

The Sermon on the Mount and the Concept of Sin

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KEYWORDS: sin, concept, Scripture, separation, forgiveness, righteousness, repentance

OUR UNDERSTANDING of Scripture is from the perspective of our all-too-human experience. It is a perspective that is influenced by a myriad of psychological, cultural, social, and historical factors, but we, for the most part, ignore this fact and instead believe that our concepts are God-given and represent his understanding rather than our own. By maintaining such a view, the God we encounter in Scripture is little more than a tribal god who confirms the prejudices of our unique perspective. By supposing that we have correct, God-given concepts, the conservative discovers in Scripture a god who affirms his conservatism and the liberal finds justification for his liberalism. The Klansman and racist find support within Scripture as does the egalitarian. In every speech that Hitler ever made, he quoted Scripture, usually more than once.

Certainly this is the misuse of Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is not to confirm our prejudices, but to transform them and renew our mind in such a way that our understanding comes to reflect better the intentional meaning of the God of the universal rather than the tribal gods of our ideologies and cultures. Of course, in order for that to happen, we must come to Scripture with an understanding of our need to have our minds renewed. Most of us may claim to be willing to be transformed but see no need for it, especially in the area of our understanding.

Take for example our concept of sin. We all have a concept of sin and most of us naively believe that God has somehow implanted that idea in us in order that we would have no excuse for doing evil. In fact, however, the concept that most of us have of sin is not the product of some God-given mental hardware that enables us to form a correct concept of sin, but instead has its roots, as do most of our concepts, in our childhood. As children, we were given commands by our parents, and if we disobeyed those commands, we recognized their anger with us and sensed we were no longer the objects of their affection. Given the nature of human parents and their children, this experience is nearly universal, and we quite naturally form the idea that our parent's affection for us is something that results from our

behaviour. Later, when presented with the idea of a heavenly father, we apply the same concept and suppose that disobedience to him will cause the withdrawal of his love and perhaps even an experience of his wrath. Like Job's comforters, we suppose good circumstances to be the result of God's favour because of our obedience, and bad circumstances to be the result of God's disfavour because of our disobedience. Job's comforters explain this theology and much of the Old Testament seems to put forth a similar theology. Of course, just as the words of Job's comforters represent God's revelation of who human beings think God is, so too, much of the Old Testament is such a revelation. It is God's revelation into a human understanding whose concepts are all-too-human. According to that all-too-human concept, sin appears to be the thing that separates God from us. Our concept is that as we are disobedient to a particular command of our heavenly father, he subsequently separates himself from us just as our earthly fathers so often do. Thus, we must do something to win back his favour. Some people spend their lifetimes trying to win the favour and affection of a parent. They suppose that it must be similar with our heavenly father.

The concept of sin that Jesus puts forth is very different. With the revelation that Jesus offers, we see that sin is not the cause of our separation from God, but rather sin simply is separation from God, from which all sorts of evil follow. Jesus is always trying to get us to see the cause of our separation from God and not the consequence of it. The cause of our separation is that we choose other sources of life, identity, and meaning apart from God. This causes us to lie, murder, steal, and commit adultery, but that is the evil that follows from our real sin which is our separation from God. This is the unique concept of sin that is part of the good news. God has not turned away from us because of our disobedience, but we have turned away from him. He is the father who awaits the return of the prodigal son with open arms. Indeed, the Gospels begin with John baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin with water from the Jordan river. Unlike the rituals which had to be performed in order to forgive sin and overcome separation from God in the Old Testament, the forgiveness of sin, as presented in the Gospels, is now as accessible and abundant as the water of the Jordan river. Furthermore, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God has been opened to everyone and what keeps us

from the great banquet God has prepared for us is not disobedience which has caused God to turn away from us but that we have turned away from him. With the concept of sin that Jesus is presenting, it would seem that our separation from God is totally on our part and not his.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' (Luke 14:16-21 NIV).

In this parable, as elsewhere, it seems that initially nothing is required to come to the banquet God has prepared for us.¹ Our not being at the banquet he has prepared for us is a result of our choice to be somewhere else and not a result of his thinking that we were not worthy. Furthermore, it is interesting that the somewhere else we choose to be is not the crack house or bordello, but we are busy doing good things like getting married or doing business. Certainly these are not the kinds of things God would condemn us for? But it would seem that God does not condemn us and exclude us from his great banquet at all, but rather we exclude ourselves. Furthermore, we do so, not by committing immoral acts, but by not coming to him and instead choosing other things rather than his presence.

In considering Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), what exactly was the rich man's sin, and what was Lazarus' virtue that merited him a place in Abraham's bosom? Is the sin of the rich man simply that he was rich and had so many things to occupy his time and attention – so many things to bring him joy – that he never had time or need to turn to God, while Lazarus had nothing but suffering and thus did turn to God as his only source of comfort?

This less conventional concept of sin as simply separation from God seems also to be at the base of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-7:27). Here we have one of the most enigmatic passages in all of Scripture, and I believe the reason it is so enigmatic is because what Jesus is setting forth are concepts of sin and righteousness that are incompatible with our all-too-human concepts.

In the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus says is very different from what anyone had previously imagined to have been God's standard for righteousness and sin. Of course, Jesus is quick to say that he is not doing away with the law but fulfilling it. When we see what he says, however, it is obvious that the fulfillment of the law means that the law was just the first step toward a right relationship with God. The law had told us that we were not to murder, but Jesus tells us we are not to even be angry with our brother (Matt. 5:21-22). The law told us not to commit adultery, but Jesus

tells us, we not to even have lustful thoughts (Matt. 5:27-28).

At first this might seem simply a stricter law – indeed, a law even more impossible to keep than the law of Moses. Of course, that would not be good news. Furthermore, as Jesus continues in the Sermon on the Mount, we see something very different is going on. He tells us that we are not to make oaths (Matt. 5:27-28), and we are not to seek retribution which had been the idea of justice for the culture to which he was speaking (Matt. 5:27-28). We are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-44), and when we give alms, pray, or fast, we are not to do it to be noticed (Matt. 6:1-18). Finally, he tells us that we are not to seek earthly treasure, worry, or make judgements concerning others (Matt. 6:19-7:2). What a strange set of dictates. They do not seem to be moral in nature, so what are they?

It would seem that what Jesus is pointing out, and warning us of, are all the false sources of identity – the things that give meaning and motivation to so many, but in the end are disappointing sources of life. The only real sin, and what separates us from God, is that we seek life and meaning apart from God. God is not in all of our thoughts, but rather, our time and attention are fixed upon hosts of things that are the gods of this world which we worship and attempt to draw life and meaning from. These are the things that cause us to turn away from the living God, and these are the things that Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not the act of murder that separates us from God and the life he has for us. We sin, and are separated from God, when the source of our energy – the thing that motivates us – becomes anger rather than God.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and any one who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matt. 5:21-22).

For many of us, our anger is our god and the source of our energy and life. It is what motivates us to do the things we do. Athletes and other competitors often find strength and motivation in anger, but Jesus tells us he is to be our source of strength. He is 'the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6)', and not our anger.

Likewise, Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:27-28).

Our contemporary culture sees nothing wrong with imagined infidelity, but Jesus condemns it. There may be several reasons behind this but certainly one is that imagined infidelities can serve as a source of energy and life rather than God. It is not that the act of adultery so displeases God that he turns away from us in disgust, but rather we turn away from God as soon as our imagination begins to draw its life and energy from the god *Eros* rather than the triune God of the universe. The popularity of pornography is evidence of the fact that *Eros* becomes our god, not when we commit adultery, but simply when we allow the thoughts of such conquests to be the thing that gives us energy and direction.

The third thing which Jesus mentions in the Sermon on

the Mount is that we are not to make oaths. Moses had given prohibitions against the breaking of oaths that we have sworn (Deut. 7:8; Num. 30:2), but now Jesus tells us we should make no oaths at all.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all . . . for you cannot make even one hair white or black (Matt. 5:33-36).

Pledging allegiance to anything other than God would have been seen as idolatry to the first century church because they took this teaching seriously. Our culture today is quite different, and we think that it is noble to keep our word and promises even when those oaths cause us to end up on the side of evil. Of course, breaking our oaths is a problem as well. Thus, Jesus tells us to promise our commitment to no one or no thing but God.

The other problem with swearing oaths is that it, like anger and lust, is something we are quick to identify with and use as a source of energy and motivation. We boast to others and take pride in giving our word, as if there was power in our words and their ability to control circumstances. Jesus tells us that we are not in control of the circumstances of our lives and thus to swear to do this or that is a false witness and a boast in a power we do not have. We would like to think that we are men or women of our word and, once given, our word is enough to motivate us to do what we have sworn. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we see what a lie that is and how powerless our sworn oaths are. Jesus reminds us of that powerlessness and that we cannot make one hair white or black (Matt. 5:36). Of course, we love the illusion of power within ourselves and therefore swear oaths, as if we were able to will to do this or that. Therein lies our sin or our separation from a God who wishes us to draw our power from him rather than ourselves.

Jesus next addresses our idea of retribution.

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also (Matt. 5:38-39).

The Mosaic law had allowed for retribution, but it seems that it, like divorce, was hardly God's ultimate standard. Ultimately, retribution is a source of sin and separation from the fullness of life God has for us. Indeed, many of us find our energy and motivation in retribution and reaction to the sins of others. For many of us, retribution provides our souls with energy and meaning, but it is God who wishes to give us life and meaning. The heavenly standard is that we would not need retribution to motivate us, but, with God alone as our source of energy and strength, we could turn the other cheek because our strength comes not out of a reaction to injustice but from a power on high which is willing to pay for the injustice of others.

The next thing Jesus tells us probably goes farther beyond what Moses had given in the law than anything else Jesus ever said. It is a commandment whose revelation the people of the Old Testament were in no way ready to receive, just as we are still not ready to receive it today. Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour

and hate your enemies.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:43-44)

This is not merely a difficult commandment, it is impossible *a priori*. Enemies are by definition people we do not love. If we love our enemies, the idea of an enemy would lose its meaning. That may be just the point, but is that humanly possible? Perhaps Jesus could ask us not to take revenge upon our enemies or maybe even not to hate them, but to love them seems beyond the realm of human possibility. Indeed, the only way this is at all humanly possible is if we are connected to God as the source of our very being. Of course, that is what is behind everything Jesus is telling us in the Sermon on the Mount.

Following the command to love our enemies, Jesus then begins to command us concerning religious activities. Giving to the needy is to be done in such a way that you do not gain recognition from men. Thus, it is not enough that you give, but you must give with the right attitude and that right attitude is that you give without a desire for recognition (Matt. 6:1). This may seem strange since previously Jesus said, 'let your light shine before men, that they might see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven' (Matt. 5:16). Obviously, giving with the intent to be seen before men is not a good deed, and is not righteous. Indeed, it is intent upon bringing glory to ourselves, but the real problem with giving for the sake of recognition, and the reason it is sin, is that it makes prestige and reputation among men our motivator and source of meaning rather than God.

There is a similar situation with the religious practices of prayer and fasting. Like alms giving, it is to be done in secret in order that no one but God knows. It is not enough that we pray and fast, but we must do it without being motivated by a desire for reputation or esteem. That is the sin, for it separates us from a God who desires to be our ultimate source of worth. To seek meaning apart from him is the trap that catches so many. It is the root of all sin and cause of all manners of evil.

Jesus then warns us concerning our attachment to earthly treasures.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. (Matt. 6:19-20)

Jesus knows how easily we become attached to the things of this world and how easily they, rather than God, become the source of our identity and sense of worth. Most people, especially successful people, draw their energy from their treasure and the things they have accomplished in this life. Jesus tells us that such treasures are a fleeting source of worth and we will soon be disappointed if we put our hope in them rather than God.

Jesus next tells us not to worry. Certainly being frightened is not a sin, but as we allow what scares us to remain in our lives and become worry, we certainly do sin and are separated from God. The opposite of the kind of faith Jesus is calling us to is anxiety. When we are anxious about many things, our attention is not on God. With worry at the centre of our being, God is not in all of our thoughts, and it is not God, but worry, that energizes and defines us. In so far as

worry is at the centre of so many people, it certainly is their god, and the thing that separates them from the living God, and the identity he has for them.

Finally, Jesus says, 'do not judge' (Matt. 7:1). But that is exactly what we most want to do. What is behind so much of our theology is a desire to have a standard by which we can judge the saved from the unsaved, the godly from the ungodly, the moral from the immoral. We think we can judge good from evil, but the truth is that our concepts are all-too-human. We do not know the wheat from the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). Indeed, if God's true standard for righteousness is being revealed here in the Sermon on the Mount, our concept of sin and righteousness is so far afield from God's concepts that any judgements we make based on our concepts are very often going to be less than righteous judgements. We are certainly lost in our own human conceptualization of reality, but we are not hopelessly lost. Jesus has brought good news.

The good news that follows the impossible standard for righteousness that Jesus has just set forth is that all you need to do in order to escape the sinful condition Jesus has been describing is to 'Ask and it will be given to you' (Matt. 7:7). If we can have anything we ask, in light of what Jesus has just said, what we need to ask for is that God would give us a spirit of repentance in order that we can turn from these false gods in order to find the living God. In this world we will always face these false gods and false sources of life. What we need is a grace that will allow us not to tire of repentance in order that we continually turn away from those sources of the false self so that we might find an identity in God. God is willing to give us the ability to turn again and again from those false gods who promise so much and give so little, if we are willing to live in a state of almost constant repentance. If we can have anything we ask, what we need ask is that repentance would fill our soul and we would live in a constant state of turning away from all those things that so easily entrap us and keep us from drawing our strength and energy – our life and meaning – from God alone.

The good news that we have received and are to preach to others is that God is not calling us to obey a moral law of endless requirements. He is calling us to a relationship, and all we need to do to establish that relationship is repent and turn from the false gods which surround and engulf us. We do not need to find him, he finds us as we turn from those false gods and idols that capture our attention and prevent us from having God as the source of our identity and life.

Of course, in order to turn from the things of this world which so easily capture us and hold us in their sway, we have to see a need to do so. Most people are content with the gods of this world. They are happy with their earthly treasure and the reputation they have taken so long to acquire. They like the life that comes from their lust, anger, and even their worry. These are the things that define them – their source of meaning and energy. They see no reason to turn from such things and it is for this reason that Jesus tells us that the truly fortunate and 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matt. 5:3).

Indeed, the truly fortunate ones are the poor in spirit who lack a rich identity in the things of this world, for it is in our detachment from the things of this world that we become aware of our true identity in God. Unfortunately, most of us

do not think we are poor in spirit. We feel good about ourselves and are proud of how much we have accomplished, all the good we have done, all the evil we have avoided. But if we consider what Jesus says, we see that we have stored up treasures on earth, sought the approval of men, and proudly stood in our own judgements. Truly, the poor in spirit are the blessed ones, for they, and they alone, have nothing but God as the source of their identity and self worth. They are certainly freer from many of the sources of the false self that the rest of us find so difficult to escape from.

Jesus goes on to say,

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matt. 5:4-5:8).

Indeed, only when we mourn the loss of all that others hold dear, do we find the God who is the only true source of comfort and joy. Equally, it is not the self-righteous who are meek but those who realize their sin and separation from God. They, and they alone, 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matt. 5:6), for those who are satisfied and content with their own righteousness have no need to mourn or hunger and thirst. The only truly blessed ones are those who are full of a desire for mercy, for they will be shown mercy.

Our cultural understanding of 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Matt. 5:7) is usually understood from our cultural perspective of virtue. That is, that we must show mercy in order to receive mercy, and there is certainly a truth in that. The greater truth, however, is that we are all in need of mercy. We have all separated ourselves from God and are in need of forgiveness in order for our relationship with him to be restored. This is the narrow gate which leads to eternal life which Jesus speaks of in Matthew 7:13-14. Few find this narrow gate because they trust in their own righteousness and do not see their great need for mercy because of their separation from God. Of course, those who ask for mercy and see their need of repentance are usually those who are most willing to show mercy. But it is out of the receiving of mercy that we are able to show mercy toward others. The mercy that we muster on our own is certainly meagre in comparison to the true mercy that comes forth from us when we have seen our own great need to receive mercy. Life and righteousness proceed from God to us and not the other way around. Our mercy does not create mercy within God, but God's mercy creates mercy within us. Sadly, our cultural prejudice is that God responds to our actions, but the truth of the gospel is that any true good that will ever come forth in us is a reaction to something God has done. Indeed, the blessed ones are those who know how insufficient they are in themselves and seek God to be their source of righteousness.

Finally, our ability to see God is conditioned upon our being able to repent and turn from all those other gods who stand in the way and prevent us from seeing him. This is the purity of heart of which Jesus speaks, that we would be pure and have a single source of life and identity in God.

The Beatitudes, and what follows them in the Sermon on the Mount, are linked in that what follows the beatitudes

explains why the poor in spirit, the mournful, and those meek souls who hunger for righteousness and mercy are blessed. If we accept what Jesus is setting forth as God's true standard, we realize how poor in spirit and in need of mercy we really are. In light of what Jesus says, a humble state of repentance, in which we seek God's mercy, is the only blessed place.

Of course, those who do not accept what Jesus is setting forth as God's ultimate standard, but are confident that they can achieve their own righteousness by following some set of religious principles or practices are not the poor spirited, meek and mournful souls Jesus tells us are blessed. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees probably kept the Mosaic law better than any group of Jews who had ever lived. They took great pride in that and believed they were living according to God's ultimate standard. What Jesus reveals, however, is a deeper spiritual life of faith. Of course, the Pharisees resisted and wished to stay where their identity was well founded. They were good at keeping the law, and what Jesus was calling them to was a life of repentance and radical faith in the mercy of God.

Faith for the Christian is not an absolute certainty that God will do this or that particular thing, but rather that all of our hope is in God and the greatness of his mercy. That kind of faith can come about only when we no longer have any hope in ourselves, but are forced to trust in God's mercy and learn to live in that blessed place of repentance. This is the narrow gate which Jesus tells us is the only way to life.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

Notes

- 1 In the version of this story that appears in the Gospel of Matthew a garment is required, just as so many parables speak of requirements that must be met in order to follow him, but sin or separation from God is overcome on our part by simply turning from our false gods and coming to him

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