

## **The Rich Young Ruler and the Creation Order: The Ethical and Theological Implications of Matthew 19:13 – 30**

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: August 10, 2012

### **Problems with Evangelical Treatments of Jesus' Teaching on Wealth**

In discussions about homosexuality, evangelicals (including me) 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 announces that he is removing 'hardness of heart' and restoring 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.

In American evangelicalism, the collusion between Christian faith, American nationalism, and corporate capitalism has bred a conservative religious and political philosophy that sanctifies greed, along with the creation and possession of vast amounts of wealth. But this collusion goes much further back. In the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers made implicit and explicit alliances with merchants and bankers to fund the Reformation movement. Roman Catholics owned land, the dominant form of wealth at the time, and the Reformers had to pay printing and traveling costs, organize people, and fund ministers. Hence Calvin departed from the fifteen-hundred-year-old church tradition of critiquing and condemning interest rates; he was probably the first major Christian theologian to approve of commercial banking. Protestant Reformers read most ordinary vocations and 'economic dominion' into the Genesis narrative, to buttress their theology of the priesthood of all believers in contrast to the Catholic special priesthood. Later Christian philosophers like John Locke fashioned a political philosophy around private property, which influenced American evangelicalism a great deal. Undoubtedly more reasons can be found for this major defect in Protestant theology, in both formal and popular levels. But I intend to focus, not on the history of interpretation of this particular passage, or of greed more broadly, but on re-reading Matthew 19:3 – 20:28 in light of Matthew's chiasmic structure, and hearing Jesus with fresh power recalling us to God's heart from the creation. In this essay, I focus on Matthew 19:13 – 30, the story of the rich young ruler.

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? Elsewhere, I have provided my treatment of Genesis 1 in the context of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament as a whole.<sup>1</sup> I have also benefited a great deal from Kikawada and Quinn's comparison of Genesis 1 – 11 to the other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, where they conclude that Genesis 1 – 11 is a ringing defense of the dignity of each and every human being as being made in the image of a loving God.<sup>2</sup> The other creation stories limit the value and worth of human beings in favor of some 'social order,' a social order which assuredly benefits the rich and powerful.<sup>3</sup>

I find the Protestant view of 'dominion' to be problematic, primarily because of a lack of serious scholarship integrating Genesis 1 and 2 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 and 2, when human beings were empowered spiritually and supernaturally to spread the wondrous garden of Eden over the wild creation. A thorough treatment of this topic must address that question on a canonical level, especially including Paul and 1 Corinthians because of Paul's thorough and systematic treatment of Jesus' resurrection as God's resumption of His original purposes for humanity

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<sup>1</sup> [http://nagasawafamily.org/archives\\_question\\_work.htm](http://nagasawafamily.org/archives_question_work.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.36 – 53

<sup>3</sup> Mako Nagasawa, 'What's More Important to God? The Individual or the Social Order: Genesis 1:1 – 11:26'; <http://nagasawafamily.org/genesis 01-11.pdf>.

from creation. 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.

**The Literary Structure of Matthew’s Gospel**

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.

<p>But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were 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)</p>	<p>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, 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)</p>
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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*.

### **The Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5 – 7**

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 (Zion, Sinai, perhaps even Eden). 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. Matthew is not following the more chronological account of Mark and Luke. His purpose in compressing the ten miracles into a dense narrative is surely to create a literary echo of the ten commandments, reflecting back on the new ‘law of the heart’ to indicate that Jesus’ teaching is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

On a deeper level, Jesus appears to be writing this very ethic into his own humanity, as he has taken human flesh to himself in his incarnation, ‘to save his people from *their sins*’ (Mt.1:21). 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* and not merely *their guilt*. 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]’.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Gary Tuck, *Matthew 5:17: Jesus Did Come to Abolish the Law...And He Said So*, available on line

<sup>5</sup> *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.’

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.

### **The Rich Young Man and the Teaching of Jesus: Matthew 19:13 – 30**

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 creational 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 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.25:40 – 41). 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.

### **Matthew's Language of Money and Debt**

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 debts, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your debts' (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,<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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.'

MORE TO COME