

Chapter Twelve: Moving Through the New Testament Documents

As we cast a wider net to study the other New Testament writings, we find the same message.

Matthew

I begin my examination of Matthew with a comparison. In discussions about homosexuality, evangelical scholars are quick to go to Matthew 19:3 – 12 for Jesus’ teaching on marriage. Why? The passage so clearly links God’s original creation to Jesus’ new creation, and spells out the implications for marriage and sexual expression. While making room for the single eunuch who does not get married, Jesus removes ‘hardness of heart’ and restores people to God’s creation order as far as marriage, divorce, and sexuality are concerned. ‘He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’’ (Mt.19:5 – 6). However, many of those same evangelical scholars are exceedingly slow to recognize that the very next section, the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:13 – 30, has profound implications for Christian ethics about money and the economic dimension of human relationships. Jesus is returning God’s people to the original creation order, indeed. This has radical implications for wealth, generosity, and hospitality, and how we evaluate the church’s faithfulness to the Scriptures.

What did God intend from the creation order for human beings in relation to wealth and economics? Since at least the Protestant Reformation, many Christians thought it is relatively straightforward to read Genesis 1 and say that God wanted human beings to simply have dominion over the created world. This view of the biblical phrase ‘rule and subdue’ (Gen.1:28) as dominion over natural resources coincided with, and to a large degree fueled, the growth of capitalism. Political theories like those of John Locke and Adam Smith were based on ideas of private property that referenced Genesis 1. But was this what God intended from the creation order? I have already provided my treatment of Genesis 1 in the context of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament as a whole, and I find this Protestant view of ‘dominion’ to be completely deficient, primarily because of a lack of serious scholarship integrating Genesis 1 with the rest of its literary and theological context: God’s original commission to humanity to spread *the garden* over the wild creation is simply not possible anymore. Even when we factor in ecological or environmental sustainability questions, which I support wholeheartedly, I do not believe that that approximates the real significance of Genesis 1. I will return to fully address that question on a canonical level when I examine Paul and 1 Corinthians. For the moment, however, I make an argument from a different angle. I believe that Protestants (among others) largely neglected the question of what God intended for human economic relationships from the creation, and how does Jesus relate to that vision. What I find missing from these analyses of Scripture is a fuller treatment of the question, ‘How did God intend human beings to relate to one another economically prior to the fall?’

In Matthew, Jesus answers that question. To discuss Jesus’ answer, I will examine Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, then examine three passages in Matthew: the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:29), the story of the rich young ruler (Mt.19:13 – 30), and the teachings on forgiveness which often employ the language of money (Mt.6:14 – 15; 18:19 – 34). Matthew, showing his familiarity with money, frames much of his teaching on wealth around Jesus’ language of heavenly treasure. What Luke achieves by repetition, thematic development, and sheer volume, Matthew achieves by conciseness and literary structure.

First, I will briefly summarize Matthew’s larger literary structure and organization. Matthew seems to structure Jesus’ teaching around five literary markers.

- When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.7:28)
- When Jesus had finished giving instructions... (Mt.11:1)
- When Jesus had finished these parables... (Mt.13:53)
- When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.19:1)
- When Jesus had finished all these words... (Mt.26:1)

Matthew is essentially setting up a literary structure similar to the Pentateuch. In doing so, he is suggesting that his book functions for the church as a new covenant charter similar to the way Moses’ Pentateuch functioned as an old covenant charter.

Various scholars have downplayed the significance of this structure, but the other parallels between Matthew and the Pentateuch make a literary correspondence persuasive. For instance, the endings of the two works beg to be compared.

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were	Now Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan,
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doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' (Mt.28:16 – 20)	and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, 'This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.' So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. (Dt.34:1 – 5)
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Like Luke, Matthew envisions the Gentile peoples themselves to be the 'inheritance' of Jesus as Messiah. Israel's exhilarating moment perched on a mountain overlooking the land of Canaan becomes a precursor of the disciples of Jesus perched on a mountain receiving the Great Commission and about to start their worldwide mission. Whereas Moses died on a mountain before engaging in the conquest, Jesus leads his disciples from a mountain into a new conquest. He is victorious, having conquered sin and death itself. In fact, perhaps Jesus should really be compared to God leading the Israelites into the promised land. This comparison is meaningful given Jesus' birth-name Immanuel, 'God with us,' which then finds itself restated as 'I am with you always,' marking the beginning and ending of Matthew's Gospel. Various other motifs can also be explored comparing Matthew to the Pentateuch; Jesus meeting his disciples on various mountains parallels God meeting Israel on mountains (Sinai and Zion), for instance. The structural similarity between Matthew and the Pentateuch appears vital as an exegetical consideration.

However, whether one accepts the literary structure of Matthew to be an echo of the Pentateuch, as I do, should not affect whether one sees the Great Commission as referring us back to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus says, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, that discipleship involves 'teaching them to observe all that I commanded you' (Mt.28:20). To help his readers be organized and systematic about this, Matthew has already organized the teaching of Jesus into five sections (Mt.5:1 – 7:29; 10:1 – 11:1; 13:1 – 58; 18:1 – 34; 23:1 – 25:46). This helpful fact should immediately challenge all Christians of Lutheran or dispensational persuasions who see the commands of Jesus as extensions of the Mosaic Law and hence 'law' as opposed to 'gospel.' On their view, the commands of Jesus are not primarily meant to be enacted, done, and *lived*. When preachers and teachers from these traditions approach these texts, they view Jesus as primarily raising our awareness of sin and guilt before God by 'raising the bar,' so to speak. Seen in this way, the teaching is merely a prelude to Jesus' death, which achieved for us 'forgiveness' but not 'transformation' in connection with Jesus' resurrection and bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Only secondarily, and perhaps distantly at that, is Jesus' teaching intended to be actually *lived*. This means that for a non-trivial proportion of Christians, systematic theology is fundamentally divorced from ethics. By contrast, I and many others find that Jesus' Great Commission command to go out with a missionary mindset and teach others, if it is actually meant to be *lived*, refers us back logically and necessarily to the five sections of Jesus' teaching as commands that are actually meant to be *lived* as well. Thus, the teaching of Jesus – including those commands concerning wealth, generosity, and sharing – has normative status for all Christians *to be lived out*.

Second, I will comment briefly on the first major teaching section of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:29). If Matthew is the new covenant charter, then the Sermon on the Mount (really, the teaching of Jesus more generally) is nothing less than the new covenant 'law' promised through Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy (Jer.31:31 – 34). It unquestionably deals with the human heart. The theme of Jesus transforming the human heart is the main focus of this section.

- Blessed are the pure in heart... (Mt.5:8)
- But I say to you that everyone who is angry [in his heart] with his brother... (Mt.5:21 – 26)
- He who looks on a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Mt.5:28)
- But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you [heart attitude of self-defense vs. self-giving]. (Mt.5:38 – 48)
- Your Father who is in heaven sees your secret motives. (Mt.6:4, 6, 18)
- Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Mt.6:21)
- Beware of the false prophets, who...inwardly are ravenous wolves. (Mt.7:15)

The beatitudes (5:1 – 12) are focused mainly on acknowledgement of inward deficits and willingness to be defined by Jesus. The six antitheses (5:21 – 48) surpass the Mosaic Law and go much farther than addressing behavior; it traces human activity back to the heart on subjects like anger, lust, and personal 'rights.' Centering oneself on God's

praise (6:1 – 18) rather than human praise is an inward, heart-level disposition. Forgiveness (6:14 – 15) is a heart level command given by Jesus. Materialism (6:19 – 34) must be rejected from the heart. Anxiety is an internal heart condition that is rebuked by Jesus. Jesus commands us to seek God’s kingdom and heavenly treasure instead. Judgmentalism (7:1 – 6) is a heart-level problem. Healing others is the antithesis of judging, and requires a healthy heart. Being a false teacher means that one is still a ravenous wolf inwardly (7:15 – 23) who devours the sheep. If the Sermon on the Mount is the ethic of the new covenant people, and if Matthew is a new covenant document, and if Matthew suggests that we disciple others based on the teaching and patterns laid down in his own book, *then the teaching of Jesus described by Matthew regarding materialism and wealth cannot be set aside or diminished in the slightest*. It must be declared with full force. Anything less is not true discipleship. I believe Matthew sees the Sermon on the Mount as quite normative and binding on Christians today, despite claims by dispensationalists who would see Jesus’ ethics as an impossible standard driving us to grace or for another time period. Such a position is utterly foreign to the text of Matthew.

The Sermon is given on a mountain, following the Jewish symbolism of divine utterance and encounter on mountains (Eden?, Sinai, Zion). Jesus, in his itinerant preaching, must have given this teaching multiple times to various audiences. He seems to have intentionally given at least one version of this sermon on an actual mountain, as God gave the Ten Commandments before on Mount Sinai, and Matthew is eager to help us see that connection, since he does not narrate the sermon ‘on the plain’ as Luke does (Lk.6:20ff.). In fact, in the very next section, Matthew 8 – 9, Jesus does ten miracles by his word: a new ten commandments, reflecting back on the new ‘law of the heart’ to indicate that this is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus appears to be writing this very ethic into his own humanity, as he has taken human flesh to himself in his incarnation. He is preparing his new humanity for all humanity through his life and ministry, and soon also his death and resurrection. This is to fulfill his purpose of saving people from *their sins* (Mt.1:21). Jesus speaks of the need for heart level transformation not only here but in Mt 15:19 – 20 and 19:8: ‘Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries...’ which is in this sick condition ‘...because of your hardness of heart...’ Jesus, following Moses (Gen.6:5 – 6; Dt.30:6), David (Ps.51:9), Jeremiah (Jer.17:1; 31:31 – 34), and Ezekiel (Ezk.36:26 – 36) saw the human ‘heart’ as the source of human sin in every human being which needed transformation. Simultaneously and correspondingly, he saw himself as the embodiment of Israel before God, receiving the law of God into his own heart and the Spirit of God into his own humanity, as the remedy and the source of salvation from the sin that had lodged itself in the human heart.

The language of ‘fruit’ versus ‘thorns’ in the Sermon on the Mount also refers us to God’s original creation order. This would have been clear to a Jewish audience because Jesus says about false prophets that their ‘fruit’ is, ironically, only thorns and thistles (Mt.7:16), which are not really fruit at all in the literal sense, but are ‘fruit’ in the sense that they are the ‘results’ of still being ‘inwardly ravenous wolves’ who have not yielded to Jesus’ heart-transforming word. Thorns and thistles were emblematic of the fall into sin in Genesis 3. Jesus’ use of those terms signifies that those who do not wrestle on the level of the heart to receive Jesus’ word are still in the realm of sin and resisting Jesus’ work of renewing the creation order. By contrast, a true follower of Jesus bears fruit that is nourishing (7:17ff.), emblematic of the life-bearing life forms God created in Genesis 1 and 2. Moreover, Jesus echoes the creation order by his dense usage of the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in 7:11 and 7:17 – 19. Everything about how Jesus envisions the human heart being responsive and obedient to God is how the human heart was supposed to be in the creation. Jesus’ vision of human life lived in trust of the Father was informed by the creation order: relationally (5:21 – 48), spiritually (6:1 – 18), and materially (6:25 – 34). Jesus is helping us understand what he means by ‘pure in heart’ (5:8) and how he will be restoring our hearts to that state. By delivering this ‘new law for the heart,’ Jesus is renewing the creation order in the heart of his followers. Marriage according to Mt.5:27 – 32 is a return to the creation order, as he expands on in Mt.19:1 – 12 and 19:13 – 30 as well. This is what it means to overcome ‘hardness of heart.’ Jesus is transforming our hearts to a state of unusual and radical generosity – that is what God had intended from creation.

The relationship between Jesus and the Sinaitic Law is important to define. If Jesus is truly sending his Jewish disciples to leave the land of Israel and go out into the world to disciple the Gentile nations, then he must make this break from the Sinaitic Law; it is theologically and pragmatically necessary. This fact poses a great difficulty for those who wish to interpret Jesus as merely ‘deepening’ the Sinaitic Law and standing in fundamental continuity with it. Within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17 about not abolishing but fulfilling the Law and the Prophets has provoked much discussion, and many attempts to reconcile it with other statements found in the New Testament about the relation between the Law and the Christian believer. Due to limitations of space and time, I cannot treat that question with the depth and rigor it fully deserves. Suffice to say at this point that I have been persuaded by Dr. Gary Tuck, who writes that the grammatical construction of ‘not [A] but

[B]' often means 'not *only* [A] but *also* [B]'.¹ Hence, 'You have not lied to men but to God' is an idiomatic way of saying, 'You have not [*only*] lied to men, but [*also*] to God' (Acts 5:4). Surely Simon Peter did not mean to deny that Ananias had, in fact, lied to men. Tuck writes:

A few other examples might help to settle this question. "Do not let your adornment be ... putting on dresses, but ... the hidden man of the heart" (1 Peter 3:3f). The NAS supplies the qualifier, "only," absent from the original Greek text, but necessary in the English translation to guard the reader from misunderstanding. No serious reader could think that Peter intended to forbid the wearing of dresses. In John 12:44 Jesus says, "He who believes in me does not believe in me, but in him who sent me."⁸ Scarcely could the addition of the words "only" and "also" be more obviously justified ("believes not only in me, but also in him ..."); otherwise the negative clause is self-contradictory. And when John writes, "Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18), surely he is not forbidding us from telling our loved ones we love them; though that is the 'literal' ('face value') meaning of his words.²

In my opinion, Tuck's reading of Matthew 5:17 as idiomatic and not simply 'literal' makes the most sense of the rest of the Sermon, as well as the broader question of the relationship between Jesus and the Sinaitic Law. Jesus takes an ethical turn from Moses in the six antitheses (Mt.5:21 – 48) and elsewhere. His teaching on lust and marriage (Mt.5:27 – 32; 19:3 – 12) is more challenging than Moses' because he overturns the divorce clause of Dt.24:1 – 4. Whatever Jesus means precisely by commanding his disciples to turn the other cheek and not resist an evildoer (Mt.5:38 – 48), at the very least he must mean that his community of disciples would not retain within the church the death penalty and penal system from the Sinaitic Law. So when Jesus teaches on earthly treasure in sharp contrast to heavenly treasure (6:19 – 34) in Matthew's Gospel, he means the same thing he does in Luke's writings: Jesus calls Israelites to disinherit themselves from their ancestral land and their traditional forms of wealth. Jesus clearly breaks from the Mosaic land system. I will comment more on this as I examine Mt.19:13 – 30, for it has clearer significance there.

Third, Matthew's account of the rich young man (Mt.19:13 – 30) puts into narrative form the implications of Jesus' teaching on wealth. This is not merely an encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, but is an extended contrast between the disciples, who embody responsiveness to Jesus, and the rich man, who does not. In saying this, I am also treating as very significant the timing of the encounter: it occurs in the context of Jesus journeying to Jerusalem for his final conflict and confrontation with the Jewish leaders (19:3 – 25:46). They try to ensnare Jesus in various biblical, political, and popular opinion traps; they ask nine questions (19:3, 7, 16; 21:10, 15, 23; 22:17, 28, 35) which Jesus deftly answers until he turns the tables on them with a tenth question of his own (22:41). As the upshot of this game of texts and wits, Jesus utterly silences his opponents: 'No one was able to answer him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask him another question' (22:46). We should therefore not read the account of the rich young ruler without factoring in the overt, escalating, and high-stakes conflict between Jesus and the leading parties of Judaism in his day. This story must be understood as Jesus drawing the sharpest possible contrast between his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and others' understanding, between his ethics and others' ethics, between his vision for life as the people of God and others' vision. Matthew detects in this episode of the rich young man an opportunity to show how Jesus' teaching on wealth is superior to Moses' teaching on wealth from the Sinaitic covenant, for Jesus goes back to the full creation intention from Genesis before the fall. He no longer makes an allowance for Israel's 'hardness of heart.'

Frequently, in studies and conversations about this story, people attempt to distance themselves from this rich man. This is true all the way from the casual reader to the preacher in the pulpit to the scholar in the study. And this tendency is not surprising. If we can isolate the rich man as being unusually greedy, we would therefore make the sting of Jesus' challenge fall uniquely on this man and the few others like him. However, many exegetical reasons mitigate against distancing ourselves from this rich man. First, there is no indication in the text that this man was any more or less greedy than anyone else, or you and me. He is identified as 'rich' in contrast with the 'poor' that Jesus calls him to give to, but Matthew gives no other descriptions of the man. Second, the disciples themselves, within the story, understand this encounter as typical of everyone who comes to Jesus. Simon Peter asks Jesus, 'Behold, we have left everything and followed you; what then will there be for us?' (19:27) In other words, Peter recognized that when Jesus called him and the other disciples earlier (4:12 – 25), and taught them about the radical

¹ Dr. Gary Tuck, *Matthew 5:17: Jesus Did Come to Abolish the Law...And He Said So*, available on line

² Ibid, p.3. For a fuller treatment of this question about the gospel and the law, see *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, 1996). I side with Douglas J. Moo on his analysis, 'The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses.'

heart transformation he was bringing about in them (5:1 – 7:29), Jesus did call them to leave everything and follow him, just as he did this rich man. The rich man was unable to do what the disciples had already done. ‘He went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property’ (19:22). On the one hand, the disciples were ‘very astonished’ (19:25) at the high bar Jesus presented to this rich man. Apparently, they expected Jesus to use softer language with this man, or allow the rich man to grow into a full commitment rather than hit him all at once, or they harbored desires for a messianic ‘golden age’ akin to Solomon’s reign when God would restore Israel to its ancestral lands (20:20 – 28), or something of that sort. On the other hand, they saw the continuity and consistency of Jesus’ teaching and call to all people. Third, clearly Matthew, Mark, and Luke, by including this story in each of their Gospel narratives, saw this rich man as *typical*, not atypical. Matthew, for example, is clearly integrating this story into the consistent theme that wealth is a potential obstacle to following Jesus (4:12 – 25; 5:38 – 42; 6:19 – 34; ‘the deceitfulness of wealth choke[s] the word’ in 13:22; the contrast between the cost of radical kingdom hospitality for ‘birds’ in 13:31 – 33 and the cost joyfully paid in 13:44 – 46; 25:31 – 46). So we cannot distance ourselves from the rich young man in this story, nor the claims that Jesus makes on him. We must have no question that the rich young ruler story mirrors part of Jesus’ invitation to every person and pertains to every true disciple of Jesus.

Correspondingly, I believe that the way we define – explicitly or implicitly – the rich man’s ‘problem’ is telling. As I said above, I do not believe that the rich man was unusually wealthy or unusually greedy. The text gives us no indication of that. Rather, the text indicates that the rich man had an Old Testament Sinaitic perspective on wealth, and that this is what Jesus regarded as the problem. In other words, the man believed that God would reward his obedience with wealth. This expectation was nurtured by the Sinaitic covenant itself and Israel’s own history. The Sinaitic covenant stipulated that Israel’s obedience would allow them to enjoy the fruitfulness of the promised land:

You are to keep My statutes and My judgments...so that the land will not spew you out, should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. (Lev.18:26 – 28)

Hence I have said to you, ‘You are to possess their land, and I Myself will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ (Lev.20:24; cf. Lev.26; Dt.11, 27 – 30).

The rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, which drew upon the Sinaitic association between obedience and wealth, nurtured that connection in the minds of Jewish readers:

For evildoers will be cut off,
But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.
Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more;
And you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there.
But the humble will inherit the land
And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity. (Ps.37:9 – 11)
I have been young and now I am old,
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
Or his descendants begging bread. (Ps.37:25)

Honor the LORD from your wealth
And from the first of all your produce;
So your barns will be filled with plenty
And your vats will overflow with new wine. (Pr.3:9 – 10)

I walk in the way of righteousness,
In the midst of the paths of justice,
To endow those who love me with wealth,
That I may fill their treasuries. (Pr.8:19 – 20)

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children (Pr.13:22)

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the

ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,' says the LORD of hosts. All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,' says the LORD of hosts. (Mal.3:10 – 12)

Historically, Israel's sin did in fact lead to exile under foreign Gentile powers, from Babylon all the way up to Rome. Therefore, popular Jewish messianic expectation was that God would oust the Romans from Jerusalem, throw off Gentile rule entirely from the land, restore the supernatural fruitfulness of Israel's land (e.g. Isa.35), and usher in a golden age that would dwarf the riches of Solomon. Both Jesus and the rich man recognize that Israel enjoyed this historic relationship between obedience to the Ten Commandments and material wealth as a blessing from God. But whereas the rich man wanted to maintain this Sinaitic covenant, as evidenced by his reluctance to disassociate his obedience from the wealth he had (19:22), Jesus has no such reluctance. This is evident because Jesus articulates those same commandments (Mt.19:17 – 19) in a new framework of unlimited generosity without the expectation of God giving them a land, or agricultural or commercial blessing. Jesus reasoned, from the creation account, that God will provide a minimum of food and clothing for his disciples (6:25 – 34), although he also said that persecution and other factors could make the disciples homeless, naked, imprisoned, vulnerable, and so on (25:31 – 46). Regardless, Jesus completely severs Israel from the Sinai covenant, by returning his people to the ethics of the creation order even though the conditions of the fall still prevail.

Of course, various Christians also retreat to the Sinai covenant throughout the Old Testament for their theology of wealth and providence. They range from the American Puritans like John Winthrop and his nationalistic heirs who read themselves into the story of Israel from the point of Deuteronomy's covenant and preach 'American exceptionalism,' all the way up to Pentecostal 'prosperity gospel' preachers who contributed to the financial meltdown of 2008 by interpreting adjustable rate home mortgages as a blessing from God. On a nationalistic level or on an individualistic level, or both, Christians are clearly drawn to the Sinaitic covenant's offer of wealth as reward for obedience. And how many sermons are preached from the pulpit on Malachi 3:10 – 12 when the church fiscal year is closing and needs to meet its budget? But all this is inappropriate from a canonical and Christ-centered standpoint. For Jesus sliced through the jugular vein of that approach to the Old Testament. The rich man's problem is that he expects God to give him wealth to possess in exchange for obedience to commandments. That attitude is far from dead, so the story of the rich man continues to be terribly relevant.

In the immediate context of Mt.19:3 – 12, Jesus claims to be reversing 'hardness of heart' (19:8), which set into humanity after the fall, Israel not excepted. Jesus saw the divorce clause in the Sinaitic Law (Dt.24:1 – 4) as a concession to Israel's hardness of heart. He saw marriage from the original unspoiled creation as only partially preserved by the Sinaitic Law. Hardness of heart and its downstream effects of sin, adultery, and divorce, would not have affected human beings in the original creation, so the Sinaitic Law had to allow for the reality of sin which was now internal to human nature. Jesus apparently believed that something similar held true about humanity's economic relationships from creation to fall to Israel. The Sinaitic Law preserved in Israel only part of what God intended from the creation order for all human beings. However, hardness of heart and its downstream effects had to be considered by God in the Sinaitic Law. But which parts?

The economic vision of the Sinaitic Law made that law code unusual and remarkable in its own right. Moses had already set a fairly high bar for both equity and wealth. The Sinai Law liberated Israelites from debt-indenture after seven years (Ex.21:1 – 8; Dt.15:12 – 15) and every fifty years on Israel's fixed calendar (Lev.25). The Law established this jubilee year to restore land to ancestral family boundaries to ensure that people did not have to suffer from the economic mistakes and misfortunes of their parents and grandparents (Lev.25). Moreover, the Law required Israelites to lend generously to fellow Israelites in need (Lev.25:35 – 43; Dt.15:7 – 11; 24:10 – 22) and banned interest rate lending between Israelites by which one could profit from another's misfortune (Ex.22:26 – 27; Lev.25:35 – 38, Deut.23:19; cf. Ps.15:5; Ezk.18:10 – 18, 22:12); this legislation made it much less likely that Israelites would fall into debt, the reason why most people in the ancient world became slaves and indentured servants in the first place. Besides all that, the Law required Israel to respect the physical needs and dignity of the poor in a robust number of ways (Dt.24:10 – 22).

However, Jesus calls the rich young ruler to completely disinherit himself from his parents' land and the Mosaic land system, and give everything he had to the poor. This disinheritance and separation from the Sinaitic Law is evident because of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about giving to anyone who asks without expecting a return (Mt.5:42). Jesus' call to radical divestiture compares with Moses commanding the Israelites to 'generously lend' to fellow Israelites in need (Dt.15:8), but meanwhile expecting that money to be returned at some point, all within the overarching context of expecting to inherit one's portion of the promised land and the even larger context of God providing Israel with the new garden land as a partial restoration of what Adam and Eve had forsaken (Dt.11). Jesus supersedes the Sinaitic Law in three ways. First, he shifts the commandment from lending, which has an expectation of return, to giving without any such expectation; he therefore deepens the nature of the financial sacrifice and the risk. Second, he calls for the rich man to sell his land inheritance and not look back; he

therefore removes the Israelite male and any of his family members from the economic safety net that existed beneath him. Third, Jesus also broadens the scope of possible recipients in need, from fellow Israelites to anyone; he therefore broadens the pool of possible claimants from one group, needy fellow Jews, to every needy human being on the planet. Jesus is not only interested in Israel's poor; he is interested in the world's poor. Hence, I am arguing that Jesus himself believed that the economic care for the poor, generosity, and hospitality commanded by the Sinaitic Law did not happen frequently enough. And the concession to Israel's 'hardness of heart' within the Sinaitic Law that prevented generosity and hospitality was the Sinaitic institutionalization of possession and inheritance. Jesus saw as a problem the larger level of the Israel's possession of land *as a nation*, all the way down to the inheritance of one's portion of wealth *as an individual*. We cannot fail to notice, especially in Matthew and Luke, that Jesus removes any theological support from the idea of economic possession. *The claim of exclusive possession – both nationally and individually – did not exist in God's original creation order and would not have existed but for the fall.*

Jesus is reissuing norms from God's original creation order described in and implied by Genesis 1 – 2. Jesus' solution to divorce is to say, 'From the beginning it has not been this way...' Similarly, his solution to greed and a lack of concern for the poor *around the world*, not just in Israel, also refers to the creation order. Arguably it could only come from the creation order because that is the order which embraces all humanity. What other evidence does Jesus and/or Matthew give for this?

Matthew alone uses the word 'regeneration' (*palingenesia*) in his account of the rich young ruler (Mt.19:28; cf. Mk.10:13 – 31, Lk.18:15 – 30). The word occurs only twice in the entire New Testament: once here in Matthew and once in Titus 3:5, where Paul says of Jesus, 'He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.' In Titus, the word 'regeneration' is clearly a semantic tie to the Book of Genesis, and is built on the conceptual foundation of the new creation, new humanity, and new birth language which Jesus used to communicate his vocation. 'Regeneration' is symbolized by the baptismal 'washing' which is an enacted reference to a literary source: the waters of creation in Genesis 1. 'Regeneration' refers to the reinstatement in and through Jesus of human nature and human relationships back to the design God intended originally. Thus, in Paul's letter to Titus, Jesus 'saved us' not from God's wrath as a distant judicial problem, but from the ontological corruption of sinfulness that had set into us – that is, into human nature – from the fall. To be *regenerated* and *renewed* means that one's original purpose is reinstated. It presumes the Genesis creation order.

Similarly, in Matthew, Jesus ties 'the regeneration' to the time when 'the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne' and the apostles will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. The seating of the Son of Man 'on his glorious throne' has Adamic authority as its primary concern, as the prophet Daniel envisioned that the Son of Man would rise enthroned above the other powers to vindicate Israel (Dan.7:13 – 14). Jesus referred to Daniel several times in the moments prior to his crucifixion (Mt.24:15, 27, 30, 39; 25:31; 26:64), showing that 'the coming of the Son of Man' to the 'throne' of authority was uppermost in his mind. Jesus connects the enthronement and 'the regeneration' to his crucifixion when he is crowned king of Israel, albeit in exile and ironically (Mt.27:27 – 37), and then to his resurrection when he is given Adamic authority over all things in heaven and earth (Mt.28:16 – 20). Whereas Luke is more explicit that Jesus' enthronement occurred at his ascension (Acts 1:1 – 10), Matthew simply connects Jesus' authority to his resurrection, commissioning of the disciples, and to the downfall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD as the sign of vindication that Jesus and his followers are now the new 'Temple-people' of God. Jesus and his disciples will henceforth be the explicit measure by which Israel is 'judged,' that is, truly constituted and defined. Jesus' resurrection is the regeneration and the renewal of humanity in principle because in Jesus' physical body, God has personally completed that work and offers it, in and through Jesus, to all humanity. In other words, the 'regeneration' in Matthew's and Paul's usage is not in the far distant future when Jesus comes again. It is the age that dawned with Jesus' resurrection, which is unfolding all over the world through the mission of the disciples in the power of the Holy Spirit. The regeneration – the restoration, in a very real sense, of God's creation order, His true humanity, and His design for relationships – is happening right now.

As the story of the rich man indicates, Jesus' renewal of the creation ethic of generosity and economic sharing poses a very real difficulty for the rich to be saved, or equivalently, to enter the kingdom of heaven, just as Jesus said (Mt.19:23 – 24). For 'salvation' here does not refer primarily to 'escaping the wrath of God,' as if Jesus intercepts God's wrath as an abstract attribute, and then throws in Christian ethics after the fact. In that scheme, Christian ethics is not actually essential for salvation and soteriology can be discussed entirely without Christian ethics. But no: 'Salvation' refers to deliverance from our own sin, from our hardness of heart, from the fall itself. Jesus is saving us *for* God's original creation order. He is saving us *from* our fallenness *back* to what God originally intended. In other words, Jesus is saving us *for* Christian ethics. Christian ethics exists theologically prior to the declaration of salvation in Christ and forgiveness by him, precisely because Christian ethics is *creational* ethics. The rich and poor alike need to know that Jesus saves us from our own sin – and in regards to wealth, the sins of

hoarding, possessiveness, anxiety, lack of generosity, greed, jealousy, coveting, etc. So salvation from sin, by definition, is logically dependent and conditional – not upon the perfect performance of these ethics – but upon rational acknowledgement that Jesus oriented his teaching ministry and his own life as a personal example around the original creation order, and upon the believer’s subsequent growth by the indwelling Spirit of Jesus towards that quality of Jesus’ life. After all, this is how Matthew understood the ministry of Jesus: ‘He will save his people *from their sins*’ (Mt.1:21). Once again, many evangelical leaders seem perfectly willing to point out that heterosexual marriage is part of God’s creation order *into which* we are saved; they therefore agree with the framework I am articulating here. But those same evangelicals seem rather reluctant to perceive that unlimited generosity and sacrifice are also part of God’s creation order *into which* we are saved. In my view, this hypocrisy is unacceptable and intolerable.

Reference to God’s creation order in Genesis corresponds perfectly with the story immediately preceding the rich young ruler’s encounter: the story of children being brought to Jesus. Mark and Luke also perceive the importance of this juxtaposition. Jesus blesses the children against the hesitations and protests of his disciples (Mt.19:13 – 15). While Jesus loves children themselves, he says, ‘The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ In his eyes, those who become ‘such as these’ children – accepting low status, dependent, trusting, and content to be the newest and youngest members of a family – can become part of his kingdom family (cf. Mt.18:1 – 5). The young children physically represent ‘the regeneration’ Jesus speaks of in Mt.19:28, and also those who go back ‘to the beginning’ as in Mt.19:8. The rich ‘young man’ (Mt.19:20, 22) who asks Jesus about how to inherit eternal life, however, is no longer a ‘child.’ (Luke heightens the contrast by using the term ‘infants’ in Lk.18:15 and removing the reference to the man being ‘young.’) The man has possessions that he considers to be his own: not only the moral currency of deeds done against the Sinai Law (‘all these things I have kept’), but also the land inheritance that had been God’s reward for Israel’s faithfulness...until the time of Jesus. The rich young man is not childlike because he does not receive what is provided for him in Jesus. He is not willing to ‘start over.’ The contrast between his own keeping of the Sinai Law and Jesus’ invitation to personally follow him, as well as the contrast between his owning ‘much property’ and Jesus’ lifestyle of owning nothing, is striking. Therefore, the rich young man does not become as a child, at least in this particular encounter with Jesus; at this time, he does not enter the kingdom of heaven – and the kingdom family with kingdom ethics – that Jesus is creating around himself.

The fourth Matthean theme I wish to consider is Matthew’s language of money and debt. Compounding the force of my analysis above is the fact that Matthew uses the language of money to describe one’s very experience of God’s forgiveness through Jesus *and* one’s relationships with others (more frequently than Luke, e.g. Lk.7:36 – 50). Ordinary, sin-bound human relations are described as reciprocal exchanges that disciples must overcome. Disciples are to give far beyond what they get: ‘But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (5:44 – 48). Further, sin is described as owing a massive debt (Mt.18:21 – 35), the cancellation of which by God logically impels Jesus’ disciples to extraordinary acts of forgiveness, generosity, and self-sacrifice towards other human beings. These actions must go above and beyond merely reciprocal relations, for it is the evidence that a disciple has truly understood and received God’s forgiveness in Jesus. Giving money is thus an organic outflow of experiencing Jesus, and therefore mandatory.

Furthermore, for all the theological problems this causes Protestants, Matthew links forgiveness of others with forgiveness from God, at times with the language of money. ‘The merciful shall receive mercy’ (Mt.5:7). ‘For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses’ (6:14 – 15). One cannot withhold the one and claim to live in the other. The king in Jesus’ parable says, ‘I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And Jesus draws the parallel, ‘And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart’ (18:32 – 33). From Matthew we learn that forgiveness and reconciliation can precede the resolution of an economic injustice on the same basis that giving money is an organic outflow of experiencing Jesus: Both extend to others that which they have not earned.

What is at stake for Matthew is (1) one’s ability to participate in the new creation – new covenant community that comprises one’s traditional enemies and (2) one’s ability to make disciples of all nations, which are usually enemy peoples. If a person has not forgiven others on some fundamental level, which in Matthew has to do with the Jewish disciples’ ethnic prejudice, then one is not really able to make disciples of all nations. For Matthew, this means that one has not really joined the new covenant community, i.e. that one has not yet really ‘been saved.’

Christians, while they may indeed vigorously point out social injustice to convict the world of sin, are simultaneously those who must suffer it. Matthew understands discipleship as leading to fairly intense conditions of deprivation, some of which occurs by persecution, some by obedience to Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount envisions disciples of Jesus being persecuted for righteousness' sake, whereas the rich young man is asked to give up everything out of obedience. The climax of Matthew's upper room discourse (the parable of the sheep and the goats) shares the same thought. The hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, imprisoned, and the homeless, though commonly used as a mandate for Christian social action, refer to Christians themselves and how they are treated by non-Christians. Jesus calls the deprived 'these brothers of mine' (Mt.25:40). That term (*adelphois*) is used of the disciples alone in Matthew (Mt.12:46; 23:8; 23:20). Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats restates the Old Testament tradition of God identifying Himself with His covenant people such that when the people are harmed, God is affected. This occurs with Abraham, continues through Israel in exile,³ and is powerfully reasserted in relation to the renewed Israel, the Messianic community of Jesus' disciples, into which the Gentiles are drawn. Hence when Saul persecuted the early Christians, he was really persecuting Jesus (Acts 9:3). Likewise Paul draws on this tight identification between God and His people, 'If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are' (1 Cor.3:17). And to the Thessalonians, Paul makes the bold claim, 'For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you...dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Th.1:7 – 8). This idea might seem to us like an intolerably high view of the church, but to the original disciples it would have been understandable in retrospect as one of Jesus' last teachings. They, as a small, persecuted community, will soon be commissioned to go out to the ends of the earth and make disciples of all nations. The tight identification between Jesus and his church shows how seriously they must take the teaching and example of Jesus, individually and as a community. In Matthew, this identification extends even to the eternal destiny of others. As the peoples of the world receive or reject Jesus' disciples, they receive or reject Jesus himself.

Hence Matthew agrees with Luke that Jesus' definition of heavenly treasure reflects his desire that his followers be not just more economically 'egalitarian,' but animated by a zeal to imitate him in all things, or more precisely, for global mission even to enemies. 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' This is to be expressed by giving away material things for the sake of others. Heavenly treasure, then, is not so much a set of eschatological rewards doled out in 'heaven' at the end of time, nor is it earthly resources spread out and shared in the church in a 'heavenly' or 'eschatological' way. It is something that accrues to Christians individually now, just as Jesus said to the rich ruler that the one thing he lacked, he would have when he gave up everything and followed him. It is the accumulation of a certain experience, the experience of Jesus' own sacrificial love for others pouring out through a believer. It is thus internal to a believer and expressed in the context of relationships, whether those relationships be with Christians or non-Christians. To reiterate, heavenly treasure is not just giving to the church, gaining from the church, or redistributing wealth within the church. Of course it can be glimpsed and exercised in the sphere of the church, but it is not bound by it.

To put it differently: Before we speak of the body of Christ on any meaningful level, we must first speak of Christ's relationship to the creation story, from which he derives his understanding that the Sinaitic Law from Exodus 19 onward was temporary and a partial concession to 'hardness of heart.' Jesus' elevation of sacrificial love is what made Jesus' attitude towards material wealth so different from Israel's and so challenging to human nature in general. Because Jesus' life and love are characterized by unflinching sacrifice on behalf of God and others, so our lives, once joined to Jesus by the Spirit through faith, must look this same way. Accumulating heavenly treasure consists in giving earthly treasure away as the Spirit of Christ directs; the accumulation of one is diametrically opposed to the accumulation of the other. In this sense, obedience is its own reward. The sharing and sacrifice of wealth serves as a demonstration of one's union with Christ and the spiritual riches inherent in him. The call of the church is not just to help the poor in one's own nation, but to actually *become* poor for the sake of expressing the life of Christ to the whole world. Paul may or may not have had the 'heavenly treasures' saying of Jesus in his mind in 2 Corinthians 4:7 – 11, but his statement nevertheless reflects Jesus' thought accurately: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels...always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.'

James

The similarity between James and Matthew – particularly the Sermon on the Mount – has long been noted. However, the tendency among conservative exegetes to treat James as a collection of wisdom sayings not directed at

³ To Abraham: 'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse'; Gen.12:1 – 2. To Israel in exile: 'he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye'; Zech.2:8.

any concrete situation is problematic. I believe James contextualizes the teaching of Jesus into a specific – and difficult – situation. Probably writing to Palestinian Jews suffering from a famine,⁴ James addresses a situation rife with class conflict. Although no evangelical scholar (besides Justo Gonzales) I know of agrees with my view of James and his audience, the exegetical data is more than sufficient. Stronger claims about other books have been made and accepted on less data.

For example, natural and economic hardship is a satisfying explanation for the ‘trials’ James refers to in 1:2. In a short span of verses, James quickly turns to discuss the poor and the rich (1:9 – 11). Is this a completely new thought or an interrelated one? I believe it is interrelated. The trials come from economic hardship. James challenges the rich in many ways, telling them to glory in their humiliation as they are taught and corrected in the church (1:10 – 11). The most concrete ethical instruction is to provide for orphans and widows; this is an economic issue (1:27). James rebukes his audience for bringing the oppression of the world into the church service (2:1 – 13). In this context, James notes in passing that the rich drag the poor into court (2:6). This seems to be one reason behind the ‘quarrels and conflicts’ in 4:1. After all, no other larger conflict is addressed in James.

Likewise, the entire section about ‘justification by works’ is not a disembodied theological reflection. Still less is it uttered with Paul’s doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ in mind as a foil. ‘Justification’ for both Paul and James is a corporate, communal term. This was another substantial error of the Protestant Reformers. Because of their context in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, they assumed that ‘justification’ means something like ‘how an individual is made right with God,’ or ‘how God declares an individual innocent,’ or ‘how a person becomes a Christian,’ or something like that. Also, because of Luther’s conscience-stricken paranoia, his preoccupation was with how an individual person relates to God. But that is only a secondary aspect of ‘justification.’

The Jewish and biblical framework for understanding ‘justification’ is God’s covenant with Israel at the cusp of their return from exile, i.e. expecting ‘resurrection.’ The word ‘justification’, which might mean ‘vindication’ in its simplest form (e.g. Rom.3:4), has an eschatological flavor when applied to us, referring to participation in the resurrected new covenant community that has ‘returned from exile’ and has been vindicated in an ultimate, eschatological sense. N.T. Wright has stressed that ‘justification’ is not an individualistic idea; it requires the concept of covenant community. Hence, when Paul is speaking in Romans about how Abraham is the father of a community of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom.4:16 – 17), he has in mind the word ‘justification,’ and it is linked most organically to the resurrection of Jesus, in which his people collectively are bound up: indeed, ‘he was raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). This is connected to Old Testament links between resurrection and justification, for example, in Ezekiel 36 – 37, when being given a new heart in chapter 36 is identified with being resurrected in chapter 37, and being resurrected is identified with being vindicated, that is, justified. Biblically, justification has to do with joining the true Israel, the covenant community, on the other side of her exile and death, an exile and death that Jesus takes on at the cross and emerges through in his resurrection. Paul says of the Gentiles, ‘you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise...[but] you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household.’ (Eph.2:12, 19) Just as the old covenant community was redeemed out of Egypt as a community to be a community, so the new covenant community was redeemed out of the Law, sin, and death as a community to be a community.

This teaching on the new covenant community situates James and Paul in their proper contexts. For Paul, discussion about justification occurs in the context of ethnic and cultural tension in the community, in his time between Jew and Gentile. N.T. Wright says, ‘His polemic against ‘works of the law’ is not directed against those who attempted to earn covenant membership through keeping the Jewish law (such people do not seem to have existed in the 1st century) but against those who sought to demonstrate their membership in the covenant through obeying the Jewish law. Against those people Paul argues (a) that the law cannot in fact be kept perfectly – it merely shows up sin; and (b) that this attempt would reduce the covenant to a single race, those who possess the Jewish law, whereas God desires a world-wide family.’ (*New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP, p.360)

For Paul, preserving the unity of the Jewish and Gentile believers is absolutely essential to the gospel. This is the main thrust of Ephesians, not least when Paul talks about the ‘dividing wall of hostility’ between Jew and Gentile being torn down, because all who believe in Christ are now placed ‘in Christ,’ and there is no division ‘in Christ’ (2:11 – 22). Disrupting the unity of the body is rebuked in the severest possible terms. It allows Satan to gain a foothold in the church (4:27) and grieves the Holy Spirit (4:30). But for centuries, Protestant commentators on Paul have emphasized Romans 1 – 8 and Galatians, and misinterpreted those letters as if Paul were really talking

⁴ We know from Acts 11:28 that a famine hit the Mediterranean region during the early years of Barnabas and Saul, prompting relief to be gathered for the brethren in Judea. James hints at a famine in 1:11, ‘For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass...’ and in 5:17 – 18 when he observes that Elijah’s prayers stopped the rain for three and a half years and started them again.

about 'individual salvation' and its precise mechanics (I elaborate on this below). So too, statements like 'He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil.1:8) were applied to the individual, even though they are really about community (e.g. the argument between Euodia and Syntyche; see also Gordon Fee's commentary on Philippians). If the Protestant Reformers had started with Ephesians, which is closest in succinctness to Paul's native concerns, they would have oriented Paul's theology around the Christian community and horizontal reconciliation, not merely around 'individual salvation.' In Ephesians, Paul is not dealing with some pressing problem but rather giving God's grand vision for the church. In fact, some manuscripts have a blank space instead of the destination 'Ephesus' in the address, suggesting that what we call 'Ephesians' was really designed as a more general chain letter. This would have had dramatic consequences. For Paul as well as the rest of the NT, horizontal reconciliation with others (especially across ethnic, racial, and national lines) goes hand in hand with vertical reconciliation with God because of the reality of the church as a new family stretching across national, ethnic, and racial lines.

James has the same theology of the covenant people. Because James is addressing the issue of favoritism between rich and poor in the new covenant community, he invokes the challenge of 'justification by works.' This does not mean that you must earn salvation from God by doing 'meritorious' things. Neither does it mean that we must achieve a state of 'moral perfection.' Rather, it has to do with whether a person has really committed to living in the reality of Jesus' covenant community. The unity of the covenant community makes favoritism in the community a sin calling into question one's membership in the first place. If a rich man gets favored treatment over a poor man, that is the sin of partiality, which violates the principle of unity within the covenant community (2:4, 9). Partiality and favoritism, as compared with murder and adultery (2:11), seem at first like small sins of omission, like merely forgetting to do help as opposed to intentionally hurting someone. But in reality, James says, partiality and favoritism are gross sins of commission *just like* murder and adultery. 'For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all' (2:10).

We can make the parallel between James and Matthew even clearer at this point. Echoing Matthew's conceptual language where *realms* of mercy seem to be emphasized, James says, 'For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy [in this context, to the poor]; mercy triumphs over judgment' (2:13). One either lives in the realm of God's mercy and showing mercy, or in the realm of showing judgment and therefore incurring God's judgment. That is the organic link. What James calls 'justification by works,' Matthew calls 'forgive as you have been forgiven,' and its converse, 'if you do not forgive men, your Father will not forgive your transgressions.' Favoritism is a lack of mercy and a failure to live in the realm of mercy.

The ethical trajectory becomes clear. If a brother or sister is without clothing or in need of daily food, and gets only lip service and not real assistance (2:15 – 16), that also violates the principle of unity within the covenant community and demonstrates a lack of having received God's mercy. That's why James calls it 'dead faith' (2:17). The partiality revealed in favoring a rich person in some social setting, or conversely, in not making efforts to care for the neglected, is a gross sin. It is a failure to love as Jesus loves. It is a capitulation to the selfish relational patterns of the world, which God breaks through and countermands by loving us in and through Jesus. The question is not, 'How can you teach God's free grace and say we are obligated to give to the poor?' The question is quite the opposite: 'How can you teach God's free grace and *not* say we are obligated to the poor?' In James, favoritism against the poor reveals a fundamental flaw in one's spiritual development, and can only call into question one's participation in the covenant community – i.e. one's very salvation – in the first place. This is exactly what James does in chapters 1 and 2. This is also Paul's logic when he talks about how believers must work towards unity and reconciliation in the body; it is a logical outgrowth of our union and reconciliation with Jesus (e.g. Ephesians, Romans 12 – 15, etc.). The community of Jesus is marked outwardly by a different social ethic than others. The evidence of our identification with Jesus' community (i.e. our 'justification') is by such relationship.

That James thinks of 'justification' as 'how to join the new covenant community' is evidenced by his use of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and Rahab receiving the Israelite spies as examples. At first these examples strike us as utterly strange. Is this how 'works' justify us, according to James? Certainly if we were reading James as if he were preeminently saying 'earn your way to God,' these examples would be extremely bad ones. Abraham's act was not simply a 'moral' act; he was not even living under the Mosaic Law, and his willingness to sacrifice his son would have been forbidden under the Mosaic Law. As Kierkegaard said, it was beyond standard categories of morality, and, given the uniqueness of Abraham's experience, it would be hard to understand how he serves as a model for us. Rahab's act cannot be placed in standard categories of morality either. She harbored Israel's spies – how does that have any bearing on the rich/poor issue? But closer examination reveals James' clear-headedness. Rahab's act was a gesture of joining the covenant community, Israel. In siding with the spies, she switched allegiances from the community of Jericho to God's covenant community, Israel. Thus, her example is appropriate. She demonstrated the 'works' commensurate with joining the covenant community. And Abraham's act of offering Isaac is also appropriate if James – and if not all early Christians as a whole (e.g. Romans 4:16 – 25) – understood Abraham as

identifying himself with the 'covenant community' that flowed out of the resurrection of a supernaturally born son? He did not just 'intellectually believe' that God's word is authoritative. He acted on that word of promise and, believing that God must be able to resurrect Isaac (Heb.11:19), identified himself with the family-community that must emerge with Isaac on the other side of Isaac's resurrection. That resurrection faith then becomes a precursor of the Christian faith. Abraham identifies himself with a resurrected Isaac and the covenant community flowing out from a resurrected Isaac, which has profound parallels with the renewed covenant community flowing out from and participating in the resurrected Jesus. This supports N.T. Wright's argument that 'justification' must be understood not individualistically, but with reference to the community of faith. Here, it supports my argument that James teaches that among the people of God, wealth disparities must be addressed.

James seems to divide his address between actions and speech at chapter 3, perhaps employing a Hebrew merism referring to the totality of what proceeds out of a person. In addressing speech, James says that some [the rich landowners] speak arrogantly, saying that they could escape hardship [the famine] by going to the city and even making money in the process! They hoard up riches, he continues, to the detriment of their laborers and, because of their sin, themselves (4:13 – 5:6). If the challenge, 'Come now, you who say' in 4:13 is addressed to the same people as in 5:1, 'Come now, you rich,' which is a reasonable assertion, then the lines seem to be drawn between wealthy landowning families who have enough mobility to escape the situation and poor tenant farmers who do not. The arrogant talk of the mobile rich exacerbates the tension in the Christian community, just as talk about expensive vacations, new business opportunities, house décor, and lunches in fine restaurants would be divisive in churches today. The rebuke to the rich cannot be missed, nor can it be downplayed in our contemporary world that is also rife with (often unspoken) class conflict.

What is especially surprising, however, is that James also challenges the poor to rejoice in their suffering and low position (1:2 – 4, 9), to renounce jealousy in favor of wisdom and gentleness (3:13 – 4:4), to not pray for wealth with certain evil motives ('so that you may spend it on your pleasures' in 4:3). James' dramatic warning to the rich envisions the wealth of the current creation rotting or being burned in fire (5:1 – 3; cf. 2 Pet.3:7) but this is audible to all, which reinforces my contention that those who are aligned or identified with the coming new heavens and new earth through Jesus must live as pilgrims and aliens because the judgment preceding it will overtake all those who are aligned or identified with the current world. Indeed, James cuts through the materialistic desires of both rich and poor by telling both groups to await the coming of the Lord, accepting with endurance and patience the present suffering (5:7 – 11). Like Jesus, James challenges both rich and poor, demonstrated by the sheer number of quotations or allusions to Jesus' preaching. He does make the advantaged share their resources with the disadvantaged. He challenges the poor as well, which is only possible by addressing the conflict in the context of the discontinuity between the old creation and the new.

Paul (2 Corinthians 8 – 9, Philippians)

Paul's collection for the famine victims in Jerusalem is a case study in what some have regarded as simple redistribution of wealth within the church. Indeed, Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 raises the desire to see a rough level of 'equality' across the church worldwide, and rightly so, in our opinion. Second Corinthians 8 – 9 suggests answers to at least a few important questions: Can we argue for a redistribution of wealth within the church? If so, how? How are we to use the Law and the Prophets, especially when we are desirous of stimulating financial sharing and redistribution of wealth?

Observing Paul's Old Testament quotations, Richard B. Hays suggests that Paul exercises hermeneutical freedom using an ecclesiocentric lens with very few constraints. Hays believes Paul does not wrestle seriously with the contexts from which he pulls these Old Testament fragments. He goes on to encourage Christians to make the same use of the Old Testament. We cannot go into great depth here, but we believe Hays – a New Testament scholar writing in 1987 with very few Old Testament literary scholars listed in his bibliography – was not attentive to the emerging findings of Old Testament biblical scholars concerning biblical narrative and intertextuality. We believe Paul's work evidences more deliberation than Hays attributes to him, and that Hays overstates Paul's hermeneutical freedom. In 2 Corinthians 8 – 9, where the redistribution of wealth is discussed on the occasion of the fundraising effort for the Jerusalem poor, which of Israel's traditions are quoted? Interestingly enough, Paul does not take Israel's historic condition of being oppressed in Egypt and use it in favor of the Jerusalem believers and against the Corinthians, which might have been appropriate given the fact that the Roman Empire was oppressing Israel. Paul does not quote passages from the Exodus deliverance event such as, 'You will not go empty-handed' or 'The LORD had given the people favor.' (Ex.3:21; 12:36) Nor does Paul quote from Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh as if he were in the role of Moses, the Greek Christians were in the role of Pharaoh, and the Jewish Christians in the role of Israel in Egypt. He does not use the convenient sociological hermeneutics of much liberation theology, and I say that despite my personal sympathies with what liberation theology is trying to accomplish. Nor does he, perhaps even more surprisingly, use Israel's land traditions as a model for economic equality within the worldwide church

community. He does not quote, 'So that the needy of your people may eat' or, 'There shall be no poor among you.' (Ex.23:11; Dt.15:4) Instead, Paul quotes from the wilderness manna episode. 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack' (Ex.16:18 quoted in 2 Cor.8:15). Why?

Obviously the two situations are not perfectly equivalent, but quoting the wilderness manna episode serves several pastoral purposes Paul conceivably had. Hays notes some of them. The quote depicts the church's life in the world as an echo of Israel's wilderness wandering episode, preventing the Corinthians from adopting a settler mentality (cf. 1 Cor.10). It reinforces the church's unity as a people sojourning together, warning them against a schism. It highlights the church's dependence on God by echoing Israel's dependence on God's supernatural provision. To these reasons we may add that this quotation strategically critiques the Corinthians' materialism and their temptation to hoard for the future. In the wilderness, when the Israelite men went out to gather manna for their own households, they discovered that if they tried to gather a large amount, their portion mysteriously shrank to suit their household for that day. Extra manna spoiled. Is Paul suggesting that the Corinthians' excess, if they try to hoard it for themselves, will be wasted from a divine perspective? Probably. Is Paul suggesting that God acts, and invites the church to act, in ways to meet the basic needs of its members as it sojourns in the world? Probably. We cannot be absolutely sure which echoes Paul intended and which he didn't, but as Hays rightly says, the lingering literary echoes that fill the air are fascinating.

The other quotation Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 is at least Psalm 112:9 and possibly another Old Testament text which is probably Psalm 147:16. If we assume once again that these quotations are meant to evoke these Psalms in their entirety, as Hays and other literary scholars suggest, they serve Paul well in his immediate purpose. Psalm 112 holds up the creational/Israelite ideal of the one blessed by God and having seed or descendants being mighty on the earth by holding it up as God's promised future for His true humanity. Mention of evil and enemies (v.7, 8, 10) in the present makes the Psalmist expectantly turn to the future when God will vindicate the righteous with secure permanence and abundant wealth (v.1 – 3a). Hence this Psalm describes Israel's 'waiting for restoration from exile' period. The most frequently repeated refrain – the righteous will endure or be remembered forever – occurs three times (v.3b, 6, 9). And how is that righteousness described? That righteousness which will be vindicated in the future is demonstrated by financial generosity in the present. The upright one is gracious, compassionate, and upright (v.4), lends money (v.5), is steadfast in this cause even in the face of evil tidings and uncertainty (v.6 – 8), and gives freely to the poor (v.9). It is this portrait of the waiting righteous that Paul uses to describe the Corinthians. Those who are truly righteous do such things, by definition.

The phrase 'He scattered abroad' might come from Psalm 147:16, which is a celebration of YHWH regathering His worshipers in Jerusalem, summoning the outcasts, healing the brokenhearted, binding their wounds, and supporting the afflicted (v.1 – 6). As in the natural world, where God provides rain, makes grass grow, and gives food to beasts independently of humanity and their plow-mates, the horses (v.7 – 11), so within Jerusalem, where God strengthens His people with wheat and scattered frost which turns to melted ice water (v.12 – 20). Praise consequently flows to God (v.12, 20). This Psalm is thus a 'being regathered from exile' text. This is a beautiful image to apply to the church, which is described elsewhere as the new Temple and the citizens of the much-anticipated New Jerusalem. The church is the people who are being regathered from exile. And it suits the pastoral situation with the Corinthians, where Paul reminds them not only that God can meet their needs (2 Cor.9:8 – 12) but that because of their bountiful gift (v.5 – 6), cheerful giving (v.7), good deeds (v.8), and generous liberality (v.11, 13) in helping the poor, thanksgiving to God is and will be overflowing (v.11 – 13). God is being praised. The unbelieving world is noticing. The Corinthians' actions are, in some way, enacting the major themes of this Psalm from a fresh perspective redrawn around Jesus and his people.

Together, the combination of Exodus 16, Psalm 112, and Psalm 147 invoke a cluster of motifs that reinforce Paul's burden in writing, that of reminding the Corinthians of the financial gift that they promised. Themes echo and reverberate constructively in Paul's petition. We hear in the foreground and the background of Paul's writing the themes of God's provision for His people, the honor and dignity of being the church, the pilgrim status of the church, unity among God's people, generosity being a central aspect of righteousness, and praise resounding to God as we testify not only to His provision for us, but His provision through us to others. So Hays is correct in saying that Paul strives for an ecclesiocentric application affirming the whole church, but he does not push his analysis on hermeneutical freedom further by asking what Paul does not quote from.

If the Old Testament is a resource from which Christians can freely draw, then why does Paul, in this very significant instance where one part of the church needed help from another, not use this source in the way many today would propose? Why does Paul not quote from the Exodus deliverance event, as is so common today when the church deals with issues of inequality? We are, after all, examining a situation of the oppression of Israel by Roman power and Hellenistic culture. But perhaps the motif of conflict between Israel and Egypt would exacerbate the tensions in the church between Jew and Gentile and at least in part, jeopardize its already fragile unity, a concern ubiquitous in Paul. Or, why does Paul not quote from Israel's land legislation? Perhaps because that would lead to

mistaken attitudes about the church ‘settling’ the current creation. Attitudes of entitlement and materialism grow out of an imprecise eschatology, which Paul struggled against, as 1 Corinthians and, to a lesser extent, the Thessalonian letters show. Would those echoes be destructive to the church? By any account here, if we allow Paul any kind of thoughtful deliberation in his use of the Law and the Prophets, his selection ought to raise questions for us. Did Paul understand, as we are now rediscovering today, that stories shape people’s attitudes and ethics more than a logical exposition ever can? This is not entirely unreasonable to assume of the apostle. Likely Paul’s brain moved with the rhythms of Hebrew haggadah as much as it did in logical, rabbinical halakah. I suggest yes – Paul knew it is dangerous to invoke pieces of another story when doing so orients you in a different direction, ethically speaking, than the story you yourself are attempting to tell.

I also note that before Paul offers any of these quotes, and before he gives any ethical framework from which the Corinthians could interpret this opportunity/responsibility, he interprets the incarnation of Jesus. That is, he offers a christocentric model and storyline for Christian obedience and ethics. ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Cor.8:9). Though Paul offers this reflection on the act of Jesus’ incarnation without drawing immediate application from it, this is surely not accidental. The Corinthians were taught of Jesus, have benefited from Jesus, and are now in Jesus. By inserting this reminder into his appeal, Paul indicates that the ultimate example and motivation for Christian giving is Jesus himself. It is a response to what has been done by and in Jesus Christ. Because the heart of the Christian life is to allow the life of Christ to be expressed in and through our human lives, the responsibility of Christians to give is limitless. Sometimes a situation will call for such costly giving. How much easier is giving, then, when a situation calls for much less, when it is ‘not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but...equality’ (2 Cor.8:13).

The equality Paul has in mind is probably more than the state of everyone merely having basic needs met. While he probably does not have in view a strict condition of equality across all metrics, he does want the church worldwide to have a relative, though not absolute, sense of economic equality *and economic sharing*. This passage has profound implications for our giving practices that reinforce the sense of Christian community developed by Matthew and James. Concerning how Christians give financially to the church, Paul does not seem to think in terms of Christians giving only to their own local congregation. Instead, he glances across the wider, worldwide body of Christ and encourages Christians to give money where it is needed most. In this case, need outweighs proximity, affinity, and personal acquaintance, since Paul is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to give generously to Jewish Christians who live far away, are culturally different, and known only through the reports of Paul and others. In this light, the contemporary practice of tithing 10% of our income to a local congregation should be re-evaluated. Such local churches might give a token amount to ministries elsewhere, but they surely spend the lion’s share of the money on their own operations. This practice reinforces often vast inequalities among churches, as wealthy congregations build sparkling buildings equipped with the latest technology, while others struggle to pay one pastor. Perhaps Christians should be mindful of Paul’s example here by giving our money to the church in a way that contributes to greater partnership within the worldwide body of Christ, instead of exacerbating class differences.

Finally, Paul welcomed Christians giving beyond what would have produced equality. We see this through Paul’s interaction with the Philippians. Notably, Paul affirmed the Philippian believers, who were impoverished (2 Cor.8:1 – 5), for giving to the Jerusalem collection and to his own ministry (Phil.4:10 – 17). The more we reflect on Paul’s encouragement to the low-income Philippian church, like the story of the poor widow in the Gospels, the more surprising it becomes. What kind of person would take money from poor people? Only someone who was convinced that giving was so important it either reflected or ushered in one’s possession of the greatest of all riches, the life of Jesus Christ by the Spirit within. This, after all, was Paul’s understanding. His Christ-centered motivations, ‘For me to live is Christ,’ and ‘I want to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings,’ carry him beyond liberation theology and beyond a particular level of economic equality. His entire being is fixed on the personal expression of Jesus Christ in him.

Paul on Slavery (1 Timothy, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon)

In 1 Timothy, which for the sake of simplicity I will assume Paul wrote, we have pastoral directives. Towards the end of the letter, Paul gives Timothy advice regarding slaves and masters as well as rich and poor. Apparently there were tensions then as there are now. A discussion about slavery deserves much more comment than I have space to do here.⁵ But I will repeat comments that I have made elsewhere. Understanding slavery in Scripture is very important, since slaves were ‘wealth’ in a very real sense, and yet many other theological considerations entered into the biblical view of humanity and the condition of slavery that overrode the view that

⁵ For my treatment of slavery throughout the Old and New Testaments, see www.nagasawafamily.org/article-slavery-in-the-bible.pdf.

slaves were simply someone else's wealth. Many slaves were in fact emancipated by the early Christians. Christians regularly purchased slaves and set them free. Exegetically, one's interpretation of the slave-master teaching in the New Testament completely depends on how one sequences the various responsibilities, ideas, and texts. One cannot simply read Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 and Colossians 3:22 – 4:1, where Paul teaches about the goal of various human relationships, without regard for 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul challenges and limits all human relationships and commitments. I regard 1 Corinthians 7 as logically and theologically prior to Ephesians and Colossians because it gives the larger framework into which everything must be placed. The teaching on Christian household relationships in Ephesians and Colossians is limited by 1 Corinthians 7 and framed by the thoughts there. The fundamental reason I believe this is that the opposite sequence makes the texts impossible to reconcile: If one takes Ephesians and Colossians as the larger framework, making those relationships paramount and binding (not even considering the fact that manumission happened fairly frequently in Roman society), then 1 Corinthians 7 with its limitations on relationships and loosening of human commitments to each other would make very little sense.

Furthermore, the sequence of responsibilities within Ephesians itself suggests that we must read Ephesians in proper order. The dynamics of Christian responsibility required the master to grant the slave enough freedom to participate in Christian giftedness and leadership (Eph.4:7 – 16) and mission (Eph.5:7 – 14), not only to the local community but the whole world (Mt.28:18 – 20; Lk.24:44 – 47; Jn.20:21 – 23). Practically speaking, networks of house churches would have required very mobile and flexible groups of elders, deacons, preachers, and leaders, including those who were Christian slaves. Significantly, the prior material in Ephesians 1:1 – 5:20 and Colossians 1:1 – 3:17 affirms not only the equal worth of all Christians, but the equal responsibilities of all Christians to demonstrate love, integrity, gifts, and mission, all of which requires a significant degree of freedom of relationship, mobility, speech, and use of wealth. The master could not impede those responsibilities. Thus, the master becomes a sponsor of the slave for the purpose of Christian love and mission, which all are called to do. Paul's teaching about slaves and masters in Ephesians and Colossians limits the power of the Christian master, and refocuses it.

For the same reason that Paul urges Christians to consider singleness as opposed to marriage, while still upholding the goodness of marriage (1 Cor.7:28), the practical criterion in 1 Corinthians 7 is discretionary independence ('undistracted devotion') to serve the Lord. There may be situations in which being a free but employed person would give a person less discretionary time and energy than being a slave of a supportive master. This underlies Paul's statement, 'Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called' (1 Cor.7:24). Upward mobility for its own sake was not highly looked upon in Christian ethics. However, Paul taught that lawfully obtained manumission is the ideal for slaves: 'Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that' (1 Cor.7:21). Paul therefore has a general preference for a slave becoming free. Paul's admonition to 'not become slaves of men' (1 Cor.7:23) shows an aversion to slavery or indentured servitude in general, despite the fact that in the Roman world, people voluntarily sold themselves into slavery to wealthy and powerful patrons to strategically advance their careers. This is absolutely consistent with the overarching question of how we must live if our bodies are the Lord's (1 Cor.6:19 – 20). Skill in Christian service and leadership was valued highly, and led to early manumission (Philem.10 – 12). Since the slave's status may also conflict with any call of God to a new people, geography, or ministry task, in which case the master may have been asked to release the slave. Paul's letter to Philemon, asking Philemon to free Onesimus reflects that principle. This led to an early form of meritocracy based on Christian character and ability.

I hasten to point out that my conclusions about slavery in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Corinthians, Philemon, and 1 Timothy are rooted in *exegesis*. That is, I do not diminish Paul's letters by saying that some or all of his letters were 'occasional,' as if Paul delivered sub-Christian ethics in some situations. The argument that Ephesians in particular is 'occasional' is weak since Ephesians is not a response to any problem; in fact, it seems to reflect the 'center' of Pauline thought. Nor do I believe that doing biblical interpretation in liberal America, with its cultural bias towards freedom and individualism, means that we should look at the 'trajectory' of biblical slavery as trending towards the freedom and individualism we experience today, as if the New Testament pointed beyond itself and looked ahead longingly for white American culture.

Those privileged are to be reminded firmly and constantly 'not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches...but to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed' (1 Tim.6:17 – 19). In the same language that Jesus used in his own teaching, Paul absolutizes the Christ-shaped character quality of giving and generosity. This means that the responsibility of the rich towards the poor is independent of all social and political conditions: the political or economic climate, the relative disparity between rich and poor, the historical reasons for why such divisions exist, whether the poor are Christian or not, and whether the poor are 'deserving' by demonstrating a particular attitude. The responsibility always exists. We can extend that further because politically conservative Christians in the United States tend to believe that calls to help the poor or address the racialization of wealth are political agendas influencing the church for the worse. Whether they are items

on the political agenda or not is irrelevant: We are called to do it all the same. And while Christian responsibility always requires personal acts of giving, it is not restricted to just that. What we call 'organized' or 'institutional' efforts are probably to be commended (albeit carefully navigated) because the New Testament impresses upon us that that too is a form of 'personal' involvement. The responsibility of the resourced Christian is to express the life of Christ; therefore the Christian responsibility to give and care for the poor is unlimited.

At the same time, Timothy is to give slaves and the poor challenging teaching as well, insofar as these poor have their basic needs met (v.8). They are not to be disrespectful towards the privileged, but cultivate contentment, ridding themselves of the idea that godliness is a means of financial gain. They are even to rid themselves even of the desire to get rich (v.1 – 10). If the Christian slave was not manumitted immediately, s/he was still responsible for paying off her/his debt, finishing a sentence, etc. However, the desires for upward mobility and material gain were not considered appropriate motivations for anyone, including Christian slaves seeking automatic release from Christian masters (1 Cor.7:17 – 35; 1 Tim.6:2 – 11). Nor, on a practical level, did independence necessarily lead to an easier life, so manumission by a Christian master, while it certainly happened, was not automatic. It is in this context that Paul says, 'For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith.' This is not at all to say that the Christian poor can have no forum to make their needs known, that they must stay silent, or that they should do nothing on behalf of other poor people. To the contrary, the poor always received special assistance from other members in the church (e.g. Gal.2:10), and Christian slaves sometimes did receive or buy back their freedom (1 Cor.7:21), but again the intersection of social issues with character issues did not result in an inverse relation where one completely canceled out the other. The Christian poor, as well as the Christian rich, must first and foremost express the life of Christ.