



Learning What Righteousness Means: Hosea 6:6 and the Ethic of Mercy in Matthew's Gospel

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SUMMARIZING MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, ROBERT SMITH WRITES, "MATTHEW PICTURES Jesus as bringer and teacher of righteousness. He makes right, and he summons to a surpassing rightness."¹ Readers of Matthew agree that righteousness is central to the teaching of Jesus in this gospel, and that righteousness as Jesus teaches and practices it requires an adjective of excess.² It is a higher, better, surpassing righteousness. This understanding of righteousness is based in part on Jesus' comment to the hearers of the sermon on the mount that "unless your

¹Robert H. Smith, *Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 15.

²Günther Bornkamm et al., *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 24-32, speaks of "better righteousness." Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995) 104-111, title their remarks on Matt 3:1-7:29, "The Higher Righteousness."

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For Matthew the difference between Jesus and his adversaries is based on Hosea 6:6: Whose observance of the law is characterized by the steadfast love that God desires from Israel and whose is not?

righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).

However, to say that a higher righteousness is central to Matthew's Gospel is not yet to describe what Matthew means by righteousness or how that righteousness qualifies as excessive. Two of Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees can help provide content for the righteousness Jesus commends. Twice Jesus quotes Hos 6:6 to Pharisees who are questioning his or his disciples' carefulness with respect to righteous behavior. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" is the response of Jesus to concerns that he is failing to practice the righteousness he preaches. Along with other material in the gospel that speaks of mercy and righteousness, these two conflicts suggest that, in Matthew's Gospel, to be righteous is to show mercy.³

I. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND MERCY IN JESUS' CONFLICTS WITH THE PHARISEES

The noun ἔλεος (mercy) appears only three times in Matthew's Gospel, twice in the context of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees (9:13 and 12:7) and once in a statement of woe issued by Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees (23:23). The conflict scenes provide a starting place for the study of righteousness as mercy in this gospel.

In Matt 9:9, Jesus calls Matthew away from the tax booth with the words, "Follow me." Matthew does follow Jesus, perhaps all the way home,⁴ to a dinner with a guest list that includes tax collectors, sinners, and disciples. Some Pharisees, apparently witnessing the gathering, ask the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"⁵ The teacher himself answers the question that was directed to his disciples. In Matthew, Jesus' answer has three parts. First, he speaks a proverb: "The well have no need of a physician." Then, acting as the Pharisees' teacher, he points them back to the scriptures, suggesting that they "go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Finally, he describes his own mission by saying, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt 9:13). Mark and Luke include the first and third parts of Jesus' response. Matthew alone quotes Jesus' citation of the verse from Hosea.

Jesus quotes the same verse in Matthew's version of the controversy over

³While both righteousness and mercy are commonly recognized as important themes in Matthew's Gospel, their relationship to each other is less often highlighted. A connection between righteousness and mercy has, however, been noted by Günther Bornkamm et al., *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 26, and David Hill, "On the Use and Meaning of Hosea vi.6 in Matthew's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977) 107-119.

⁴As is commonly known, the tax collector who is numbered among the twelve is named Levi in Mark and Luke and Matthew in Matthew. While the Lucan parallel makes it clear that Levi is the host of the party that immediately follows his call, Mark and Matthew offer a more ambiguous account of where the party takes place. The house may be Peter's (cf. Matt 8:14) or Jesus' (cf. Matt 4:13) or Matthew's. See the discussion in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989) 99f.

⁵It seems unlikely that the Pharisees are also among the guests at the dinner, though in Luke's Gospel, at least, Jesus eats with Pharisees on more than one occasion (cf. Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-41). Neither Mark nor Matthew speaks explicitly of Jesus at table with Pharisees.

plucking grain on the sabbath. Again, Matthew alone includes the scripture citation in a story that appears in all three synoptics. In this controversy, the Pharisees mention the law explicitly, saying to Jesus that his disciples "are doing what it is not lawful to do on the sabbath" (Matt 12:2). Their comment initiates further teaching by Jesus from the scriptures, followed by his own inflammatory action on the sabbath.

Jesus' teaching begins with an allusion to a story about David. The story is from 1 Samuel 21. David is on the run from Saul, who wants to kill him. At Nob, David asks the priest Ahimelech for provisions for himself and his men, and the priest provides him with the only provisions available, the shrine's holy bread. The law required that such bread be eaten only by the priests (Lev 24:5-9), yet an exception was made for David and his companions. Apparently Jesus expects that the Pharisees will agree (or that they should agree, at least) with his conclusion that under such circumstances, the unconventional use of bread that had been consecrated to another purpose was justified.

The second biblical allusion Jesus offers is to the law itself, which commands sabbath offerings (Num 28:9f.). In order to make such offerings, the priests routinely "break the sabbath," Jesus says, yet they are guiltless. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater: if the Pharisees agree with Jesus that these two exceptions to the law are justified, how much more should they agree that the disciples' action of plucking grain is justified, provided they believe that "something greater than the temple is here" (Matt 12:6). Of course, this is precisely what the Pharisees do not believe, so once again, Jesus cites Hos 6:6. "Mercy I desire and not sacrifice." Mercy is the "something greater" to which Jesus refers, the "something greater" which is here in Jesus' teaching and actions.⁶

After Jesus speaks of mercy, he does it. It is not merely coincidental that as a demonstration of what is lawful on the sabbath, Jesus does something that elsewhere in the gospel is requested with the words, "Son of David, have mercy..." (9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30f.). Five of the seven uses of the verb ἐλέεω in Matthew's Gospel occur in the context of healing stories. Mercy is what people ask for from Jesus before they receive healing.⁷ Immediately after his conflict with the Pharisees over whether it is lawful to pluck grain on the sabbath, Jesus practices mercy by healing a man with a withered hand. In this case, the healing happens not in response to a request for mercy but as the answer to a question about whether it is lawful to heal on the sabbath. Jesus argues that it is lawful, and then he acts in concert with his argument. Righteous observance of the law is expressed in merciful action toward the neighbor. Jesus' action makes an impression on the Pharisees, but it is not a favorable one. Matthew tells readers of the gospel that in response to

⁶The neuter form of the comparative μέγας makes it likely that what is greater is mercy (τό ἔλεος). Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus 8-17* (Zürich & Braunschweig: Benziger and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990) 231.

⁷A request for mercy from a blind man (or blind men, in Matthew's case) is in all three synoptics (cf. Matt 9:27; 20:30; Mark 10:47; Luke 18:38). Matthew adds a request for mercy to the story of the woman who requests healing for her daughter (Matt 15:22 // Mark 7:24ff.) and the man who requests healing for his son (Matt 17:15 // Mark 9:14ff. // Luke 9:37ff.).

these conflicts with Jesus, “the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (Matt 12:14).

Hos 6:6 plays a central role in the arguments Jesus uses to defend his and his disciples’ actions to the Pharisees. He explains not only his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners but also his interpretation of sabbath law by referring to God’s will for mercy rather than sacrifice. The absence of this verse elsewhere in the New Testament and its presence on the lips of Jesus twice in Matthew’s Gospel suggest that it is particularly important to the first evangelist. Matthew’s use of scripture is not wholly constrained by the Old Testament context’s plain sense of the biblical texts he cites.⁸ Yet in the case of Hos 6:6, the text’s prior context contributes much to an understanding of what the repetition of “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” means in Matthew. In the context of Hosea, the call for mercy rather than sacrifice is a call for righteousness that exceeds standard religious piety.

The word that is translated mercy in Matt 9:6 and 12:7 is, in the Hebrew text of Hosea, רַחֲמִים. It is often used to speak of the way God loves, as when God is said to be abounding in or showing steadfast love (e.g., Exod 20:5f.; 34:6f.).⁹ In Hosea’s prophecy, however, steadfast love is used not to speak of what God will show to Israel, but what God desires to receive from Israel. The verse quoted in Matthew occurs in the context of a report of the people saying to each other,

Come, let us return to the Lord,
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth. (Hos 6:1-3)

Whether these remarks indicate sincere repentance or only the expectation that God can be quickly and easily manipulated by a show of remorse, the prophet lets the people know in the next verses that their devotion falls short of God’s desire. God says,

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?

⁸Matthew’s use of the Old Testament is extensive enough to have inspired several critical studies. Monographs in English include Robert Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), and Richard S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew’s Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1969). Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1996) 51-61, provides a helpful, brief review of current research on the use of the Old Testament in Matthew.

⁹See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Heseḏ in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula: Scholars, 1978). For a synopsis of her findings, see “Love (OT),” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:375-81 (New York: Doubleday, 1992). For work that is directly related to Hosea’s use of רַחֲמִים, see Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 101-130.

Your love (LXX, ἔλεος; MT, רַחֲמִים) is like a morning cloud,
 like the dew that goes away early.
 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,
 I have killed them by the words of my mouth,
 and my judgment goes forth as the light.
 For I desire steadfast love (LXX, ἔλεος; MT, רַחֲמִים) and not sacrifice,
 the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:4-6)

Israel's love is not *steadfast* love at all. The people's way of demonstrating love for God is at odds with the chief characteristic of the love that God desires. Sincere or not, their רַחֲמִים is as short-lived as fleeting dew or cloud cover that burns off with the sunrise. As readers of Hosea will recall, faithfulness and unfaithfulness are themes throughout the book. Sincere or not, the people's love is not true because it is not faithful over time.

Neither is it faithful with respect to what it expresses. That is, the problem is not just that Israel's love is short-lived or intermittent. It is also not רַחֲמִים because it is not characterized by any expression of mercy. The people are loyal neither to the Lord nor to their fellow Israelites. Both in secular and religious usage, רַחֲמִים generally describes the benevolent action of a more powerful party in relationship to a weaker party.¹⁰ (In this sense it is related to what most Americans think of when they hear the word charity.) Describing Hosea's use of רַחֲמִים, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld explains that the word is "used as a summary term for Israel's carrying through on covenant commitment both to exclusive worship of the Lord and to communal justice; that is, *hesed* represents the entire decalogue in a single word."¹¹ "Mercy I desire, and not sacrifice," the Lord says. Yet instead of demonstrating steadfastness in their devotion to the Lord, or mercy in their interactions with fellow Israelites, Ephraim has been making love with Baal and making war with Judah.¹² At one point, Hosea speaks of the people's turning from God and their strife with one another in back-to-back verses: "There is no faithfulness or loyalty (רַחֲמִים), and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hos 4:1-2).

As it turns out, the Pharisees' expression of righteousness in Matthew is wrong because it also is neither steadfast nor merciful. The Pharisees appear to be concerned with righteousness—at least they are concerned with law observance—yet Jesus argues that their understanding of righteousness is at odds with what God desires. Their teaching is internally inconsistent (Matt 23:16-22) and their practice is inconsistent with even those elements of their teaching that are true (Matt 23:3). Their lives are characterized by a failure of words and actions to match one another; hypocrisy, rather than loyalty, describes their way of life. Their actions are not faithful to their speech. The Pharisees are not steadfast.

¹⁰Sakenfeld, "Love (OT)," 378f.

¹¹Ibid., 380, emphasis added.

¹²Harlotrous behavior is Hosea's primary metaphor for describing Israel's fascination with Canaanite religion. See for example, Hos 4:17-19; 5:3f., 7. Hos 5:8ff. describes an attack by the northern kingdom on Judah.

Nor are they merciful. They have failed to recognize the connection between law observance and mercy. They object to Jesus' association with sinners and to his work of healing on the sabbath. Jesus accuses them of missing the forest for the trees. "You tithe mint, dill, and cummin," he says to the scribes and Pharisees, "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" (Matt 23:23). In short, the Pharisees' righteousness exhibits neither of the defining characteristics of צְדָקָה , and so is not the righteousness of God at all.

II. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND MERCY ELSEWHERE IN THE GOSPEL

The connection between righteousness and mercy in Matthew's Gospel is not confined to Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees. Minor characters in the gospel provide both positive and negative examples of that righteousness which finds expression in merciful action, and the sermon on the mount includes two pairings of the terms.

Both Matthew and Luke speak in the opening scenes of their gospels of certain characters' righteousness. Luke reports that Zechariah and Elizabeth "were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6).¹³ In the opening chapter of the First Gospel, Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. For Matthew, however, the focus is not on Joseph's blameless observance of the Lord's commandments. Instead, Joseph's righteousness is offered as an explanation for what readers learn in the next verse: he is unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace—or worse—and determines instead "to dismiss her quietly" (Matt 1:19). Joseph is a righteous man, and so he resolves to practice mercy.

Of course, even as the righteous Joseph is determining what to do, he learns that something greater than the mercy he intended to show will be required of him. Rather than dismissing Mary quietly, he will share in the disgrace of her unusual circumstances, even as he shares in the fulfillment of "what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet" concerning the one whose name means "God with us" (Matt 1:22f.). When Joseph awakes from his dream and does "what the angel of the Lord commanded him," his actions demonstrate steadfast love both for God and for Mary.

Characters in three of Jesus' parables also illustrate the connection between righteousness and mercy in Matthew. Interestingly, all three of these parables appear only in Matthew's Gospel.

The unforgiving servant provides a negative example for hearers of the gospel concerning the righteous practice of mercy. In the story, a servant is forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents. On his way home from the very meeting at which his master/creditor had pity on him, he happens upon a fellow servant who owes him the relatively insignificant sum of one hundred denarii. In spite of the second

¹³Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 25f., comments that Luke may mention the couple's righteousness in order to reassure readers that whatever the reason may be for their childlessness, it is not the result of God's judgment against one or both of them for unrighteousness.

servant's plea for patience—nearly identical in wording to the first servant's own plea issued just moments before to his master—the one who had been forgiven refused to forgive or even to have patience until the smaller debt could be repaid. When the master heard of the first servant's refusal to heed another's plea for patience, he said to him, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33). Clearly, the right and righteous thing for the servant to have done would have been to show mercy. Because he failed to do so, he is called wicked (Matt 18:32).

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) features a character who shows mercy and then has to defend his action against the suspicion, if not the explicit charge, that he is being unrighteous. The vineyard owner contracts both with workers who begin early in the morning for the daily wage of a denarius and with those who begin later for "whatever is right" (ὅ ἕάν ᾗ δίκαιον). When evening arrives, those who have worked only one hour receive the same daily wage as those who worked throughout the day. Those who worked the longest complain, and the householder says to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong" (οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε). Demonstrating generosity to some does not translate into injustice for others. The vineyard owner shows mercy to whom he pleases, in spite of the fact that such a display is liable to be mistaken for unrighteousness by some who witness it.

The parable of the last judgment (Matt 25:31-46) describes the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous set to occur "when the Son of man comes in his glory." In the parable, members of both groups are surprised at where the judgment finds them. Those on the right hand of the king are ushered into "the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" with the words, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." The righteous ones question the king to find out when this happened. When did they see him in such a state and show him mercy? The king replies, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The separation of the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous, happens on the basis of who has shown mercy and who has failed to show mercy. In this parable righteousness has a single defining characteristic. The righteous provide for others so as to demonstrate that type of loyalty to God and neighbor which is known as steadfast love.

Twice in the sermon on the mount, righteousness and mercy appear together. Matthew's version of the beatitudes includes a blessing on those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness," spoken just before the blessing on the merciful, who "shall obtain mercy" (Matt 5:6f.). Luke's list of beatitudes does not mention either righteousness or mercy.¹⁴ Neither does Luke include advice from Jesus

¹⁴Luke does, however, provide a possible parallel of Matt 5:7 in the saying, "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). The Lucan verse uses οἰκτιρόμενος rather than ἔλεος.

like that offered in Matt 6:1ff. There Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) before others in order to be seen by them." Following this warning, Jesus gives three examples of activities that characterize righteousness. The first is giving alms, literally, showing mercy (ἐλεημοσύνην). The practice of righteousness includes acts of mercy (Matt 6:2-4), as well as prayer (Matt 6:5-15) and fasting (Matt 6:16-18), all of which should be carried out without the self-serving and attention-getting techniques of "the hypocrites."

III. CONCLUSION

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus practices and teaches a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees in this way: it is abounding in steadfast love. Matthew's use of Hosea 6:6 in two different conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees defines the differences between them chiefly in terms of whose observance of the law is characterized by the רָצוֹן that God desires from Israel and whose is not. Discussions of righteousness and mercy at other points in the gospel confirm that for Matthew the two are very nearly identified with each other. Space permits two brief comments about the implications of Matthew's pairing of righteousness and mercy for an overall understanding of the gospel.

The first comment concerns the christology of the gospel. Matthew's Jesus is often described as a teacher. Like the Pharisees, he is a teacher of the law, except that unlike "the hypocrites," Jesus' way of life reflects the substance of his teaching. Surely, for Matthew, it is true that Jesus teaches by the example of his life, and by his life, he fulfills the scriptures. Yet to that picture of Jesus we may add something more. Another of the ways Jesus teaches is simply to read the scriptures; that is, to speak his own interpretations of the law and the prophets. For Matthew, Jesus is as much an interpreter of the law and the prophets as he is the fulfillment of them. Furthermore, Jesus does not always place his teaching over against the scriptures or standard interpretations of them. Sometimes he does differentiate his interpretation from the tradition, as when he says, "You have heard it said..., but I say to you..." (Matt 5:27, etc.). Other times, as when he cites Hos 6:6, his readings reflect continuity with the scriptures rather than innovation beyond them.

Matthew's understanding of righteousness as mercy also has implications for our understanding of this gospel's emphasis on mission. "Go and learn what this means," Jesus says to the Pharisees, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt 9:13). For readers of Matthew, to learn what Hos 6:6 means is not so much to receive a new law as to come to recognize the steadfast love of the God of Israel as it is embodied and enacted by Jesus. First, by his association with sinners and his acts of healing, Jesus offers steadfast love (i.e., mercy) to his fellow human beings. Then, by keeping faith with his Father through his arrest, trial, and crucifixion (see the prayer in Gethsemane: "Not what I want, but what you want" [Matt 26:39]), Jesus offers steadfast love (i.e., faithfulness) to God. Demonstrating both mercy and faithfulness, Jesus loves the way God loves, and Jesus loves the way Hosea announces that God intends God's people to love.

At the end of the gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples to "make disciples

of all nations," and to teach them "to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19f.). Surely God's desire for mercy, which the Pharisees were supposed to go and learn, is part of what is to be taught to all nations. Yet the commission to teach mercy should not be understood as a call to exhort hearers to a new legalism of "niceness" or some other version of *noblesse oblige* that would be at best a distant and pale cousin of God's רַחֲמִים . The call to teach mercy is instead a call to proclaim in word and deed God's loyalty and lovingkindness as, in Christ, they break into the present time and break through the boundary between Israel and the nations. ⊕