



Now You See It, Now You Don't: Ethical Reflections on a Textual Variant in Matthew Six

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I.

The first eighteen verses of chapter six of Matthew consist of a preface, a triad of highly-structured exhortations, and a parenthesis which includes the Lord's Prayer. The preface warns against practicing one's piety in public in order to be seen doing it. The exhortations about almsgiving and praying and fasting advise strongly that these pieties should be practiced in secret. It is stated in each case that the piety practiced in secret will be seen by the God who sees in secret, and that this God "will reward you" (6:4, 6, 18). The full stop is placed, rather abruptly, precisely there. Had the rhythm of the last sentence of each exhortation been allowed to follow its natural course, it would have stated that the piety should be practiced in secret, and that the God who sees in secret will reward you *in secret*. Such a completion of the sentence would have been quite unsatisfactory, however, because it would tend to imply that there are no visible fruits or signs whatsoever of the Christian faith and life, no visible gifts of the Spirit to be discerned, no visible "rewards" (granted the difficulty of the term) to be anticipated. But that would not fit at all with the consistent drive of the New Testament toward the empirical, nor with, for instance, the reality of the "blessing" and all of its cognates in the Old Testament. It would be expressive of a Christianity which is entirely other-worldly, or inner-worldly, or mysterious. It was an inspired move to place the full stop exactly where it is placed.

It is instructive, however, to notice what was actually done to this text as it was read and used for proclamation and instruction. The fact is that there were many early Christians who could not stand to leave the full stop where it was placed. They finished off the sentence, but not by following its own rhythm. Instead they introduced the entirely strange words "in the open." Yet the addition seemed so natural and so right to so many people that the reading soon gained acceptance and became an unquestioned part of the Greek text used by

Luther, of the so-called "textus receptus," and thus of the King James Version. The result is that for many centuries Christians understood this text to say that one's pieties should be practiced in secret, and that the God who sees in secret will give "rewards" *in the open*. In this case the church has the entirely opposite problem from what it would have had if it added the words "in secret." If "in the open" is added, Christianity becomes simply and directly visible, faith becomes empirically provable in a matter-of-fact way, and "rewards" for being a Christian become verifiable by observed data.

By adding "in the open" to each of the exhortations, the church destroyed the important

ambiguity of all empirical evidence for Christian faith and life, making it purely visible and demonstrable. If it were to have added “in secret,” the church would have also destroyed the ambiguity by making of Christian faith and life something completely other-worldly or internal or mysterious. Placing the full stop precisely where it is placed allows for both the empirical emphasis in the biblical witness, and also the fact that the empirical data to which Christian witness points are always, and necessarily, ambiguous. The connection between piety and “reward” (or blessing), or between faith and ethics, is never a matter of openness without secrecy or of secrecy without openness. It is always rather a matter of simultaneous visibility and hiddenness, a matter of “now you see it; now you don’t.”

The Christian claim that God’s presence and power in the world are marked by simultaneous visibility and hiddenness is and always has been a problem for those who would like it one way or the other but not both ways at once. In Walker Percy’s novel *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett sends a long rambling letter to a doctor Sutter Vaught about a plan he has designed “to settle the question of God once and for all.” He does not give Dr. Vaught all the details of the plan. “Suffice it to say,” he writes, “that for once in my life I know what is what, what I know, what I don’t know, what needs to be done, and what I shall do.” Will Barrett has a terrible problem. He thinks believers are intolerable and that unbelievers are insane and he does not want to be in either camp. So he puts together an elaborate scheme for a *tertium quid*, a way of forcing God to give a clear sign so that he can have the security of knowing once and for all whether God exists. “We have had 5,000 years of maybes and that is enough.” Will is asking God “with utmost respect to break his silence. No, not asking. Requiring.” Walker Percy begins the last paragraph of the chapter that contains this material with the words: “So it was that Will Barrett went mad.”

It is an old yet current problem that has seduced Christians for twenty centuries. Unbelievers have often found those who believe to be intolerable, and believers have frequently thought those who do not believe to be insane, or at least to be playing with something less than a full deck. Those uncomfortable with the “maybes” want to get it settled once and for all. One way to have that happen is to get God to give a sign that is right out there in public for everyone to see in so clear a way that those who refuse to see it will be “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). The other way is to say that God is so completely hidden from public view that there is no public access whatsoever. In this case, in order to avoid sheer subjectivity, the believer needs a revelation or a revelatory experience. Actually, the evidence is just as “visible” (to the believer), although it is hidden

from public scrutiny. One could say that the first of these options is an external route to the knowledge of God, the second an internal route. Or one could risk a rather large oversimplification and label the first an “Aristotelian” move and the second an “Augustinian” move. When examined from the viewpoint of the necessary simultaneity of visibility and hiddenness, however, the two approaches have in common the refusal to grasp the ambiguity of all empirical evidence, and specifically of all empirical evidence of God’s presence and power in the world.

Of the two tendencies, the most persistent is the move toward visibility without hiddenness. (We have seen, however, how the opposite move can become an “internal” visibility

without hiddenness.) This seems to have been true in the early church, which gives no evidence of wanting to add the words “in secret” to the concluding sentences of each of the triad of exhortations in chapter six. It did add the words “in the open.” The desire to “see it” and to avoid “not seeing it” is very strong.

Luther, of course, worked with a text which included the added words “in the open.” In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, he handles the hiddenness/visibility dialectic as an eschatological division—hiddenness at the present time and visibility at the end of time. But he is not entirely consistent, and he seems to relish telling himself and his followers that they will get their reward “in the open,” that they will be vindicated before their tormentors. Luther writes:

Now we also have to look at the words that Christ appends to all three of these items—almsgiving, praying, and fasting; they are to be in secret, and then our Father, who sees in secret, will reward them openly....Not only will it be seen, it will be rewarded—and not secretly but openly, for the whole world to see it, together with its own eternal ignominy.¹

Piety practiced in secret, however, and rewards given in the open, even if this disjunction is handled eschatologically, does not take care of the Sermon on the Mount texts. These texts can be read without twisting them only if the reader grasps the importance of the simultaneity of the visibility and the hiddenness of these “now you see it, now you don’t” passages.

II.

The contrast is most obvious between the “light of the world” passage in 5:14-16 (“let your light so shine”) and the injunctions in chapter six to practice one’s piety in secret. But one can see the dialectic at work throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

There is, for instance, the question of whether the words are addressed to “the crowds” or to “his disciples” (5:1). Matthew indicates at the beginning of the sermon that the words are spoken to the disciples, but at the end says that the “crowds were astonished” (7:28). In Luke’s version (the “Sermon on the

¹Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 21.163-64.

Plain”) the words are addressed to “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people” (6:17). Entire interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount have been built upon a decision about the addressees. Luther decides that the words are addressed to all Christians but to Christians only. He objects to what was at that time the traditional Roman Catholic view that the words are addressed to special Christians only, and to the Anabaptist tradition at the time which wanted to apply these words to “the crowds,” to make them normative for the entire society. The phrase “do not resist one who is evil” (5:39), for instance, assumes very different shapes as one moves from one set of addressees to another. So also does a decision about the addressees affect the configurations of visibility and hiddenness.

In the beatitudes, the absence of a verb in the first clause of each sentence (5:3-10) also reflects a basic ambiguity. It would be possible to translate “blessed will be those who mourn, for

they will be comforted.”² The translator’s use of the present tense in the first clause of these sentences brings the blessedness into the present time. But that is not required by the text itself. The text leaves open the question whether those who mourn are now or will someday be blessed, and so with the other beatitudes. Verses 11-12 seem to indicate that that which is secret is in fact visible. If one is persecuted one can know that one is in the company of the prophets. On the other hand, there is that little word “falsely” raising doubts that could make one less certain of one’s prophetic role after all.

The delicious dialectics about the law in 5:17-20 are a special focus in the sermon on the question of hiddenness and visibility. The emphasis on law seems to emphasize visibility. The fact that the law (and the prophets!) are “fulfilled” in Jesus Christ makes the element of secrecy again a vital factor in the mix.³

The “antitheses” of 5:21-48 work, in each case, on a juxtaposition of external and internal, of visibility and hiddenness. Jesus seems to be simply internalizing and intensifying the legal structure of the Old Testament. Luther, however, rejected this notion and insisted that Jesus was attempting to bring the law back to its original meaning. If one agrees, one cannot handle these six items by saying that what is important is an attitude of the heart. The attitude of the heart and the action of the body are both involved and intertwined, although in very complicated ways. Hiddenness cannot be substituted in some simple way for visibility.

After the triad of exhortations in chapter six, there is the word about laying up treasures in heaven (6:19-21). The text says that “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The stress here is on visibility. It ought to be possible to determine by observation where a person’s treasure is, and then it is a simple matter to conclude where that person’s heart is. The hiddenness of the Christian life seems to be entirely erased. This is also true in the summary sentence of this section in 6:33. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteous-

²The second clause of 5:3 has a present tense verb, as does that in 5:10. Future tense verbs appear in the second clause of each verse in 5:4-9. In 5:3-10 the first clause of each verse has no verb.

³See my article “Life Style and Law: Some Reflections on Matthew 5:17,” *dialog* 14 (1975) 13-20.

ness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” The passage has been elaborating on “things,” specifically food and clothing. It seems to be code language for all the material things of life. The text says quite unambiguously that if one seeks God’s kingdom, “all these things shall be yours as well.” It does seem possible to work the equation backwards. If one has “all these things,” then one is certainly a seeker after the kingdom. If one does not have “all these things,” then one apparently is not. There is little stress on hiddenness in this passage. The entire weight seems to be on visibility, unless one takes seeking the kingdom to be an entirely hidden enterprise. Even then, “all these things” are surely visible.

The word about judging in 7:1 invites an important distinction between “making judgments” and “being judgmental.” But the point at the moment is that, seen from the viewpoint of hiddenness and visibility, the verse seems at first to say that we should not judge because it is not possible for us to know enough about all of the hidden aspects of a situation to make a sound judgment. Nevertheless, the second part of the sentence, “that you be not judged,” particularly when followed by the *quid pro quo* warning that one will be judged in proportion to the degree that one judges, seems to encourage the reversing of the formula. That is, one can tell how guilty

another is of judging by observing how much that person herself or himself is in fact “judged.” So what is at first a stress on hiddenness leads the reader quickly to something perhaps quite visible.

Matthew 7:7-11 begins by stating that one will receive whatever one asks for. There is here no indication of secrecy or hiddenness. Again, the formula seems to be reversible. If there is something that a person wants and does not have, it is obvious that it has not been asked for. It’s not God’s fault. It’s the person’s own fault. Anyone who has spent much time around Christian people has run into this formula in its raw form. Total visibility with no hiddenness at all is what one gets by an offhand reading of the text.

In 7:15 there is a warning against false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. The verse seems to indicate that you cannot know the inside by observing the outside. That which is inside is hidden rather than visible. However, the next verse indicates that it is possible to know the inside by observing the outside after all, “by their fruits.” Verse 18 nails it down. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. One can always then, apparently without fail, know the inside by observing the outside. Everything, even that which seems hidden, is finally visible after all.

At 7:21-23 the reader is presented with a baffling back and forth motion between hiddenness and visibility. On the one hand everything is in secret. There are those who say “Lord, Lord” but will not enter the kingdom. On the other hand, it seems entirely possible to discover whether or not they are in fact doing the will of God.

How, then, shall the wise person build a house upon the rock, doing as well as hearing the words of Jesus? Is it a matter of the heart, a piety practiced in secret and seen by the Father who sees in secret? Or is it a matter of a light shining so clearly that it can be seen by everyone? If one reads the Sermon on the Mount with this question in mind, the words are often baffling because they

seem to be repeatedly self-contradictory. Now you see it. Now you don’t. The ambiguity has often been difficult for Christians to live with, and the move to ease the tension has most often been toward underlining the visibility and passing over the hiddenness. The early church, in handling the triad of exhortations in chapter six, did not finish the sentence according to the logic of its own rhythm by adding the words “in secret.” It went contrary to that rhythm by adding the phrase “in the open.” It ought to give us pause to note that even Luther, confronted by this variant as a part of the authentic text, did not hesitate but grabbed it and ran with it.

III.

It seems at first obvious that anyone soaked in the law/gospel dialectic would come quickly and naturally to an epistemological dialectic of “now you see it, now you don’t” with regard to all theological questions. Lutherans tend to know instinctively that Will Barrett’s insistence that God give him a sign so that he will have the whole thing settled “once and for all” is simply not in keeping either with the way things are in this world or with the way in which God works with things as they are. Whatever disagreements Lutherans have about the article of justification, they ought at least to agree on the formula *simul iustus et peccator*. That *simul* insists that the justified one is *at the same time* sinner, not no longer sinner or partially sinner, but

totally sinner and totally justified at the same time. And justification is not simply in the mind of God. It is not a matter of the believer as sinner being visible and the believer as justified being invisible. That kind of Platonic split is impossible to square with the New Testament witness.

The characteristic Lutheran dialectic which is evident in the *simul* of the justification article is evident throughout all the theological loci. God is *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* at the same time. It is essential to grasp the simultaneity of the visibility and the hiddenness of God if one is going to be clear about the fact that God has made God's self known, yet in such a way that God is not self-evident to the casual observer. The dialectic is eschatological, to be sure. There is a sense in which the hidden will become visible. But the primary time reference is that of simultaneity. Now you see God, now you don't.

What is true about God is also true about Jesus the Christ, the Word made flesh. John says that he proclaims what he and others have seen with their eyes and touched with their hands (1 John 1:1). Jesus was not invisible. He was there for everyone to see. But the fact that Jesus was the Christ was hidden, *not invisible but hidden*, and some confessed him as the Christ and others said he was a blasphemer. People responded to the ambiguity of the data about Jesus, and to direct and indirect claims by him and about him, in radically different ways.

The "now you see it, now you don't" dialectic is also apparent in the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper. The real presence is a doctrine of the simultaneity of visibility and hiddenness. The bread is real bread and the wine is real wine. The believer is not translated into some other-worldly realm to have communion with an invisible and spiritual Christ. The body and the blood

of Christ himself are entirely visible, there to be touched and tasted, hidden in, with, and under the bread and the wine.

So also the church is entirely visible and entirely hidden at the same time. It is not visible and invisible, as though the local congregation is merely the visible, "institutional" church, and the true church is "spiritual," invisible. The Platonizing dichotomies of orthodoxy were never able to grasp the delicate nuances of the Body of Christ hidden in, with, and under the visible congregation where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered (A.C. VII). The local congregation is simultaneously a sociological institution and the very Body of Christ through which he chooses to be present among us.

What is true about theology and Christian doctrine is also true about ethics and the Christian life. If ethics is the flip side of theology, if believing and behaving must always be correlated, then it follows that the same epistemological ambiguity present in all our knowledge about God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ is also present in our obedience to God and in our discipleship to Jesus Christ. Luther's doctrine of the two realms—developed in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount specifically against the Roman Catholics on the one hand who tried to make of these words "evangelical counsels" for special Christians only, and the Anabaptists on the other hand who tried to make of these words rubrics for ordering the public domain—is an eloquent statement of the simultaneous visibility and hiddenness of the Christian life.

Matthew 5:38-42 contains the saying about not resisting one who is evil, turning the other cheek, giving one's cloak as well as one's coat, going the second mile, not refusing the one who

begs or wants to borrow. It is a passage where those who want the Christian life to be only visible and not hidden—only “in the open” and not “in secret”—love to ply their wares. It is not surprising that Luther’s commentary on this section is one of his most specific statements of the simultaneity, the polemic unity, of the two realms and its parallels to the law/gospel dialectic. After pointing to the fact that “this saying has been the undoing of many people,”⁴ Luther indicates how incorrect it is, on the one hand, to interpret this text as simply saying that one should be ready “in one’s heart” to offer the other cheek or, on the other hand, to say to an assailant “See, take this cheek, too, and hit me again.”⁵ Neither the simple hiddenness of the willing heart nor the simple visibility of saying “hit me again” will do. The issues are much more subtle than that. Luther continues:

But the question and argument still remain. Must a person suffer all sorts of things from everyone, without defending himself at all? Has he no right to plead a case or lodge a complaint before a court, or to claim and demand what belongs to him? If all these things were forbidden a strange situation would develop. It would be necessary to put up with everybody’s whim and insolence. Personal safety and personal property would be impossible, and finally the social order would collapse.⁶

⁴Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” 106.

⁵Ibid., 107.

⁶Ibid.

Luther is very clear that “God himself has ordained and established this secular realm and its distinctions, and by his Word He has confirmed and commended them. For without them this life could not endure.”⁷ It is also obvious to Luther, however, that if there is a situation in which a person is involved in an injury or an injustice which is to that person alone, then it is not right, according to this text, to defend oneself against it. Luther is speaking here about being struck, not about being attacked by a life-threatening force. It is not a simple matter to derive action directives from the overall perspective of two-realm ethical theory. What is clear is that, in spite of his elaborations on the “in the open” phrase of Matthew six, Luther does insist on the same essential ambiguity of simultaneous visibility and hiddenness in the Christian life upon which he insists when working through the law/gospel dialectic toward the formulation of doctrinal affirmations.

IV.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, steeped in Luther and deeply aware of his Lutheran heritage, struggled for precision in reflecting on the meaning of discipleship. Perhaps in part, at least, because the context for this reflection was the Nazi terror in Germany, he came to great clarity about the simultaneity of hiddenness and visibility in the Christian life. That simultaneity penetrates his writings and his life decisions. It should not be a surprise that it is specifically stated in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. One of the sections of his commentary on Matthew five is entitled “The Visible Community.” The title he places on the whole of his comment on chapter six is “Of the Hidden Character of the Christian Life.”

He writes: “How easy it would be for the disciples to misinterpret it!”⁸ He says that the disciples “might adopt an attitude of indifference to this present age, like the enthusiasts, and try to realize the extraordinary quality of the age to come in a visible institution.”⁹ On the other hand, they might insist that the extraordinary is entirely and only hidden, and should not be made visible at all. The question is how Jesus answers these objections. Bonhoeffer writes:

Of course it has to be visible, but they must take care that it does not become visible simply for the sake of becoming visible.... There is a pointed contrast between chapters 5 and 6. That which is visible must also be hidden.

But precisely because the Christian life is of its very nature extraordinary, it is at the same time ordinary, natural, and *hidden*. If not, it is not the Christian life at all, it is not obedience to the will of Jesus Christ.

Thus hiddenness has its counterpart in manifestation.¹⁰

Bonhoeffer’s firm grasp of this fundamental ambiguity is responsible for his being just as alert to the antinomianism of a Christian life which is hidden

⁷Ibid., 109.

⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1963) 172.

⁹Ibid., 172-73.

¹⁰Ibid., 175-76.

but not visible as he is to the legalism of a Christian life which is visible but not hidden.

It is a fatal misunderstanding of Luther’s action to suppose that his rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace offered a general dispensation from obedience to the command of Jesus, or that it was the great discovery of the Reformation that God’s forgiving grace automatically conferred upon the world both righteousness and holiness.... It was not the justification of sin, but the justification of the sinner that drove Luther from the cloister back to the world.¹¹

He was acutely aware of both the legalistic and the antinomian heresies. It was his peculiar genius, however, in the Lutheran camp, to stress the antinomian danger. His formula, as everyone knows, for the Christian life as hidden but not visible is “cheap grace.” His attempt to get hiddenness and visibility into a single formula, and to avoid both legalism and antinomianism, is “costly grace.”

So what are we to make of all this? It is no doubt true today, as it has been for twenty centuries, that a great many Christians have thought that living with the maybes, as Will Barrett called them, would drive them mad. So they have given in to the temptation to embrace one side of the dialectic, to escape the ambiguity, to “settle things once and for all.” If one were going to make a case beginning, for example, with the addition of the words “in the open” to the ending of the three exhortations in Matthew six, then one might conclude that the great danger is that of legalism, insisting on visibility without hiddenness. It is clearly evident in the contemporary church along all points of the political spectrum, from personal piety legalists to social justice

legalists. The content of that which must be visible differs. But the structure of the legalism is the same.

Yet even to the casual observer of the tradition and the present situation, it must be clear that the opposite tendency is also always present, namely to insist that the Christian life is so hidden that it becomes in fact invisible, purely a matter of the heart.

If we can allow the full stop at the end of each of the three exhortations in Matthew 6:1-18 to stand, and recognize that the Christian life is always hidden and visible at the same time, always a matter of “now you see it, now you don’t,” then we shall have both the courage and the freedom to be able to begin to struggle with one another to find our way in this world, and to discover what it is in our place and in our time that the Christian contribution may be. It is not an easy task, but it becomes possible at least to begin if we get some basic things straight at the outset.

It is only a textual variant. Although it was an accepted reading for centuries, it is today not even mentioned in the footnotes of the Revised Standard Version. Yet if one lets one’s mind play with the fact that early Christians added the words “in the open” to a text which they could not stand allowing to end where it ended, one might be led to reflect on ethical procedures which could be very instructive for our present situation.

¹¹Ibid., 52.