

Deepening Torah

A Prep Guide for Session Two of a Scholarly Stroll

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“Carpenter’s Son Challenges Moses”
The Jerusalem Gazette Religion Page

(Capernaum, Galilee) Large crowds gathered in Galilee again yesterday as a local man, Jesus bar Joseph, spoke from a hillside north of town. The recently popular teacher ruffled feathers, as he appeared to many to publicly critique the blessed Torah of Moses. Some authorities in the crowd cried foul. Rabbis have for long years interpreted Moses for the people Israel; but this local spoke of Moses in a way that distinguished his own teaching from Torah. “You have heard... ‘You shall not murder,’” said the Nazarene man, “But I say don’t be angry.” Reb Nathan of the Capernaum synagogue got word of the teaching from members of his congregation: “Since the time of our father Ezra, rabbis have hoped to understand our blessed prophet Moses, not to correct him. What does this rogue think he is doing?!”

The son of a local carpenter, Jesus also challenged “You shall not commit adultery,” Moses’ willingness to grant divorce certificates, the time-honored custom of swearing oaths, the laws of retribution, and an Essene principle of sanctioning hate for enemies. Followers of Jesus insist that he is not undermining Torah but “fulfilling” it. “He just seems to know what Moses meant!” cried one of his followers – a local fisherman called John bar Zebedee.

Temple leaders in Jerusalem had no comment, but sources near the high priestly palace observed scribes preparing for a journey north. Roman officials have also moved extra soldiers into the Galilee to control the crowds. This reporter will keep an eye on the developing conflict.

Jesus and Moses

Does Jesus challenge Moses in the Antitheses of Matthew 5.17-48? The great Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, once summed up God’s purpose for Jews: “Love all creatures and bring them close to Torah.” (Mishnah, Avot 1.12) The Law of Moses was the center of all Judaism, and the Law of Moses was central for Jesus. That’s why in Matthew 5.17-48 Jesus does what any Jewish teacher in his time or any time eventually must do: he orients himself to Moses. He begins by affirming Moses: “Do not think that I have come to abolish Moses’ Law [as some undoubtedly thought]. I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill.”

In the “Antitheses” that follow, Jesus explains his teaching in relation to Moses’ commands. Rabbis of Jesus’ time debated each other passionately about what the Law of Moses meant. For example, Hillel and Rabbi Shammai debated Moses’ custom of permitting a divorce certificate. For Hillel, a man could divorce his wife for any cause; but for Shammai, divorce should only occur in the event of sexual infidelity. Jesus enters this conversation in 5.31-32 on the side of Shammai. Portions of Jesus’ teaching clearly fit within the rabbinic conversations of his day.

Jesus' teaching departs from the rabbinic custom, however, with the adversative introduction to his own words. "Moses said...BUT I say..." This form is not generally found among the rabbis. The intentional contrast is why this section is often called the "Antitheses." Unlike the rabbis, Jesus asserts his own voice alongside rather than under Moses'. When the Gospel narrators note that people were "amazed because Jesus taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mark 1.22), this may be the cause.

One way to classify Jesus' response to the ancient traditions he cites is to assign them to three categories: internalizing, clarifying, correcting.

Moses: "Don't kill."	Jesus: "Don't be angry."
Moses: "Don't commit adultery."	Jesus: "Don't lust."
Moses: "You may divorce."	Jesus: "Only divorce in the case of infidelity."
Moses: "Swear an oath."	Jesus: "Don't swear an oath."
Moses: "An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth."	Jesus: "Do not retaliate when struck."
Qumran: "Hate the children of darkness."	Jesus: "Love your enemy."

Take a look at these summaries of Jesus' words. Ask yourself, what is the nature of Jesus' challenge in each case?

A Fence Around Torah

When I was a kid, my parents had this rule: no stepping down from the curb on a busy street. Where I lived in Sheridan, Oregon, 97378, the streets were wide. So there was at least the full width of a car between the curb and the normal path of cars driving the street. The chances of getting hit with one foot off the curb were minuscule, but the rule was the rule. Maybe your folks had the same rule for you.

What we didn't know was that our parents were unconsciously mimicking the instinctive practices of the ancient rabbis of Judaism. If the commandment said, "no work on sabbath", the rabbis found ways to make sure they and their charges got nowhere near work. So rather than saying, "You shall not fix your roof on Sabbath" they say, "Don't even pick up a tool on Sabbath, lest you forget the commandment and work." They called this strategy, "Putting a Fence around Torah". It's grounded in a passage from Deuteronomy that says, "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof." This is the logic of the alcoholic who determines never even to enter a pub or bar.

In Matthew 5, Jesus does something like this with the 6th and 7th commandments -- "you shall not murder" and "you shall not commit adultery". If Torah forbids killing, he'll push upstream and head murder off at its origin in rage. If Torah forbids adultery, he'll move focus back to the lust that moves us toward it. The rabbis and Jesus share in common a deep commitment to the Law of God. Psalm 1 tells how "happy is the one...whose delight is in the Law of the Lord and who meditates on his Law day and night". The ancient rabbis celebrated the study of the Law as a blissful gift of God. For his part, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them...anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.17, 19)

Everyone in this picture loves the Law of God. The difference between the fences the rabbis build and the ones Jesus puts up is location. The rabbis build behavioral fences to keep distance between them and transgression; Jesus takes us into the realm of thoughts and emotions. If we conquer our rage, murder becomes a whole lot less likely; if we stop ogling and lusting, the chances of adultery sneaking in become more remote. The rabbis and Jesus both build fences around Torah. The rabbis' fences are behavioral, Jesus's reside in our thought life.

And once we reach the mind -body pairing — the alignment between the two that Jesus imagines — the deeply good feeling of living a coherent life is available through him.

Beyond buffering Torah, Jesus seems keen on producing a body and mind alignment in our lives. By moving the focus upstream from behavior to govern even our ideation, he helps his followers gain the exquisite gift of integrity. He invites his followers to walk and talk in a blessed, coherent life that seems a lot like delight.

Rating Reconciliation

When preachers tell us to forgive those who have wronged us, they usually say, “You’ll feel better if you do!” And they’re right. But as a sole reason for forgiving, that motive is not particularly Christian. “Try forgiveness: It’s like a massage!” doesn’t move the part of us that aspires for more. In the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew’s Gospel more widely, forgiveness and reconciliation are central to discipleship. To tackle it, he addresses both the offender and the offended.

First, then, in Matthew 5 Jesus talks to the offender. Jesus says, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (5.23 -24).” Here, Jesus hopes to head off simmering conflict by prioritizing reconciliation even before sacrifice or contribution at the altar. “Leave your gift”, says he, “and go...first”! Here, Jesus is speaking to the one who has caused another to be angry – the brother or sister who “has something against you”.

Later in this Gospel, Jesus moves to the other side of a conflict and talks to the one who has been hurt. In Matthew 18, Jesus offers his famous confrontation model.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18.15 - 17)

The message is clear: if you have offended someone, GO and make things right! If you have been offended, GO and make things right! To bring this teaching all the way home, Jesus will append to the confrontation model an extended call to forgive.

“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy -seven (i.e., infinity) times (verses 21 - 22).’

Reconciliation is important to Jesus. I have a guess at the reason. You know it from the sports world, the business world, families, and any other human community. Have any of your offices felt thick with tension? How's the productivity level. If you want to slow down The Beatles or The Vikings or the local police department down, sow dissension. It works every time!

And in case you and I wonder why forgiveness is important, Jesus then tells a parable about a worker whose boss forgives him a billion dollar debt, but then learns that the guy won't forgive his co-worker a few hundred dollars that he's owed. Suffice it to say that the boss doesn't like that (verses 23 - 35)! So motive number one is simple: Forgive because God forgives you.

A moment of personal application is available to us here. What's getting in God's way and your way. It's a hard topic, right? There are people you've needed to forgive or apologize to for years. And there are others you just hurt or were hurt by last week. Do an inventory. Help each other imagine what reconciliation looks like. Bolster one another in this effort. The stakes are high: God would like to change the world through us. Bitterness is holding us back. So let's clear the air.

Preparatory Reading

As you know, I strongly recommend reading the Bible text thoroughly and repeatedly as your first entry into our conversation. After you have read closely and well the first half of Jesus's "Antitheses" (Matthew 5.17 - 30), some of you will wish to pursue external biblical resources (commentaries, etc.) that open the Gospel's content more fully. Here are several writings to assist you in this quest.

Michael Helmy, "How Does Jesus Fulfill the Law?", The Bible Project Scholarship Team (Access by Clicking [HERE](#))

Mr. Helmy is a Ph.D. student at Harvard and a Fellow of The Bible Project. In this popularly written 6 minute read he asks the question what Jesus means by claiming to "fulfill" the Law (and the Prophets). I include this resource, because [The Bible Project](#) is worth knowing. Through it, a very credentialed group of Bible scholars have endeavored to bring biblical studies into accessible form for wide audiences around the world. Check it out!

Intertextual Bible, "Matthew 5:38 and the Antithesis of the Antitheses – Making Fences around the Torah" (Access by Clicking [HERE](#))

In this brief piece from a reputable Substack account called "Intertextual Bible", the author asserts that the name "Antitheses" is misleading and wrongly characterizes the content of Matthew 5.17-48 as a challenge to, rather than an interpretation of Moses. Worth a read!

Miranda Callay, "Good News for All – A Feminist Perspective on the Gospel of Matthew" in Scriptura (online Journal). (Access by Clicking [HERE](#))

Miranda Callay has a splendid title. She is the Extraordinary Professor at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape. In this article, she examines the claim of some feminist scholars that Matthew's Gospel is patriarchal in its ethos and unfriendly to women generally. This is not a study of Matthew 5, but rather a context-setting survey of Matthew's inclusive or exclusive voice.

Amos Winarto Oei, *The Antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount: Moral Precepts Revealed in Scripture and Binding on All People* (Access by clicking [HERE](#))

This is a 2012 dissertation submitted by a then -Ph.D. student at Calvin Theological Seminary, who is now the President of Aletheia Theological Seminary Lawang, East Java, Indonesia. From his East Asian perspective, Dr. Oei explores the moral demands and the scope of Matthew 5.17-48. You will likely not set out to read all of its nearly 300 pages, but beaming in on parts may help you ask more precise questions of the text.

Our Class Reading Schedule

05JAN26	Blessed	Matthew 5.1-16
12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17-30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31-48
26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1-18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19-34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1-11
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.12-23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24-29

A Final Word

For two thousand years, this section of Jesus's teaching has challenged followers and called people to a higher standard of personal growth and community responsibility. There is treasure in Matthew 5. Let's mine it together on Monday evening! Until then...

Peace.
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