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# Law, Righteousness, and Discipleship in Matthew

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WITH THE STRESS OF CURRENT BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON THE DIVERSITY OF theologies to be found in the New Testament, the problem of understanding the Gospel of Matthew vis-à-vis Paul and his teaching of justification by faith no longer receives much attention. According to the current consensus, the simple fact is that we have different theologies of salvation in Matthew and Paul, one emphasizing works and the other grace, and that's that. In the classic Lutheran paradigm, the familiar law-gospel polarity results in a side-stepping of the problem by relegating the law to the realm of prolegomena. Yet it is Matthew the Christian who keeps talking about the law, and the church continues to ascribe canonical authority to his gospel.

This familiar problem deserves ongoing attention and it is pursued here in the conviction that the various theologies of the New Testament writers are compatible rather than contradictory. This is not a call for harmonizing or homogeniz-

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*Matthew's demand for righteousness is inseparable from the grace embodied in the "gospel of the kingdom." Discipleship in Matthew finds its center not in obeying the law, but in following Jesus.*

 

ing. Indeed, the writers of the New Testament do not say the same thing, nor do they speak in the same way about every topic they address. The differences within the New Testament should be rejoiced in and regarded as the gift of God. To be sure, we must be wary of Paulinizing Matthew or re-Judaizing Paul.[1] But we must at the same time protect against the misunderstanding of both that occurs when their differences are exaggerated.

The present article addresses the problem by looking at the following: the Jewishness of Matthew's perspective, the balance between demand and gift in Matthew, and the nature of discipleship in Matthew.

## I. MATTHEW: THE GOSPEL FOR THE JEWS

Matthew was written by a Jewish Christian primarily for other Jewish Christians in the first century. It is increasingly thought probable that Matthew wrote not to a single Jewish Christian community, but to many, and perhaps even to Jewish Christians in general.[2] Clearly, the Jewish character of Matthew's perspective accounts for the gospel's distinctive emphases.

*Law*. As in Judaism, so in Matthew, the law is of key importance. One of the most famous passages in Matthew, found among the gospels only here, is 5:17-18: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."

For Matthew, Jesus is fundamentally loyal to the law as the definitive and binding statement of the will of God. So, too, the law is binding upon the people called by Jesus. There is, however, one great difference between Matthew and Judaism. In Matthew's view, Jesus the Messiah is with his people and, as the Jews expected of the Messiah, Jesus provides the definitive interpretation of the law. This is the point of the "antitheses" ("You have heard...but I say to you") of 5:21-48. The rabbis debated the exact sense of the commandments; Jesus provides the final interpretation of the commandments with an unparalleled authority. The effect of the second half of each antithesis is to intensify the demand of the commandments, for example, by making them apply to the thought as well as the deed. The goal can even be stated in terms of perfection (5:48). Indeed, the standard of righteousness put before the reader is so intimidating that one must reckon with the

[1]One thinks of the current trend among proponents of the "new perspective" on Paul wherein justification by faith apart from the law recedes in favor of Paul's continuing affirmation of the law. Even Matthew has been subject to a reJudaizing, i.e., an overemphasis of the Jewish aspects of the gospel with a resultant reduction of the new and Christian elements of the gospel. This, in my opinion is what A. J. Saldarini (*Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994]) and J. A. Overman (*Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]) end up doing.

[2]The point has been recently made that the evangelists consciously wrote for wide rather than local readerships. See *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). On Matthew being written to several Jewish Christian congregations, see G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992) 50f.

new set of circumstances that provides the context for such teaching. It is the righteousness of the newly dawning kingdom that Jesus puts before his disciples (more of this in the next section). These are not ordinary ethics, but the ethics of the kingdom.

It is inconceivable to Matthew and his readers that the Messiah would not uphold the law. For them the law was a fixed and absolute reality. And we may well believe that this was the view of Jesus too. At the same time, even in Matthew there is evidence that Jesus relates to the law with an obvious sovereignty. The statement of 5:17, suggesting that some might be tempted to think that Jesus had come to destroy the law, itself implies as much. Several of the antitheses contain content that could be, and was, construed as going against a strict (i.e., literal) interpretation of the law: the prohibition of divorce and remarriage (5:31-32), which were allowed by Moses (see 19:3-9); the prohibition of taking oaths (5:33-37); and the prohibition of the *lex talionis* (5:38-42). The same must be said of Jesus' freedom pertaining to the sabbath (12:1-14), and also his statement that what a person eats does not defile, but rather what comes from a person's heart defiles (15:1-20)—even if in the last instance Matthew will have nothing of Mark's editorial comment that "thus he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19).

Matthew 15:1-20 indicates that Jesus did not observe the commandments of the oral tradition of the Pharisees, in this particular case the ritual washing of hands before eating. Jesus faults the Pharisees in the biting question of 15:3: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" It is also clear that it is the Pharisaic interpretation of the written commandments that Jesus challenges elsewhere. All of this becomes very interesting, not to say problematic, in light of the statement in 23:2-3 that "the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Since in what follows, however, the teaching of the Pharisees *is* challenged (23:16-22), this approval of the Pharisees must be *in principle only*. That is, certain qualifications are assumed. The Pharisees have the honorable calling of interpreting the law of Moses, yes, but only insofar as they do so correctly are they to be revered and followed.

The remarkable statement of 23:23 need not be taken as an outright refutation of the Pharisaic tradition: "For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others." In typical fashion, Jesus here cuts to the heart of the Torah. It is above all justice and mercy and faith that must be upheld. It was fine for the Pharisees to tithe the small herbs—something not required by the Torah—*as long as* the truly significant matters of the Torah were not neglected.

In all of this it is important to note that the law retains its validity for the evangelist, but *only as interpreted by Jesus*. It is Jesus alone who, as the Messiah, is the "one teacher" (23:8, 10). His interpretation of the law alone is definitive and finally authoritative. Thus for all the finesse of Jesus in his relation to the law in Matthew, he is construed as ultimately faithful to the law.

*Righteousness*. To talk of Torah is to talk of righteousness. It is no coincidence that the word δικαιοσύνη, "righteousness," occurs in Matthew seven times, and not in any other synoptic gospel except for the poetry of Luke 1:75. Given Matthew's Jewish orientation, one expects that he means by this word what the Jews referred to as צְדָקָה, i.e., "ethical righteousness," understood as conformity to the law. And this is what one finds, at least in the majority of instances. Thus, ethical righteousness is in view in 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; in 5:20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"; in 6:1: "Beware of practicing your piety [the NRSV translation of δικαιοσύνη] before others in order to be seen by them"; as also in 6:33, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Yet I am not persuaded that *dikaiosyne* means ethical performance in every occurrence.[3] Matthew is capable of using the word with different nuances depending on the context. Thus in the beatitude of 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," the word should be understood, according to the context, in the sense of eschatological "justice," not as personal righteousness. The remaining two instances of the word have to do with John the Baptist. In 3:15, Jesus says to the reluctant Baptizer, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Baptism is not commanded in the Torah and its connection with *ethical* righteousness is tenuous, especially in the case of Jesus, who as the Righteous One needs no baptism for the remission of sins. The word "fulfill," furthermore, leads one to think of reaching a new stage of God's saving activity. In the second reference, 21:32, Jesus says that "John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him." While John's ethical teaching could be in view here, if we relate this passage to 3:15, "the way of righteousness" could well have in view the role of John in the culmination of God's saving action now reached in Jesus.[4] The "way of righteousness" would thus be a reference to the history of salvation.

To my mind, nothing precludes Matthew from using the word "righteousness" in what we usually think of as the Pauline sense of "the righteousness of God" (as, for example, in Rom 1:17). What is meant by this phrase in Paul's writings is not God's ethical righteousness but God's saving activity. If Paul the Jew could think this way about righteousness, there is no reason that Matthew may not also have been able to conceive of righteousness in relation to the kingdom as the gift, and hence as the saving activity, of God and not merely righteousness as demand. In a few of the Matthean passages, then, it may also be the case that what is

[3]*Pace* B. Przybysklski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought*, SNTSMS 41 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980).

[4]Jesus undergoes baptism as a kind of inauguration of his saving work, not to repent of his sin or to act righteously. Note the immediate descent of the Holy Spirit and the quasi-commissioning words: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17).

in view is not ethical righteousness but God's righteousness understood as, and manifested in, God's saving activity—the heart of Matthew's story.[5]

## II. Grace in Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Because it is so easy to find texts in Matthew that put great emphasis on the importance—indeed the necessity—of ethical righteousness, it is often concluded that Matthew knows only salvation by works. In this regard, Matthew is made the polar opposite of Paul, the champion of salvation by grace. It is usually forgotten that Paul can emphasize works as much as Matthew (see, for example, texts such as Rom 2:6-10, 13; Gal 6:7-8—any one of which would be very much at home in Matthew). The writers of the New Testament seem not to have had the difficulty we have in holding these things together! My point is that Matthew and Paul may not be as far apart as we sometimes think.[6]

The "gospel" is good news. The good news for Matthew is described as "the gospel of the kingdom." Matthew is one with the other synoptic writers in stressing the coming of the kingdom in the person and ministry of Jesus. This dawning of the kingdom is nothing other than a matter of grace. The kingdom is earned by no one; it is the free gift of God. The announcement of the dawning of the kingdom of God provides the larger framework within which the ethical demand is placed. Indeed, this framework is required to make sense of the ethics. The ethics are decidedly not a detachable moral code,[7] but explicitly the ethics of the kingdom. Only when they are understood as such do they become understandable.

Several other matters point to the evangelist's understanding of grace. Of very great importance is the fact that the beatitudes precede the ethical teaching of the sermon on the mount. While the beatitudes at points contain implicit commands, they serve primarily as an affirmation of the blessedness of the recipients of the kingdom. The blessedness is ascribed not to achievers, but to receivers. The beatitudes stand in an analogous position to the covenant statement that precedes the ten commandments. That is, the law is given to a people who already enjoy relationship to God through the election of Israel by grace. *Because* they are the people of God, *not in order to become* the people of God, they are to obey the commandments. Similarly, the ethical righteousness required in Matthew is required of those who have already received the kingdom. The imperative is preceded by an indicative; the demand is preceded by gift.

In agreement with this is the prominence given in Matthew to the acceptance of sinners and the unworthy. Matthew, like Mark and Luke, notes that Jesus frater-

[5]For a detailed defense of this conclusion, see D. A. Hagner, "Righteousness in Matthew's Theology," in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin*, ed. M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 101-120.

[6]See D. A. Hagner, "Balancing the Old and New: The Law of Moses in Matthew and Paul," *Interpretation* 51 (1997) 20-30. See, too, R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives*, SNTSMS 48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).

[7]In my opinion, the attempt of Hans Dieter Betz to isolate the sermon on the mount from the gospel in which it is found and to deal with it as an independent entity without context is fundamentally wrong. See his *The Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

nized with tax collectors and sinners (11:19) and that he said "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (9:13; see, too, 21:31). Jesus comes not simply to demand righteousness, but to offer forgiveness to those who have no righteousness. At the beginning of the gospel we read that Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (1:21); in 20:28 that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"; in 26:28 that "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." In the middle of the sermon on the mount, with its clarion call to righteousness, the Lord's prayer contains a petition for the forgiveness of sins (6:12). Sin is failure in righteousness. Forgiveness of sin—the essence of grace—is of central importance in Matthew (additional references to forgiveness can be found in 9:2, 6; 12:31).

Two parables unique to Matthew touch on this theme. The parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35) refers to a servant whose practically incalculable debt had been forgiven. This unmistakably symbolizes the gospel reality of the forgiveness of sins. To be forgiven by God necessitates the forgiving of others (cf. 6:14f.). In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), the workers are in fact not paid according to the amount of work done, as they supposed just, but those who came at the last hour were paid the same. That they came late and thus did relatively little work does not hinder them from receiving the full wage. One's standing before God does not finally rest on the amount of one's work or one's righteousness.

The gospel of the kingdom brings with it an inevitable newness that necessitates a fresh understanding of the call to righteousness. That call is not less serious than earlier, but it is now conditioned by the unique announcement of grace in the dawning of the promised kingdom.

## III. Discipleship in Matthew: Following the Teaching of Jesus

For Matthew, discipleship is a calling to fulfill the righteousness of the Torah, but in a new way. Unlike the former Judaism of Matthew's first readers, the obedience of discipleship is now centered not upon the commandments but upon Jesus and his teaching.[8] The commission with which the gospel ends makes this clear: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey *everything that I have commanded you*" (28:19f.).

Righteousness is required of the disciples of Jesus. The definition and explication of righteousness, however, comes now not directly from the Torah but exclusively through the teaching of Jesus. Hence the call of the commission is not to obey the commandments of the Torah, but "everything I have commanded you."

The righteousness of the Torah has a special character, as expounded by Jesus according to Matthew. The correct meaning of the commandments depends

[8]Thus, rightly, K. Snodgrass, in his insightful article, "Matthew and the Law," in *Treasures New and Old. Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. D. R. Bauer and M. A. Powell (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 99-127: "The law is no longer the center of gravity; Jesus is" (126).

on the twofold love commandment, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself." "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40). This is the heart of the law for Jesus and these two commandments provide a hermeneutic for the understanding of all the other commandments.[9] In a similar way, the golden rule points to what is to be regarded as the essence of the law: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (7:12).

The distinctive quotation of Hos 6:6 in Matthew also penetrates to the heart of the law. In 9:13 Jesus responds to the criticism that he associated with tax collectors and sinners by saying to the Pharisees, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" When challenged concerning his demeanor toward the sabbath commandment, he concludes, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (12:7). In short, strict obedience to the letter of the law must sometimes yield to the inner essence of the law. Or to put it conversely, technical violation of the law must be allowed when more important matters are to be preserved (cf. 23:23). Here Jesus stands with the Old Testament prophets (cf. Mic 6:6-8). One might say, indeed, that the law is to a considerable extent conditioned by the prophets. And for that reason, Jesus inclines to speak of the law together with the prophets.

The call to the righteousness of the law in Matthew is not a flat call to obey commandments. Yet the disciple is clearly to make righteousness a priority: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness [i.e., the righteousness he demands]" (6:33). The righteousness that the law has in view clearly remains a goal for Matthew. But that righteousness is to be gained through obedience to the teaching of Jesus, not the Torah itself. It is for this reason that the person who follows the teaching of Jesus—the unique, messianic interpreter of the law—has *in effect* completely fulfilled the law, indeed, down to its tiniest aspect. The hyperbole of 5:18 means to refer to the law in its essential totality, as it is now known through Jesus.

Thus for all its concern with righteousness, the Gospel of Matthew is not nomocentric, but christocentric. The call of 5:20 does not mean to beat the Pharisees at their own game. The call is not to a nomism, not even to a new covenantal nomism. Nomistic scrupulosity is not what drives the evangelist, but righteousness as it can now be known in the new age that dawns with the presence of the Messiah. That righteousness in its fullest and most incisive sense corresponds to the righteousness described by the law.

We are not out of the realm of grace here and not ultimately far from Paul. I doubt that Paul would have had trouble preaching from the Gospel of Matthew if

[9]See B. Gerhardsson, "The Hermeneutic Program in Matthew 22:37-40," in *Jews, Greeks and Christians, Festschrift* for W. D. Davies, ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 129-150, and T. L. Donaldson, "The Law that Hangs (Matthew 22:40): Rabbinic Formulation and Matthean Social World," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 (1995) 689-709.

it had been available to him. And neither should the modern Christian preacher. It is only a faulty perception of the Gospel of Matthew that reads it as propounding a salvation based on works. Matthew is deeply committed to the vital importance of righteousness, but only within the context of the new situation brought by the grace of God in Christ. All is finally to be seen in relation to the gospel of the kingdom. ⊕