



St Mark's Review

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Preaching before a watching world

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The moral vision of Jesus in Matthew 5

David Neville

One of the distinctive features of Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus is presented as an authoritative teacher, reminiscent of Moses. For Matthew, what Jesus teaches has an authority not only comparable to the teaching of Moses in the Torah (Jewish Law) but also beyond it. This is borne out in the final words of Jesus, in which his remaining disciples are entrusted with a threefold mission grounded in the all-surpassing authority of Jesus: first, to make all peoples disciples of Jesus; second, to baptise them; and third, to teach baptised disciples to observe all that Jesus has commanded his disciples to do, presumably earlier in the Gospel (28:16–20). Although Jesus had earlier authorised his disciples to emulate other aspects of his own mission such as expelling demons, healing, proclaiming the impending pressure of God's heavenly reign and even raising the dead (9:35–10:15), only now does he authorise them to teach as he taught and to teach what he taught. For Matthew, it is difficult to say much about Jesus that is more exalted than that he was the teacher like Moses who taught the will and way of God.

Clearly, Matthew thought highly of the teaching of Jesus. For various reasons, however, the Church down through the ages has found ways to evade Jesus' instruction, especially his teaching in the so-called 'Sermon on the Mount' or 'Message on the Mountain'. For some, his words, while

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inspirational, are too idealistic; for others, they are simply too stringent. Sidestepping the teaching of Jesus has produced profound problems, however, as Glen Stassen and David Gushee point out:

Christian churches across the theological and confessional spectrum, and Christian ethics as an academic discipline that serves the churches, are often guilty of evading Jesus, the cornerstone and center of the Christian faith. Specifically, the teachings and practices of Jesus – especially the largest block of his teachings, the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ – are routinely ignored or misinterpreted in the preaching and teaching ministry of the churches and in Christian scholarship in ethics. This evasion of the concrete teachings of Jesus has seriously malformed Christian moral practices, moral beliefs and moral witness.¹

In a similar vein, Chris Marshall observes:

despite Jesus’ reputation as an ethical teacher, the Christian church has all but ignored his ethical teaching. At a practical level, the church has often failed lamentably to live up to Jesus’ demands; it has evaded or domesticated his words, or postponed them to some future age... Our professed admiration for the noble sentiments of the Sermon on the Mount has been matched only by our determination to minimise its impact on Christian thought and practice.²

Not only does Matthew present Jesus as the authoritative teacher like Moses but he also presents much of Jesus’ instruction in five teaching blocks. The first and most memorable of these sections is the Message on the Mountain,³ which presents Jesus’ first words in public. This is noteworthy. In view of the heightened significance that Matthew attaches to Jesus as a teacher with (divine) authority (7:28–29), we should be attentive to the teaching this evangelist places first in his account of Jesus’ public ministry. Prior to the Message on the Mountain, the adult Jesus has reassured John the Immerser that his own baptism by John will ‘fulfil all righteousness’ (3:13–15), he has cited Scripture to withstand the devil’s temptations (4:1–11) and he has called four fishermen to follow him (4:18–22). Matthew 4:17 identifies the overarching theme of Jesus’ public message, ‘Change, for the

reign of the heavens is pressing near' (compare 3:2!), but not until he opens his mouth to teach on the mountain does he begin to flesh out what that means. So, the earliest public teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is what one finds in Matthew 5. Here there are nine counterintuitive blessings, two guiding images for the community of disciples, a statement of purpose in relation to the Torah and six illustrations of how key aspects of the Torah are to be fulfilled by means of 'surpassing righteousness'. The placement of the contents of Matthew 5 at the beginning of Jesus' first teaching block in the Gospel that opens the New Testament signals that this instruction is of primary value for the Christian life.

The narrative setting of Matthew 5

The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5 falls within a section of the Gospel that is clearly and meaningfully structured. The Message on the Mountain is prepared for by the summary of Jesus' mission in Matthew 4:23–5:2, in which we are told that Jesus travelled throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of divine reign (see 4:17) and healing ailments of all kinds. The summary statement of Matthew 4:23 (teaching, preaching and healing) is echoed in 9:35, thereby indicating that the Message on the Mountain in chapters 5–7 together with the collection of miracle stories in chapters 8–9 form what one might call a 'stereoscopic portrait' of Jesus as the authoritative Messiah of word and wonders.

Within the Message on the Mountain there is thematic evidence of an overarching three-part structure. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus refers for the first time to the Torah or the Prophets, and in 7:12 he affirms that acting towards others as one would want others to act towards oneself *is* the Torah and the Prophets. Quite how the so-called 'Golden Rule' *is* the Torah and the Prophets is debated, but there is widespread agreement that these similar phrases in 5:17 and 7:12 enclose the central section of the Sermon. This makes for a threefold structure of the Sermon as a whole, with a number of subsections also comprising three component parts.⁴ Thus, Matthew 5 contains the opening section of the Message on the Mountain and the first major subsection of its central section.

One further point regarding the setting of the Message on the Mountain deserves comment. Matthew leads in to this teaching block by observing that large crowds followed him but that Jesus seemingly withdrew from the crowd by going up a mountain and sitting, the appropriate posture for

a recognised teacher (4:24–5:1). Matthew 5:1–2 suggests that Jesus directs his teaching to his disciples only, even though he has thus far called only four followers (4:18–22). Moreover, much of the content of Jesus’ teaching in what follows makes sense only if one is committed to calibrating one’s moral bearings to Jesus’ vision of God’s will and way in the world. Even then, it is difficult enough to comprehend, let alone put into practice, Jesus’ moral teaching.

There is wisdom, then, in recognising that the Message on the Mountain was primarily for disciples, those then and now committed to following Jesus. The moral demands of Jesus are inseparable from his intuition regarding God’s heavenly reign, his insight into the way of God in the world. Nevertheless, as the conclusion to this section makes clear, the crowds overhear enough of Jesus’ instruction to recognise his authority, which eclipses that of their Torah experts, and to continue to pursue him (7:28–8:1). What this suggests is that although Jesus’ theological and moral vision requires a body of believers to display God’s work in the world, it nevertheless reaches out to the wider world and captures the hearts and minds of outsiders. This still happens. To the Church’s chagrin, outsiders all too often grasp the moral meaning of Jesus’ teaching better than insiders, who are often intent on finding excuses for failing to take Jesus at his word. What Jesus taught is undoubtedly counterintuitive, but for anyone with ears to hear it has the potent potential to bring moral imagination and conviction alive.

Blessings associated with God’s heavenly reign (5:3–12)

Both Matthew and Luke preserve a record of Jesus’ pronouncements of blessing in a similarly arranged sequence of teaching material (see Luke 6:12–7:1), but the differences between their respective presentations are as striking as their similarities. Matthew presents more than twice the number of Beatitudes that Luke does and provides no counterbalancing pronouncements of woe, unlike Luke.

In Matthew 5, the first eight pronouncements of blessing are set apart from the ninth and final Beatitude in various ways. First, these opening eight Beatitudes are recorded as spoken in the third person plural, meaning that they refer to people generally who are poor of spirit and the like. Only with the ninth and final Beatitude does Jesus explicitly direct his words to the community of disciples: ‘Blessed are *you* ...’ This ninth Beatitude, which echoes the content of the eighth, both connects discipleship to the theological and

moral vision articulated in the larger block of Beatitudes and also provides the transition to what follows, which is also directed to the disciples.

A second point about the first eight Beatitudes is that the promise of both the first and the eighth is identical: Blessed are ... *because for them is the reign of the heavens* (5:3, 10). This identical refrain not only encloses the opening eight blessings but also signals that every other promise is a feature or dimension of God's heavenly reign. Rather than repeat over and over that God's heavenly reign belongs to mourners, the meek and so on, Jesus provides glimpses into what that means for mourners, the meek and so on. In God's heavenly reign, those who mourn are comforted, the meek receive the earth, merciful gestures are reciprocated and thereby generate more mercy, purity of heart provides a window into God and peacemakers are known as children of a peacemaking God.

A third noteworthy point about the first eight Beatitudes is that they relate God's heavenly reign to righteousness or justice. If the promises of the first and eighth pronouncements of blessing tie all eight together, the repetition of the concern with righteousness in the fourth and eighth Beatitudes serves as thematic exclamation marks to signal its centrality in Jesus' theological and moral vision. 'Blessed are those hungering and thirsting for justice,' Jesus promises, 'because such hunger will be sated and such thirst will be quenched' (5:6). And 'blessed are those harassed as a result of working for justice because the reign of the heavens is for them' (5:10). In each case, these particular blessings encapsulate the previous three. The poor of spirit, those who mourn and the meek are not simply melancholic personalities but rather those in our world whose hunger and thirst for justice reveals the gulf between how things are and how things ought to be, according to Jesus' vision of life. Similarly, those who display mercy towards others, those who strive for spiritual single-mindedness and moral transparency ('purity of heart') and those who build bridges of reconciliation are thereby working for justice and can therefore count on implacable opposition from those whose interests are threatened by the prospect of the reversals necessary to make things ever more fair and right. For disciples of Jesus, therefore, to be preoccupied with matters of justice is to be tuned in to God's wavelength, to be in step with God's heartbeat. Working for justice in any of the ways honoured by Jesus is to take one's bearings from his vision of life lived in accordance with divine priorities. This is the intuition articulated by Martin

Luther King in such statements as ‘the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.’⁵

Taken together, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12 present an upside-down and inside-out perception of God’s way of working in our world. This vision of reality is upside down because the Beatitudes overturn commonsensical attitudes towards what really matters and what is necessary to succeed in life. And it is inside out because in order to make sense of it and to live it out, one needs to enter into the theological-moral world or frame of reference taken for granted by, and given expression in, Jesus’ vision. One cannot assess the veracity, validity or value of Jesus’ pronouncements of blessing from the sidelines; one has to commit to entering into Jesus’ ‘beatitudinal’ worldview before making a judgement.

In his illuminating study of ‘The Moral Vision of the Beatitudes’, Chris Marshall discerns that these pronouncements of blessing share a fourfold focus: a whole-of-life focus, according to which the affirmation of divine favour (indicative) evokes and indeed provokes matching moral measures (imperative); a kingdom focus, according to which the Beatitudes take for granted the new shape of reality being pressured into being by Jesus’ proclamation of the nearness of divine reign; a communal focus, according to which the Beatitudes display ‘the ethos of the messianic community as a colony or showcase of God’s kingdom’; and a Christological focus, according to which the Beatitudes take their bearings from Jesus and reflect his own transforming demeanour.⁶ ‘The beatitudes are best understood, then, as descriptions of a *whole way of life* that we as a Christian *community* are called to live, a life *modelled on Jesus* and bearing witness to the transforming reality of the *kingdom of God*.’⁷ Such a holistic fourfold frame for interpreting the Beatitudes rightly recognises the priority of divine disclosure and initiative (*‘Blessed are ...’*) while also making the implicit imperatives of the blessings and the rigorous commands yet to come more realisable and practicable.

Christian community as salt and light (5:13–16)

After eight pronouncements of blessing on people characterised by whether they crave justice and are harassed for it or display mercy or build bridges of peace and the like, the ninth and final Beatitude directly addresses disciples: ‘Blessed are *you* when people revile and persecute *you* ...’ This form of direct address continues into the next brief section, in which the community of Jesus’ disciples is characterised as the salt of the earth and the light of the

world. At a time in which salt was valued because it preserved food as well as enhanced the taste of food, salt was seen as a staple of life, like bread. Indeed, as Eugene Boring observes, 'eating together was called "sharing salt" and expressed a binding relationship.'⁸ Taken alone, the image of the Christian community as the salt of the earth that sustains life is striking enough, so long as it is neither so mixed nor so diluted that its savour is lost. Yet this image takes on added significance by virtue of its juxtaposition with the second image: 'You are the light of the world.'

Other biblical passages provide an index to the significance of the image of light in Jewish tradition. In Psalm 119, an elaborate hymn of praise for the revelatory guidance provided by the Torah, the psalmist exults, 'Your word (Torah) is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (119:105). Psalm 27 opens with the words, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?' In a similar vein, Micah uses the image of light to signify divine comfort and vindication (7:8–9). In John's Gospel, the divine Logos is the light of life breaking into the world's darkness (1:1–18). 'I am the light of the world,' Jesus claims. 'One who follows me will never walk in darkness but will rather have the light of life' (8:12). And again, 'While I am in the world, I am the light of the world' (9:5; also 12:46). Something similar is said of Jesus in Matthew 4:13–14. When he leaves Nazareth to settle in Capernaum, this is said to fulfil Isaiah 9:1–2, which prophesies that people in darkness have witnessed a great light. In Jewish tradition, therefore, the image of light symbolises divine revelation in the Torah and divine initiative for human benefit. In the Gospels, such imagery is transferred to Jesus, thereby expressing the conviction that divine revelation and saving presence are to be found in him.

Seen from this perspective, Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:14, '*You are the light of the world*', is dumbfounding. Neither the Torah nor the Messiah but rather the community of disciples is, by virtue of its presence in the world, the revelatory light of the world! Matthew later shows Jesus commissioning his disciples to participate in his mission (9:36–11:1), so he probably envisages the community of disciples as the light of the world insofar as it continues Jesus' own mission faithfully. Even so, this is an exalted image for the Christian community and one that brings with it the responsibility to shine for God's glory. How so? For Matthew, the answer to this question lies near to hand: one shines for God's glory by living out the theological and moral vision of the Beatitudes, further exemplified in the teaching that follows in Matthew 5.

‘You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world,’ declares Jesus to – and of – his disciples. The value of salt is proportionate to how well it preserves or seasons; the value of light is the extent to which it illuminates. What this implies is that the Christian community is salt *for* the earth and light *for* the world. Its reason for being is outside itself – to be (communally) in the world and to act (corporately) in the world for the benefit of the world. It has, according to these two images, a twofold role, the dimensions of which do not necessarily sit side by side comfortably. Part of its role in the world is to preserve and to magnify the inherent goodness of God’s created order. Another is to adopt a prophetic stance towards whatever threatens to undo the integrity of the world, to shine a light into the darkness for guidance and discernment. By living in accordance with the vision of life articulated in the Beatitudes, disciples of Jesus both preserve that vision of life and prophesy the proximity and moral pressure of God’s heavenly reign.

Fulfilling Torah (5:17–48)

Following the challenge posed by Jesus’ identification of his community of disciples as the ‘salt of the earth’ and ‘light of the world’, he addresses what was clearly a pressing problem for the earliest Church: the continuing role or relevance of the Jewish Law. Among scholars, only the most intrepid take it upon themselves to sort out the attitude of Paul or Luke or Matthew (let alone Jesus!) to the Torah. Among New Testament texts pertaining to this larger question, few are more challenging than the words attributed to Jesus in Matthew 5:17–48.⁹ The task of interpreting this perplexing passage is probably hindered by coming to it without a prior commitment to Torah-observance. For in this passage, however it is understood, Jesus is presented as being devoted to the Law. From Matthew’s perspective, Jesus’ purpose was not to abolish either the Law or the Prophets but rather to *fulfil* both (5:17). Jesus solemnly affirms that even the most minor features of the Torah are as lasting as heaven above and earth below, albeit with this ambiguous qualification: ‘until everything should happen to happen’ (5:18; cf. Luke 16:17). It is difficult to comprehend precisely what this qualification means but perhaps the key point is that this final phrase is a qualification, requiring reflection and interpretation.

The sayings of Matthew 5:19–20 go beyond affirming the enduring value of the Jewish Law to indicating that one’s standing in God’s heavenly reign is dependent upon practising and teaching ‘these commandments.’ In

fact, entry into God's heavenly reign is said to depend on one's rightness in relation to Torah surpassing that of the scribes (Torah experts) and Pharisees. The 'righteousness' to which Jesus refers in Matthew 5:20 is almost certainly not Paul's notion of right relation to God apart from Law (compare Romans 3:21–31). It is, rather, right conduct according to divine commandments (5:19) or obedience to the will of God expressed in the Torah.

Coming to grips with Jesus' teaching in this passage is complicated by uncertainty over that to which 'these commandments' in Matthew 5:19 refers. In context, it appears that they are the individual commandments contained in the Torah. But if what Jesus proceeds to teach in the remainder of this passage illustrates the 'surpassing righteousness' called for in Matthew 5:20, as seems likely, it is possible to take the reference to 'these commandments' as looking forward to Jesus' illustrative interpretations of commandments contained within the Jewish Law. It is difficult to know which view is correct; perhaps the ambiguity within this passage is not accidental. In other words, there is good reason to think that Jesus' saying about the seriousness of practising and teaching all bar none of 'these commandments' has in view individual commandments found in the Torah that are fulfilled by Jesus' intensifying interpretations of such commandments.

This brings us back to what Matthew understood by Jesus' claim to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Although this passage is decisive for Matthew's understanding of the role and relevance of Jewish Law for disciples of Jesus, it is important to appreciate that Matthew's introduction of the theme of Jesus' relation to the Torah follows his preceding demonstration that Jesus is not only the promised Messiah of David's line (1:2–17), not only the Messiah in whom God is present to save from sins (1:18–25), but also the Messiah who fulfils prophetic scriptures and, indeed, 'all righteousness' (3:13–15). In other words, before reaching the point in his narrative at which he has Jesus clarify his relation to the Jewish Law, Matthew has already provided insight into Jesus' messianic identity, in whom decisive dimensions of Israel's story are both recapitulated and resolved. Reference to the Jewish Law crops up for the first time in Matthew 5:17, but this is after a number of incidents in which Matthew reveals how he understands Jesus to have fulfilled prophetic scriptures and also after he signals how Jesus fulfils 'all righteousness'. In narrative terms, therefore, Matthew has provided readers with indications of how Jesus might be understood to fulfil the Jewish Law no less than the Prophets. If, from investigating previous references to Jesus fulfilling prophetic

scriptures and righteousness, an understanding of fulfilment emerges that is consistent with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21–48, that may be taken to indicate that we are on Matthew's wavelength.

Prior to Jesus' affirmation in Matthew 5:17 that he came not to abolish but rather to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, Matthew has already applied the term 'fulfil' on six occasions in relation to incidents relating to Jesus. The first of these is in relation to Jesus' conception and birth, all of which, according to Matthew, occurred to fulfil that which was said by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah (7:14). Four of the next five formal notices of fulfilment echo this opening fulfilment citation, thereby reinforcing the view that events in Jesus' life fill fully or bring to their intended completion divine utterances spoken through Israel's prophets, including Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah. The word of God, spoken through Israel's prophets, remains efficacious and, indeed, is finally and fully efficacious in Jesus. Such further events in the life of Messiah Jesus include his sojourn in Egypt, the related slaughter of children by Herod and the settling of Jesus' family in Nazareth of Galilee (2:13–23). His subsequent departure from Nazareth to settle in Capernaum is yet another such event that fulfils prophecy (4:12–16).

All too often, such fulfilment texts have been interpreted along the lines of ancient predictions that finally came true in the life story of Jesus. That is far too wooden an understanding of Matthew's conception of prophecy and fulfilment. To illustrate the point, when Matthew affirms that Joseph's obedience in taking the infant Jesus and his mother to Egypt fulfilled that which was said by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Hosea 11:1), this is part and parcel of his presentation of the story of Jesus as a recapitulation of the age-old story of Moses. Matthew knows that Hosea 11:1 is recollection, not prediction, and he also knows, as anyone who checks knows, that the 'son' called out of Egypt is the rescued children of Israel. The point is that the ancient pattern of divine rescue is about to be repeated, only surprisingly and conclusively. Although fulfilment takes its bearings from the past – a past point in God's saving history – it is nevertheless more than simply a repetition of the past. Fulfilment of what was spoken through the prophets shares in the quality of whatever it was that led to it being recognised as being prophetic, that is, the creative and effective word of God. As a result, fulfilment of the prophetic past brings with it something creatively new and powerfully illuminating for the present

moment. Fulfilment is a dynamic process, as the image of filling to the (overflowing) full implies.

A similar conclusion must be drawn from the incident in which Jesus affirms that his baptism by John fittingly fulfils all righteousness (3:13–15). In Matthew's account – and only in Matthew's account – John resists baptising Jesus, presumably because baptism symbolises a commitment to radical change (3:1–6). Nothing Matthew writes suggests John is wrong to think that he should undergo baptism by Jesus, not the other way around. Yet, according to Jesus, by baptising him, John participates with Jesus in fulfilling all righteousness. The least that can be said is that what 'fulfils all righteousness' is not simply conduct that conforms, either to expectations or to moral prescriptions. John undoubtedly voices Matthew's conviction that Jesus had no need of his baptism but Jesus undergoes baptism unnecessarily. He goes beyond what is required and in doing so fills rightness itself to the full. Before calling for 'surpassing righteousness', he demonstrates it. In Jesus' moral vision, to fulfil what is right is to go beyond what is required – for the greater good. A similar perception pervades Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21–48, in which he nowhere repeals Torah precepts but invariably goes beyond them for the greater good.

Surpassing righteousness illustrated (5:21–48)

By any measure, the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:21–48 is astounding. Addressing central features of Jewish morality, Jesus radically reinterprets the teaching of Torah. The issues addressed are these: violence in the form of homicide; adultery; divorce; vows or oaths; violence in the form of restrained retaliation; and respect for others. There is lively debate on whether the points about which Jesus comments are moral commands found in the Law of Moses or interpretations of such teaching current at the time. Such a distinction may not have been meaningful for Jesus and his audience. After all, moral prescriptions from the ancient past invariably require varying degrees of interpretation to remain comprehensible, let alone relevant. Certainly the six illustrative concerns addressed by Jesus are drawn from the Torah, even if the way in which some are expressed seems to take into account later elaborations of Mosaic prescriptions.

The form in which Jesus' moral teaching is expressed in this subsection of the Message on the Mountain has led some to the view that Jesus is undoing the Law. But in light of its immediate context, following Jesus'

statement of purpose in Matthew 5:17–20, that is an incongruous perspective. The antithetical form of Jesus' teaching – 'You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ...' – underscores the moral authority of Jesus but it does not signal that his teaching contravenes the Torah. Careful attention to Jesus' comments on points of Jewish Law reveals that his teaching fulfils Torah by intensifying or radicalising its moral demands. In other words, fulfilling the moral obligations found in the Torah is not simply a matter of obeying them but of taking them further in accordance with their underlying purpose or rationale.¹⁰ Quelling rage that leads to homicide fulfils the commandment against murder by dealing with a root cause. Checking the lustful look fulfils the commandment against adultery by doing the same. Jesus' fairly hard line on divorce extends the original concern to prevent men from dismissing wives without due concern for their well-being. Developing the habit of keeping one's word obviates the need for vows or oaths, whose purpose is to reinforce the honouring of commitments. Practising nonretaliation takes further the likely intention of prescribing proportionate, as opposed to unrestrained, vengeance, since the natural inclination when taking revenge is to 'up the ante'. And respecting enemies may be seen as a natural, even if counterintuitive, extension of the biblical command to love neighbours, since neighbours might well not be family or kinfolk but resident aliens. Despising enemies, which is not an explicit Mosaic commandment, is one possible inference from the scriptural command to love neighbours and it was an inference drawn by some of Jesus' contemporaries. By contrast, Jesus draws a radically different inference regarding the content of the term 'neighbour', enlarging it to include even those to whom one has no natural affinity or loyalty.¹¹

Although there is nothing like a one-to-one correlation between the nine blessings of Jesus in Matthew 5:3–12 and the six illustrations of how Jesus envisaged that commandments from the Torah should be fulfilled, there is a high level of moral coherence between them. The rigorous reinterpretation of Mosaic morality might be likened to Jesus' recipe for craved-after justice. Meekness and mercy are clearly ingredients for suppressing rage, contempt and slander against others. Purity of heart or moral integrity is essential to respecting the dignity of others and to maintaining fidelity, whether to one's marriage partner or to one's word. At least half (and probably all) of Jesus' intensifications of Torah-observance illustrate dimensions of active peace-making. Within Matthew 5, there is a deep integrity to Jesus' moral vision.

Living up to Jesus' moral vision

As it is mapped out in Matthew 5, Jesus' moral vision seems to be so radical as to be utopian, so uncompromising as to be burdensome, so challenging as to be ultimately defeating. Who, then, is able to live up to it? The answer is: no one, *alone*.

If we could summon up Matthew to hear his answer to this question, it would probably contain the following encouragement to persist in the path of Christian discipleship. First of all, Matthew ends his Gospel with the promise of *Immanu-el*, 'with us is God', to remain with his disciples through to the end of the age. And as Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 makes clear, when even so few as two or three are engaged in the difficult business of acting in concert with the inner dynamic of Jesus' own mission of restoring the lost, he is present and active in that process. For Matthew, empowering divine presence accompanies those who follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Second, in an ethos characterised by rampant individualism, it is well to recall that the moral vision of Jesus is set out for – and also entrusted to – a *community* of disciples. To live in accordance with Jesus' moral vision as implied by the Beatitudes and as exemplified in the 'antitheses' requires the support of a community dedicated to living out the vision of life expressed in the Message on the Mountain. Failure is inevitable, but failure has an antidote in forgiveness. Moreover, as Marshall reminds us, 'the community is more than the sum of its individual parts. The corporate faithfulness of a nurturing community pursuing the same vision will uphold us when we falter and challenge us to try again.'¹² Of course, if the community of Jesus' disciples no longer has confidence in Jesus' moral vision and its theological grounding, that leaves individual disciples in the lurch.

Third, Matthew might well be inclined to encourage fidelity to Jesus' rigorous demands by warning of divine judgement for moral failings. End-time judgement for failing to act in accordance with Jesus' teaching is a prominent theme in Matthew's Gospel, beginning with the third and final section of Jesus' Message on the Mountain (7:13–27).¹³ Although the prospect of divine judgement has its proper place in Christian morality and ethics, it has probably featured too prominently in popular Christian teaching and imagination down through the centuries. Taken alone as it often is, moreover, the threat of divine judgement seems to have done little to prevent either the Christian community or individuals within it from betraying the moral vision of Jesus in each and every one of its aspects.

Fourth and finally, as prominent as the theme of divine judgement is for Matthew, it is counterbalanced by an equally, if not more, edifying intuition regarding the character of God. In the sixth and final ‘antithesis’ in Matthew 5:43–48, love for enemies is morally analogous to the indiscriminate generosity of God. Since God’s nature is characterised by bounteous goodness, to be a child of God is to respect the personhood of everyone – family, friend or foe. The blessings at the beginning of Jesus’ Message on the Mountain are tuned to the same theological and ethical wavelength whose moral markers are meekness and mercy, justice and peace. Morality that takes its bearings from the God of Jewish Scripture is bound to be beyond us, but in Matthew’s perspective the God of Israel is known to be for us because in Jesus God is with us.

In line with the moral vision of Jesus in Matthew 5, several other texts in the Gospel offer insight into Matthew’s distinctive ethical and interpretive guidelines.¹⁴ The so-called ‘Golden Rule’ in Matthew 7:12, which concludes the central section of the Message on the Mountain, *is* the Law and the Prophets, according to Jesus. As and when necessary, the Law and the Prophets should be interpreted for human well-being. Twice in response to Pharisaic criticism of his conduct, Jesus appeals to Hosea 6:6, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ (9:13; 12:7). Asked about what is necessary to be assured of eternal life, Jesus answers by listing some of the ten commandments but concludes with the summary command to love one’s neighbour as oneself, then gives content to this summary command by advising the wealthy young man to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor (19:16–22). When asked by a Torah expert to identify the primary commandment in the Law, Jesus nominates two indivisible commandments: love of God with all one’s heart, soul and mind, and love of neighbour as oneself. On these two commandments, the whole Law-plus-Prophets hangs like a priceless pendant (22:34–40). And in his condemnation of Torah experts and Pharisees, Jesus castigates contemporary guardians of the Law for tithing herbs while neglecting more critical features of Torah: just judgement, mercy and faithfulness (23:23). According to Matthew’s Gospel, certain moral norms comprise the core content of Jesus’ understanding of faithfulness to – and hence fulfilment of – the Law and the Prophets: love for others, justice and mercy or, perhaps better, love for others expressed by justice mingled with mercy.

Endnotes

1. Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 2003, p. xi.
2. Christopher D Marshall, 'The Moral Vision of the Beatitudes: The Blessings of Revolution', in David Neville and Philip Matthews (eds), *Faith and Freedom: Christian Ethics in a Pluralist Culture*, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2003, p. 11.
3. In view of the Mosaic symbolism and of the symbolism of mountains generally within Matthew's Gospel, it would not be farfetched to describe the Sermon on the Mount as the Revelation from the Mountain. For accessible studies of the Sermon on the Mount, see Warren Carter, *What are they saying about Matthew's Sermon on the Mount?*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, 1994; Dale C Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*, Crossroad, New York, 1999; Charles H Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5–7*, paperback edition, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006; and Frank J Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2013.
4. For a helpful overview of the structure of the 'Sermon on the Mount', see M Eugene Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', in Leander E Keck and others (eds), *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 173.
5. Depending on the context and his audience, King varied his phrasing, sometimes speaking of 'the arm of the Lord' or 'the moral arc of the universe'. On the 'justice-orientation' of the Beatitudes, see Russell Pregeant, *Knowing Truth, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2008, pp. 129–33. See also Gerard Moore, *The Beatitudes and Justice*, Catholic Social Justice Series 52, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, North Sydney, 2004.
6. Marshall, 'Moral Vision of the Beatitudes', pp. 15–21.
7. Marshall, 'Moral Vision of the Beatitudes', p. 22.
8. Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew', p. 181.
9. In addition to commentaries, I am indebted to various studies for insights on this passage, including: Donald Senior, *What are they saying about Matthew?*, revised edition, Paulist Press, Mahwah, 1996, pp. 62–73; Klyne Snodgrass, 'Matthew and the Law', in David R Bauer and Mark Allan Powell

- (eds), *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1996, pp. 99–127; William Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, pp. 154–82; Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, Rosemary Selle (trans.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005, pp. 185–218; Roland Deines, 'Not the Law but the Messiah: Law and Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew – An Ongoing Debate', in Daniel M Gurtner and John Nolland (eds), *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, pp. 53–84; and an as-yet unpublished paper by Boris Repschinski, 'Moral Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew' (prepared for the 2013 SNTS meeting in Perth).
10. For this reason, some prefer to follow Pinchas Lapide in describing the 'antitheses' as *supertheses*. See Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount: Utopia or Program for Action?*, Arlene Swidler (trans.), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1986, pp. 41–48. Compare the interpretation of the 'antitheses' as *transforming initiatives* in Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 125–45.
 11. In Luke's Gospel, the command to love one's enemies (6:27–36) is reinforced by Jesus' parable of the compassionate Samaritan, recounted in response to a Torah expert's distillation of Jewish Law as loving God without reserve and loving neighbour as oneself (10:25–37). For a profound discussion of this parable and its present significance, see Christopher D Marshall, *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*, Cascade Books, Eugene, 2012, pp. 13–176.
 12. Marshall, 'Moral Vision of the Beatitudes,' p. 20.
 13. In this connection, one should keep in mind that, for Matthew, end-time judgement will be entrusted to Jesus, saviour of God's people from their sins and *Immanu-el*.
 14. For a similar appeal to such distinctive Matthean features, see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament – Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1996, pp. 99–101. For Hays, the moral vision of Jesus mapped out by Matthew majors on mercy and love. For an accessible interpretation of Matthew in accordance with this moral orientation, see Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, St Pauls Publications, Strathfield, 2004.