

The Good Life: Blessedness, or the Joy of Progress

Two Primary Concepts: Blessedness and Righteousness, or the Good Life and the Good Person

Our focus this weekend is on two key ideas, some version of which everyone has. What makes for the Good Life? And, who is a truly Good Person?

Blessedness or the good life is whatever makes for human flourishing – a life one would choose.

- In everyday terms, this is the question of happiness – what is happiness and how do we get it?
- In biblical terms, this is the question of “blessedness” (often also indicated by “joy”). This is a life one could envy – want what he has though not who he is.

The righteous or good person, on the other hand, is the one we tend to (or should) admire and feel drawn to imitate – even if his life is not full of the things that we consider to be the means of flourishing.

- In biblical terms this is the “righteous” or “just” person (tsedeq / *dikaïos*) and “righteousness” or “justice” (tsedeqah / *dikaïosynê*).
- So, this refers to a life one could admire but not envy – one might desire to be like this person but not necessarily to have all his life circumstances or (lack of) possessions.

An easy way into this distinction might be to consider the difference between “advertising” values and “funeral” values.

- If you want to know what a culture thinks of as the good life, watch it’s marketing strategies. Advertisements try to connect products to images of the good life. They depict things that might be enviable or coveted in the broader culture.
- If you want to know how a culture thinks about the good person, read obituaries and listen to eulogies at funerals. Obituaries rarely include the sort of information that advertisements leverage. Nobody says, “He had bleached straight teeth, a great build, drove a really fast car, and got into bed with lots of super attractive sex partners... I’m really going to miss him.” That’s just not what one says at the funeral of a loved one. Instead, we search (sometimes we *scrape*) for something admirable to point out about the deceased.

In our world, blessedness and righteousness or happiness and moral excellence are intuitively felt to be in (at least potential) conflict with each other. Can the good person enjoy the good life? That depends, at least in part, on what the good life is and what it means to be a good person.

Every person and all cultures possess a rough (not fully coherent) set of answers to these questions.

- The reason they have an answer – even if they don’t say it out loud – is because humans cannot live without an answer to these questions. Life is too complex to negotiate without some fairly settled sense of what to desire and whom to admire. These decisions are too big to make repeatedly and on the spot. They’re more like compass points than forks in the road.
- Moreover, it is characteristic of all major philosophies and religions to provide some theory (and prescribed practice) to resolve the intuitive incompatibility of the good life and the

good person. The best philosophies and religions try to explain how one can be both morally good and subjectively well-off. Usually this involves re-defining one or both of these concepts in fairly radical ways.

- In Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy these correlated with the twin questions of Virtue (moral goodness) and Well-Being (happiness or eudaimonia) – roughly, what is the relation between morality and a life one would choose?⁹ The Greek and Roman philosophers offered an array of answers but, generally speaking, they tended to collapse well-being into either moral goodness or physical pleasure – happiness would be reduced to fit into one or the other.¹

Jesus on Blessedness:

- Jesus locates the nature and conditions of happiness (blessedness) in relation to something distinctively different – neither morality nor physical pleasure. Whereas the Greeks talked about happiness in terms of relations to either moral goodness (which on some accounts is largely reducible to social esteem) or to bodily pleasure, Jesus put forward an account of happiness – of subjective human flourishing – as directly arising from the experience of co-working with God.
 - Perhaps, abstractly, we could say there is a joy in actively uniting with (or yielding to?) something greater than oneself. Of course, moral character and external circumstances intersect with this experience, but the core experience seems to be the co-working (or agential enfolding) itself.
 - Thus, Jesus understands happiness as only indirectly dependent on moral goodness. As he explicitly shows in his parables (those with a theme of deferred judgment), Jesus sees immorality as capable of precluding happiness only at the point at which it prevents co-working with God. (So we could say that synchronically – within any given time-slice – morality and happiness are sharply distinguished; but diachronically – if taken over the course of a whole life – they begin to converge and condition each other

¹ The following is not exhaustive but gives a sense of the major views and their range:

For Aristotle, happiness was a composite product composed of goods of the soul (virtue), goods of the body (health, strength, beauty, etc...), and some external goods (wealth, status, reputation, etc...). Virtue was necessary but not sufficient for happiness, because pain and poverty and the like could make a good man miserable. Vice, on the other hand, was sufficient *in itself* to make one miserable, even amid bodily and external goods. (see Diogenes Laertius 5.30)

For the Epicureans, happiness was a state of pleasure realized in the absence of any accompanying pain. This happiness was identified with the sheer pleasure of existence – existence was not experientially neutral but itself already humming with a tranquil delight until some pain disturbed the quiet bliss. Since Epicureans were thorough-going materialists, this pleasure was a sort of bodily pleasure.

For the Stoics, happiness, as true flourishing, consisted only in virtue. It was nothing more nor less. Virtue was tightly circumscribed by that which was within one's own power – that is, by the cognitive assent or dissent to an implicit meaning ("sayable") within received presentations. Bodily health and all externals are morally indifferent by definition, because they are outside one's core capacity of directly effective cognitive choice. Thus, the sage would be perfectly happy even while being tortured to a slow death on the wheel.

Antiochus of Ascalon – Virtue is both necessary and sufficient for a happy life, but only necessary for a completely happy life. Like sorrow, happiness comes in degrees. It's a more or less affair. There's an intensity of happiness acquired when external and bodily goods are added to the life of virtue. But virtue infallibly makes one, shall we say, happy enough.

without ever fully collapsing into each other. This conceptual precision is important for understanding Jesus' account.)

- Beneath and behind Jesus' language of "blessedness" (*makarios*) is the Hebraic notion of the *asher* (well-off, happy person) and the experience expressed by the verb *ashar* (to be blessed, well-off). This is the word with which Psalm 1 begins, and with it the whole Psalter's relentless exploration of human emotion in relation to God and God's deeds (or troubling absence thereof). Jesus' first, and oft repeated, word in his Sermon on the Mount is "blessed" - *makarios*, which in the LXX is typically a translation of *asher*.
 - The Hebrew etymology is significant. *Asher* comes from a root whose noun refers to a step or track (*ashur*) and which can also form a verb that means to walk down a path or be guided in a way (*ashar*). The very term implies process rather than stasis, an intrinsically variable set of actions rather than a singular arrival at a stable rest. In other words, whereas happiness is often thought to be the end result of moral goodness or of bodily pleasure achieved, *Asher* / *Makarios* picks out a joy in the journey itself - the joy of goal-oriented actions.²
 - While the word, *asher*, is not used, the state is depicted in the opening lines of Psalm 23. "The LORD is my shepherd, I will not lack. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides the still waters."³ The presence and activity of God in one's life is not only necessary for subjective well-being - it's actually sufficient in and of itself for human flourishing. The imagery of sheep emphasize their satisfaction. A sheep that is hungry would be standing, because unlike teenagers they do not eat lying down. If they're laying down, they're full - experience no hunger. Likewise, if they're walking alongside still waters, they're not thirsty. If they were thirsty, they'd be standing still to drink. Yet this satisfaction is depicted as journey - a life-process with phases.
 - In contemporary psychological terms, we could say that *asher* / *makarios* is not a consumptive reward. A consumptive reward would be the tranquil satiation in eating a good meal, or the thrill of sex, or the swelling glow of esteem when mounting the victor's platform and receiving a prize. *Asher* / *makarios*, by contrast, is something experienced already in the struggle-filled process. It is more like the thrill of the competition itself, when with burning lungs and aching limbs one strains forward. Pain and joy combine in a non-contradictory manner within that experience. The joy is an apprehension of progress toward something seen as worthwhile. That's blessedness - *asher* / *makarios*.
 - Jesus' account of subjective human flourishing - blessedness - builds upon this foundation inherited from Israel. Jesus builds upon it by connecting this notion of intrinsic joy in progress to a specific activity, also illuminated by Israel's legacy - the activity of co-working with God. For Jesus, the kingdom of God - God's own action into which we can enter - provides the sole condition, both necessary and sufficient, for human subjective flourishing. In fact, Jesus takes pains to clarify that this joy of co-working with God may be experienced not only by physically pained and socially

² In this regard, *makarios*, in Jesus' account of blessedness, is somewhat akin to Aristotle's analysis of *pleasure*, rather than happiness. For Aristotle, pleasure was not a single affect but a diverse genre of side-effect affections that accompany any action performed with excellence.

³ The further feature of moral renovation - a realignment of one's emotional make up - as one lives in interaction with God is depicted next: "He corrects my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name sake..."

ostracized individuals but even immoral people – at least for a time.

- How does Jesus hold this picture together? Jesus maintains razor sharp clarity and precision when speaking about “blessedness” and “righteousness” – subjective flourishing and moral goodness. These are two different things. Jesus does not collapse flourishing into virtue, as many of the Greek (especially Stoic) philosophers do. Likewise, his is not a hedonist theory (collapsing virtue into pleasure). Jesus offers a distinctive third way in his account of personal flourishing.
- So, what does make for joy and blessedness if, in essence, it’s neither moral goodness nor physical pleasure? Jesus’ answer seems to be this. The presence of God’s activity in one’s life – the kingdom of God – is not only necessary but sufficient for inducing joy – the subjective sense of well-being or blessedness. A simple awareness that one is caught up in God’s project – playing a part in something much grander than oneself and with unending effects – brings a thrill of joy and imparts discernable energy. Moreover, that kind of joy can co-exist with pain, social disregard, and personal loss.
- Consider some specific features of blessedness / joy in the Kingdom, which are rooted in the Father’s gracious welcome:
 - Instantaneous Joy in the Kingdom (Mt. 13:44) – “Co-laboring with God is like a treasure found in a field... and from joy...” Unlike the Rabbinic parallel⁴, Jesus emphasizes that the discovered treasure and the accompanying joy is immediate – it happens on the front end. Blessedness isn’t acquired in the same way that moral transformation is; instead it *precedes* that transformation (even though it may ultimately depend for its continuance on adequate moral transformation – see more on this below).
 - Attentive co-working with God produces discernable energy and satisfaction (Jhn. 4:1-38, esp. vv. 6, 31-38) that is not reducible to physical pleasure or caloric intake. In the Gospel of John chapter four, Jesus starts off exhausted and hungry, but by the end of the encounter he is no longer hungry. The woman comes for water, presumably driven by thirst, but by the end of their conversation she pointedly leaves her water bucket behind. She’s no longer thirsty. Both are experiencing energy and satisfaction directly derived through co-working with God.
 - No Moral Pre-Requisite: Jesus explicitly detaches blessedness from righteousness by showing how, on the one hand, it was often lacking from the lives of better people and is now present in the lives of his lesser disciples. Blessedness comes from seeing God’s activity. It was not enjoyed by “many prophets and righteous men” of the past. (Mt. 13:16-17) On the other hand, Jesus also explicitly depicts the invitation to co-work with God as extended to (and taken up by) some morally bad people (Mt. 13:47-50 and Mt. 22:1-14, esp. v.10). There will eventually be a separation, which we’ll discuss in due course. But God is willing to receive morally bad people into the joy / blessedness of

⁴ Midr. Cant. 4.12 but also seen in Nag Hammadi 109, which indicates it was widespread and circulated much earlier than the midrash was penned. The Rabbinic tale tells of a man who buys a field, assiduously plows and cultivates and works the field. Then, through his great labors, he discovers a treasure hidden within the field. He then rejoices and the seller laments. For the Rabbis, joy or blessedness follows after the labors of moral and spiritual renovation mediated by studying and practicing the Torah.

co-working. This is the scandal that the “friend of tax-farmers and prostitutes and sinners” openly taught and lived.

- But such joy, while instantaneous, may also be ephemeral and end abruptly. Consider those represented by the shallow soil in the Parable of the Sower: he “immediately receives the word *with joy* but does not have a root in himself...” (Mk. 4:16-17).⁵

The Beatitudes: Jesus’ Paradoxical Theory of an Amoral Beginning to Blessedness

- In the “Beatitudes” Jesus emphasizes that neither personal character, nor material circumstances, nor social position produce kingdom joy, rather kingdom joy can pervade persons in different conditions of each of these aspects of life.
 - The Lukan beatitudes are a good place to start. Unlike their analogue in Matthew, few are tempted to misunderstand Jesus’ “blessed,” in Luke’s account, as if it meant “morally praiseworthy.” Rather, these clearly refer to life conditions which extend beyond the more limited confines of chosen, or at least complied, activities for which one may bear personal responsibility.
 - *And looking up at his students Jesus said:*
“Blessed are the poor, because yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are those who are hungry now because you shall be stuffed.
Blessed are those who cry now because you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and mock you and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and skip for joy, because your reward is great in the heavens, for in the same way their fathers treated the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich because you’ve received your consolation.
Woe to you who are fulfilled now because you will be hungry.
Woe, those who laugh now, because you will mourn and cry.
*Woe when all people speak well of you. For in the same way their fathers treated the false prophets. Luke 6:20-26*⁶

⁵ A failure to toughen one’s awareness – deepen the connection between the word and one’s focus – through spiritual disciplines in everyday life can curtail the initial, spontaneous joy of hearing the word of the kingdom. See also Matt. 16:17 – “Blessed are you, Simon son of John, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father who is in the heavens...” The flash of insight, received from above, brings joy and a sense of worthwhile existence. However, Peter’s lack of shared understanding and moral coordinates becomes clear in the very next interaction. He’s progressing in something bigger than himself, but he’s still susceptible to even satanic confusions.

⁶ Καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπάρas τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ ἔλεγεν·

Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί,

ὅτι ὑμετέρα ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.

²¹ μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες νῦν,

ὅτι χορτασθήσεσθε.

μακάριοι οἱ κλαίοντες νῦν,

ὅτι γελάσετε.

²² μακάριοί ἐστε ὅταν μισήσωσιν ὑμᾶς οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ ὅταν ἀφορίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ ὀνειδίσωσιν καὶ ἐκβάλωσιν τὸ ὄνομα ὑμῶν ὡς πονηρὸν ἕνεκα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου· χάρητε ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ καὶ σκιρτήσατε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ· κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ γὰρ ἐποίησαν τοῖς προφήταις οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν.

²⁴ Πλὴν οὐαὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς πλουσίοις,

ὅτι ἀπέχετε τὴν παράκλησιν ὑμῶν.

²⁵ οὐαὶ ὑμῖν, οἱ ἐμπεπλησμένοι νῦν,

- Two elements are clear in the Lukan beatitudes.
 - First, Jesus' words are not statements of virtues or intrinsically praiseworthy traits. Poverty, hunger, tearful loss, and social exclusion are life conditions with no unambiguous cause-effect relation to personal moral traits. Likewise, there is no clear moral wrong in the wealth, full stomachs, laughter, and social praise which may accompany personal misery.
 - Second, there are different time relations built into Jesus' analysis.
 - Two pairs are completely in the present. Poverty and wealth are present conditions under which one may, conversely, enjoy co-working with God or all the consolation one will ever receive. Likewise, social exclusion or inclusion are not awaiting a future reversal for happiness or misery to follow. They are present circumstances in the midst of which one can nonetheless be either happy or miserable. Both the life condition and the reason for blessedness or misery are *present* realities.
 - Two pairs, however, include a future reference that promises a reversal of circumstance. The hungry, who even now are happy, will be well-fed. The stuffed, who even now are miserable, will be hungry. Those who cry now, even while happy, will one day laugh. Those who laugh now, amid misery, will be overtly deprived and sad (i.e., will *mourn* and cry). The life condition is present but the reason for blessedness or misery, in these cases, also entails a future reversal. In other words, *present subjective flourishing in at least these circumstances implies or entails hope* – anticipation – of a reversal in circumstance.
- Why this difference in time relations and promise of reversal?
 - Perhaps Jesus understood basic food and intimate relations (implied in the notion of mourning) as real conditions for a life well-lived. Though one may experience happiness, or perhaps we would say joy, in the midst of their deprivations, one could not experience happiness in the midst of their *indefinitely prolonged* deprivation. As Jesus says in Matthew, “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” (Matt. 6:32) They are temporally close (i.e., nearly immediate) requirements for life in the body. Happiness, even now, must come with an understanding that they will eventually be provided in minimally sufficient measure for one's life.
 - Poverty-wealth and esteem-enmity in broader human society, on the other hand, are more remote from the basic needs of a person. Both pairs are socially defined – relative to the possessions and reputations of others in proximity. And both, in Jesus' teachings, have replacements readily available from the heavens.⁷

ὅτι πεινάσετε.
οὐαί, οἱ γελῶντες νῦν,
ὅτι πενθήσετε καὶ κλαύσετε.

26 οὐαὶ ὅταν ὑμᾶς καλῶς εἰπωσιν πάντες οἱ ἄνθρωποι·
κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ γὰρ ἐποίουν τοῖς ψευδοπροφήταις οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν.

⁷ They are not solely dependent upon human or earthly conditions. Esteem before the Father and his angels can sustain a person's social identity. Treasure, which one may possess, and upon which one may draw even now, may be accumulated in the heavens. Social esteem and excess resources, on earth, serve more as a real or imagined reservoir from which future needs may be met. But the only real security for tomorrow, in Jesus' understanding, comes from the Father and his resources in the heavens. I know today that I will be fine tomorrow for the same reason I am fine

- The better known Matthean “beatitudes” provide a spectrum defective (if not immoral) and morally admirable states – then declares that “blessedness” is possible in each state within the kingdom of God.
 - At the beginning and end of the list, we are told the actual reason and sufficient condition for subjective well-being – “for the kingdom of the heavens is theirs” (Matt. 5:3, 10). The bookends state what is to be understood as the active ingredient in all the cases in between – collaboration with God here and now.
 - In short, subjective flourishing is rooted exclusively in the experience of co-working with God. Both morality and external life conditions are, essentially, extraneous to one’s (momentary) blessedness or subjective well-being in the kingdom.
- Here’s a breakdown of the range of conditions within which one might experience personal, subjective flourishing due to co-working with God:
 - Spiritual zeroes, the deprived, the pushovers, and those inwardly controlled by their lack of (and, yes, *desire for*) rightness (Matt. 5:3-6) – these are not morally exalted states, even if the last has moral aspirations. They are at best pitiable conditions.
 - Mercifulness, undivided attentiveness, and peacemaking are morally praiseworthy attributes (Matt. 5:7-9), albeit moral states that are not often thought to coincide with the “good life” in any obvious way. These are virtues for whose exercise one might well expect to face extra difficulties – peacemakers, for instance, often find themselves suddenly assaulted by one or both of the warring parties they would reconcile.
 - Righteousness is praiseworthy but suffering violence for it does not intrinsically enhance the righteousness (Matt. 5:10-12). Being good *and a victim* does not make one better than just being good.
 - I know that sounds wrong today. The assumption which is most prevalent in our day seems to be that being a victim, in and of itself, means being morally good or at least innocent. But victimhood is something that both good and bad people sometimes suffer. Jesus is clear about this – “Do you think that these Galileans were sinners more than all the Galileans because they suffered this? I tell you no...” (Luke 13:2-3. See also, John 9:2-3).
 - Of course, this does not mean there is *no* relation between these two states – moral goodness and the experience of happiness. But it does mean that the relation is not a simple matter of cause and effect. They are somewhat separable. We need to think about both independently to see how they connect and relate to each other.

So *What is Required* for Blessedness?

- Jesus implies that the experience of coworking with God is sufficient for blessedness. But are there *any conditions*, albeit not the usual (i.e., ethical) suspects, for coworking with God? Yes.
- **Blessedness in the kingdom – requires a watchfulness or attentiveness to God’s action**, but little, or perhaps nothing, more *for the moment*. Attentiveness here is simply an aspect of trust – A handful of passages illustrate this theme in Jesus’ teachings.

today. The sufficiency of the Father’s kingdom, which is here today, will be there tomorrow as well. Once we settle into this reality, it really is enough.

- For instance, in Luke 12:35-40 Jesus describes, through parable, an experiential paradox of blessedness amid an inconvenient occasion for coworking with God. Here are Jesus' words:
- Let your waist be girded [for work] and your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master when he is released from the wedding feasts, so that when he comes and knocks, they may immediately open [the door] for him. **Blessed are those slaves, whom the master will find awake when he comes.** Truly I say to you that he will gird himself, and cause them to recline, and approaching will wait on them. Even if it is in the second or third watch of the night that he comes and finds them thus, blessed are those [slaves]. But note this. If the Lord of the house knew at what hour the thief is coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken through. You also be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you don't expect. (Luke 12:35-40)⁸
- The paradox is that amid great weariness, by "opening" to the master or being ready for the Son of Man's coming (the moment when the Father's rightful agent acts), one suddenly finds that in the act of serving one is also being served. The master has contrived to use such occasions to serve the servants. Thus, his servants experience a paradoxical blessedness in co-working even at an unexpected or inconvenient time.
- Here the untimely and paradoxical blessedness is rooted in the character of the "master" – who obviously stands for the Father in this parable. The Father's generous care disrupts the expected cause-effect sequence of service followed by rest, labor preceding joy.
- Jesus adds that this attitude of watchfulness – scanning life situations for occasions to join with the Father's project – has the ancillary benefit of also preventing needless loss through neglect. "If the lord of the house knew...he would not have allowed his house to be broken through..."

The Deferred Judgment Motif:

- Throughout Scripture, God chooses to work with people who lack moral stature. It's a bit of a scandal. Rarely is it clear that God has chosen the morally superior person. Often it seems he's clearly chosen a person of significant moral deficiency. Abraham – "She's my sister." Jacob lies and tricks and maneuvers his way, and the lying he perpetrates he later suffers. Moses has anger issues and is generally emotionally aloof from the people he would lead. Aaron, on the other hand, caves in to please and ends up guilty of leading Israel into idolatry. The list could be extended nearly endlessly, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Saul, David, Solomon, etc... *All* begin flawed. *Some* undergo significant moral growth through their collaboration with God. Jesus summarizes and clarifies this feature with his motif of deferred judgment in the kingdom.
- Jesus clarifies this by the simultaneous affirmation of two features of life with God. One's moral standing is initially irrelevant – the Father welcomes good and bad to collaborate with him (Mt. 13:47-50 and Mt. 22:1-14, esp. v.10.) He's merciful and kind to the evil and

⁸"Ἔστωσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιζωσμέναι καὶ οἱ λύχνοι καίόμενοι· ³⁶ καὶ ὑμεῖς ὅμοιοι ἀνθρώποις προσδεχομένοις τὸν κύριον ἑαυτῶν πότε ἀναλύσῃ ἐκ τῶν γάμων, ἵνα ἐλθόντος καὶ κρούσαντος εὐθέως ἀνοίξωσιν αὐτῷ. ³⁷ μακάριοι οἱ δοῦλοι ἐκεῖνοι, οὓς ἐλθὼν ὁ κύριος εὕρήσει γρηγοροῦντας· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι περιζώσεται καὶ ἀνακλινεῖ αὐτοὺς καὶ παρελθὼν διακονήσῃ αὐτοῖς. ³⁸ ἂν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ ἂν ἐν τῇ τρίτῃ φυλακῇ ἔλθῃ καὶ εὖρῃ οὕτως, μακάριοί εἰσιν ἐκεῖνοι. ³⁹ τοῦτο δὲ γινώσκετε ὅτι εἰ ἤδῃ ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης ποῖα ὥρα ὁ κλέπτης ἔρχεται, οὐκ ἂν ἀφῆκεν διορυχθῆναι τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁰ καὶ ὑμεῖς γίνεσθε ἔτοιμοι, ὅτι ἡ ὥρα οὐ δοκεῖτε ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔρχεται. Luke 12:35-40

ungrateful (Lk. 6:35-36, see also Lk. 15:11-32). But one's own character eventually catches up with a person and either supports or destroys his/her ongoing activity of co-working with God (and thus the joy or blessedness that flows from it).⁹ For this repeated theme of deferred judgment, see Matt. 7:21-23; 13:47-50; 22:1-14, Lk. 12:42-48; 13:22-30; John 15:6, etc... We'll return to this theme in the final session.

Conclusion:

Jesus teaches with spiritual realism about life within the Father's project (the kingdom of God). The Father's patience, which is also his allowance for the processing times necessary for human life, allows for some significant temporal disjunction between the reception of two gifts – blessedness and righteousness. One may be blessed and unrighteous – for a time – by co-working with God. But, in the long term, really receiving the Father and returning to a life-giving relation of collaboration with him means receiving both gifts. Eventually, blessedness and righteousness will both characterize the life of a person fully at home in God's reign. The necessity, though not prerequisite, of character-change will be addressed in our final session.

⁹ Theologically, one could think about it this way. Since blessedness and moral goodness in the kingdom are non-causally related, they are temporarily separable. But because they are both products of grace, they are not separable *indefinitely*. Eventually, either both or neither will be received. We cannot forever receive one gift from God while refusing the others. Grace is always personal – rooted in a relation to the Giver. If we do not want to be around God, with the accompanying ethos of a life imbued with his character, we will eventually exclude ourselves also from the joys flowing from collaboration with him.

Blessed Nevertheless: Or, How to See God's Help (Lk. 16:19-31)

How do you recognize a blessing? What does it look like when God comes to one's aid? We usually assume that blessing is something easy to spot.

- Blessings. That's what's happening when stocks are high and cholesterol is low... when your children's teeth grow in straight without the need for added metal or when you get a big raise at work... Or the big final exam, that you've not sufficiently prepared for, gets canceled.
- Spotting blessing is a no brainer. Just look at what feels good.
- I won't say these aren't gifts of God too. Of course, they are. Every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights. Our Father is unfathomably kind and generous – all things being equal, he wants to bring every good into your life.

But how many of those typical elements could be missing and one still be receiving God's help and blessing? This is an important question because it shines light on a primary problem for the spiritual life.

Here's the problem. People often think that under the current conditions of their life, it is just not possible to experience flourishing with God – as if God's blessing could not reach you until the basic conditions of your life have changed.

- “Not in this job or in this financial situation – God couldn't bless me in this.”
- “Not in this marriage, or not with my son or my daughter behaving that way.”
- “Not with this cancer, or not with this chronic pain – God's blessing just can't do anything while this is here.”

God has yet to bless anyone except in the place, and under the life-conditions, he or she is in. The circumstances of your life – your job, marriage or lack of a spouse, economic and social status – your *life*, as it is, is perfectly suitable for receiving God's blessing – for experiencing flourishing with God.

This is important. So Jesus addresses it the starkest form possible. Let's consider a passage in which Jesus presses us to contemplate the outer limits – the most extreme circumstance – under which one could experience God's blessing. Jesus tells a parable to help us rethink things.

- In philosophical terms, this parable is a thought experiment exploring “limit conditions” – its asking us to think not about the normal ways in which blessings appear but to consider how much could be changed or removed from that ordinary picture before blessing becomes impossible.
- Important things are learned from considering such limit cases. In this parable, Jesus helps us to see that some of God's greatest gifts, paradoxically, might be received amid some pain and significant misfortune.

But to understand Jesus' teaching we need to adjust the focus and horizon of our perception. Throughout Luke 16, Jesus has been reframing wealth and value in light of the reality of persons as unceasing spiritual beings.

- Jesus' vision is hard for us to inhabit largely because we tend to walk through life with a unspoken thought percolating in the background. We don't usually articulate it but if we did, it

would sound something like this: 'Someday I will cease to exist; and there is nothing I can do about it'.

- But Jesus lives with a very different set of understandings. To see through his eyes, we need to try on this thought. 'I am going to exist forever; and there is nothing I can do about it.' All I can effect is what kind of person I'll be as I continue forever.
- Will I be a person whose inner make up is a misery, or will I become one whose inner life is a source of ongoing joy the flows from love for others?
- That's a different world-experience, isn't it?

Luke tells us clearly that Jesus is addressing those with inverted values – some Pharisees who loved money (Lk. 16:14).

- Of course, they would give God credit for their wealth. They know Deut. 28. They could quote it. Wealth is a sign of God's favor. God's curse appears as financial distress. (Not to mention political, medical, and military distress.)
- Other texts in scripture were less fondly read. The opening chapters of Isaiah, with its woes upon those whose homes are filled with the plunder of the poor and who buy up property without attending to the defenseless.
- Well, you can find a verse for anything. So Jesus doesn't quote a verse. He tells a story instead.

The tale Jesus tells is about two persons whose insides and outsides are mismatched. Their outward appearance is radically different from their inner character.

- The first character is lavishly wealthy (Lk. 16:19). Although he's stereotypically 'blessed' on the outside, on the inside he's miserable – self-absorbed, full of posturing and social ostentation, neglect for the poor, and deafness to Torah.
 - Self-absorbed Posturing and Ostentation: We're told that he wears purple *everyday*! Even royalty doesn't do this in the ancient world. Purple dye, derived from hand-harvested ink of a rare shellfish, is so expensive that even royalty served purple garments for special ceremonial occasions.
 - Likewise, he wears expensive linen underwear – I guess just in case some peeks.
 - Wealth, evidently, is not for meeting real human needs but for sending social signals of superiority.
 - Contempt for Revelation: He feasts every single day! Implicitly, this means that he does not give his servants a sabbath rest. And, of course, he carries nothing about the poor man who is left at his gate. He's deaf to the Torah.
- The second character, on the outside appears cursed and miserable. He is impoverished, crippled and suffers from an illness that includes open sores – perhaps leprosy (Lk. 16:20-21). Moreover, he hungry and malnourished. There are hints, however, of something greater on the inside.
 - He's crippled, so those who care for him place him daily outside the gate of the person most able to help. But help, at least in any visible form, doesn't come.
 - He's continually hungry. What's even worse is that he can smell the BBQ and hear the party on the other side of the gate. But he can't get any of it.
 - Yet, there are hints of something grander on the inside. At first, lying next to the rich man's gate, the only hint is his silence. Afterall, even Job, after seven days lifted up his voice and cursed the day of his birth. But this man endures everything quietly.

If one stops at the end of vs. 21, a question presses. *Where is God in all this? Why doesn't he help? What is he doing in such a situation? Is there no justice?!* The circumstance seems God-forsaken.

Jesus is a master storyteller – skilled in characterization. The behaviors he describes gesture toward an underlying discrepancy.

- The stereotypical “blessing” of wealth is here accompanied by a rather petty social posturing and self-absorption that must be miserable. There’s a poverty *of character* that flows deeper than one’s social rank and outer circumstance.
- Perhaps, one might wonder, there could be a deeper wealth of character flowing beneath the surface one might easily deem cursed? Could there be an inner flourishing amid outer pain and misfortune?

Gratefully, Jesus doesn’t just evoke the question and leave us to guess. He presses us to reevaluate the stereotypical accounts of God’s blessing and curse. And he does so through his use of a *proper name*.

- Jesus parables are full of type-figures – farmers and merchants and fishermen and shepherds, old ladies and servants, rulers and judges. But none of these figures is ever given a proper name.
- Except this once. Jesus uses a proper name in this parable: *Lazarus*. And the name is deeply significant. Lazarus is the Greek for Eleazar – ‘the *one whom God helps!*’. In so doing, Jesus challenges us to look for God’s blessing or aid in the poor man’s story.
- Obviously, we’re exploring a limit condition – the most extreme case in which something can still occur. By using the name Lazarus Jesus is asking us to adjust our lenses and to look with special care for a kind of blessing that flows deep beneath the surface conditions of life.

In Lk. 16:22 both men die.

- Lazarus isn’t buried. He’s too poor for a funeral. (The rich man should have seen to his burial but there’s no mention of it.) But angels escort him to Abraham’s bosom.¹⁰ There Lazarus is seated in the place of honor at the banquet!

¹⁰ Of course, this is a second proper name in this unique parable. Why *Abraham*? Minimally, two things are significant about Abraham (as opposed to Moses or some other luminary of the past) that make Abraham the appropriate person to receive the one whom God helps:

First, Jesus does not want anyone to image this is only about material wealth. Afterall, Scripture emphasized several times that God had made Abraham fabulously wealthy and great. The rich man is not suffering simply because of bank account holdings, Lazarus’ blessedness is not just a cosmic counterbalance to lack of possessions in his life. Abraham is a case of a rich man who also was blessed in the deeper sense to which Jesus’ thought experiment points.

Second, Abraham is both the one who, by God’s call and promise, is a blessing (Gen. 12:1-3) and is the common father of both the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man does not think of Lazarus as his brother but they share a father. Abraham even addresses the rich man as “child.” So, the blessing comes through connection with father Abraham.

Third, Abraham is known for getting hospitality right – welcoming without turning his home sharing into enslavement (like Laban and Pharoah) – and for doing so in a way that he was, at least once, “entertaining angels without knowing it” (Gen. 18:1ff; Heb. 13:2). Since the angels escort Lazarus at death, it’s not a surprise to find Abraham as the host of the dinner party they attend. This also contrasts with the rich man’s failure to host the poor man who was continuously at his gate.

Fourth, another second temple text, Jubilees 22:25-23:3, depicts Jacob as lying in the bosom of Abraham *after Abraham blessed him*. This allusion again reminds us to consider that the blessing of character transformation,

- The rich man has a funeral – no doubt complete with paid mourners and a monumental tomb – but he then finds himself in torment.

Death has become the great revealer of persons. What was on the inside during life becomes visible in death. And this enables us to recognize the shape of God's blessing – to find out what God has really been doing all along in these men's lives.

Here's what we see revealed in death:

- When the rich man speaks (v. 24), we find out what is inside: insolence, social disdain, and pure entitlement. There are surprises throughout.
 - The first surprise is that he actually knows Lazarus' name! So, he had not simply been ignorant of Lazarus' plight – he knew and never helped.
 - But, even now, the rich won't speak directly to Lazarus. He's above speaking to such people. He still imagines that Lazarus is beneath him!
 - Instead, he negotiates with Abraham as his patriarch and expects Lazarus – Lazarus who is seated in the place of honor! – to be his bellboy or messenger boy. The closest he gets to escaping self-centeredness is to ask Abraham to send Lazarus to speak with his living brothers.
 - Even in death, he finds no place for repentance and continues to hold God's revelation in contempt. In fact, the rich man is the refutation of his own claim. He sees one beyond the dead and still doesn't repent of his disregard for God's teaching in the Torah and the Prophets!
- It's not just that the rich man is in torment. He is a tormented person. He isn't just experiencing a misery of circumstance, from within he's become a miserable person.

But in Lazarus we discover the character – the inner experience – of the one whom God has helped. Two features of Lazarus' inner life deserve special notice.

- First, Lazarus is anger free, utterly at peace, and bears no ill-will to anyone. Just within the context of this story, it's striking.
 - One might expect rage and indignation to boil over when the rich man acknowledges that he has known about Lazarus – especially when he starts issuing him orders from across the divide. Or, at least, when the rich man refuses to address him but want to make his messenger boy. Yet, instead there is quiet – peace. Lazarus is not given to anger. He's forgiven whatever there was to forgive.
 - In context, this is remarkable because we possess another account from Jesus' world of the divide between the departed spirits of the righteous and sinners (1 Enoch 21-22). It's not scripture but it is illuminating of what would be expected in Jesus' cultural world. And this extra-biblical picture highlights how atypical Lazarus' character is – this one whom God has helped. In Enoch's story, the righteous are continually indicting the sinners and calling for their judgment from across the divide. A raw nerve throbs

which was invisible to the outer eye, had indeed been worked in Lazarus during the days of his overt suffering in life. He was blessed, so he's found in Abraham's bosom at death. The rich man with the external trappings of a blessing, has actually been living a life without blessing, and is now seen in the torment that is his character disposition.

from the injustices borne and there's much anger. The righteous are a noisy, angry bunch in 1 Enoch's imagination.

- Yet Lazarus has no impulse to cry out. He is not given to anger. Hatred has no foothold in his character. As a talented forgiver, he's discovered deep peace.
- Lazarus also has developed an extraordinarily expansive capacity for compassion. This character detail is provided for the careful reader or listener. Abraham, in his reply to the rich man, speaks of 'those who want to come over from us to you' (v.26). There is a chasm fixed so they cannot but *to whom* is that referring? *Who desires* to go from the comfort of Abraham's banquet into the torment in order to ease the rich man's pain? Lazarus!
 - In context, we should picture Lazarus leaning back in Abraham's bosom. You can almost hear him. "Send me. It's okay. I understand suffering. I can take it. Let me go help him."
 - Here's where we see God's help most clearly. God has gifted Lazarus with a capacity to care for others – even others who once neglected or harmed him. He's not only forgiven the rich man, his inner experience includes a genuine desire to benefit and bring aid even to him.
 - Such is the inner shape, the eternal depths of the one whom God helps.

So we need to ask the question again now. Who is miserable and who is well-off?

Again, this parable is a thought experiment intended to explore the limit condition of blessing. For this purpose, Jesus creates an extreme case to help us see what we might easily miss about God's blessing in more prosperous and typical circumstances.

- God gives his greatest aid and most valuable blessings with eternity in view. What actually lasts through all eternity is the person – the inner experience and character traits – that you become. Thus, we need to remember eternity in order to recognize the deepest aspect of God's help in person's life.¹¹

And there's a personal realism to Jesus' story. Here's reality.

- There is no suffering like self-absorption. The inner experience of one continuously chasing pleasures and posturing to look important is misery. A life lived without any love for others is a long exercise in pointlessness.
- Likewise, there's a deeper well-being than affluence and comfort, success and fame. There is nothing so joyful as one whose heart is skilled at and readily given to forgiveness – one whose inner life bears no trace of bitterness or ill-will. Nobody experiences significance and meaning like one given to love of others – a person full of expansive, unforced compassion.

We need to know this so we can see clearly.

- He's helping me *see*, from Lazarus' perspective as it were, that my suffering of ethical neglect and whatever worldly travails I may pass through cannot prevent God from blessing me. His primary and most precious blessing is to shape me into a person who, as I live forever, could

¹¹ To be clear, this does nothing to excuse a failure to care for the poor... Theological depth doesn't excuse ethical neglect. God's blessing to Lazarus, which arrives amidst the rich man's neglect, does not in any way lessen the wrong involved! That's clear right on the surface of the story.

experience the particularities of my life, my existence, as a meaningful joy rather than a searing misery.

- Likewise, Jesus enables me to see that merely accruing a massive surplus of resources and living in continual “party-mode” does not prevent my life from become a long and pointless sorrow – a misery both now and forevermore. Money, on its own, just doesn’t buy happiness.
- The greatest blessing actually comes through *who one becomes*.

Of course, God is unspeakably gracious. He delights in granting us the humdrum, easily recognizable blessings too. It’s almost never, except in rarest occasions and for good reasons, an either/or. Once we’re able *to see* God’s deepest mode of blessing, we also see that most often God blesses his children in a many-layered way.

My prayer for you is that you would indeed lead a life of deep, multi-faceted richness and blessing.

- May you enjoy easy health and high returns on your investments.
- May your life be full of success and may your name, for Jesus’ sake, be held in honor among those who know you.
- May your children and grandchildren flourish in ways inexplicable yet oh-so visible.

But *even more* I pray that you and I may become Lazarus – those whose inner life, by God’s help, is much larger and more fully pervaded by goodness than anyone might guess from the outer contours of our life. May you grow a talent for forgiveness, become expansive in compassion – exuding peace and calm and unforced love for all those around you.

Because that’s the blessing that matters most – that’s what will last through ages unending.

May it be so.

Prelude

Beyond the Heart of an Actor: The Underlying Structure of Jesus' New Covenant Ethic

The Substance of the New Covenant = Internalization of God's Instructions and Pervasive Personal Interaction with the LORD across all levels of Society

- Jer. 31:31ff; Ez. 36, etc...
- Jesus' teachings, as well as his life, death, resurrection, and forty days of appearances are all designed to bring about this new form of human life. The imagery and timing of the Spirit's bestowal at Pentecost clearly announce the new covenant.

Two features of Jesus' teaching especially locate his aim of guiding people into the New Covenant.

- First, Jesus' negative ethic is rooted in the Second Tablet of the Decalogue (Mt. 5:21-48)
 - Jesus' instructions about what we want to *not* do – moves from explicit prohibitions (“Thou shalt not...”), unveils layers of intentionality at the level of the heart, and then offers a stark illustration of a type of person whose heart is oriented toward his new way.
 - Behind the five “Thou shalt not”s of the Second Tablet of the Decalogue, Jesus sees three primary distortions at the level of the human heart.
 - Behind murder, the heart problem is retained anger that mutates into contempt...
 - Behind adultery and theft, the heart problem is cultivated coveting or lust (the same word in Greek and Hebrew) that would reduce others to occasions for self-gratification.
 - Behind false-witness (as well as oaths and vows), is a heart that would use language not for communion and truth-seeking but for posturing and procurement of private desires.
- Second, Jesus injects a new concept into the history of ethical thought – hypocrisy or play-acting.
 - Prior to Jesus, this concept (but obviously not what it refers to) was absent from human ethical reflection. You will not find it in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or the Stoics. Nor is the term used in the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible.
 - Jesus notices that people tend to approach the explicit instructions, and especially the commandments, as something they could pretend or play-act in order to gain reputation and its benefits.
- Hypocrisy, as an ethical concept, seeks to disentangle Torah (God's revelation) as moral-spiritual guidance from its role as mere legality.

- Not only does this feature large in Jesus' teachings and his public interactions – often in unveiling and rebuke of leaders – but Jesus also arranges his arrest, trial, and crucifixion as a way of revealing the difference between morality and legality.
 - The gospels take pains to indicate the underlying motivations of the various leaders involved. Caiaphas has “prophesied” Jesus' death for the nation. The different groups, especially Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees, collude to destroy Jesus as his teaching and miracles become increasing influential. Legality becomes a weapon for entrapment as they seek his death.
 - Despite their full intention to kill Jesus, the two trials (before Caiaphas and before Pilate) are marked by a concern for legal precision and procedure. Caiaphas is trying to get witnesses to agree about Jesus' alleged threats to the Temple. Finally, Jesus' self-confession before the Sanhedrin gives him cause to shift to blasphemy as the charge against Jesus. Pilate has mixed motives. He dislikes the Judean leaders trying to manipulate him and initially refuses to judge Jesus. His wife's premonitory dream likewise makes him want to remain uninvolved. But the Judean leaders orchestrate a mob that provides temporary motive and, finally, by framing Jesus' Messianic status as a threat to Caesar, offer Pilate a compelling cause to execute judicial murder.
 - Both judges, Caiaphas and Pilate, are concerned with “cause” (αἰτία) – a threshold for legal action – but care nothing about guilt or innocence, let alone moral goodness or evil.
 - This exposes the hypocrisy involved – using Torah as mere legality while doing things obviously aimed at unjust killing.
- Hypocrisy, by distinguishing between Torah as moral-spiritual guidance for life versus Torah as mere legality, names one of the human problems that the New Covenant is intended to resolve. When we receive God's instruction written on our hearts – internalize them – we move beyond play-acting and using Torah as bureaucratic leverage to aligning our own intentions with God's intentions.

Finally, what are we moving toward when we move away from distortions of heart (anger, lust, deceit, etc...)? We move towards a full functionality in love.

Jesus' Way Beyond Anger and Contempt (Mt. 5:21-26)

Why does Jesus, in his ethical teaching, consistently start with anger and its manifestations? It's probably because more wrongdoing, in human affairs, stems from anger than any other state of heart. Think about it. Why do husbands beat wives? Why do sisters stop talking to each other? Why do churches split? Why must children grow up deprived of one parent or another? According to FBI statistics, about 15,000 people were murdered in the US last year. Roughly 725,000 aggravated assaults were reported. How many of those would have happened without anger? Jesus' teaching begins with anger, because so much damage in human lives begins precisely there.

Jesus, according to our primary sources, makes a distinction between basic (involuntary) anger and retained (chosen) anger, which naturally morphs into contempt. The primary Greek understandings of anger, by contrast, took wrath to be a temporary madness and/or false judgment of injury.

The difference is deep and important. At the very least, Jesus' distinction evokes a different ethical worry than the Greek theories evoke. I'll try to make that difference clear in what follows. But my hunch is that Jesus' distinction better highlights a feature of widespread anger in our world, along with its behavioral results, than do the Greek and Roman theories.

Below I offer a brief overview of the primary Greek and Roman philosophic understandings of anger. But feel free to skip directly to the section entitled Basic Anger to grasp Jesus' distinctive teaching on anger.

What is the Nature of Anger: An Overview from Achilles' Wrath to Stoic False-Judgment

What is anger? Considering the early answers to this question – the ancient ontologies of anger – reveals some fundamental differences in the streams that flow into Western thought and practice.

Among the Greeks, anger or wrath (*orgē*) is a temporary madness that overtakes a person.¹² Anger is a *pathos* or passion – something that happens to a person rather than something a person does.

Achilles' wrath is the prototype for subsequent Greek reflection on anger. In the Iliad, Achilles' wrath stands over against Achilles' reasoning abilities and conquers them. While it makes him strong in battle, wrath simultaneously obliterates all proportion, decorum, and self-care. Achilles becomes a berserker, to borrow a term from Nordic warrior culture. Under the impetus of wrath, a person acts with vigor and power, but against his own reason and, thus, against his own good.

¹² Seneca encapsulates the tradition: “quidam itaque e sapientibus viris iram dixerunt brevem insaniam” (de Ira 1.2)

Later Greek and Roman philosophical reflection sought to integrate the concept of anger into a larger account of humans as specifically rational animals.¹³ Often, they relied on explanations of proportions of the elements within the human organism tipping out of balance. Too much fire or heat in the heart and blood produces, or conversely is produced by, anger. The relations between physiological cause and rational defect exercised ancient philosophers (and doctors) greatly.

For Aristotle¹⁴, anger is a desire to repay suffering or grievance that heats the heart and blood. The desire is the formal cause and the boiling blood the material cause.¹⁵ Aristotle acknowledged that anger, even as a *pathos*, possessed certain powers and sought to find the mean with regard to its utilization. The mean would prescribe rational boundaries, which could domesticate anger's power. "The man is praised who is angry with the right things and with the right people in the right manner, at the right moment, for the right length of time." (Nic. Eth. 4.5.3)

The Stoics considered anger, like all the passions, to fundamentally be a false judgment. In the case of anger, the false judgment regarded an appearance of personal injury. "The person or object has injured me and deserves to be injured" would be a sayable (*lekton*) embedded in an appearance. If that implicit meaning, or sayable, were assented to then the subject would undergo the passion of anger. The Stoics maintained a cosmological dogma that they lived within a minutely fated best-possible-world. The only possible injury would be moral injury inflicted by oneself. Thus, a judgment of injury by another, no matter the concrete circumstance, could only ever be false. Externals simply cannot injure in a Stoic universe.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the Stoics saw degrees of anger – first, second, and sometimes third motions within the passion.¹⁷ The first movement was a physiological "impulse" – a pre-rational (and thus involuntary) precursor to anger. This is the somatic rush of energy (rising spirit) immediately reacting to another's blow or disdainful remark. The first movement tends in the direction of anger but is still subject to a subsequent act of cognitive assent or dissent. With cognitive assent (or at least ceding), the impulse to action immediately ensues and one enters the state of anger proper. The impulse to avenge, which is anger, has been initiated. This is the second movement, anger proper, which one enters through a *failing rational* act. It doesn't last. The second movement is like a threshold whereby one passes almost imperceptibly from an initial impulse to a full rage. Rage is the third movement. Failed reason is so extinguished or "evicted" as to be utterly unresponsive for the duration of the rage. Only time can exhaust the rage and restore to the subject sufficient control for rational choice.

¹³ The front chapters of de Ira book 1 focus on distinguishing non-rational beasts, which may have impulses but no anger, from human adults who have anger.

¹⁴ I begin with Aristotle because Plato's *thumos* – centered in the chest and dominant within the "guardians" of his city in speech – does not refer to anger (*orgē*). Anger is one possible expression of *thumos*, but *thumos* itself refers to something more akin to a pre-rational insistence on conforming the impending future to present expectations. See Joshua I. Weinstein. 2018. *Plato's Threefold City and Soul*. Cambridge for the best discussion of *thumos* and its essentially temporal orientation to date. In so far as *thumos* is used as an explanation for *orgē*, Plato is elevating the natural philosophers' tradition of seeking physiological causes (an overabundance of "fire") for the temporary madness.

¹⁵ De Anima 403a30

¹⁶ The technical distinction for the Stoics was between harm and injury. Harm was the infliction of suffering, but without malice or personal intent. Injury implied an other's intention to harm.

¹⁷ Seneca's De Ira is the best place to find an overview.

But a flaw in this account, viewed from within the Jesus-tradition, is that it only weighs justification. It doesn't reflect ethically upon the duration nor upon the tendency of anger to morph into something else.

"The man who exacts punishment not because he is craving it but because it is right to inflict it should not be counted as angry," says Seneca.¹⁸ Yet, who has ever experienced an anger that was not righteous? Phenomenologically, all anger is right to the angry subject.¹⁹ Anger justifies itself. Jesus' account may prove more useful here.

Key Differences of Jesus' Theory from the Greek Ontologies of Anger

While Greek theories differ with each other in significant ways, three primary commonalities distinguish them from the theory attributed to Jesus of Nazareth.

- First, anger is a passion – a breakdown in reason. It is more something that happens to a person than something the person does.
- Second, the moral turpitude of anger is located in the de-rationalization of the subject. My anger is bad *for me* because it strips me of rational dignity and control. Alterity is scarce in the Greek's ethical evaluations.
- Third, when the vices are ramified into primary and subsidiary vices, Greek anger is a subspecies of desire. Greeks think of anger in terms of an ethics of desire. It's a craving, for vengeance to be sure, but it's still just a craving and not a distinct vice of its own.

For the purposes of this chapter, I'll focus nearly exclusively on the first difference – how Jesus' concept differs from the Greek and Roman ontologies of anger.

I'll also offer a few passing indications of the second difference. Namely, that Jesus morally evaluates anger by weighing the harm it does *to others* rather than primarily the injury anger does to oneself. Alterity (or other-orientation) is central to Jesus' ethical concept(s) generally and of anger in particular.

The final difference, patterns of ramification in vice lists, I'll not develop here. However, it is significant that Jesus and his earliest followers see retained anger and its permutations producing a distinct class of heart dispositions (or vices).²⁰ Perhaps this is entailed in the alterity of Jesus' moral evaluation – since it focuses on the benefits and harms accruing to others and not only to oneself.

¹⁸ De Ira 1.9.4, *Nam si quis poenam exigit non ipsius poenae avidus sed quia oportet, non est adnumerandus iratis.*

¹⁹ The Stoic tradition tacitly acknowledges this at a formal level through its false assent ontology.

²⁰ This is reflected in the way the early Jesus movement organized vice lists, in which various permutations of anger are grouped separately from vices of misused desire. See, for instance, Matthew 5:21ff; 15:17-20; Col. 3:5-9; Gal. 5:19-20; 2 Cor. 12:20-21; Rom. 1:18-30a; Didache 2-3, 5; Justin Martyr 1 Apol. 14-16. Three vicious states of heart form the primary focus of the early Christians' negative ethic as manifested in their vice lists – retained anger and its byproducts, overweening desire (*epithumia*) and its permutations, and deceit grouped with other misuses of speech. These three focal points have an exegetical root. They are viewed as condensations of the second tablet of the Torah (Ex. 20:13-17; Dt. 6:17-21). (For a roughly contemporaneous, Jewish witness to the conceptual division of the Decalogue into two tablets, one dealing with obligations toward God and the other with obligations toward neighbor, see Philo of Alexandria's *On the Decalogue*.) These three principal vices would be dilated or elaborated upon in specific contexts. The resulting expansive lists of 'subordinate' vices could be viewed as 'species' of the three primary distortions of heart.

Key Contrast: Jesus' Concept of Retained Anger

Jesus' ethical theory offers a distinctive understanding of anger and its moral evaluation. A bit of conceptual archeology is required to see his point. Moreover, that archeology must make a couple initial assumptions:

- First, we must assume Jesus' general intelligence and thoughtfulness in articulating a view that aims at both insight and coherence. I assume that Jesus isn't just listing pet peeves but is trying to tell us something about the nature of moral realities and our experience of them.
- Second, I will utilize a similar methodology for reading the testimonia concerning Jesus' life and teachings (a.k.a., the Gospels) as I use to read other ancient thinkers for whose theories we only have occasional or fragmentary testimony. So, for instance, the choice of verb aspects in Jesus' teachings will be assumed significant in a manner analogous to how contemporary scholars of ancient philosophy analyze the fragments of say, Cleanthes and Chrysippus, or of Posidonius and Antiochus of Ascalon. We read them closely with an aim to reproduce their underlying theories and, when appropriate, we compare the testimonia of their sayings with related accounts in their teachers or followers and their philosophical opponents. I'll do the same with Jesus and his followers.

Our primary textual source for Jesus' account of anger is found in Matthew 5:21-26.²¹

A counterpart to this process of grouping expansive vice lists as species under a basic group of primary vices is found in the ancient philosophic schools, albeit under quite different conceptions of what constitutes the primary vices. For instance, the Stoics grouped their expansive vice lists under the four primary vices of 'Pleasure, Distress, Desire, and Fear', see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.111-116, Stobaeus, 2.90, 19-91, 9 (easily accessible in *SVF* 3.394), Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.16. While the ordering of vice lists according to dilations of subordinate vices is a shared feature of these ancient ethical teachings, the Jesus movement's lists differ substantially in the groupings.

For instance, anger is simply a particular subset of desire on the Stoic account. And several of the vices that Paul characteristically groups with anger related vices, such as jealousy and envy, are classified by the Stoics as species of 'distress' or 'sorrow'.

All that to say, the process of identifying primary vices and analyzing vice lists according to expansive subordinate species is a shared feature of ancient ethics. The specific shape of the primary vices recognized by early Christians, however, is distinctive and derived from an exegetical abstraction of the second tablet of the Torah.

Two texts in prior Jewish literature may anticipate a similar exegetical abstraction as that attributed to Jesus. Hosea 4:1-2 describes the dearth of loyalty and faithfulness in the land by means of the following threefold grouping 'Swearing and lying, murder, stealing and adultery'. Wisdom 14:21-31 traces the ruin of humankind from idolatry as the *arche* (originary font) of evil and includes an account of the extent of moral depravity that follows from this root cause. The depiction of pagan society, which follows in vs. 24-26 contains a good deal of dilation based upon the prohibitions of the second tablet.

²¹ Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις· οὐ φονεύσεις· ὃς δ' ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει. ²² ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ· ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ· μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός. ²³ Ἐὰν οὖν προσφέρῃς τὸ δῶρόν σου ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον κάκει μνησθῇς ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ, ²⁴ ἄφες ἐκεῖ τὸ δῶρόν σου ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου καὶ ὑπάγε πρῶτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου, καὶ τότε ἐλθὼν πρόσφερε τὸ δῶρόν σου. ²⁵ Ἴσθι εὐνοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου ταχύ, ἕως ὅτου εἶ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, μήποτε σε παραδῷ ὁ ἀντίδικος τῷ κριτῇ καὶ ὁ κριτὴς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ καὶ εἰς φυλακὴν βληθῇς· ²⁶ ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδῷς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην.

Basic Anger:

The truth is that anger itself wounds, even apart from the deeds that follow from it. You know this experientially.

If you found out that I was angry with you, you would already be hurt. Indeed, you would likely become angry with me in response. Anger, all by itself, evokes hurt and anger in others. Why?

Anger has built into it a readiness to harm another. There is an inclination to hurtful action wrapped up in the emotion itself. You can see this even in anger toward inanimate objects. Have you ever slammed your toe against a piece of furniture as you wandered toward your bathroom in the middle of the night? Anger flares. Your first impulse is to destroy the object that inflicted pain. Of course, you probably thought through it enough to stop yourself. But it's built into anger to desire harm upon its object. That's why anger hurts others.

Nonetheless, *basic anger* is not yet morally wrong. Rather, basic anger is a natural response to injury or the frustration of one's will. Think about it as psychic pain. (There is nothing sinful about a headache, but who needs it?) In its basic or natural form, anger would naturally blow over rather quickly. The interpersonal damage would be minimal, if anger were allowed to subside quickly and naturally. You could think of such basic anger as anger the sun doesn't go down on – its not there long enough for the sunset catch it (Eph. 4:26).

Retained Anger:

This is why Jesus' moral teaching begins one step past 'basic anger'. When he traces the first distorted movement of the heart toward murder, Jesus begins with '*retained anger*'. 'But I say to you that everyone *who goes on being angry* with his brother shall be culpable before the court ...' (Mt. 5:22).²² Your translation probably just says 'everyone who is angry', but the grammar implies continuing action. (For my fellow Greek-geeks, *orgizomenos* is a present participle, which has durative aspect.) One should assume significance unless there is good evidence to the contrary. What does that matter? **Jesus articulated an ethical evaluation of anger in which the duration, rather than the cause, was of primary importance.**²³

- Thus, Jesus begins his moral evaluation with anger that one chooses, holds onto, keeps fresh and ready to use. This is both a brilliant insight and new in the history of ethical thought. (The ancient Greeks thought of anger as a madness or insanity that overtakes a person.) Jesus sees clearly that this sort of anger – retained anger – is something I choose. In an important way,

²² This evaluation tacitly implies a prior form of anger after which Jesus' ethical blame begins. I have dubbed this prior, unevaluated form, "basic anger." On Jesus' account, unlike the Stoics', it is ethically blameless. (It may not be a human *good* but is not blameworthy.)

²³ The novelty of Jesus' concept may be measured by early attempts to homogenize it with the Stoic ontology of anger as false judgment. From as early as the 2nd century onward the one-word addition, *eikē*, "without adequate cause" or "randomly," made its way into a broad range of textual traditions (East and West). It rapidly became the majority reading – you'll find it in the King James Version – but it is absent in the earliest extant texts. As was common with attempts to smooth textual difficulties, Jesus' words were made to conform to what was intellectually ascendant. In this case, that was the Stoic ethic. But the modified text hides the novelty of Jesus' ethic. He evaluated anger not in terms of justifiability but in terms of its *duration* and the implications thereof.

anger is not just something that happens to me. Anger is something I *do*.

- The truth is that people strategically use anger. In our world, many use anger like caffeine. It is a strategy for energizing oneself. As the 'to do list' piles up, we use a bit of anger as a stimulant to keep ourselves moving. If I weren't a little angry, my blood pressure might drop too low and I'd just fall asleep.
- Others strategically retain anger as a way to feel momentarily powerful and right. Have you noticed that anger is a totalizing emotion? When I am angry at another wronging me, I cannot *at the same moment* entertain the idea that I too might be mistaken or in the wrong. Paradoxically, those who struggle with guilt and self-condemnation often employ a sense of 'righteous indignation' against others as a temporary release from personal guilt.
- For another retained anger might simply be a strategy for getting one's way. Early in life some learn that a red face, flaring eyes, and impassioned voice cause most people to back down. Often simply displaying anger is enough to cause others to yield to our desire. So retaining anger – nurturing a sense of having suffered injustice – becomes part of our toolkit for making our way in the world by our own power.
- So, maybe retained anger is a strategy for acquiring a burst of energy. Maybe it is a way to feel right or powerful. Or, perhaps, it is simply a strategy for getting one's way by intimidation. Perhaps there are other reasons people do it. But *why* is less important, and surely more varied, than the fact *that* people strategically retain and employ anger. Anger, as something retained, can be a calculation.

A Common Misconception:

Before we move to the next step in Jesus' analysis, we need to clarify a common (post-Fruedian) misconception that might otherwise block us from thinking through Jesus' teaching fully. The misconception is what I call the 'Hydraulic Model' of emotion. We might also call it the 'vent or explode model'.

The basic idea, which we uncritically accept and parrot, is that emotions are like fluids or gases under pressure within us. If we don't release the pressure, by acting on them regularly, then eventually the pressure will exceed capacity and we will 'blow' – act out in extreme, destructive, and erratic ways.

I believe this model of emotion is fundamentally false as can be seen by two problems with this account.

- First, we don't actually think about emotions this way – not generally. Upon reflection, we only speak of two emotions or feelings this way – anger and sexual desire. Yet, the myth of 'vent or explode' provides us with a sense of justification in acting out when we want to in these two areas of life.

It's easy to see that we don't really think of emotion this way. Just try transferring the

description to another emotion. Take gratitude, for example. Imagine an intervention by friends. 'I'm really concerned about you, Joe. I know this is going to be hard to hear, but we've been talking and you have a problem with repressing *gratitude*! For years people have been helping you out and doing kind things for you. But you've plugged up all the gratitude inside. It's been growing in there... the pressure's rising, my friend. If you don't start letting some of it out, one day someone will do you a favor and it will just blow... It'll be like a gratitude bomb. It's gonna be messy.' Doesn't that sound outlandish? We just don't experience emotion in that way.

- Second, the truth is that 'venting' is not releasing but rehearsing. When we begin 'venting', by recounting our gripes against another, we engrain the sense of injury and injustice so as to keep it fresh. Repeatedly running the script does not reduce anger but amplifies and sustains it over time. In fact, 'venting' is a primary means of *retaining* anger.

Within the kingdom, Jesus says this sort of retained anger isn't needed. We can simply set it down. It's a tool we can live without when we are co-working with God.

Duration in Jesus' Ethic

In the earliest Jesus movement, it is not so much the just or unjust reason(s) for anger but its duration that makes it culpable. This is wise. Here's why.

Phenomenologically, no first-person experience of anger was ever *unjust*. When I'm angry, I'm always right. Anger is intrinsically self-justifying. So shifting the question is practically wise. By focusing on the duration or retention of anger, regardless of the justice of its cause, the early Jesus movement was able to develop an ethic of patience and forgiveness.

This distinct focus continues. In a later text within the early Jesus movement, Ephesians 4:26-27, Paul modifies the Septuagint (LXX) text of Psalm 4:4. The LXX text read, "Be angry and do not sin; speak those things in your heart and in your beds be pricked." In other words, don't sin in your anger but think over the matter in your bed at night. But, practically, can one hold on to the anger and mull over the matter without it morphing into something worse? The Jesus' movement's general prediction is no. So, Paul explicitly changes LXX Ps. 4:4. Now he counsels, "Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Don't give a place to the Devil." (Eph. 4:26-27) Holding on to anger and rehearsing its reason amounts to giving the devil a point of leverage – a place. Isolating *retained* anger as a distinct moral problem, within the self, enabled Jesus' early followers to engage in a different spiritual exercise and develop lives of patience and non-reactionary resistance to the violence of their day.

Contempt:

The second step, in Jesus' progressive analysis, is the emergence of *contempt*. The transition from anger to contempt is a natural progression. Retained anger, perhaps through the sheer exhaustion of holding on to hostility, tends to decompose into contempt. Long retained anger is like the vegetable or fruit left in the fridge too long – eventually it turns into something else. When anger rots, contempt is the immediate product.

Apart from the prolonged harm to human relations which retained anger produces, it also has a tendency to morph into a deeper contempt for its object. So Jesus says, ‘... and whoever shall say to his brother, “Raca,” shall be culpable before the Sanhedrin ...’ (Mt. 5:22).

‘Raca’ is untranslatable because it is a sound more than a word. It mimics the sound that one makes when hacking up something to spit in another’s face. Fundamentally, ‘raca,’ as an utterance, is a sign of personal contempt. Since antiquity, commentators have noted that Raca is not a word but a verbal gesture – one that imitates the sound of preparing to spit on someone. It is a display of contempt.²⁴

- By contempt, I mean holding another person as something less than fully human – as unworthy of consideration or of hearing. If in anger I oppose another, in contempt I consider that being beneath me – perhaps not even worth the effort of opposition. Anger opposes. Contempt dismisses.
- And contempt is more damaging, and thus more severely culpable, than mere anger because contempt *depersonalizes* in a way that anger does not. If in anger I want to oppose or harm you, in contempt I would say, ‘He’s – or perhaps *It’s – not even worth the effort...* He’s beneath me.’ This sense of being ‘blown off’ or utterly disregarded wounds other persons more deeply than anger alone.
- When in a prolonged state of hostility toward another people group, societies tend to create demeaning epithets for them. This is well known. In fact, it is a standard element in the preparations for war. During WWII, for instance, German people, to the US military and much of the populace, became “Krauts.” Japanese people became “Japs.” It was much easier to coax a soldier to kill a “Kraut” than to snuff out the life of someone’s son – who was perhaps also a husband and father – but who, as a German citizen, was drafted to fight, perhaps against his will. Such nuanced acknowledgement inhibits lethal violence. Contemptuous diminution facilitates violence.
- But it is not just societies that do this, within individuals retained anger decomposes into contempt as well.

Even prior to physical violence, Jesus – through the metaphor of escalating guilt penalties – states that contempt inflicts more harm on its object than anger.

- Whereas anger implies a readiness to harm, contempt depersonalizes and strips the other of basic dignity – ethical weightiness. It hurts more to be held in contempt – to be disdained – than to be opposed in anger.
- Again, you can see this understanding in the instinctive reactions of people to being held in contempt. For instance, children intuitively know that contempt is worse than anger. That is

²⁴ See Augustine, *De Sermonibus Domini in Monte* 1.9.23. Augustine also sees the progression (ibid 1.9.24), although he misses the first distinction of retained anger for two reasons. First, he is working with the corrupted text that adds “without cause” and, second, he is not reading it in Greek at this point to appreciate the aspect of the participle. Later Augustine becomes aware that the better Greek manuscripts lacked the *eikē* from which “*sine causa*” was rendered but cannot disgorge his earlier mistaken sense of the text in light of the evidence (*Retractiones* 1.19.4).

why when a child feels he or she is being held in contempt, the natural response is to do something to evoke anger from the person who withholds his or her regard.

- Why? Through angering another, the person achieves a social promotion – *now* he's unquestionably effecting something in that relation. He "got a rise" out of the other person. Although the opposition inherent to anger hurts, it actually hurts less than being completely ignored and disregarded.

In this progression, Jesus identifies a natural tendency or momentum within the human heart (or psyche, if you prefer). Perhaps it is a psychological byproduct of exhaustion within hostile relations. But if I hold anger against another person long enough – keep rehearsing the wrongs done – eventually I begin to reimagine that person in a dismissive, low-resolution form. He or she becomes sinisterly banal. The person that I perhaps once admired in some way is now just a "_____."

The Fusion of Anger and Contempt:

The third step Jesus traces within the human heart is a *fusion of anger and contempt*.

Pure contempt, on its own, tends to be more dismissive than violent. But it need not remain pure for long. Contempt can be fused with a reignited anger. A cool dehumanization, rooted in a past suckling of anger, may find reason to again rage. This combination of dehumanizing contempt and rage holds all the psychological elements that are necessary for perpetrating physical violence – even murder.

This final progression, arriving at the psychological threshold of actual murder, Jesus indicates through the phrase, "Whoever shall say, 'Fool!', shall be culpable enough for the Gehenna of fire." (Mt. 5:22). The intensity of the negative evaluation is clear enough due to the guilt penalty. The connotative sense of "Fool!," however, can easily escape a contemporary reader. The word, in our cultures, does not hold the same animus.

We are apt to miss the severity of identifying another as a fool, because we don't think of fools as especially malicious or perverse. Rather, the word might evoke in our imaginations a loveable but goofy sort of person.

- To grasp the intense fusion of hate and contempt implied by "You fool!" in Jesus' world, we need to read *Proverbs*. The fool, in *Proverbs*, is a being at once so incompetent and pernicious that he not only brings ruin on himself but also on the whole community. The fool is so twisted and malignant a figure, that he destroys the very fabric of community everywhere he goes. He is barely human anymore. He's so stupid, arrogant, and perverse that the best thing one could do for him is simply beat him. But even that probably won't work (Prov. 27:22). Even a beating won't improve a fool – he's beneath any capacity for improvement.

The natural next impulse? If the fool cannot be improved, he can be removed. When anger, with its built-in impulse to harm, fuses with contempt and its depersonalization of another, all that is lacking for physical violence to follow is the convenient circumstance. The rationale is already

there. Indeed, most cases of assault and murder are rooted in this precise fusion. Thus, Jesus has traced, within the human heart, the movements of intention leading up to the threshold of 'thou shalt not murder.'

Usefulness of Jesus' Concept of Retained Anger

Different ethical worries emerge from the Greek as distinguished from Jesus' account of anger. The Greek worry is that we have lost rational control – something else is doing the thinking and we're increasingly at the mercy of its impulses. Undoubtedly, this is an important consideration. However, a different ethical worry emerges from one inhabiting Jesus' conception of retained anger as prone to mutating into contempt. From Jesus' ethical vantage, regardless of its relative justification, we still need to consider how prolonged agitation and anger sets in motion a fundamental alteration in my mode of perceiving and relating to my neighbor.

Jesus' key insight, beneath his account of anger, is the tendency of prolonged anger to morph into something else. ***Duration prompts a qualitative change.*** The temporal factor is determinative. That's why Jesus offers a linked sequence or chain of ethical postures rather than a single ontology of anger.

When retained, originally small, trivial grievances – justified or not – tend to morph into contempt. Contempt is an acid no familial or civil relation can long withstand.²⁵

Civil society depends upon a broadly shared capacity for citizens to hear others and to weigh their voiced reasons as if they were spoken by someone who possesses dignity. These conditions are rapidly eroded whenever contempt replaces respect as the default posture toward other persons in society. Only violence follows when contempt becomes widespread and agitation persistent.

In our deeply interconnected world, we exchange messages at ever accelerating paces and manners. We would do well to consider the long-term damage done by prolonged agitation and its propensity to morph into contempt. Since our increasingly online optic is algorithmically selected, our capacity to justify anger is elided. In the perspectival silos produced by these algorithms, any therapeutic or practical approach focused on questioning anger's justification is significantly weakened. But Jesus' ethic of duration, focusing on the cascade of damages that begin with retaining anger, offers us a way out of the current frenzy.

A Glimpse of the Way beyond Anger:

So what is Jesus' way beyond a life of anger and contempt? In Mt. 5:23-26, Jesus offers two illustrations of how a new heart might look in motion. Jesus is providing wisdom. So, please do not

²⁵ John Gottman's work, though developed in the domain of couple's therapy, is significant here. Signs of contempt (rolling of eyes, etc...) have been used with an extraordinarily high degree of accuracy to predict divorce between married couples. Likewise, interventions aimed at restoring admiration for the other have been significantly effective in reversing the otherwise inevitable outcome. Dignity mutually acknowledged seems to be a relational binding force that enables difficult negotiations while maintaining personal connection.

imagine these are 'new laws', rather they are stark examples intended to evoke a question – '*What sort of person* would do this?'

In each case, the answer to that question *is the point* of Jesus' illustration. These illustrations are meant to be pondered and meditated upon until they yield insight. Like so many of Jesus' parables, they're time-bombs for the mind.

- In the first illustration (Mt. 5:23-24) one is presenting an offering at the altar, an act of reconciliation with God, and there remembers that his brother holds something against him. One with a new heart might abruptly leave the sacrifice on the altar. He would seek out his brother and be reconciled to him first. Then he would return to complete his act of reconciliation with God. *What sort of person* would do that?!
- There is much to ponder. I'm sure the Lord will give you personal insight beyond anything in this book. But, minimally, this would be a person who considers reconciliation to God as best achieved through reconciliation with his neighbor. Moreover, he must have a grand vision of human worth (expansive enough for one's neighbor to be the primary altar for rendering service to God) and a profound sense of the ruinous damage that prolonged, retained anger would cause to his brother's soul. Even as he suffers the brother's wrath, this person can sympathize with the twisted hurt that is balled up inside his brother. That certainly would be a different sort of human person. Within God's kingdom, it could be you.
- In the second illustration (Mt. 5:25-26) one is journeying to a court date at which another is suing him. We're not told about the validity of the litigation. In Jesus' world, expecting to lose the case does not necessarily imply guilt. Courts were often corrupt. Nonetheless, on the way to court one interacts with the person suing in a 'kindly minded' or 'well-disposed' manner.
- Contrast this with one's normal reaction to another seeking to harm or dispossess you of goods. The common human response is to harden oneself against another and create layers of distance. A typical human response might be: "Just talk to my lawyer. I have nothing to say to you." But this person is kind and personable (one might even say emotionally vulnerable) toward the one set against him. *What sort of person* would do this?
- Again, there is plenty to ponder, and I will offer only a starting point for meditation. Minimally, this would be a person who carries, in his heart, a readiness to forgive. The inclination to forgive now fills the heart-space once occupied by retained anger and a readiness to explode. Just imagine being so secure within God's project that your unbidden thoughts ran in this direction! Here is a very different way to be human. With God's help, this could be you.

Within the atmosphere of God's activity, or Kingdom, this new sort of heart is available to you and to me. As we lay down anger and contempt, in order to co-work with God, we find new forms of motivation – vastly different thoughts filling our minds. The joy and drama of participation in God's project of redemption provides more abundant energy than an anger-jolt, and a sense of goodness is deeper and more real than self-righteous indignation. The wonder of God's invitation and the security of his embrace more than replace the sham significance we manufacture for ourselves through contempt of others. Moreover, intimidation has no use when co-working with

God. He has other, reliable ways of getting things done. Evil is overcome with good – pure and simple – not with more strategic use of evil. Nothing is lost by leaving anger and contempt at the door as you enter God's kingdom. This is a life for everyday apprentices like you and me.

Beyond Cultivated Lust and Distorted Desires

Jesus' teaching aims at revealing wisdom beneath Torah – to disentangle God's moral-spiritual guidance for human life from mere legality.

- Hypocrisy is Jesus' new ethical concept. He inserts it, for the very first time, into the history of human ethical thought. In many ways, hypocrisy helps us see the difference between legality and moral-spiritual intentionality.

As legal code, “you shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20 / Dt. 5) prohibits one man from having sexual intercourse with another man's wife (and perhaps also another's betrothed). The married woman is also prohibited from having sex with anyone other than her husband. *As a legal code*, this prohibits no more and no less.

- It does not forbid a man from having sexual relations with other women – whether inside or outside marriage – so long as the woman in question is not another man's wife.
- *In this legal sense*, polygamy is not adultery; nor would be the seduction of an unmarried woman; nor would consorting with a prostitute be adultery.
- Marriage in the Ancient Near East, including Israel, only legally forbade a woman from sexual interaction with a man other than her husband. It did not reciprocally bind male sexual activity.
- Likewise, when the wife of another man was sexually violated, the adultery had been committed *against* the other man *with his woman*, not against the woman!

Obviously, Jesus' teachings go much deeper than mere legality – humanity needs it!. Jesus' teaching aim at revealing God's moral and spiritual guidance – God's wisdom – that was originally imparted through the Decalogue. This wise guidance must be distinguished from the Decalogues function as part of a public legal code for the Israelite and then the Judean temple-states (not to mention the much larger temple-state of the Roman Empire).

- Jesus on God's Wisdom beneath the 7th Commandment of the Decalogue – again, Jesus peels back the onion of human intentionality in a manner that shows what leads up to physical sexual violation of another.

Basic sexual noticing and desire is a created good.

The first command in the bible is positive, not prohibitory, and reflects God's deep desire for his creation to flourish. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...”

- Sex is God's idea and gift, not our invention. There are other ways we could have been designed to reproduce – some biological species simply divide themselves to multiply.
- But God created humanity with a deep need for counterparts – the Adam, after naming all the animals, did not find a “helper over against him.”
 - The language is paradoxical – what help is *opposed to* the one helped? That doesn't sound very helpful. We tend to assume that help should take the form of agreement. But the need for a “helper over against” is rooted in our God-given nature and calling to exercise co-dominion under God and with each other in this world.

- If Adam – and this applies equally to Eve – is tasked with dominion (agency for the good), then he will need knowledge. Finite beings, however, can only see, directly and personally, from one angle at a time. We have vantages and horizons. What I can see from this position, reveals *part of* the world to me. But it simultaneously conceals a part that is visible to one gazing from the contrary direction that my wife might inhabit. She always sees, at least part of, what I cannot see. And, of course, the reverse is true. I see a bit from this angle of what she cannot see. As Paul points out much later, “Now we know in part...” and our vision is always somewhat warped. (1 Cor 13:9ff)
- So, God gives Adam a great gift. He provides a “helper over against” him. A woman who can see what Adam cannot – someone who can contradict him in love and solidarity. In an important, but not exclusive, sense, God created Eve so Adam could hear the word “no.”
- The created need of man for woman and woman for man includes much that is not sexual and reproductive.
- But created human nature certainly also includes sexual and reproductive needs too. These are a feature of a good creation that is endowed with a propensity to continue itself – to be fruitful and multiply and flourish.

Basic sexual interest or desire always contains some degree of exhilaration and tantalization; and it is a normal feature of created life. There is nothing wrong with sexual desire, or sex, *in itself*.

This is why, as in his teaching concerning anger, Jesus begins his moral evaluation a step beyond basic sexual noticing and desire. He begins on the other side of *two layers of intentionality* that mark the beginnings of a misuse of the other person.

If basic sexual interest is neither directly voluntary nor is there any wrong in it. Where, then, does it go wrong? Here are Jesus' words:

You have heard it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ but I say to you that everyone who *goes on gazing* at a woman *in order to* inflame desire for her has already adulterated her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:27-28)

Jesus' moral evaluation begins with two layers of intentionality that separate the prolonged gaze from basic sexual noticing and desire.

- **Duration.** As in his teachings concerning anger, Jesus' moral evaluation of sexual desire begins with a temporal condition and that temporal element indicates a choice. “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ but I say to you that everyone who goes on gazing at a woman...” (5:27-28) Again, for my fellow Greek-geeks, Jesus uses a present (instead an aorist or perfect) participle to describe the wrongful gaze (as he did for retained anger). It indicates a durative aspect – in other words, an ongoing activity.
- So, Jesus' moral evaluation begins with the prolonged gaze, not a glance. A viable sexual ethic, we might say, begins with the *second look* – but even that is not yet enough.

- **Intentionality.** An unfocused, absent-minded stare, devoid of any intention, would be unwittingly rude; but it would not be the ethical violation of another that Jesus identifies in this passage. The intentional gaze, *in order to inflame desire*, is the point at which one is misusing another person.

The Prolonged, Desirous Gaze is Public

- An excuse I often hear goes like this. ‘Well, I struggle with lust but it’s a private thing – something just between me and God. It doesn’t hurt anyone else.’
- We need to be clear. That’s baloney!
- Ladies, do you really *need* a man to tell you when he’s lusting after you in this way? The face and bodily gestures, under states of intense emotion, communicate all on their own. Words, when present, are typically either redundant or full of misdirection.
- The nature of this prolonged undressing with one’s eyes is that it’s always already public. The human body naturally telegraphs intense emotions – lust and anger being the most obvious and easy to spot. Yes, it is possible, for the sufficiently poker-faced, to conceal a secret flame for another person. But the *stare* aimed at inflaming desire – *that’s public*. Nobody in the room who is even moderately aware can miss what is happening. This is just to state the situation clearly. It creates a dynamic within a community and shifts the relational center of gravity.
- And, for the person who is its object and did not invite it, the stare can be deeply uncomfortable – even threatening.²⁶

So, the gaze is public. But it also is personally diminishing, even if the other person happens to be unaware of it.

Who is violated by this action? The woman herself. The one who subjects a woman to a prolonged, intentional gaze “has already adulterated her in his heart.” (5:28)

- Again, in *purely legal terms*, this was an impossibility in the Ancient Near East. Adultery was a violation of one man’s legal right to exclusive sexual use of a woman he has contracted, typically at price. Adultery is committed *against* another man *with* his wife.
- But Jesus sees the harm that is done to the woman herself.²⁷ She is a moral agent of significance and worth, even without reference to her husband. Although the violation of her husband does constitute an additional layer of wrong, Jesus in his context didn’t need to emphasize it. It could remain completely unspoken because it was universally assumed in Jesus’ day.

²⁶ In the animal kingdoms, prolonged direct gazes are understood as predatory and often instigate fights. This goes deep within us.)

²⁷ While there is certainly an element of self-harm in lust as well, which we will return to, Jesus’ focus is primarily on the harm done *to others*. It’s one of the ways in which Jesus doesn’t fit easily within the “cultivation of happiness” (or “eudaimonism”) focus of the Greek philosophers – where the ultimate ethical responsibility is to oneself. Jesus’ Way does involve a certain “eschatological eudaimonism”, if you’ll forgive such a cumbersome phrase – all I mean to say is, in Jesus’ account, doing good to others does ultimately turn out best for oneself as well. God runs the world with such love that it turns out that way. But Jesus doesn’t *root* the morality or immorality of one actions toward others in their results for one’s own happiness. Rather, love – what is good for the other person in the presence of God – is Jesus’ ethical NorthStar.

Today we need to help people see both wrongs because our society's tendency is to approve of any and all sexual conduct so long as the particular people involved want it and consent to it.

The lustful stare reduces the intrinsic complexity of the person, who is its object, to a small set of physical actions and functions.

- The reduction is easy to recognize. Consider any young lady and contemplate the full range of relations, interests, concerns, and competencies that make her the preciously unique person that she is. She is a daughter and sister – she enjoys tender and warm interactions with her father but somewhat strained, yet ultimately loving, relations with her mother. She enjoys bickering and joking with her brothers, who are fiercely protective of her – showing though never saying how much they treasure her. She's quiet and reserved in public but becomes suddenly ebullient and talkative when someone touches on a topic that she cares about. She's passionate about art-history, literature and cinema. The reserved exterior vanishes as she provides incisive analyses and critiques of the movies and mini-series she's streamed. And, of course, she has a relation to God, though she's not sure how to think about it and never says much out loud concerning it. She prays, converting worries into requests, and notices that her requests often are answered.
- All this and more, would just be a fraction – the tip of the iceberg – of what constitutes her personhood. All these things and more are treasured by those who know her but don't want to have sex with her.
- The lustful stare strips all this away and discards it. Such complexity would only be an impediment to its purpose. One, and only one, physical function holds any significance for the one indulging in the prolonged, lust-intending gaze. As such, there is a diminution of the person in this act of undressing and fantasizing with the eyes.
- And this reduction actually harms the person who is its object – it diminishes, however slightly, the fullness of her created dominion in this world, even if she remains unaware of it.²⁸

How “the gaze” harms, even when it does not hurt.

- The predatory sexual stare reduces the person who is its chosen object in a manner somewhat analogous to how contempt depersonalizes another person. In fact, sexual desire, when detached from the deep personal bonds of a committed relation, tends to drift in the direction of debasement, animality, and degradation.
- The pornography industry, with its incomprehensibly vast extension in contemporary society, illustrates this feature of degenerated sexual desire. Sex, degradation and

²⁸ Generally speaking, harm is an in-the-world damage to a person within the web of relations that, at least in part, makes that person who he or she is. As such, harm does not require that the harmed person *feel* anything or *know* anything about the harm done to him or her. While hurt (a *feeling* of pain or slight or injury or injustice, etc...) readily alerts us to notice harm, it is possible to feel hurt without suffering any harm (think of Cain's envious brooding in Genesis 4) and, conversely, it is entirely possible to suffer real harm without any feeling or awareness of it. For instance, when a person is being slandered, even if he or she knows nothing of it and thus feels nothing with regard to it, real damage is being sustained. The slandered person's standing in the world, which he has created need and call to exercise some say over, is diminished by the slander spoken. This is so even if he doesn't know that it has happened. Likewise, if one promises to carry out a friend's deathbed request, such as ensuring that a message reaches a loved one or that a piece of property is passed to a particular person, but then fails to keep the promise, there is harm to the deceased person – who, of course, could not know or feel the harm. (This scenario assumes, of course, that the request was ethically appropriate and the fading person was of sufficiently sound mind.)

domination, and violence, evidently produce mixtures highly marketable to unrenovated human appetites – presumably one could obtain statistical figures to quantify this tendency within the unrenovated human heart.

Human beings, male and female, were created to exercise dominion – agency for the good – within God's world. A basic ethical demand, following from this, is to regard each human person as responsible to be an agent for the good in this world – and, of course, to regard oneself as such an agent for the good.

- Even if someone doesn't know it's happening, when one fails or refuses to acknowledge such world-shaping agency in another, he or she is harmed, in however minute a way, through this diminishment – through not attributing to him or her the personal weightiness due them as God's image.
- The harm involved when one indulges one's sexual fantasies of another person is likewise that of *lightening the person* – turning her (or him) into a play thing at the beck of one's personal cravings.²⁹

Jesus' Positive Alternative

“If your right eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from you. It's better your that one of your parts should be destroyed than your whole body be rendered useless (lit. cast into Gehenna). And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and cast it from you. It's better for you that one of your parts should be destroyed than your whole body go away into uselessness. (lit. go away into Gehenna) (vv. 29-30)

- Remember, Jesus is not legislating but illustrating a different type of life. With each illustration we're intended to ask: What kind of person would do this?!
- Second, this is obviously figurative. If taken literally and as a legal code, it becomes absurd.
- Could one pluck out an eye and still use the remaining eye to steadily gaze upon another for the purpose of inflaming desire? Of course! Could one cut off one hand and still employ the remaining hand to misuse another sexually? Yes. So, as literal command or laws, these would fail to address the very thing Jesus so clearly analyses for us.

So, what is behind the hyperbole? What is Jesus actually recommending as a life course?

²⁹ An example of this intuition surfacing in contemporary society is the widespread condemnation of AI fake porn. AI can metabolize an ordinary photo of a person and turn it into pornographic videos. The people who suffer this wrong, usually young ladies, *know* that they have been cheapened and degraded – even though their own bodies have not been directly touched. And this isn't restricted to the videos that get released on social media as "revenge." A young lady whose image was manipulated would rightly count herself harmed, even if it was never made public, although publicizing it would multiply the harm. I'm certain her father or mother, if they have any moral sensibility and hadn't been "educated" into moral numbness, would consider it a harm.

It would not be difficult to find indicators of the harm (even in a scenario where the victim never becomes aware of the wrong done her) by considering how those who had viewed such a production would tend to regard and interact with her should they ever meet. The lightening or diminishment would have significant interpersonal reverberations. This contemporary example simply externalizes – by adding a digital artifact – to what the sexual fantasizing that Jesus addresses in our passage does internally.

- The person with a renovated heart might willingly give up even good and lawful things if, under the specific circumstances, they would tend toward distortion or otherwise prevent healthy relations as a whole.
- So, for instance, I made a decision very early on in my ministry to never sit alone with a young lady for a meal. I only do that with my wife. Of course, there is nothing sinful about ingesting food in the presence of another woman. There is no law against it. But I consider it unwise to share that intimacy with someone else. This is one possible example of “plucking out the eye” or “cutting of the hand” and casting it away.
- Again, there is no sin in doing otherwise. But my aim in such relations is not just to avoid sin but to avoid temptation for the sake of better loving all involved.

Beyond Verbal Manipulation and Deceit (Mt. 5:33-37)

- What is speech for? Why do we bother speaking?
 - You've asked this question with regard to specific people – usually in frustration. “Why do I even bother talking to that man?!”
 - But I want us to reflect on the question more generally. What are we up to when we open our mouths and utter words to another?
- Obviously, at one level, speech is functional. We want to make certain things happen.
 - We were created with dominion – agency for the good. So deep within us is an impulse to shape the world and make it a bit better because we were here. God placed that impulse within you. It's a manifestation of his image in humanity.
 - But, of course, he created more than one being with this impulse and capacity. It was not good for Adam to be alone, so God created Eve as a “helper over against him.”
 - At least in part, humanity – and the differences between man and woman – exist so we collaborate in our world-shaping under God. Collaborate requires communication. So speech, as a vehicle for truth-telling – and loving contradiction at times – has a very obvious functional use. “Too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the soup” as the old saying goes... Multiple agents, in the absence of healthy communication, easily get entangled in conflict and make a mess of even well-intended projects.
- But I want you to consider a deeper, more fundamental aspect too. I'll try to evoke it through a simple thought experiment.
- Imagine a scenario, perhaps from a slightly earlier age and a different place. But I believe you can relate to it.
 - You're boarding a bus to travel between Eastern European cities in the middle of summer. Nobody is carrying a smart phone that offers artificial windows into other places and to other people. It's very hot, the windows are barely cracked and it's hard to breathe (because in these parts “a draft” is thought unhealthy, perhaps deadly). You wander down the aisle until you find seat with nobody next to you.
 - Not far down the road, the bus stops again. Someone wanders down the aisle and plops down in the seat next to you as the bus pulls out.
 - At first there's an awkward silence, neither looking too directly at the other... Eventually, you turn to the stranger next to you and say, “Wow, it's hot in here.”
- Pause. Why say that? What are you doing when you say, “It's hot in here.”
 - There is no new information passing between you and the stranger.
 - You're not asking him to do anything. And, indeed, there's nothing to be done.
 - So, what does this utterance do? Why bother speaking? What is that sort of speech for?
- At a deeper level, speech is a means of creating rapport – even communion. Between two complete strangers, in an uncomfortable situation, at least now there is a space opened up with one shared thought between you. “It's hot in here.” We're together in this. We know it. And now we've said it.
- The God who speaks and exists eternally as a community of three loving persons fashioned us to connect at least in part through speech as well.

Jesus' Instructions about Speech (Mt. 5:33-37)

Again you've heard it was said to the ancients, "You shall not swear falsely but you shall fulfill your vows to the Lord. But I say to you, do not swear at all. Neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king, nor shall you swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Rather, let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No." That which exceeds these is from evil [or the evil one].

The Human Problem in Historical Context

The underlying issue that Jesus addresses is a tendency to use speech to bypass the other person's God-given responsibility to decide what is good and true and right. In Jesus' day, an oath was supposed to settle a matter. It marked the point at which investigation, questioning, and truth-weighing were to end. (This continued to be the case until fairly recent historical times.)

Consequently, a vow or an oath – solemn and impressive statements about what had happened or would happen – became a useful tool for manipulating others or even deceiving them.

The desire to manipulate or misinform people, for the sake compelling their action, is a fundamental distortion of the human heart. Like the other three core distortions, it is a way of making things happen apart from God – a necessary strategy for life outside the kingdom of God.

The Detailed Scriptural Context

Jesus draws together oaths and vows, and interprets both in terms of the sanctity of truth embedded in the Decalogues' "You shall not bear false witness." This is not conceptual sloppiness. *Rather, Jesus is intentionally showing the inner connection between these three speech acts as rooted in formally privileged affirmations of truth* – affirmations that are designed to exempt what is said from normal examination and/or deliberation by another.

- Oaths affirm, in the presence of a higher witness, that something present or past is the case; Vows affirm, in the presence of a higher witness, that something future (and implicitly within one's power to do) will happen.
- Under oath, for instance, one swears that one did not eat one's neighbor's missing goat. But one vows that if God gives success in a particular venture, that one will sacrifice an sheep or oxen to the LORD.

While oaths and vows typically deal with different timeframes, they both amount to a use of privileged "witnesses" to curtail any further investigation into the truth or likelihood of a matter.

Besides identifying one of the three core defects of the heart that the Decalogue addresses, Jesus also draws together a recurrent cluster of type-events, strewn from Genesis to his own day, which foreground an unresolved problem in the human heart.

- **Deceit Type-Events:**

Lying, deceptive (often partial) truth-telling, and manipulative speech more generally form a cluster of type-events. These are current problems that surface in the stories of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the his twelve sons.

- Abraham's presentation, in contexts of relative social and physical weakness, of Sarah as his sister was somewhat truthful but wholly misleading. In the understated way that scripture guides and activates our moral-spiritual reasoning, the wrong (to others and especially to Sarah) becomes evident.³⁰
 - One overarching issue in the education of Abraham by the LORD may be stated this way. What character, as a husband and father, is needed by a "father of nations"? Abraham is called to be the founder of a people who will become the chosen nation. He must develop certain distinct forms of moral character and trust in God to even semi-adequately fulfill this calling.
 - Abraham's ambivalence regarding Sarah, as his *wife*, and the courage to claim her as such in threat-dense situations, is one such character-flaw that must overcome before God enables the miraculous conception of Isaac – the promised seed.
 - Twice Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister such that she is taken into the harem of another – first with the Pharaoh in Egypt, second by Abimelech of the Philistines.
 - At least two elements of the big story are designed to prompt our own moral and spiritual evaluation. First, it is not until Abraham is told by God and learns to honor (and *listen to*) Sarah as *his wife* in the matter of Hagar and Ishmael, that Abraham and Sarah are enabled to conceive Isaac. Second, the recurrence of Abraham's deception in the story of his son Isaac, whose wife is not also a half-sister, and then throughout the story of Jacob and his sons provides ample opportunity to directly notice what dynamic deceit of various types release into the world.
- Jacob's story, in particular, foregrounds deceit as a dynamic both in the social world generally and as a character problem within God's own chosen people. Again, in scripture's understated way, Jacob's own deceit against others comes back on his own head, and infects the subsequent generation, in morally symmetrical ways.
 - Jacob lies to his father, Isaac, about being the older instead of the younger brother and uses clothing to accomplish the trickery. This leads to Jacob having to flee to Haran and his uncle Laban.
 - There Laban tricks Jacob, passing off the older sister (Leah) for the younger daughter (Rachel).
 - Then, Jacob's sons deceive their father, by means of misleading clothing, into believing that Joseph has been killed by some wild beast.

³⁰ By understated, I mean that we do not have explicit *narrator evaluation* in the text. The narrator of scripture does not interject a, "by the way, this is ethically wrong" or "and Abraham was sinning by doing this," before resuming the story. Instead, the recurrence of event and character types, with micro-variations, provides human thought the means of noticing the wrong and the long term, intergenerational outcome of such actions and character-traits.

- **Rash Vow Type-Events:**

But Jesus is also evoking another type-event. Rash vows (or hasty stupid promises), and how one weighs any obligation to keep them under different circumstances, form a recognizable event-type which raises moral questions – questions not clearly resolved in the Hebrew Bible.

- The most egregious and infamous example is Jephthah's vow, which he refuses to renounce and instead offers up his own daughter as a burnt offering. But other examples abound:
- Just consider: the vow of the Israelites with the tricky Gibeonites; the vow of the Israelites, amidst the civil war against Benjamin, to never give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite; the vow and curse of Saul upon anyone who eats until the battle's end and Jonathan's taste of wild honey; David's vow to slay Nabal and all the males of his household and Abigail's intervention; etc...
- In the very recent story of Jesus' day, what led to John the Baptists' execution? Herod's rash vow.

Others' Hazy Recognition of the Problem

Other teachers of Torah in Jesus' day also saw at least part of the problem. But they sought a resolution in the sphere of legality rather than the sphere of heart-calibration.

- Matt. 23:16-22 "Woe to you blind guides who say..."
- One way of dealing with the use of swearing, whether in oath or vow, is to legislate the details of which ones are binding and which ones are null. The "blind guides" take this approach. Instead of seeing the root of the problem, they try to create a subset of oaths and vows – defined by increasingly precise verbal formulae – that are considered binding while all others are considered null.
- Of course, these rules are particularly useful for the purpose of cheating an outsider. The outsider, one would presume, would not know the intricacies of binding and nonbinding oaths and vows. He could be easily fooled by an impressive oath or vow that, unbeknownst to him, happens to be legally nonbinding according to the experts' judgment.

Jesus' Teaching on the Evil behind Privileged Speech

Jesus seeks to repair the flaw in the human heart instead of add legal nuance for its management. Jesus' way is to simply dispense with such privileged speech acts. "Don't swear at all." In the kingdom of God, one doesn't need them to be effective in the world. When working with God, one can risk speaking plainly, explaining as needed, and then simply inviting others to choose for themselves. We don't have to control all the outcomes.

- Notice that Jesus' teachings about titles and honorifics – don't be called Rabbi / Teacher or Leader / Ruler (Mt. 23:8-11) – is given in the same context has the same aim.
- The problem is claiming unwarranted deference. But deference, in the context of truth seeking, short-circuits the process of learning. Jesus would not have us pretend to understand out of deference instead of probing until we actually see.

So what is evil about claiming and wielding privileged speech? It deprives persons, created for co-dominion under God, of their responsibility and need to decide based on what they see to be true, good, and right.

Moreover, by so doing, it ruptures the underlying rapport or communion upon which a shared search for truth could proceed.

Humility, or Before the Father Alone

(Luke 18:9-14; Matthew 7:1-5)

No aspect of Jesus' teaching is so distinctive and world-changing as that concerning pride and humility. A simple historical observation makes the point well. Among the ancient moralists, humility and a mind given to service was actually considered vicious. Servility was despicable and vile. To do great things, it was thought, one must have a high self-estimation. The great-souled man made big boasts and then made good on them. Thus humility was thought a vice. For Jesus and his followers, on the other hand, humility is a primary virtue.

Jesus understood that the engorged self-esteem, which was considered healthy and laudable among the pagans, actually debilitated them. Pride hinders the exercise of our greatest power – 'power under' others in service.

- As a quick litmus test of the world-changing effect of Jesus' teaching and example, just consider the last time a political leader assumed a title like 'the Great'. This serves as an indicator of how much Jesus' teachings have changed the consciousness of the West... at least at the level of public affirmation.
- On the other hand, human nature has not changed. The individual impulse to self-aggrandizement rages on and proves just as toxic today as ever.

The peculiar damage of pride lies in the blindness it creates in its practitioner. Simply consider the fact that our secular society has developed ways of addressing every other distortion of heart that Jesus unveiled. Various therapies, 12-step programs, and institutions are in place to deal with anger, distorted desire, and even dishonesty – at least to some degree.

- Anger management therapy is available through purely secular institutions. Everyone recognizes sexual addiction, compulsive shopping, and kleptomania as problems. Clinical professionals address them in some manner. Even lying, when it reaches a certain level of compulsiveness, is acknowledged as undesirable. Sociopaths are considered diseased.
- The reason these programs and institutions exist is because people struggling with such things *know* they have a problem. When people are gripped by anger, twisted desires, and compulsive deceit it ruins their lives in a way they cannot easily ignore.

But what about pride? Can you name a single analogous therapy, program, or institution designed to address it?

- With the possible exception of marriage, there is no institution in secular society designed to restore humility.
- I've yet to find a chapter of Boasters Anonymous. Maybe a few of us could start the first. There's not, as far as I know, a Mayo Clinic for the Abrasively Arrogant. Where does one go to detox from an ego that sucks the air from any room into which one walks?

Pride is the most spiritually debilitating distortion we face. Here's why. With all other sins, one *knows* something is wrong. But pride impairs my capacity to notice the danger and disease of my own soul.

Two teachings are necessary to address it. First, we'll identify and seek to understand what pride is. Then, we'll articulate clearly and practically how to grow in humility.

So what is pride? In Lk. 18:9-14, Jesus helps us see it clearly.

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 ESV)

Consider first the audience. Luke tells us clearly that Jesus is speaking to some who are impressed with their own spiritual achievements. They think they can manage goodness by themselves. Consequently, they blow off or despise those who don't live up to their personal standards.

- Jesus knows the harmfulness of this attitude and cares enough to help them. But he also knows that a frontal, finger-wagging assault would be no help. So Jesus doesn't chew them out or lecture them. Instead, he tells a story.
- Two characters enter the temple at the hour of prayer. One is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Pause there. We need to calibrate our expectations – both regarding the characters and the setting – to really hear Jesus' story as he told it.

Character Expectations

- Because we grew up hearing these stories, we immediately expect that the Pharisee will be a villain. Pharisee is a 'boo!' word for us. Usually it's taken as synonymous with 'hypocrite'. But in Jesus' world the Pharisees were highly respected, religiously serious people. In a moment when many were growing lax in their observance of Torah in order to gain from compromising with the Roman overlords, the Pharisees held to a costly obedience. In Jesus' world, 'Pharisee' was generally a 'yay!' word.
- Tax collectors, in contrast, were universally despised. 'Boo!' These were people who sided with the Romans – against their own people – simply in order to make some cash. They cared more about turning a profit than helping their own people. Everyone considered them vile. So Jesus' audience would immediately expect the Tax Collector to be the bad guy and the Pharisee to be the good guy. But, then, Jesus' stories always come with a twist.

The Temple Setting

When we read about people going to the temple for prayer, foreign prayer practices distort our expectations. Prayer, for the modern Christian, is typically silent and solitary. When we pray in groups, our eyes are often closed and our heads bowed. Only one person at a time speaks into the silence. The temple was very different.

- In the ancient world almost nobody prayed silently or alone or with eyes closed. Prayer was corporate. Particularly during the afternoon sacrifice, the people would gather in the court of the temple. After the lamb's fat was consumed on the fire and the libations were poured, the incense was lit.
- As the Levites sang and the aroma ascended, everyone prayed out loud and simultaneously. (Evidently they didn't worry about God being able to sort out who said what. God could manage it.) The people's prayers rose with the fragrance of the incense to God. (See Ben Sirach 50:14-19; Judith 9:1; Lk 1:8-10; Acts 3:1; Mishnah Tamid 7.2) Prayers were public utterances.

Jesus' Depiction of Pride

Both men enter into this bustling, public setting for prayer. The Pharisee, unlike everyone else, stood *by himself* to pray.

- Some translations have 'prayed *to himself*' but this is mistaken. Luke had consistent ways of describing internal speech, but the grammar was different. (For interested Greek-geeks, notice that in 7:39; 12:17; 16:3; 18:4 Luke uses ἐν ἑαυτῷ not πρὸς ἑαυτόν, as in our text, to describe an internal monologue.) The point here is spatial separation – physical distance from others.
- This bodily distance might not mean much to us, but to those in Jesus' world the point would have been obvious. The Pharisee sees himself as a *holy man*! He has scrupulously observed all the purity rituals, but he cannot be sure the others have. He's gone through the ritual ablutions. He has meticulously abstained from forbidden foods and the pleasures of the bed prior to his visit. But he doesn't trust that others are pure. So he stands by himself lest he be defiled by others. He's sending a *very clear* signal.

When the Pharisee opens his mouth, he reveals his heart. We get an X-Ray of the pride twisted soul. The essence of pride emerges in his first line. 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other men...'. Pride mistakenly locates a person's value in how they compare to others.

- As such, pride turns on an illusion. The deception is that my identity and worth arise from a comparison with other persons.
- As a result I develop a visceral urge to compare. When I'm gripped by pride, an instinctive impulse drives me to side-glance at others. I've got to size them up. Depending on the measurements I'll feel a better or worse about myself. But this is rooted in a misapprehension.

What is the truth about my identity and value? The truth is that my identity comes from my relation to my maker, without reference to others. I have value, not because I might compare favorably to or outperform others, but because the one who made me cherishes me. He gave his Son for me. I'm beloved. No measurement against others is needed to know it. That's reality.

Pride as the Log in My Eye

When I'm gripped by pride, however, I can't see it. So I gravitate toward what Jesus described in Mt. 7. Remember the 'plank in the eye'?

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5 ESV)

A common interpretation of this passage would boil down to the following advice: 'Clean up your own act so you can more effectively condemn your brother.' It's merely procedural. Remove whatever unrelated sin you struggle with (the 'log in your eye') before tearing into your brother.

But what if Jesus is going deeper than that? Could it be that he wants to address the very impulse we have to compare – and in comparing to condemn? The 'log' in my eye, is precisely my need (instilled by pride) to find fault in my neighbor.

- You know the impulse that Jesus is addressing. We don't voice it out loud, but if we did it would sound like this. 'Hi, my name's Daniel and I specialize in flaw detection and removal. I look for flaws and failures in people and point them out. I *pretend* to be distressed by the discovery – but the truth is I savor the experience. I feel like I grow an inch each time I make another shrink.'
- Maybe you've known someone like this? Well, that attitude *is the plank* Jesus is talking about! Perhaps I'm not the only one who needs it removed.

So Jesus is asking us to imagine personal interaction without any impulse to find fault – without any personal need to compare. That mindset would enable us to see clearly and be truly helpful toward our brothers and sisters.

Now back to Jesus' story. The Pharisee has given himself over to the impulse to compare. **In his prayer, he offers a list of reasons for his superiority** (18:12). They are worth pondering in context.

- His first reason is that he fasts *twice* per week. Pause there. Think for a moment through the Old Testament. How many times *per year* was one required to fast? Only once per year, on the Day of Atonement. So this guy is doing serious extra-curricular work.
- The second reason he offers is that he tithes *everything* he acquires. Again the historical context clarifies. According to the Rabbis, one did not need to tithe

everything. Some things were not liable to the tithe. For instance, you didn't have to tithe parsley and celery (Mishnah Shebiith 9.1). I guess they figured that even God doesn't like parsley, so you don't need to tithe it. Likewise, if you bought food in the market you didn't have to tithe it, because it was already supposed to have been tithed. But this guy tithes *everything* that comes into his possession. You can imagine him meticulously measuring his herb garden and cutting off one-tenth of each sprout. As he returns from the market, he shaves the tenth part off his pot roast.

- Why is he engaging in the additional work? It is a display of religious seriousness in a context where that is respectable. The Pharisee is exaggerating the demands of piety (fasting and tithing) in order to appear more righteous. He's playing the 'Who's Better?' game with ferocious intensity.

The Tax-Collector also stands apart from the crowd, but for a different reason. He knows his sin and is afraid he will pollute others.

- His whole body registers truth. He 'would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast'. His heart is also in his words. There is no bargaining or list of reasons he should be heard – nothing but pure request. 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' He has no achievements to commend, only a request for mercy sufficient to restore a relation to God. The pray, though spoken in public, was addressed only to God. The Tax Collector had found the holy place – what the old Puritans referred to as the 'Audience of One'. In humility, he stood before God alone.
- So the hour is past. The service is over. Two men walk home. One, no doubt, feels pretty good about himself. But he's just as far from God as possible. He's taken the time for prayer and turned into self-advertisement and an opportunity to humiliate other humans created in the image of God. (Remember, his words about the Tax Collector and the crowd were spoken out loud. He was shaming others publicly.) The other, Jesus said, 'went down to his house made right... For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.'

The essence of pride is a mislocation of the self. In pride, I yield to the illusion that my identity and value is established through *comparison* with other human beings. As a result, I begin to manufacture points of comparison, focusing on things at which I consider myself adept, in order to feel superior. This compulsive sizing up, I call the 'Who's Better?' game. The label is made up, but we've all played the game to which it refers.

We've all heard sermons against pride and know it is something we avoid. However, too seldom is accompanying teaching provided for growing in humility. We know we *ought* to be humble, but we might not know *how* to grow in humility or adequately understand what has prevented us from doing so. In this session we will focus on the positive or growing side of the equation.

Let's begin with some troubleshooting at the level of thought. Two prevalent assumptions – unspoken ideas – often block us from growing in humility. It helps to state them clearly so we can

examine them. The common notion is that to be truly humble one would have to be weak and stupid. Let's consider each of these ideas:

- **Stupidity:** There is an idea floating around that if I were really humble, I couldn't know it. In other words, humility requires ignorance – at least of myself. This idea is incredibly destructive because we were created to desire truth. It's hardwired into us. Moreover, if you read through scripture, wisdom and humility are travel partners. They show up in the same places and the times. Consider the words of Proverbs 11:2, 'When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.' The truth is humility makes you smarter.
- **Weakness:** Another idea we silently hold is that I were truly humble, I'd be a doormat. We imagine humility as embodied in a limp, compliant person. So a humble person could never be powerful. Again, this idea is destructive because we were created for dominion. We're designed for effectiveness – fashioned with a desire to make good things happen. In truth, humility is not about a lack of power. Humility, rather, wields power with gentleness and a clear awareness that the source of my power is not in me. Again, consider the words of scripture. In Numbers 12:3, we are told 'Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.' Obviously, there was no lack of power with one who split the sea, for whom the earth yawned and swallowed his enemies. Rather, Moses simply knew this power was not his private property and exercised it with great gentleness toward others. Indeed, humility makes it safe for God to entrust more power to a person. Humility is a prerequisite for strength.

So how, practically, can we grow in humility? **In principle, anything that enables me to steadily and consistently see everything (myself, others, circumstances) before the face of God will help me grow in humility.** Remember, pride rests on an illusion that my significance comes from comparison with other people. So anything that positions me again in God's presence alone will nurture humility.

But I'd like to recommend three practical ways to live this out. The threefold advise for learning humility was Dallas Willard's in a talk I heard him give – never pretend, never presume, and never push. They just stuck with me. But I've since noticed these map well onto some of Jesus' observations concerning the scribes and Pharisees in Mt. 23:1-12. If something is wrong in what follows, that's probably my part.

First, we will grow in humility if we *never pretend*. Instead, we will live from a quiet authenticity. In and of itself, this will largely break the backbone of pride. For pride in essence involves acting like something I know I'm not.

- 'Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees have sat on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they say, but do not do. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves have no desire to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds *in order to be seen* by others..." (Mt. 23:1-5a). Pretense or acting is the fundamental roadblock to humility.
- So, practically, I can stop pretending about all sorts of things. To grow, I'll stop pretending about being humble. I'll stop pretending about bad things I do, but also won't pretend about

the good things. I'll be upfront about what I know and what I do not know. I'll give up adjusting perceptions about my abilities. I'll stop pretending about emotions I do or do not feel.

- A handy exercise to this end is simply to observe how you use words. In particular, for a period of time, notice how many words you use to explain or adjust another person's perception of your deeds. Impression management is pride's project. Humility can risk being seen just for what it is – no more or less.

Second, we will grow in humility if we *never presume*. In other words, we won't expect any special treatment or recognition. Pride tempts us to look at what God does through us as if it were our own accomplishments. As a result, we expect special honors.

- Jesus sees this dynamic in the religious luminaries of his day. '...they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.' (Mt. 23:5b-7)
- A good diagnostic for the degree to which presumption holds you is simply to observe your thoughts when you don't get your way. Have you ever found these words floating through your mind? 'After all I've done for them...!'
- This is a regularly recurring issue in church life. Within any church, there are always a number of people who give and serve sacrificially. No church could exist without those people. But the temptation is to think that such labors entitle one to have things go his or her way. So what happens when a decision goes against the desires of one of those persons? Often there is offense. But offense grows only from the soil of presumption.
- Consider Jesus' teachings. When you are invited to a banquet, which seat do you choose? (Lk. 14:7-11) When you've done all you were commanded, what are you to say? (Lk. 17:10)

Third, we will grow in humility if we *never push*. In other words, we will set aside the project of pressuring and manipulating people into accepting our vision of things. While humility and power go together, humility does not try to *drive* others or demand their automatic assent.

- 'But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.' (Mt. 23:8-12)
- Jesus specifically calls us to give up claims to others' deference. 'Rabbi', 'Teacher', 'Father', 'Leader / Guide / Instructor' are not just labels to avoid, but social roles that demand automatic compliance.
- Paradoxically, Jesus' apprentices discover that many things can be accomplished through the draw of a good example, which could never be achieved through pressing others. Greatness comes through service.

Welcome and Judgment:

Or, the Connection between Righteousness and Blessedness

A Scriptural Pattern: The Paradox of Collaboration and Character

Throughout Scripture, God chooses to work with people who lack moral stature. It's a bit of a scandal really. Rarely is it clear that God has chosen the morally superior person. Often it seems he's clearly chosen a person of significant moral deficiency.

- Abraham – “She’s my sister.” Jacob lies and tricks and maneuvers his way, and the lying he perpetrates he later suffers. Moses has anger issues and is generally emotionally aloof from the people he would lead. Aaron, on the other hand, caves in to please and ends up guilty of leading Israel into idolatry. The list could be extended nearly endlessly, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Saul, David, Solomon, etc...
- *All* begin flawed. *Some* undergo significant moral growth through their collaboration with God. Jesus summarizes and clarifies this feature with his motif of deferred judgment in the kingdom.

Blessedness and Goodness: Related but Temporarily Separable

We’ve already considered Jesus’ direct teaching about God working through people who are morally flawed – even evil! The underlying reason for this phenomenon is the Father’s gracious welcome. Our Father’s eyes are always on the horizon, always longing for our return. He’s so eager for our inclusion in his project that he’ll happily receive us with the flimsiest of good-intentions and the worst of mangled character.³¹

But here’s the rest of the story. *He* will receive us but *we* won’t find it easy to stay with him, collaborating in his project, given those character-traits. We’ll find that resources for significant and ongoing change are provided us, but what happens if we ultimately refuse those resources? This sad question brings us to the focus of this session.

The Deferred Judgment Motif:

Because blessedness and moral goodness in the kingdom are non-causally related, they are temporarily separable. Because they are both products of grace, they are not separable *indefinitely*. Eventually, either both or neither will be received.

We cannot forever receive one gift from God while refusing the others. Grace is always personal – rooted in a relation to the Giver. If we do not want to be around God, with the accompanying ethos of a life imbued with his character, we will eventually exclude ourselves also from the joys flowing from collaboration with him.

Character eventually catches up and either supports or destroys the activity of co-working (and thus also one’s joy derived therefrom). For this repeated theme of deferred judgment, see such passages as:

- “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, ... cast out demons, ... perform many miracles...?” (Matt. 7:21-23)

³¹ We’ve already noted Jesus’ explicit teaching about God working through people who are morally flawed (Mt. 13:47-50 and Mt. 22:1-14, esp. v.10). The underlying reason for this possibility is the Father’s indiscriminately gracious welcome – all who will may freely come. He’s merciful and kind to the evil and ungrateful (Lk. 6:35-36, see also Lk. 15:11-32). He generously bestows his goods on evil and good, righteous and unrighteous (Mt. 5:45).

- Shallow soil = “immediately receives the word with joy but does not have a root in himself...” (Matt. 13:)
- Parable of the Dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50) – co-working with God extended to both the good and the bad, but then comes the separation.
- Parable of the Wedding Feast, Seedy Guests, and the eventual Garment Check (Matt. 22:1-14)
- Parable of Faithful and Negligent Servants (Luke 12:41-46... maybe continue through 13:9?)
- Strive to Enter into the Narrow Doorway because Workers of Injustice will be turned away from the Closed Door (Luke 13:22-30)
- Related point of John 15:6 – the Father’s pruning or cleansing of those branches bearing fruit in the vine.

But let’s take a closer look at one of the more developed passages:

Grace, Initial Acceptance or Rejection of the Co-Working Invitation, and Long-term Character (Mt. 22:1-14)

General Point: This is a parable about collaboration in God’s project and about the consequences of *joining in to differing degrees over time*. It is *not* directly about heaven and hell.

To begin, please notice that there are multiple invitations to the Wedding Feast

- The First and Second Invitations (Mt. 22:2-7): The first two notices meet with human refusal, accompanied by varying degrees of vehemence or hostility.
 - In the second notice, the temporal urgency and unrepeatability of the co-working moment is articulated under the figure of the feast. “I’ve prepared dinner. My oxen and fattened livestock are butchered. Everything is ready. Come to the feast.” (Mt. 22:4)
 - In his work in history, God is making irreversible preparations for our contributions – for our moment of co-agency with him. Historical moments are by nature irreversible – one cannot *un*butcher the oxen. The setup for any given moment, like the moment itself, is unrepeatable. (If you don’t pass the ball or take the shot in a game, that moment’s gone. One has to play forward, the past is unchangeable.) God says, “I’ve set up all the conditions right where you’re at. Now is the moment to enter into others labor (cf. Jhn. 4:35-38). I’ve fashioned a nearly completed deed with a gap just your size and shape.” The co-working moment awaits our personal engagement.
 - This is why attentiveness is so central to collaboration with God. Jesus, here, highlights what occurs in its absence. Inattentiveness produces a refusal to collaborate, which tends to escalate in some into an outright rebellion that brings punishment (Mt. 22:5-7).
 - But God – the King throwing the Wedding Feast – is not done. His project must go on...
- The Third, New Invitation (Mt. 22:8-10) – The temporal demand of God’s project, which is still underway, means pulling others into the project – even those not yet suited in character for the task ahead. “The wedding feast is ready... Go therefore to the highways and invite whomever you find there” (22:8-9)

- The result is that **both evil and good people** enter the wedding feast – co-work with God. Jesus is clear. God will welcome both evil people and good people into his project... for a season.
- Consider, for instance, how Judges narrates Samson's character-flaws of sexual impulsivity and his tendency to violent vindictiveness as occasions that the LORD used for his own purposes. A morally bad person is co-working with God. (Judg. 14:4)
- The Meaning of the Garment Check (Mt. 22:11-13):
 - Because of God's immense grace – his personal readiness to welcome and redeem – one can begin, even as a bad person, to collaborate with God. But *one cannot continue that way* without it eventually disrupting one's ability to collaborate. There will be a hard expiration date for such co-working with God, and its accompanying blessedness or subjective flourishing, unless personal transformation ensues. (Samson may stand as a readily available example of this dynamic and life-trajectory in co-working with God. In fact, this parable may be a midrash on the Samson story – see the conclusion of both stories.)
 - Implicit Assumption: God's grace not only provides entry to collaboration in God's project, but grace also provides resources for moral transformation (aka wedding clothes).
 - Clothing, in the NT, consistently symbolizes moral character – not so much specific deeds as settled dispositions and traits (e.g., Rm. 13:13-14; Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:8-17; Eph. 4:22-24 (and following); 6:13-17; 1 Thess. 5:8; 1 Pet. 5:5; Rev. 19:8).
 - The wedding clothes are provided upon entrance to the wedding feast. For high occasions put on by a king in the Ancient Near East, it is not unheard of for festal garments to be provided (e.g. 2 Kg. 10:22). Unfortunately, we don't have any contemporary example of a wedding feast providing clothing. (But we also don't possess any historical narratives of royal wedding feasts in Jesus' setting.) There is one late ancient example in Arabia of a king providing the wedding clothes for guests. So, this implicit assumption is certainly not absurd though it's not historically incontrovertible.
 - However, the *internal sense* of the parable only works if the wedding clothes are provided by the king. The guests are all ushered in off the streets. This includes multiple evil people (notice the plural in v. 10). Yet only one is without wedding clothes – remains without character transformation. This implies that most are changed upon entering.
 - Moreover, the king expresses surprise that this one person is not wearing wedding clothes. Yet, he could not reasonably be expected to even own such festal garb, let alone have it with him on the streets when invited in. Moreover, the one questioned is speechless. He doesn't say, "I was brought in off the street and didn't wear my festal robes to the market today." He has no answer. The only plausible reason, within the narrative, is that the man was offered garments but that he had refused to wear them.
- Here is Jesus' point. It can be lifted out of the figures of the parable and stated plainly. If one consistently refuses to accept and make use of the resources for moral-spiritual transformation given within the kingdom, there will come a moment of collapse – a moment in which

collaboration with God in his project will be impossible. One's character will prevent continued collaboration.

- Jesus clarifies what happens to people in such moments of character collapse and inability to continue in step with God. Morally untransformed co-workers will *eventually find themselves impotent, ignorant, and frustrated* as they fall out of sync with God's project. Consider the metaphors:
 - Bound hand and foot – one is incapacitated in where one can go and what one can do. Agency, for which we were created, becomes extremely restricted in such moments.
 - Cast into outer darkness – One is suddenly unable to determine what's happening... there is a loss of distinctions in one's perception (darkness entails not being able to visually discern where one thing stops and another begins). Confusion.
 - Weeping and grinding teeth – Such a person is frustrated at the resulting impotence or lack of results in one's life. This is not so much a matter of pain as of frustration.
 - (The Samson story ends here as a well. Due to his own character flaws, he cuts himself off from God's unspeakably accommodating willingness to work with Samson. Then Samson's bound hand and foot. He's blinded. He's subjected to the frustration of enslaved grinding; see, Judg. 16:21.)
- Each of these depict the loss of agency that one would experience by falling out of the collaborative relation with God's project. They are not God doing mean things to people. They are the intrinsic state of human agency apart from God's empowerment. We were created for co-working. The above metaphors describe the experience of trying to run the world on our own – apart from God's accompanying activity.

Conclusion:

Jesus' spiritual realism of life within the Father's project (the kingdom of God) provides an distinctive account of human flourishing and its indirect relation to moral goodness and transformation. The distinctive element stems from the personal relation with the Father who readily gives, to any who will receive it, both the opportunity to collaborate in his project (along with its byproduct of subjective well-being) and, concurrently, the means for moral transformation. The Father's patience, which is also his allowance for necessary human processing times, allows for some significant temporal disjunction between the reception of these two gifts. One may be blessed and unrighteous – for a time – by co-working with God. But, in the long term, really receiving the Father and returning to a life-giving relation of collaboration with him means receiving both gifts. Eventually, blessedness and righteousness both characterize the life of a person fully at home in God's reign.