

Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels

THE GOSPEL
IN
PARABLE

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FORTRESS PRESS

giving that others might be free (10:45). His death was not the end of the story, for he has been raised up (16:6). The community lives between the resurrection and the return of Jesus, between promise and presence. Jesus is "lord of the house" which awaits his return. The community lives therefore by hope as well as by faith. When it recounts the parables and allegories of Jesus, it shares the memories of Jesus that have been handed down. A community that can share such memories can become a community of shared hopes.

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THE PARABLES OF MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to Mark, Matthew has a great number of parables: four from Mark (Matthew omits the Seed Growing Secretly); nine from Q (the sayings source which he shares in common with Luke); and ten that are called M or Matthean special material.¹ Matthew's parables manifest certain common traits.² Many are dramatic parables where human actions and human decisions engage the hearers. Matthew loves the grand scale. Mark's shrub (Mark 4:32) becomes a tree (Matt. 13:32); the treasure and the pearl exceed all value (Matt. 13:44-46); the debt of the servant exceeds the taxes from Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria (Matt. 18:24); ten bridesmaids are the retinue for a rich man's daughter (Matt. 25:1-13); and the talents given to the servants equal wages for thirty, sixty, or 150 years (Matt. 25:15). Matthew also loves stark contrasts and reversals. His parables contain more allegorical elements than those of Mark or Luke, and he exhibits a fondness for apocalyptic imagery to underscore the crisis occasioned by the teaching of Jesus. The stakes are heaven or hell, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. This combination of dramatic interaction, imaginative language, and religious awe provides an entree into the theological world of Matthew.

1. Numbers are based on the list of parables in Jeremias, *Parables*, 247-48. For a more complete list which includes parabolic sayings, see Drury, *Parables*, 70-72.

2. Gouldier, "Characteristics of the Parables," 52-53.

ETHICS AND DISCIPLESHIP: MATTHEW'S REDACTION OF MARK 4

In his sermon in parable (Matt. 13:1–52), by changes in his Markan source, by the addition of his own material, and by his own placing and arrangement of material, Matthew creates a discourse twenty verses longer than Mark's and one that conveys distinctive themes of his theology.³ While I do not undertake an exhaustive study of Matthew 13, I will call attention to major characteristics of the discourse and aspects of its theology. To anticipate my conclusions, I will suggest that, while Mark's discourse serves his Christology and the *summons to discipleship*, Matthew stresses more the *ethics of discipleship* and the relation of ethics to eschatology.

Matthew 13 is the third of the five major discourses that give the Gospel its distinctive flavor (chaps. 5–7, the Sermon on the Mount; chap. 10, the Mission Discourse; chap. 13, the Discourse in Parables; chap. 18, Instructions on Life in Community; chaps. 24–25, the Eschatological Discourse). The parable discourse follows narratives portraying the growing estrangement between Jesus and his contemporaries. While Matthew follows Mark in placing the discourse immediately *after* the saying that those who do God's will are the true family of Jesus (Matt. 12:46–50 = Mark 3:31–35), he leaves the Markan order at the conclusion of the discourse by telling the story of the rejection at Nazareth (Matt. 13:53–58 = Mark 6:1–6a).

Also, while Matthew follows Mark closely in reproducing the text of the Sower, the following section which corresponds to Mark 4:10–12 is considerably expanded by Matthew (Matt. 13:10–17). In Matthew only disciples (*mathētai*) ask the question, which is not about the meaning of the parables but about the reason for speaking in parables at all: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (13:10). The response of Jesus is also different: "To you it has been given to *know* the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11). There is no explicit reference to "those outside," as in Mark. Matthew immediately adds Mark 4:25, "For to him who has will more be given." In 13:13 (= Mark 4:12) Matthew changes Mark's puzzling *hina*

3. The most important study of Matthew 13 is by Kingsbury, *Matthew 13*; cf. the summary by W. Harrington, *Parables Told by Jesus*.

("in order that") to *hoi* ("because") and adds the full quotation from Isa. 6:9–10 as a proof from Scripture to confirm the deafness and blindness of the hearers. These later changes soften the predeterministic potential of Mark's text and root the hardening effect of the parabolic discourse in the obstinacy of the hearers. In Matthew the parables clearly do not cause the division between the disciples and others but are a consequence of it, that is, Jesus turns to special instruction of the disciples because others have rejected his teaching.

After the quotation from Isaiah, Matthew then adds a blessing on the disciples which comes from Q (13:16–17 = Luke 10:23–24). In his presentation of the allegory of the seeds Matthew stresses not only hearing the word but also understanding it (13:19). He omits the parable of the Seed Growing Secretly as well as the sayings of Mark 4:21–24, even though he has these at other places in his Gospel (5:15; 7:2; 10:26). He adds the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (13:24–30), and to the parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31–32) he joins the parable of the Leaven (13:33)—which shows a Matthean penchant for a triadic grouping of parables. He then concludes this section of the discourse by showing that Jesus' discourse in parables is in fulfillment of Scripture (13:35 = Ps. 78:2).

At 13:36 there is a major shift in the discourse. Jesus leaves the crowds, enters a house, and speaks to his disciples alone. He also leaves the Markan source here, and the following material is completely from his own tradition, or due to his own composition.⁴ This section contains an allegorical interpretation of the Wheat and the Tares (13:36–43), a triad of kingdom parables—the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, and the Net (13:44–50)—and a concluding saying about a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven who brings from his treasure what is new and what is old (13:51–52), which could well be Matthew's self-description of his literary technique.⁵ The chapter ends with a formula similar to the conclusion of the other major discourses: "and when Jesus had finished these parables" (13:53; cf. 7:28; 11:1; 19:1; 26:1).

4. M is used to designate material in Matthew without parallels in either Mark or Q. It is virtually impossible to distinguish here actual Matthean composition from 149–252.

5. See Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven*, esp. 11–31.

Matthean Theology in the Discourse

In his groundbreaking study of Matthew 13, Jack D. Kingsbury argued that the discourse marks a great shift in the Gospel when Jesus turns away from the crowds and toward the disciples, which is underscored by the division at 13:36. He argues that the crowd symbolizes the Judaism of Matthew's own time and its rejection of Christian claims.⁶ Matthew portrays Jesus as experiencing this same rejection and turning away from his contemporaries to form a new Israel of which the historical disciples of Jesus were to be a nucleus. The Matthean church is the heir of the disciples, and the same Jesus who taught the disciples now as exalted Lord (Matt. 28:16–20) continues to instruct his church.

While Kingsbury's presentation is a model of careful research and methodological clarity, and while it has won wide acceptance, it captures only one aspect of Matthew's theology. I propose that the discourse is equally concerned with the responsibility of "Christian discipleship."⁷ In fact, throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses the rejection of Jesus by his contemporaries as a warning to the disciples that they too can reject Jesus. The main thrust of the discourse deals with the ethics of discipleship, an ethics that is qualified by Matthew's eschatological vision.

The focus on the responsibility of the disciples is marked initially by the relocation of Mark 4:25 to Matt. 13:12. After the expanded version of the hardening saying in Matt. 13:11 (= Mark 4:10) which stresses the culpable responsibility of those who do not understand the parables, Matthew adds a blessing on the disciples who have seen and understood (Matt. 13:15–17). Thus the disciples become clear examples of those who "will have abundance" (13:12). He then directs the interpretation of the Sower explicitly to the disciples by the phrase "You, therefore, learn the meaning of the parable"

6. Kingsbury, *Matthew 13*, esp. 130–37.

7. For this aspect of the discourse I follow Dupont, "Le point de vue de Matthieu dans le chapitre des paraboles," 221–59. For discipleship as a major theme in Matthew, see Bornkamm, Barth, and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 95–125, 200–206; Kingsbury, *Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 85–88; idem, *Matthew as Story*, 103–19; and U. Luz, "The Disciples in the Gospel according to Matthew," 98–128.

(13:18, au. trans.) and stresses that hearing must be joined to understanding.

In 13:24 Matthew then returns to the crowds (the "them" [*autois*] refers to the crowds in chap. 13) and addresses three parables to them. The first, the Wheat and the Tares (13:24–30), often thought to be a variant of Mark's Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29), allows different interpretations, depending on the context. The surprising element in the parable is that the householder allows the thorns to grow alongside the wheat. The central thrust of the parable is the contrast between the householder who waits until the harvest and the servants who are eager to root out the weeds at first sight. The parable also contains the paradox that the action of the enemy which was meant to harm the owner of the field ends up for his benefit, since the weeds can be burned for fuel (13:30).

In the kingdom proclamation of Jesus, this parable may have served as a defense of his association with sinners and his unwillingness to establish a "pure Messianic community."⁸ As the *Psalms of Solomon* (first century B.C.) attests, the arrival of God's kingdom was to be marked by the separation of the good from the evil and the purification of the land.⁹ Jesus does not deny that such a separation will take place but disassociates it from his proclamation of the kingdom. Now is the time for the offer of mercy and forgiveness to the sinner. Those who will be "blessed of my Father" (Matt. 25:34) will be known only at the final judgment.

In Matthew this parable is to be read along with the Mustard Seed (13:31–32) and the Leaven (13:33), both of which stress the hidden nature of the kingdom. All three capture the paradoxical nature of the Matthean church. The church is a *corpus mixtum*, a body in which the good and the bad are mixed together. Like the mustard seed, it is small and insignificant, but it will become a tree. Its growth is as imperceptible as that of the rising of leavened bread. There is an

8. Jeremias, *Parables*, 223–25.

9. See esp. *Pss. Sol.* 17:23. The psalmist prays that the hoped-for king, a son of David, will "expel sinners from the inheritance" and "smash the sinner's arrogance like a potter's vessel" (v. 23) so that "the shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in righteousness," trans. Brock, in Sparks's *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, 678.

added paradox in that heaven is often a symbol of evil in biblical thought (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6–8).¹⁰

Therefore, in these parables, which along with the Sower are addressed to the crowds (= potential believers in Matthew's own day), Matthew explains the paradoxical nature of his church. It is no less paradoxical for him than the teaching of Jesus which was rejected but which bore great fruit, bringing forth a community that contains both the good and the bad. The future manifestation of this kingdom is hidden now under the insignificance of its present state, and even what may appear evil to outsiders conceals the mystery of God's growth.

The next major section of the parable discourse begins at 13:36 where Jesus enters a house to give private instruction to his disciples. Here the demands of discipleship are made explicit and are placed in the context of ethics qualified by eschatology, that is, conduct in the light of God's future for the world.

The instruction begins with the allegory of the Wheat and the Tares (13:36–43), couched in dualistic and apocalyptic language. The disciples (and Matthew's readers) are transported to the end of history. The Son of man will separate all causes of sin and evil; the righteous will shine like the sun, and for evildoers there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The allegory serves both to encourage and to warn the Matthean church. They are exhorted to patience in the face of evil and warned against precipitous judgment of evildoers. At the same time, they are assured that the just will be rewarded and the evil punished.

The next parables of this section are totally different in language and atmosphere. The reader moves away from the violent world of the final judgment to the almost idyllic atmosphere of folk tales about finding a treasure and a pearl (13:44–46).¹¹ These short parables admit of multiple interpretations. Traditionally they have been interpreted in terms of the "cost of discipleship"—that is, like those who sell all they have to secure their discovery, disciples are to sacrifice all to respond to the proclamation of the kingdom.¹² In the first parable, however, there is the note that it is the joy of

discovery which precipitates the decision to sell all (13:44).¹³ The joy of receiving God's forgiveness proclaimed by Jesus releases the hearer to respond without counting the cost of the response.

The third parable in this section, the Net (13:47–50), reiterates motifs from the Wheat and the Tares. The kingdom is like a large fish net that gathers up both the good and the bad and after the large catch the good and bad are separated. The eschatological application is that such a separation will take place at the "close of the age" (cf. 13:40) when the just (righteous) will be separated from the evil and, as in 13:42, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

By his arrangement and structure here Matthew makes a programmatic statement about the relation of ethics and eschatology. Both the first and the third "parable" (13:36–43, 47–50) are in reality allegories of the end time; both employ standard apocalyptic imagery and motifs: reference to the close of the age; the presence of the Son of man and angels; separation of the good and the bad; and punishment by fire.¹⁴ In contrast the twin parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl are not allegorical; the imagery is this-worldly and the application deals with immediate activity. Therefore, by bracketing these parables by the two apocalyptic allegories Matthew shows that conduct or the ethics of response to the kingdom is qualified by eschatology. The present is not simply the time for passive waiting but is to be characterized by the joy of finding and the risk of losing all to possess a treasure. At the same time, the disciples are not to be overly concerned about apparent failure and by the presence of evil in their midst. Ultimate judgment is in the hands of God, and the end time will be the time when their hidden deeds of justice will be disclosed.

Therefore, while Mark took over the seed parables of Jesus to stress Christology and discipleship, Matthew sharpens the focus on discipleship and qualifies it by his eschatological vision. To respond to the teaching of Jesus ("God with us," Matt. 1:23; cf. 28:20) means to do the will of God (7:21). The disciples are those who not only hear but understand. Unbelief is due to the deafness of the

10. Funk, "Beyond Criticism in Quest of Literacy."

11. See Crossan, *Finding Is the First Act*, esp. 73–122.

12. Perkins (*Hearing*, 26–29) centers on the risk involved in the parables.

13. Crossan (*In Parables*, 38) notes the "joy and discovery" in these parables.

14. On apocalyptic imagery, see esp. J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 1–32.

hearers but has been willed by God. The failure of the ministry of Jesus, the insignificance of the present church, and the presence of evil should not be a cause of scandal or discouragement. The ultimate separation of good from evil is reserved for the end time, and the criterion will be whether one is truly just or not. Prior to that time the community should be more concerned with their own response to Jesus than with separating the good from the evil. Matthew's discourse in parable sets the tone for the interpretation of subsequent parables where Matthew instructs his community on how they are to live in recollection of the teaching of Jesus and on how their present life is to be sustained by the hope of God's future.

THE JUSTICE OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW

After the parables of chapter 13, the next major parables of Matthew are in the Sermon on the Church, or on life in community (chap. 18), and in the teaching of Jesus between 19:1 and 20:16. Two parables in these sections, the Unmerciful Servant (18:23–35) and the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1–16), reveal Matthew's fundamental convictions in a special way.¹⁵ These parables each deal with Matthew's distinctive understanding of "justice" (Hebrew *śē-dāqāh*; Greek, *dikaioynē*), a concern where Matthew manifests the profound influence of his Jewish heritage. All references to *dikaioynē* in Matthew are without parallels in the other Synoptics and they give a distinct flavor to the Gospel.¹⁶ Mark never uses the noun "justice" and Luke uses it only once; Matthew uses it 7 times and uses the adjective *dikaios* 17 times (contrast, Mark, 2 times; Luke, 11 times). One needs to be sensitive to the richness of Matthew's appropriation of this important term.

Dikaioynē is a multidimensional term which evokes a rich heritage of associations.¹⁷ The translations "righteousness" and "righteous," found in many contemporary translations (e.g., RSV), with their overtones of moral rectitude, do not capture the richness of the biblical terms, which convey a sense of "rightness" or what should

15. I am in debt to the interesting study of Daniel Patte for showing the relation of chap. 18 to the material that follows (*The Gospel according to Matthew*, 244–80).

16. Bornkamm, "The Better Righteousness," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 24–32; and Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought*.

17. Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," 68–112.

happen. Paths, for example, are called just when they do what a path should do: lead to a goal. Laws are just when they create unity and harmony within the community.¹⁸

In the OT, Yahweh is proclaimed as just (2 Chron. 12:6; Neh. 9:8; Pss. 7:9; 103:17; 116:5; Jer. 9:24; Dan. 9:14) and seeks justice (Isa. 5:1–7). Justice has also the overtones of saving help. God is just in coming to the rescue of the threatened community or in defending those in the community who have no one to defend them (Pss. 82:3–4; 103:6). God is also just in punishing those who turn away from the Torah or follow other gods. Justice is associated with a number of other central concepts of biblical faith, such as "just judgments" (*mišpāt*, Isa. 28:17–18) and "steadfast love, mercy and fidelity" (Hos. 2:19–20; cf. Matt. 23:23).

In Matthew, John prepares for the ministry of Jesus by coming in the "way of justice" (21:32; RSV: "way of righteousness"), and in his inaugural Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) Jesus praises those who hunger and thirst for justice (5:6) and who are persecuted for the sake of justice (5:10). The justice of those who would heed his words must be greater than that of the Pharisees (5:20), and the prescriptions of the law are to be observed not simply by external observance but by a renewal of mind and heart culminating in love of God and neighbor (5:21–48; 22:34–40). Matthew pictures Jesus as the Servant who proclaims justice to the nations and who will bring justice to victory (12:18–21, citing Isa. 42:1–4). The harshest criticism of the Pharisees is that they have neglected "the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith" (23:23).¹⁹ The "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; cf. 26:13) which Jesus proclaims and enacts is the way the world is made "right," or just, before God.

In two significant parables Matthew adapts Jesus' proclamation of the justice of the kingdom to the needs of his community. Both use legal language and both have the atmosphere of a trial or hearing before a lord or judge. They both come in sections of the Gospel that deal with instruction to the disciples about life in community. In these parables—the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23–35) and the

18. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture I–II*, 337–40.

19. The text here reads *krisin* which in the LXX translates the Hebrew *mišpāt*, a term often synonymous with *śēdāqāh/dikaioynē*.

Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16)—Matthew's Jesus teaches his disciples that pursuit of the justice of the kingdom flows from the experience of unmerited forgiveness from God. They are to manifest it to others with the realization that God's justice is always joined with mercy and with surprising lovingkindness. In the words of Abraham J. Heschel, "God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency."²⁰

Justice, Mercy, and the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23–35)

Matthew's sermon on church order is often divided into two major sections: care for little ones (18:1–14) and care for sinners (18:15–35).²¹ It begins with an address of Jesus to the disciples, and the tone of the whole chapter is set by the concern for the little ones (18:1–10), those in the Matthean community whose faith is weak (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20, those of "little faith") or who need special care (10:42; cf. 25:40, 45, "the least").²² While in the first part of the chapter Matthew takes over material from Mark (18:1–9 = Mark 9:33–37, 42–48) and Q (18:10–14 = Luke 15:3–7), the second part consists of material from his own tradition, M, or of his own composition. Within this larger twofold structure there is a sub-structure whereby the two parables (18:10–14 and 18:23–35) which conclude each section also bracket disciplinary regulations dealing with sin and conflict within the community (18:15–20).

The parable of the Lost Sheep and the parable of the Unmerciful Servant not only transmit important aspects of the teaching of Jesus but give a definite theological stamp to the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew the Lost Sheep is clearly marked by its context, and the Lukan context is closer to the meaning of the parable in the ministry of Jesus, where he defends his ministry to the "lost" of his society: tax collectors, sinners, and those whom his contemporaries consider outside the pale of God's mercy (Luke 15:1–2).²³ Matthew's application of the parable to his community emerges from his distinctive

20. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 16.

21. Gundry, *Matthew*, 358; and Meier, *Matthew*, 199–200. For a complete discussion of the structure and content of this chapter, see Thompson, *Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community*.

22. On identity of "little ones," see Gundry, *Matthew*, 203. Little ones are "disciples who do not occupy positions of leadership in the church." Meier says they are "insignificant disciples who easily go astray" (*Matthew*, 202).

23. Jeremias, *Parables*, 38–39, 132–36; see below, pp. 147–51.

wording. In Matthew one of the sheep goes "astray" (*planēthē*, a term not usually used of wandering animals but frequently used of moral straying; cf. James 5:19–20). In 18:14 the interpretation of the parable, "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish," directs the parable to leaders of Matthew's own church who are to have special care for weaker members of the community. Matthew shows here the influence of Ezek. 34:6–8, where religious leaders are criticized because God's sheep "were scattered" and "wandered over all the mountains" and "my shepherds have not searched for my sheep." The location of the parable in Matthew, immediately preceding what seems to be a rather harsh and juridical approach to failure within the community, shows that, however community discipline is to be applied, order within the community is to be measured against the claims of the weaker members for special care and assistance.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23–35) as Text

The final parable of the chapter is also the first major dramatic parable in Matthew. Its context as the conclusion of the chapter marks it as the hermeneutical key to the chapter as a whole. It is introduced by a Q saying on forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22 = Luke 17:4) taken from a collection of sayings on discipleship preserved by Luke in their more original form.²⁴ Three things are distinctive to Matthew's version: (1) He makes the saying a direct response to Peter's question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matt. 18:21). (2) He changes the numbers from the offense and the repentance (Luke 17:4, "If he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him") to the forgiveness. (3) He magnifies the forgiveness: "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" (Matt. 18:22). Also, as we shall see, the parable itself does not really answer the question of Peter "How often?" but deals with the precondition (i.e., the quality) of forgiveness rather than with the number of times (quantity) it must be extended.

The concluding verse of the parable (18:35), "So also my heavenly

24. Fitzmyer, *Luke X—XXIV*, 1136–40.

Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart," reflects Matthew's editing in the use of "heavenly Father" and sounds like a paraphrase of the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). By adding v. 35, Matthew makes the parable into a warning, which builds on the original meaning but does not exhaust it.

In approaching the dramatic parables, it is helpful to break them into scenes or acts and to study the dramatic interaction of characters in the different parts. J. Dominic Crossan proposes a helpful division to this parable by noting a threefold division in which each part is characterized by a similar structure of introductory narrative, followed by dialogue and with concluding action.²⁵

ACT ONE: The King and the Servant with the Immense Debt

Narrative, vv. 23–25; dialogue, v. 26; action, v. 27

ACT TWO: The forgiven Servant and the fellow Servant with Debt

Narrative, v. 28; dialogue, v. 29; action, v. 30

ACT THREE: Fellow Servants, King, First Servant and Second Servant

Narrative, vv. 31–32a; dialogue, vv. 32b–33; action, v. 34

MATTHEAN EPILOGUE, v. 35

Such a division enables us to follow the double dramatic movement in the parable. In the "comic" movement the first servant moves from ill fortune to good fortune in act one only to end up in tragedy in act three.²⁶ The second servant moves from ill fortune to good fortune in the second and third acts. The rapid interchange and intersection of movements increases the dramatic involvement. Running throughout the parable, like a musical motif, is the constant repetition of terms for "debt" (vv. 24, 27, 30, 32, 34) as well as words for mercy and strong human emotion (vv. 26, 27, 28, 33). Critical shifts in each act take place when narrative shifts to dialogue.

The power of the parable emerges from progressive engagement with the characters. When the parable begins, our sympathies are with the first servant. The desire of the king "to settle accounts" (cf. Matt. 25:19) strikes an ominous note, as does the description of the servant as being "brought" before the king. The reason for this

25. Crossan, *In Parables*, 105–7.

26. See esp. D.O. Via, *Parables*, 137–44.

threatening situation is held in suspense until the final words of v. 24, "who owed him ten thousand talents." Since the annual income of Herod the Great was about nine hundred talents and since the taxes for Galilee and Perea were two hundred talents a year, such a debt would evoke an unbelieving gasp.²⁷ The inability to pay is not surprising, and the king's order of slavery for the debtor with his family suggests that he is a tyrannical gentle despot, since by Jewish law only a debtor, and not the family, could be enslaved for unpaid debts.²⁸ At this point the sympathy of the hearers would be toward this servant, since an unpayable debt to a heartless master is pitiable.

In v. 26 the narrative shifts to dialogue and the servant makes his plea: "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." The shock in the first part of the parable comes in the first words of v. 27. The king, who was depicted as heartless, is rather a person who takes pity (lit., "has compassion on him") and forgives the debt. A reader does not expect one who was ready to enslave a whole family to be so moved. The surprising turn of events continues when the king does not heed the servant's request for time to pay but forgives the whole debt. The parable could have ended at this point and it would have been a good illustration of Matt. 7:7, "Ask, and it will be given you," or an example of what it means to play for forgiveness even when burdened with the debt of sin.

The parable, however, moves forward to the second act, where the major thrust is found. In contrast to his passive earlier state when he was dragged before the king, the first servant now "goes out" and chances upon a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. Since one denarius is the equivalent of a day's wage (cf. Matt. 20:2), the debt is not inconsequential. Since a talent is the equivalent of fifteen years of daily wages, the contrast between the debts of the first servant and the second servant is immense. This second servant now becomes a mirror image of the first. He too falls on his knees and makes a petition in the very same words as the first servant, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you" (v. 29). The difference is that the terms of his request could be met, since in time the debt could be repaid. At this point the story could conclude with the first servant remitting the debt or even granting the request, and the

27. Limmemann, *Jesus*, 108.

28. Jeremias, *Parables*, 211.

parable would be a good illustration of the "golden rule" (Matt. 7:12, "Whatever you wish that people should do to you, do also to them," au. trans.). The opposite occurs, and with a brutality even greater than he experienced—he seized him "by the throat"—the first servant demands payment. At this point the sympathy of the readers or hearers of the parable shifts. The person with whom we rejoiced earlier now becomes repulsive. Like the fellow servants of v. 31, we are shocked at the injustice (they are "greatly distressed").

The third act begins with the actions of these servants. They do as we would like to do and go to the king in the hope of redressing the situation. The king summons the first servant, calls him wicked, and tells him what exactly happened in the first act. He was forgiven simply because the king had mercy on him and he should have expressed this mercy to his fellow servant. In v. 34 there is a tragic irony for the first servant in that now he will have what he originally requested, time to pay his debt, only the time will be spent in prison.

Interpreting the Unmerciful Servant

Redescribing the parable helps us to realize better the narrative skill and dramatic irony that permeates the story but leaves certain unanswered questions, principally why the first servant acted as he did. The answer unlocks the religious power of the parable and its importance for understanding both the message of Jesus and the theology of Matthew.

The key is the skillful way in which the narrative juxtaposes the actions and the dialogue of the first two servants. When the first servant is brought to the king his request is in the form of a plea to have time to pay a debt that is unpayable. There is something awry in his petition. Instead of asking for mercy, he thinks that the way out of his tragic situation is to restore the order of justice, of debts to be paid and obligations met. The surprise in this part is that the king acts out of mercy, not justice. Strictly speaking, the king does not grant his request but goes beyond it by granting what the servant did not even hope to receive. His request is in the order of justice; the king operates in the order of mercy out of compassion.

The second act plays out the result of the servant's faulty understanding. When he goes out and hears the request of the second servant, he hears an echo of his own disposition. He enters again

the familiar world of strict justice. The forgiveness and mercy that he received were something that simply happened to him, not something that changed his way of viewing the world. His self-understanding remains unaltered by the gift he received.²⁹ The statement of the "lord" in v. 33 is the moment of tragic revelation of why he acted as he did, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" The master says, in effect: Even given your predisposition to view the world through the eyes of strict justice, you should have seen that the mercy which was "right" in your case was also owed to your fellow servant. Paradoxically, then, mercy becomes justice and justice or "the right order" between God and humanity is maintained through mercy.³⁰ The Matthean addition of v. 35 stresses that forgiveness must be "from your heart." This is a warning that unless the gospel transforms the innermost dispositions of its hearers, they will act in much the same fashion as the first servant. The Jewish-Christian letter to James, with its accustomed directness, conveys a similar view: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). The parable thus conveys the precondition for a proper Christian ethic, and not simply an exhortation to forgiveness.

In the kingdom proclamation of Jesus this parable invites one to experience through narrative the challenge of Jesus' summons "to repent" or to have a change of heart (*metanoia*, Matt. 4:17). What is called for is a totally new way of viewing the world which shatters misunderstandings of the justice of God. Behind the God who comes to expression in the parables of Jesus is the God of Hos. 2:19 in whom are joined righteousness, justice, steadfast love (closely akin to compassion, cf. Matt. 18:27), and mercy. Behind the image of the king stands the God of Jesus who summons people to be forgiving because they have experienced forgiveness. It cautions against a legalistic or closed way of experiencing life which filters the unexpected through the narrow categories of rights and duties. In the ministry of Jesus this parable could have had a polemical thrust against religious leaders, who through the Torah and the saving act

29. D.O. Via, *Parables*, 143.

30. See esp. Linnemann, *Jesus*, 111–13.

of God in history have received mercy and forgiveness but would want to deny this to others.

The Parable in Context

The parable picks up motifs from earlier in the Gospel such as the petition "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12) and the statement "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:15, au. trans.). It also anticipates the attack on the Pharisees in 23:23, "You have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith." Its immediate context, however, is Matthew's concern for life in community.

As noted, it concludes a chapter where the central theme is care for the little ones, and serves, with the parable of the Lost Sheep, to bracket the disciplinary regulations of 18:15–20. Here Matthew describes a quasi-legal procedure (v. 16, "evidence," "witnesses") which can result in the exclusion of someone from the community—"let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17). These decisions are to be made with confidence that they will be ratified by God, who is present in the midst of the assembled community (18:18–19; cf. 16:19). Similar processes of exclusion of unrepentant members from the community are known both from Qumran and from the Pauline churches (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1–13).³¹ The Matthean structure, however, puts such power in a proper context. A community that confronts the sinner and excludes the incorrigible must first realize that it too is a community of the little ones who have strayed and been found and who have been surprised by undeserved mercy. It will bear authentic witness to the teaching of Jesus only when its juridical procedures are subject to the "law of mercy."

Matthew's readers may even see a certain irony in treating the recalcitrant member of the community like "a Gentile and a tax collector"—groups which in the Gospel receive the special attention of Jesus. Though Matthew follows the Markan order of the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, he inserts after Mark's first miracle,

31. On similar but more extensive procedures at Qumran, see the Community Rule (IQS 5:25–6:1; 6:24–7:25; 8:20–9:2). Eng. trans.: Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, 84–85, 87–90, 91–93; and Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 82–86.

the healing of a Jewish leper (8:1–4), the healing of the servant of a gentile centurion (8:5–13). He also places early in his Gospel the charge against Jesus that he is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (9:11; cf. Luke 15:1–2). It is when ordinary community order breaks down that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to seek those who have strayed.

Matthew seems to confront two distinct groups that are causing difficulty in the community.³² One consists of "enthusiasts" who seem to reject any legal constraint and take pride in their prophecy and mighty works (7:15–23). To these Matthew affirms the enduring validity of the law (Matt. 5:17–20). At the same time, Matthew rejects a "Christian Pharisaism" which would turn the gospel into a rigid system of rights and duties, and argues that life in the church is to be under the new law of mercy and love. Mercy is not an exception to the rule of justice. A person is perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48) when he or she relates to others with that mercy and love which he or she has received.

The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16)

The Parable as Text

This parable takes as its field of comparison the practice of hiring day laborers for occasional work. Though a large number of characters are mentioned—the householder, five groups of laborers, and the steward—the interaction between the householder and those first hired is the key to interpreting the parable. The parable can be divided into three acts: Act One, the hirings (20:1–7); Act Two, the payments (20:8–11); and Act Three, the dialogue between the owner and the grumbling workers (20:11–15).

The first act begins with a familiar sight: day laborers waiting for work. In first-century Palestine work was scarce and poverty widespread, so a story of a householder who engages a great number of workers would be appealing. At the outset, however, there is a surprising note. The householder (and not his steward) goes out

32. On Matthew's battle on two fronts, see R. Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, esp. 57–72 by Meier; and Schweitzer, "Observance of the Law and Charismatic Activity in Matthew."