 5:22 as a command. "For the most part later Christian tradition followed Eph. 4:26 and did not demand the elimination of all anger--only anger misdirected" (Allison, *Sermon* 64; cf. 64-71). But Jesus does give commands here. There are five of them, all imperatives in the Greek. They all come in what the above diagram

tacks on as an ?illustration.? Yet verses 23-26 are not ?illustrations, they are not ?illustrations of a negative avoidance--not being angry. They are *transforming initiatives* that are the way of deliverance from anger and killing. They are not mere illustrations, they are the climax of the teaching. Therefore, I propose that the teaching should be diagrammed in a way that, instead of overlooking the climax of the teaching, highlights it as the third and climactic part.

**Traditional Righteousness**

	<b>Vicious Cycle</b>	<b>Transforming Initiative</b>
<p>Matt 5:21 You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ?You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.?                      (In the Greek, ?shall not? and ?shall be? are futures, not imperatives; as translations of the Hebrew in the Ten Commandments, they do of course imply a command.)</p>	<p>5:22 But I say to you that every one being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, ?You fool!? will be liable to the hell of fire.?                      (No imperatives in the Greek.)</p>	<p>5:23-26 So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <i>leave</i> your gift there... and <i>go</i>; first <i>be reconciled</i> to your brother, and then coming, <i>offer</i> your gift. <i>Make friends</i> quickly with your accuser....                      Explanation: lest your accuser hand you over to the judge... you won?t get out till you?ve paid the last penny.                      (Italics mark the Greek imperatives.)</p>

We can see that the third member is the climax in three ways: It is where the commands, the imperatives, come. It is longer than the other parts of the teaching. And in biblical teaching, the third member of a teaching is regularly where the climax comes. In fact, the Gospel of Matthew has about seventy-five teachings with a threefold or triadic pattern, and almost no teachings with a twofold or dyadic pattern. It would be odd if Matthew?s pattern in the Sermon on the Mount were only dyads, when everywhere else he presents triads.

So I want to propose the simple shift in perspective of putting the emphasis on the climactic part, where the imperatives are. I propose to label it the *transforming initiative*--in three senses: it transforms the person who was angry into an active peacemaker who comes to be present to the enemy and to make peace. It transforms the relationship as merely being angry into a peacemaking process. And it hopes to transform the enemy into a friend. It participates in and is empowered by the way of grace that God takes in Jesus when there is enmity between God and humans: God comes in Jesus to be present to us and to make peace. He sends His Holy Spirit to be with us until the end of the age. This is the breakthrough of the kingdom that we see happening in Jesus and in Pentecost. Disciples who deserted Jesus, and people of all tongues, experience God?s presence, making community with us rather than shame and alienation. It is the way of grace that Jesus is calling us to participate in. It is an invitation of grace and deliverance from the vicious cycle of anger and insult.

This pattern of transforming initiatives is followed consistently through the whole central section of the Sermon on the Mount, from Matt 5:21 through 7:12. And this transforms our understanding of the whole Sermon. It means the emphasis is not on some negative commands that are hard teachings. The emphasis is on the way of deliverance based in the grace of God?s inbreaking kingdom.

These transforming initiatives are regular *practices* that are commanded by Jesus for Christians to take. Here, for example, in the first teaching (Matt 5:21-26), whenever we find ourselves in a relationship of anger or insult, we are to engage in the *regular practice* of talking it over and seeking to make peace, doing conflict resolution. And so throughout the Sermon: Jesus is giving us regular practices that participate in God?s way of grace, God?s way of deliverance from the vicious cycles that we get stuck in. These are *practice norms*. They are not mere inner attitudes, or vague intentions, but regular practices to be engaged in. As we engage in them, we learn better ways to practice resolving conflict: it is better first to listen carefully rather than to begin by accusing or by stating our position. It is better to point to my own problem, saying ?I feel hurt by something you said? rather than to speak judgmentally, as in ?You often insult me.? (This is called ?making an *I* statement rather than a *you* statement.) Conflict resolution is a shared community practice among followers of Jesus. We learn from each other in the community how to go to our brother or sister and seek to make peace. As a Christian community, we can do role-playing, teaching each other how to do this practice more sensitively. (Each transforming initiative throughout the Sermon ends with a brief *explanation*, just as here I have given an explanation of conflict resolution. In this teaching, the explanation is ?lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, etc.) It is not a ?high ideal,? to be admired from a distance, but an actual practice. It is not an impossible teaching, but is in fact practiced regularly by many of us. It solves problems. It is the way of deliverance from vicious cycles of anger and insult. Nor is it legalism. It is the way of grace--the way God takes toward us in Christ and in the Spirit, and the way we can participate in God?s grace mediated through the community. It is part of what we celebrate in the Lord?s Supper: Jesus? death for making peace between us and God, and between us and one another. And it is part of what the Christian community practices: making peace among us. Paul?s letters are full of the practice of making peace among us in the Christian community.

**The Pattern of Transforming Initiatives in Matt 5:38-42**

Let us look at another teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5:38-42. Again we see the threefold pattern:

<b>Traditional Righteousness</b>	<b>Vicious Cycle</b>	<b>Transforming Initiative</b>
<p>5:38 You have heard that it was said, ?An eye for an eye and a</p>	<p>5:39 But I say to you, do not retaliate by evil means.</p>	<p>5:40-42 But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, <i>turn</i> the</p>

tooth for a tooth.?	(Not an imperative in the Greek, but an infinitive-- probably with implied imperatival meaning.)	other also; and if any one wants to sue you and take your coat, <i>give</i> your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, <i>go</i> also the second mile. <i>Give</i> to one who begs from you, and do not refuse one who would borrow from you.
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Clearly the first column is a traditional teaching, as expected. And clearly the second column is a vicious cycle--the cycle of retaliation. And again the transforming initiative has the imperatives (marked with italics).

I should explain our translation of the second column, verse 39, as "do not retaliate by evil means." Usually it is translated, "do not resist evil." But this seems wrong to anyone who thinks about it, because Jesus often resisted evil, confronting Pharisees who exclude the outcasts, Peter who told him not to suffer, the devil who tempted him not to follow God's will, the wealthy who hoarded their possessions, and the disciples who lacked faith.

In a seldom noticed insight, Clarence Jordan has pointed out that the Greek for evil can mean either "by evil means," or "the evil person." Either translation is equally good according to Greek grammar; the decision must come from the context. The context is that Jesus repeatedly confronts evil, but never by evil means, and never by means of revengeful violence. Therefore the context favors the instrumental "do not resist by evil means" (Jordan, *Substance of Faith*, 69).

Furthermore, the Greek word for "resist" or "retaliate" usually means military or violent or revengeful resistance in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the *Septuagint*) and in the Greek sources of the time. Therefore the verse should be translated "do not retaliate or resist violently or revengefully, by evil means" (Ferguson, 4f., Hagner, 130f., Lapse, 134, Swartley, 2338, Wink, 199). This is nicely confirmed by how the Apostle Paul reports the teaching in Romans 12:17ff.: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.... Do not overcome evil by evil [means], but overcome evil with good." Paul also commands transforming initiatives of peacemaking: feed a hungry enemy and water a thirsty one. The teaching is also echoed in Luke 6:27-36; I Thess. 5:15, and Didache 1:4-5; and a somewhat similar teaching in I Peter 2:21-23. Not one of them refers to an evil person; not one of them speaks of not resisting evil; not one of them speaks of renouncing rights in a law court. All emphasize the transforming initiatives of returning good and not evil, using good means and not evil means; and Luke and the Didache give almost the same four transforming initiatives (cheek, coat, mile, alms). I Thess 5:15 says "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all." The evidence is overwhelming: this is not an impossible ideal of not resisting evil, but a naming of the vicious cycle of retaliation by violent, revengeful, or evil means. And a transforming initiative of peacemaking.

Furthermore, the emphasis should be placed on the four transforming initiatives in the third column, with their four imperatives, and their greater length--surely the climax of the teaching. Each of these initiatives is like Martin Luther King's nonviolent direct action: it is nonviolent, and it is activist. Each takes an action to oppose injustice, to stand up for human dignity, and to invite to reconciliation. Turning the other cheek has been misunderstood in Western culture that thought there were only two alternatives--violence or passivity. But since Gandhi and King, we can appreciate Jesus' teaching better. In Jesus' culture, "to be struck on the *right* cheek was to be given a hostile, backhanded insult" with the back of the right hand. In that culture, it was forbidden to touch or strike anyone with the left hand; the left hand was for dirty things (Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives*, 64f. and 68f.). To turn the other cheek was to surprise the insulter, saying, nonviolently, "you are treating me as an unequal, but I need to be treated as an equal." Jesus is saying: if you are slapped on the cheek of inferiority, turn the cheek of equal dignity. As we will explain in chapter 12, the other three transforming initiatives--the cloak, the second mile, and giving to the beggar, similarly are not merely giving in; they each go beyond what is demanded to take a nonviolent initiative that confronts injustice and initiates the possibility of reconciliation. The point I want to make for now is that these are not impossible demands any more than nonviolent direct action was an impossibility in the civil rights movement and its continuing echoes in the overthrow of injustice by nonviolent direct action in the Philippines, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and Latin America (Buttry 63ff.). John Howard Yoder demonstrates that nonviolent direct action was practiced successfully by Jews resisting Roman oppression in Jesus' time (Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, chapter 5).

Beyond this, notice that the four initiatives that Jesus teaches here use seven of the same Greek words in the Septuagint version of the Suffering Servant passage, Isaiah 50:4-9: *resist, slap, cheek, sue, coat, give, and turn away*. Isaiah 50:4-9 is a passage of participative grace in God's dynamic, living, empowering presence. God, the living Lord, gives deliverance, and the servant's actions participate in God's deliverance. Here I quote only part of it, showing how it is based in the Lord who, in grace, gives deliverance: *The Lord God has given me the tongue of one who is taught, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. God wakens me morning by morning, God wakens my ear to hear as one who is taught.... I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not turn away my face from mocking and spitting. Because the 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.... It is the Lord who helps me. Who is it that will condemn me??*

Furthermore, each of the four initiatives seems to look forward to Jesus' crucifixion, and suggests our participation in Jesus' way of the cross. Davies and Allison (546) write: "Jesus himself was struck and slapped (26:67: *rapidzo*) and his garments (27:35: *himatia*) were taken from him. If his followers then turn the other cheek and let the enemy have their clothes, will they not be remembering their Lord, especially in his passion?? And the word, "compels," as in "if someone *compels* you to go one mile," is the Greek word used when Simon of Cyrene is *compelled* to carry Jesus' cross, thus participating in Jesus' crucifixion with him (Matt. 27:32). Jesus gives his life for us. When we go the second mile as an initiative of peacemaking, when we give to the poor, we are participating in the way of Jesus who was crucified for us. We are participating in the grace of the cross. The Christian virtues, as taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes, include being surrendered or yielded to God, and in the word we (mis)translate as "meek," yieldedness is closely connected with being peacemakers (see chapter one of the forthcoming *Christian Ethics as Following Jesus*). Jesus is explicating here what that means.

## The Pattern of Transforming Initiatives in Matt 5:43-48

Now let us turn to the next teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the climax of the six teachings in chapter 5, Matt 5:43-48:

Traditional Righteousness	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
5:43 You have heard that it was said: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."	5:46-47 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?	5:44-45 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

The traditional teaching comes not from the Old Testament, but from the Dead Sea Scrolls (Davies, *Setting* 252). The transforming initiative ("love your enemies") comes before the vicious cycle. Probably this shift in order signals that this triad is the climactic conclusion of the first six triads in Matt 6. So also a summary verse, 5:48, is added, like the summary verse at the climax in 7:12. The transforming initiative is to participate in the kind of love that God gives regularly: as God gives sunshine and rain to God's enemies as well as friends, so are we to give love and prayers to our enemies as well as friends. It could hardly be clearer that the transforming initiative is participation in God's active presence and God's grace (On grace as participation, see Land, 76, 197, 201f., 205). God's giving rain and sunshine to God's enemies is no abstract doctrine or high ideal; we experience that the living God does this every day. So is it for us: in practicing this kind of love, we are "children of our Father in heaven." The teaching clearly points to our experience of God's present reign--God's present kingdom--and our participation in it.

Those who want to make the Sermon on the Mount into impossibly high ideals interpret the summary verse, 5:48, as demanding moral perfection, as a Greek idealist ethics might. They assume that "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" means moral perfection. But it would be odd in Hebrew and Aramaic to presume to speak of God as morally perfect in that Greek sense. Rather, the word here means *complete* or *all-inclusive*, in the sense of love that includes everyone, even enemies. This is the point that Jesus has been emphasizing in this teaching: the love of God's grace that includes the complete circle of humankind, with enemies in it as well, by contrast with tax collectors and Gentiles, who love only their friends. Its meaning is very much like Luke 6:36: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." There Luke also has been emphasizing love that includes enemies. So we are not to think of impossible moral ideals, or idealistic moral perfection, but of practical deeds of love toward enemies, including prayer for them. And again, it is participation in God's dynamic present action, giving love to all.

### The Pattern Continues Throughout the Sermon

We have examined three of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and have seen that their basic pattern is threefold. They are not impossible ideals, but transforming initiatives, based on God's grace, the inbreaking of God's reign, and our participation in it. They are the way of deliverance from the vicious cycles that we get stuck in. Thus we have taken a major step in overcoming the "hard teachings and high ideals" interpretation that has caused evasion of the Sermon. We have begun to see how the Sermon on the Mount is transforming initiatives that give real, practical, grace-based guidance for Christian ethics. This is a major step in the recovery of the way of Jesus for Christian ethics. And it leads to specific guidance for peacemaking initiatives well beyond the debate between nonviolence, just war theory, and nationalism over the rightness or wrongness of making war.

### The Triadic Pattern Continues Throughout the 14 Teachings of 5:21-7:12

The pattern of threefold teachings, climaxing in grace-based transforming initiatives, continues throughout the central teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. My time and space are running out. What I can do is to give a road map, diagramming the Sermon on the Mount as follows. Then I can offer a brief comment on the other teachings.

## THE FOURTEEN TRIADS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Traditional Righteousness	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
1. You shall not kill	Being angry, or saying, You fool!	<b>Go, be reconciled</b>
2. You shall not commit adultery	Looking with lust is adultery in the heart.	<b>Remove the cause of temptation</b> (cf. Mk 9:43ff.)
3. Whoever divorces, give a certificate	Divorcing involves you in adultery	(Be reconciled: I Cor 7:11)

4. You shall not swear falsely	Swearing by anything involves you in a false claim	Let your yes be yes, and your no be no
5. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth	Retaliating violently or revengefully, by evil means	<b>Turn the other cheek</b> <b>Give your tunic and cloak</b> Go the Second mile <b>Give to beggar &amp; borrower</b>
6. Love neighbor & hate enemy	hating enemies is the same vicious cycle that you see in the Gentiles & tax collectors	<b>Love enemies, pray for your persecutors; be all-inclusive as your Father in heaven is</b>
7. When you give alms,	practicing righteousness for show	but give in secret, and your Father will reward you
8. When you pray,	practicing righteousness for show	but pray in secret, and your Father will reward you
9. When you pray,	practicing righteousness for show	<b>Therefore pray like this: Our Father....</b>
10. When you fast,	practicing righteousness for show	but dress with joy, and your Father will reward you
<b>11. Do not pile up treasures on earth (cf. Luke 12:16-31)</b>	<b>moth &amp; rust destroy, and thieves enter &amp; steal</b>	<b>But pile up treasures in heaven</b>
<b>12. No one can serve two masters</b>	<b>Serving God &amp; wealth, worrying about food &amp; clothes</b>	<b>But seek first God's reign and God's justice/righteousness</b>
<b>13. Do not judge, lest you be judged</b>	<b>Judging others means you'll be judged by same measure</b>	<b>First take the log out of your own eye</b>
14. Do not give holy things to dogs, nor pearls to pigs	They will trample them and tear you to pieces	<b>Give your trust in prayer to your Father in heaven</b>

The bold type indicates the teachings that are also presented in Luke (and in one case, Mark).

5:27ff. on removing the eye or hand that causes the practice of looking at a woman lustfully or covetously clearly has the threefold pattern that we expect. The initiative of removing the eye or hand is one of Jesus' dramatic exaggerations for impact; I think it means to cut out the practice that I engage in which leads me to lust.

5:31ff. on divorce is the one exception to the pattern. The transforming initiative is omitted. It appears instead in I Cor. 7:11??be reconciled to one's spouse.? This, too, is a peacemaking initiative, and its variation from the pattern would be interesting to discuss, if there were time and space.

The next teaching on not swearing falsely, which involves one in the vicious cycle of defending a lie by claiming God as witness, and the initiative of letting your yes and no be truthful, clearly follows the pattern.

6:1-18 on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting continue the transforming-initiative pattern. In 6:7-15, nobody misses the point that the climax is not 'do not heap up empty phrases,' but rather the transforming initiative, 'Pray like this: Our Father who art in heaven....?' Nobody suggests praying the Lord's Prayer is an impossibly high ideal; it is regular practice of Christian groups and churches. Each of the four teachings (6:2a, 5a, 7a, 16a) begins with a traditional practice of righteousness:

Thus, when you give alms....

And when you pray....

And praying....

And when you fast....

Each then has a warning against a vicious cycle of practicing righteousness for show.

And each climaxes with a transforming initiative to practice it in God's knowing, merciful, and secret presence; and an explanation that your Father sees in secret what you need and will reward you (6:3-4, 6, 9-15, 17-18.). Thus again, the transforming initiative at the climax points to God's dynamic, living presence and our participation in God's presence.

6:19-6:23 begins with a proverbial and traditional teaching, a negative imperative resembling the traditional negative teachings in 5:21-6: 'Do not treasure up for yourselves treasures on earth.'

The vicious cycle is clear: 'where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal.'

with the focus on the eye and the heart.

A brief suggestion to show that the transforming initiatives are not "impossible ideals": Heaven is "the sphere of God's rule where his will is done.... To have one's treasure in heaven means to submit oneself totally to that which is in heaven--God's sovereign rule. It is this motif that follows in 6:22-23, 24, 33, not to mention the parallels in 5:8, 7:21, and 12:34" (Guelich 327-8). The contrast is not this life and the life after, but this life where there is injustice and God's reign characterized by peace, justice, and joy in the Spirit. The transforming initiative is to invest one's treasures in God's reign of justice and love. The teaching does not reject all possessions, but "treasuring up treasures," i. e., stinginess or greed. The evil eye in the OT and Judaism connotes stinginess, jealousy, or greed, and the healthy eye connotes generosity. An impossible ideal would be to practice piling up wealth for oneself but not letting it be consumed and not letting it affect where one's heart is. Jesus' initiative is more realistic: invest it in God's reign, in God's justice and charity, and your heart will be invested there as well.

6:24ab is the traditional teaching that begins the next triad: "No one is able to serve two masters. For either one will hate the one...." This is in the form of a traditional Jewish wisdom proverb (Guelich 333; Grundmann 213; Davies and Allison 642; Betz 456; Allison, *Sermon*, 145; Hagner 159).

Then the vicious cycle is named in 24c, "You are not able to serve God and mammon." "Do not be anxious" in verse 25 continues naming the vicious cycle. It is a negative verb, and so we expect it to belong with the vicious cycle, and its meaning also fits: it names the vicious cycle of trying to serve mammon and thus being anxious about possessions. As in the other vicious cycles, it is characterized by not trusting or obeying God--not participating in the dynamic, gracious, delivering presence of God. But it is an imperative, and so is the one exception to the pattern that the imperatives come only in the transforming initiative member of the triads.

The positive transforming initiatives are three imperatives, look to the birds, observe the lilies, and seek first God's reign and God's justice (verses 26, 28, 33). They put us in the midst of the grace of the reign and righteousness of God, as we have seen in most all transforming initiatives. It is the way of deliverance from seeking to serve both God and Mammon. And it makes this triad parallel in meaning and form with the previous triad about investing treasures in God's reign rather than in treasures that moth, rust, and thieves consume. The expected explanation follows the transforming initiative: today's trouble is enough for today.

The transforming initiative in 6:33 points explicitly to the inbreaking reign of God and God's delivering justice.

Since God's sovereign rule and all the benefits for our material needs come from God to us, this passage suggests by implication that we can become a part of God's redemptive force in history by sharing these benefits with those who are in need.... Part of the presence of the Kingdom is indeed material blessings. Therefore, we can hardly live under God's reign, receive his blessings, and not use them to help alleviate the evil of hunger and need elsewhere.... Not only do we recognize that all we have comes from God, but we also recognize that sharing that with others to remove their suffering is to defeat the enemy and to "seek the Kingdom...on earth as in heaven" (Guelich 373).

The structure of the next triad (7:1-5) is straightforward. The traditional teaching is in proverbial form: Do not judge, for you will be judged with the judgment with which you judge.

The vicious cycle is criticizing or trying to correct the fault in the brother's eye while having a log in my eye.

The transforming initiative is repentance, "First remove the log from your own eye." The explanation comes next, as expected: "Then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." "First," *proton*, has also occurred in 5:24, *first* be reconciled, and in 6:33, seek *first* the reign of God. In its echo of the transforming initiative immediately preceding, "seek first the reign of God," it suggests that the initiative of repenting for the log in my eye is a practice that participates in the coming of the reign of God.

We have now arrived at the verse that is the most puzzling, mysterious, and indeed baffling of all in the Sermon: 7:6. Scholars cannot find a context in which this verse has a clear meaning. I propose that 7:6 looks exactly like a *traditional teaching* that begins a new triad. Many traditional Jewish teachings call Gentiles dogs or pigs.

The *vicious cycle* follows: they will trample them under foot and turn and tear you into pieces.

The *transforming initiative* has the imperatives, as expected: *ask*, *seek*, and *knock*. They are all positive initiatives, not negative commands, just as we expect. The expected explanation follows in 7:9-11. And as in the previous teachings, the transforming initiative brings us into the presence of the dynamically present Father who graciously gives us good things. He is worthy of our trust--far more worthy of our trust than the dogs and pigs are.

Now we have a very strong clue. The meaning of the transforming initiative is very clear: give *your trust, your loyalty, and your prayers*, to your Father in Heaven. It is not only about prayer; it is about how trustworthy, how merciful, how caring your Father in Heaven is; He knows how to give good gifts. He deserves your trust and loyalty much more than the dogs and pigs do.

What then, logically, can the traditional teaching in 7:6 mean? Do not give *your trust and loyalty* to the dogs and pigs instead of to God, as 6:19ff. taught us to give our trust and loyalty to God rather than to treasures and mammon, and as 6:1ff. taught us to give our trust and loyalty to God rather than to prestige.

Whom do the dogs and pigs stand for? Usually scholars say they stand for gentiles, which is not wrong, but I want to be a bit more precise. The many references in the Talmud and Midrash to swine *as Rome* fill twice as many lines as do references to swine as the heathen world in general. Dogs stand for non-Israelite *nations* in a more collective sense, not individuals. Not one saying applies either dog or swine to an individual Gentile or to a specific group of Gentiles smaller than a nation (Str-B, I, 449f.; 725). This suggests "dogs and pigs" more likely refers to Rome than to particular kinds of Gentiles--for example those who do not receive the Gospel willingly.

In Mark's story of the healing of the demon-possessed man in the Gerasene region, i.e., a Gentile region (Mark 5:1ff.), the man says: "My name is Legion," as in Roman Legion. The unclean spirits are sent into a herd of pigs, who rushed into the sea, as many Jews wished the Roman Legion would do. The association between pigs and the Roman Empire--and demon possession--is transparent.<sup>[1]</sup> In another passage about whether to give loyalty to the Roman Empire in the form of giving the poll tax to Caesar, Matthew 22: 21 uses the same key word in Matt 7:6-12, *didomai* (give), with the prepositional prefix, *apo*. So also do Mark 12: 21, and Luke 20: 25. The temptation to give loyalty and trust to the Roman Empire, and thereby seek prestige, power, and wealth, was a very present temptation in Jesus' time. Its outcome in being trampled under foot and torn in pieces by the Roman troops (Matt 7:6) took place in A.D. 70. Furthermore, being "trampled under foot" is precisely the fate that salt deserves when it has lost its distinctiveness by compromising with the world (Matthew 5:13). In the Gospels, Jesus often warns against the temptation of



seeking prestige, places of honor, and wealth within the system of the powers and authorities while neglecting the weightier matters of the Law--justice, faithfulness, and mercy--and neglecting to lift a finger to lift the burdens from the needy. His own temptation was to seek rule over the world by the means of Satan, and he opposed it by teaching Deuteronomic loyalty to God alone: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him?" (Matt 4:8-10). Is this not what the concluding triad teaches--worship the Lord your God, and serve only him, not the powers of the Roman Empire? It is the temptation against which the Book of Revelation warns us.

### Conclusion

The threefold, transforming-initiatives structure can be verified in seven ways:

1. It is remarkably consistent throughout the fourteen triads, with only one exception.
2. Once we see the threefold structure, the Greek verbs line up with remarkable consistency. The main verbs in the teachings of traditional righteousness are all futures or subjunctives. The main verbs in the vicious cycles are all continuous process verbs--indicatives, participles, infinitives. The main verbs in the transforming initiative members are consistently imperatives, and this is the only place where imperatives occur, with one exception (6:25).
3. It fits the consistent tendency throughout Matthew's Gospel to prefer triads over dyads--with about seventy-five triads and almost no dyads.
4. The number, three times fourteen, was important to Matthew. The Sadducees and Pharisees saw a mystical significance in this number, and Matthew's rival group claimed their teachers were descended from a triad of fourteen generations. So Matthew began his Gospel by pointing out that there were three times fourteen generations from Abraham to Jesus (Davies, *Setting* 303-4). It fits neatly that here he gives us fourteen threefold teachings.
5. It gives a fruitful clue for the likely meaning of the hitherto baffling Matt 7:6, on not giving our holy things to dogs and pigs.
6. Its emphasis on the third member of each triad is confirmed by the Gospel of Luke. Luke sometimes omits the first or second part of a teaching, but always includes the third part. (Where Luke parallels the Sermon on the Mount is indicated by the bold print in the diagram.)
7. It shows that Jesus' teachings engage us in transforming initiatives that participate in the reign of God, or the presence of the gracious God who acts in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit within our present experience, who reconciles us with enemies, who is present to us in secret, who is faithful and trustworthy, and who brings deliverance from the vicious cycles that cause the violations of the traditional righteousness. The second member consistently names vicious cycles; the Sermon is by no means based on an idealistic assumption that we do not get stuck in vicious cycles of sin. And the third member points the way of deliverance in the midst of this real world of sin. This refutes the kind of idealism that seeks to hallow Jesus' teachings by making them impossible or making them call for hard, strenuous human effort. Instead it suggests a hermeneutic of grace-based, active participation in eschatological deliverance that begins now. The split between attitudes and actions, in which Jesus allegedly emphasized intentions and not actual practices, falls away. Legalism falls away too; Jesus is pointing to participation in the grace of the deliverance that characterizes the inbreaking of the reign of God. Jesus is indeed the prophetic Messiah who proclaims the inbreaking reign of God and points to specific ways of participation in the kingdom.

### Causes of Evasion

Four causes of evasion of the Sermon on the Mount deserve mentioning:

When, in the early centuries, some Christian theologians began seeking to appeal to Greek culture and philosophy by adopting Greek metaphysics, they lost a sense of God's dynamic action in history. Greek metaphysics sees God as beyond history, in an eternal realm that does not change or move. So they lost God's grace breaking through the sinful course of life. In other words, they lacked a dynamic eschatology. Lacking a dynamic eschatology of God's dynamic rule, God's lordship, this Greek metaphysics misunderstood what Jesus pointed to as the breakthrough of the kingdom merely as ideals for human effort.

Some have interpreted the Sermon legalistically. They have seen it as hard teachings, prohibitions of anger, lust, divorce, oaths, resistance, and concern about what we shall eat or wear. So it became, for them, a guilt trip. Seeing the Sermon as transforming initiatives makes clear that Jesus is no legalist; Jesus is pointing to the breakthrough of the kingdom. Jesus offers a way of life that participates in deliverance from vicious cycles that trap us.

Many miss the meaning of justice for the poor and powerless in our use of money that we saw above in discussing *righteousness*. Their loyalty to *mammon* or wealth causes them to evade God's will and so to miss the true experience of God's presence.

Many evade the Sermon because they are living in disobedience to the way of Jesus. We genuinely hope this book will help change that. Our responsibility and our fervent commitment is to try to remove obstacles to Jesus' way of life that come from misinterpretation of Jesus' teaching. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit and you, with the support of your community of faith.

[This study will form the basis of the forthcoming textbook for Christian ethics by Glen Stassen and David Gushee to be published by InterVarsity Press, tentatively titled *Christian Ethics as Following Jesus*, or *Christian Ethics as if Jesus Mattered*.]

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[1] See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Orbis: 1988), 190ff.