

Union Theological Seminary

Cheapened Generosity: An Exegetical Look at Hoarding, Abundance, and Living Generously in
Matthew 6:19-24

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Does Matthew's Sermon on the Mount provide any applicable guidance for modern society? Many Christians believe that it does. After all, sections of the Sermon on the Mount are read, recited, and sung throughout churches around the globe. The texts most familiar to Christians are those of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-11) and the infamous Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13). The Beatitudes and Lord's Prayer texts are popular texts because the words inspire, bring hope, and provide comfort, but these are only short passages within a much larger teaching block in Matthew. The reality is that the Sermon on the Mount spans three chapters (Matt 5-7) and presents some uncomfortable aspects of human nature as well. Such reflections of humanity included covetousness, possessions, scarcity, and worry, and while uncomfortable to dwell on, must be reviewed. Matt 6:19-24 is one such passage that seeks to tackle these difficult topics. I argue that in Matt 6:19-24, instead of relying on earthly materials, Jesus is encouraging his followers to reclaim the divine provision echoed in the Jewish community's exodus experience. Matthew found these lessons instructive to share with his community members in Antioch as they were relevant and actionable to their context. Just as the Matthean Jesus challenged them to abstain from hoarding and amassing wealth as was modeled by the Roman Empire, the modern church is challenged to review and instate these same principles within a 21st-century capitalistic culture to create the kind of intended abundant living made manifest under the Kingdom of God.

Located in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 6:19-24 could be argued as the most pivotal and climatic passage within the teaching. Far beyond spiritualized messaging, Jesus brings forth the crux of what it means to be a disciple within these few verses. The message

received is that to follow him there needs to be action. To bring God's Kingdom to earth, the values of Matt 6:19-24 must be put into practice. What are some of these actions? The actions followers of Christ must take are not to store up earthly treasures (Matt 6:19-21), to give generously (Matt 6:22-24), and to abandon the master of money (Matt 6:24). The primary concern in verses 19-24 is how resources and possessions are managed, and the primary lesson, when managed properly, results in all people experiencing the abundance of God. This abundant living for those surviving during the time of Christ was not an over-spiritualized understanding of God's promises. For the followers of Jesus, these teachings of generosity and provision meant far more than placing money into the tithing plate. The abundance promised in Matt 6:19-24 was tangible and could become physically manifest.

Many modern interpretations of the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and Matt 6:19-24 manufacture indoctrinated speeches that, while nice to hear and memorize, remain idealistic and treated separately from current, real-world issues. The tendency for many modern church members is to read the comfortable excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount such as the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer on a Sunday morning then carry on with their busy lives. In an individualistic society, like the United States, the idealism preached on righteousness, which at first glance the passages seem to immortalize, is presented as an individual and private journey that concludes in personal salvation.¹ This is the outcome when the Sermon on the Mount is framed in a westernized context that values a certain way of life. This way of life is that of conventional, western values which include individual property rights, rewarding others based on perceived merits, and hold a very specific definition of what justice means. When discerning

¹ Not all Christians and Christian communities' hold this same theology. In fact, there are several growing progressive and traditional Christian communities that are doing incredible work in reframing the mission of the modern church. My aim is to not create an over-simplified view of the church. There are nuances, and it would be an injustice not to recognize them at this time.

what Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is conveying, is it ethical to apply these modern filters? This western midframe was not realized by the original audience. Matt 5-7, arguably one of the most famous Matthean Jesus messages, has a rich history of tradition, but to draw inferences from Jesus' message, the reader must place themselves back into the environment of its intended audience. Therefore, it is not as simple as pretending to be in a congregation at a Christian church where Jesus is the minister.²

Many scholars locate Matthew's community to be in and around a large Syrian city called Antioch.³ Authorship of the book of Matthew was 40-60 years after Jesus' ministry.⁴ While Matthew's community wasn't the same as Jesus', they still faced the daily struggle of living under the Roman Empire. They too were trying to reconcile their faith amid the Roman Empire's ongoing threats to their community, culture, and resources. The threat of oppression by the Romans was a daily cause for worry and concern brought on by limited resources and unfair governmental practices. The value gleaned from Matt 6:19-24 is consistent with the context both within the time of Jesus' teaching ministry, Matthew's authorship, and in a 21st-century environment. For Jesus and Matthew, the oppression they faced came from the Roman Empire. Matthew found the teachings of Jesus about money (Matt 6:19-24), pertinent to communicate to the Matthean communities in Antioch. These communities would have had similar concerns as those of Jesus' audiences regarding sustaining enough resources to supply their daily needs perhaps even preventing them from sharing and caring for one another. For society today, the

² Far from it — most scholars conclude it was never a “sermon” given in one setting, to begin with, but rather a collection of his teachings which Jesus would have repeatedly given. Hans Dieter Betz, “Introduction,” *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 6.

³ Warren Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew's Sermon on the Mount?*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 57.

⁴ *The NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 1604.

challenge is to not perpetuate the values a capitalistic society presents. The goal of making more money at whatever cost not only endangers less privileged communities, but it eternizes feelings of dissatisfaction which only furthers injustices and discontent.

In the beginning, God illustrates the wisdom in the divine design of creation and gave humans agency in the garden to exhibit God's presence on earth, and what Matt 6:19-24 does is retell of this Godly generosity. The promise of supplying one's daily needs is expressed through the covenantal language God shared with Israel. "In light of God's actions on their behalf, Jews maintained that he had chosen them and made a covenant with them to be their God... In exchange, Jews were to obey his laws..."⁵ Over time, the ebbs and flows of human nature drift away from these sovereign laws, and prophets come to warn the people of Israel to return to God's sovereign laws which address the idolization of earthly materials (Amos 5:11-12 NRSV).⁶ Jesus positions his message in Matt 6:19-24 to remind his audience of these Jewish principles, and while the laws are familiar to a Judeo-Christian congregation, the virtues are universal.⁷

The task of unearthing the realities from which Jesus first spoke, to Matthew's written recount, to the interpretation read in many Bibles today could take lifetimes. The summary to follow does not come close to attempting this feat, but rather provides a few foundational considerations which to draw when reading Matt 6:19-24. We will first review methodological approaches to reading the Bible, why they are important, and how they support the student of the Sermon on the Mount. This understanding of methodologies leads to the historical and contextual background which will affirm the setting which inspired the Sermon on the Mount

⁵ Bart Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literature, Theology*, 3rd and 4th Editions, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31.

⁶ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press).

⁷ Three important Jewish principles are displayed in the wisdom of the exodus story and manna, the festival of Jubilee, and the practice of sabbath which are discussed later in the thesis.

and relevant audiences' positions. Realizing the agrarian context from which Jesus and his audience were familiar, the issues of the time of Matthew's writing, and the demands of the Roman Empire within both, will help to expand the imagination of those readers of the texts to conclude a more grounded and lived understanding of the passages. Next, is a brief background on the sources which scribes used to interpret the Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain. The historical background of the faith traditions of Jesus such as manna, the festival of Jubilee, and the practice of sabbath will be discussed to lay the foundation and provide insight into these Jewish values. Finally, by establishing the duality of God's Kingdom to that of Rome, a careful application of the verses leading up to Matt 6:19-24 will be reviewed. This will lead into close reading of Matt 6:19-24 and briefly highlight the texts that follow it. We will conclude with some modern-day applications based on this study and a conclusion for moving forward.

CHAPTER 2 IMPORTANT READING METHODS FOR MATTHEW 6:19-24

New methods of studies have developed to help support the reader of Matt 6:19-24. These reading lenses aid in expanding the imagination and succors against misconstruing the intentions of the authors. Methodologies help to facilitate this by providing the reader with certain clues which to look out for in interpretations of the Bible. Methods also decenter the reader by providing an alternative approach to reading texts like Matt 6:19-24.⁸ When considering topics such as community, possessions, scarcity, and oppression, it is necessary to investigate what may have threatened the people at the time the texts were written. Before Jesus' birth, there were centuries of Hellenistic influence.⁹ This cultural effect was further realized through the power-hungry, wealth-seeking occupation of the Roman Empire's elites and retainers.¹⁰ Postcolonial criticism is an essential perspective to take when reading as it was developed to understand how Biblical texts have been used to exploit marginalized communities throughout history. Empire criticism looks for certain clues such as how control was maintained through the possession of resources and power of the Roman Empire and in relation to the followers of Jesus. Furthermore, social-scientific criticism grounds readers in the context of the time to provide support in understanding difficult passages by giving historical context to the socioeconomics of the culture. In defining each it will become clearer how these methods of

⁸ These approaches not previously considered since they were not that of the normative narrative.

⁹ Peter J. Miano, *The Word of God and the World of the Bible: An Introduction to the Cultural Backgrounds of the New Testament*, (London: Melisende, 2001), 52.

¹⁰ William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 53.

study serve as guides to the modern-day Bible reader in traversing their journey through Matt 6:19-24.¹¹

Postcolonial and Empire Criticism: Matthew 6:19-24 and the Threat of the Roman Empire

Vast amounts of books and articles are written about postcolonial theory. While I cannot attempt to cover all elements of postcolonial theory, one crucial ingredient for reading Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is the impact of colonialism, and searching for "alternative sources, alternative readings, alternative presentation of evidence."¹² By reading with a postcolonial awareness, the question becomes who holds the power in the given context and if the authors of the text are in support of or challenging them.¹³ Furthermore, it engages the texts and considers what role the Bible played in colonial expansion inclusive of slavery, racism, and sexism and how to hold the results accountable by "dismantling of the empire and its attendant instruments of power."¹⁴

Yes, European colonialism occurred after the authorship of Matthew, but colonialism impacts the filter from which the passage is interpreted. Additionally, the act of colonization was very much a reality for the Jewish people and residents of Israel at the time of Jesus and throughout the first century. The colonizer, in this instance, is the Roman Empire. Not recognizing this, promotes a frame of reference disassociating from the "protest or oppositional"¹⁵ actions that may have occurred in the everyday lived experience of the audience.

¹¹ As an American of European descent, it was important for me to call attention to these reading methods. Utilizing them in my studies enables me to realize my privileges and expands my imagination of the intention and application of the biblical texts.

¹² R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, n.p. [cited 11 April 2021], Online: <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t373/e77>.

¹³ Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation."

¹⁴ Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation."

¹⁵ R.S. Sugirtharajah, "From Orientalist to Post-Colonial: Notes on Reading Practices," *Asian Journal of Theology* 10 (1996), 24.

"When exegeting... commentators often invest it with allegorical meanings.... from an overly-Christological perspective"¹⁶ The trouble then becomes, if that Christological perspective was formed in a postcolonial environment where the oppressor developing the perspective holds the power of speech, it drowns out those not of the dominant domain. Colonizers destabilized agriculture production leading to competition to amass wealth. It left those without resources in poverty and introduced scarcity. Essentially, postcolonial theory helps to restore the voices of those marginalized and threatened, and it uplifts their stories for consideration when readings Matt 6:19-24.

Utilizing the model of postcolonial theory gives power to the stories of the oppressed in a way that also acknowledges those in similar circumstances, even in a modern context, by reminding readers that despite the normative society prescribing otherwise, there is always another side of the story. "It will engage in an archival exegesis as a way of memorialising the narratives and voices which have been subjected to institutional forgetting."¹⁷ Concurrently, it demonstrates to those in positions of power or privilege the values of such communities, and why they must be considered. Jesus states it clearly in the first verses of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:3 NRSV) While the standard interpretation of this would appeal to the cause of those in need, understanding that there was an additional governmental omission in perpetuating their exploitation is a different viewpoint entirely. How different does Matt 5:3 read when it is read as a "resistant literature of the 'natives' themselves as they talk back to the master"?¹⁸

Postcolonialism is an indispensable tool in the interpretation of the Bible as it aids in addressing

¹⁶ Sugirtharajah, "From Orientalist to Post-Colonial," 25.

¹⁷ Sugirtharajah, "From Orientalist to Post-Colonial," 25.

¹⁸ Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,"

the diversity of peoples and what sort of daily dangers they experienced under occupation and oppressive rulership.

Understanding how a postcolonial theory can aid in reading the Sermon on the Mount, we can begin to consider supplemental models in aiding in further interpretation. Empire criticism's focus is "on the interactions between Jesus-followers and the Roman Empire."¹⁹ By understanding that most Jews and Gentiles in the Second Testament were an oppressed group, the reader of the Bible can then unmask the contexts of living under the Roman Empire and that Jesus specifically addressed imperial power in Matt 6:19-24. Not acknowledging the Roman presence in the overall control of the region from whence these stories are authored does an injustice to their interpretations. The Roman Empire remained in power "and extended its control by various political, economic, military, and religious means."²⁰ Roman aristocracy stockpiled wealth and spent frivolously at the cost of those in weaker positions and it continued in a vicious cycle.²¹ Not only did the cycle perpetuate more and more demand by the Romans, but the introduction of scarcity also trickled down to those with little resources furthering the temptation to hold onto what little they owned and covet what they did not. Empire criticism provides even further insights into the lives of "those committed to the purposes... of God manifested in Jesus"²² to get a clearer perspective on their lived experiences.

Social-Scientific Criticism

If the Roman Empire caused such concern, why didn't the author of Matthew include more of this language in the text? The reality is that the Sermon on the Mount does speak to

¹⁹ Warren Carter, ed, "Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, n.p. [11 April 2021]. Online: <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t373/e15>.

²⁰ Carter, "Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation."

²¹ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 70.

²² Carter, "Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation."

these threats. The narrative, however, does not easily translate over from Matthew's context to a modern one. Social scientific criticism helps to provide some light to this seeming discrepancy. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, cultural anthropologists, developed a model for helping understand the difference which may result when a person in a modern context reads passages from a pre-industrial context. This model they classify as "high- and low-context societies."²³ High-context societies share many of the same lived experiences. "For example, everyone in ancient Mediterranean villages would have a clear and concrete knowledge of what sowing entailed, largely because the skills involved were shared by most (male) members of that society."²⁴ An author in such a context would therefore not need to document the specifications of the symbolism utilized in storytelling. This leaves large gaps in the literature where the reader or hearer must use imagination to fill in the space, but because of familiarity with the context, the high-context imagination relates closely to the author's intended purpose.

The alternative is a low-context society like America or northern Europe.²⁵ These societies "produce highly specific and detailed texts that leave little for the reader to fill in or supply."²⁶ Thus when a reader of a low-context society reads texts like the Bible which was authored for a high-context community then "as a rule, not understanding — or at best misunderstandings will be the result."²⁷ These types of misunderstandings could lead to misinterpretation of critical theological assumptions preventing readers from grasping the full meaning of the nuance language originally utilized in the texts. To fill the gaps for the modern

²³ Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 11.

²⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 11.

²⁵ There are pockets of high-context groupings within low-context societies like a church or university, but mainly, one must be diligent in providing context clues in a more modern environment.

²⁶ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 12.

²⁷ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 14.

reader, one must understand and “seek access to the societal system(s) available to the original audiences.”²⁸ This consideration of the importance of context builds on the application of postcolonial theory and empire-critical models.

Models such as postcolonial and empire criticism along with the frame of reference from high-context communities introduce key considerations in the reading of Matt 6:19-24 which is the liberation of the oppressed from under the exploitation of empire. These alternative lenses challenge the purely allegorical application of previously understood renderings of Matt 6:19-24. The goal is to not claim the ultimate knowledge of the text but to consider an alternative prospect. The alternative provides new insights which usher the reader closer to the context of Matthew’s audience, and by getting closer to the audience, we might be able to get closer to the hope and guidance the texts provide.

Just as different sources were called upon to institute the Christian canon of texts, readers of Matt 6:19-24 have the responsibility to utilize many different methods in reading and interpreting the scriptures today. These methods must address the oppression of colonizers and bring light to the voices of those colonized. Additionally, in understanding these complexities and diversities of voices, we can harness a truer sense of the socio-economic landscape of Jesus and his followers in the time of Roman occupation. Seeing beyond the literary expands our abilities in reading Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount – thus helping us apply them to a world which on occasion can be dominated in colonizer-like narratives. Next, we will dive deeper into understanding the historical context and study of the audiences.

²⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 14.

CHAPTER 3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 6:19-24

Jesus and his followers lived in an agrarian society. “In various forms, agrarian societies dominated human life from about 3000 B.C.E. to the advent of the Industrial Revolution around 1800 C.E.”²⁹ With “inventions of the plow, the wheel, and the sail” and eventually “the spread of iron,” this region around the Mediterranean world formed a “culture continent.”³⁰ Being high-context the various parties of such a cultural continent would understand the meanings “embedded in a social system”³¹ which the reader of a postindustrial society, or rather a society not dependent on solely the manufacturing of goods, would miss. The important consideration when reading passages authored in an agrarian context is that this shift of economy over time purposed big changes to the structure of the society. The domestication of animals and the invention of the plow meant that families could remain in each location for generations. It also meant, “the cultivation of the soil could finally yield an economic surplus that was large enough to encourage cultivators to settle in villages, lucrative enough to attract an exploiter class, and significant enough to support urban centers...”³²

Jesus spent much of his ministry in and around Galilee, a region whose economy was closely tied to agriculture and fishing — a lush environment.³³ This was a land whose quiet and rural villages allowed for “Jewish ideals” to be preserved.³⁴ “The land for sixteen miles around

²⁹ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 56.

³⁰ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 3.

³¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 10.

³² Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 56.

³³ Douglas E. Oakman, “Debate: Was The Galilean Economy Oppressive Or Prosperous?: A. Late Second Temple Galilee: Socio-Archaeology and Dimensions of Exploitation in First-First-entry Palestine,” Pages 346–354 in *Galilee In The Late Second Temple And Mishnaic Periods, Vol. 2*, Edited by David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

³⁴ Ernest W. Gurney, *Studies In Galilee*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1909), 130.

Sepphoris is reported in the Talmud to have ““flowed with milk and honey.””³⁵ The fertile land and territory of regions like Galilee made them an especially important target for the Roman Empire. Therefore, over time, Galilean villagers found themselves “in the midst of a Roman province of very considerable importance.”³⁶ At the time of Jesus’ birth, the ruler of the region was Herod the Great. Concurrently, Herod was undergoing tremendous building projects which cost money in addition to whatever dues were owed back to the emperor. The Herodian family maintained power and favor with the elites of the empire by assigning tributes, taxing “subjects to near ruination.”³⁷

Unrealistic Demands Led to Unfair Conditions

Rome worked closely with the local aristocracies in Judea who already maintain a “predatory relationship with their peasants” and often “extracted multiple layers of tribute from the same peasant base.”³⁸ With limited resources available after such payments were required to be made, many had to work longer in the fields to provide food for their families. Exploitative interest rates applied to debt left them having to sell their land and inevitability falling subject to working on the very land “that previously was the source of life”³⁹ for them and their family. This growing audience of oppressed peoples in the time of the Roman Empire is coined by Herzog as the “have-nots.”⁴⁰ Seventy percent of the population were peasants and they supplied the labor that “generated the wealth on which agrarian societies were based.”⁴¹ This audience

³⁵ Gurney, *Studies In Galilee*, 136.

³⁶ Gurney, *Studies In Galilee*, 136.

³⁷ William R. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus*, (United States: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2005), 43.

³⁸ Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 45.

³⁹ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, Translated by Linda M. Maloney, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006, 210.

⁴⁰ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 63.

⁴¹ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 63.

would certainly have been in the crowds that listened to Jesus, but their situation is often not realized in teachings on Matt 6:19-24.

The peasants of the agrarian Mediterranean lived under the rule of the Roman Empire and faced unrealistic demands. “The more unbalanced the power relations were between elites and peasants, the greater the drain on the peasants' subsistence.”⁴² Therefore certain words used in the Sermon on the Mount would have a different emphasis than they might in modern times. For peasants, to have a promise of “daily” (Matt 6:11 NRSV) or “forthcoming” provisions in the form of bread meant a future free of worry, and life with God was to be like a “never-ending banquet.”⁴³ Jesus was also challenging them to not stir up competition amongst themselves. In times of limited resources, the tendency was to “squirrel away”⁴⁴ enough to guarantee a family’s survival. The hope wasn’t just for a future without worry but to empower and inspire egalitarian living as a strong community. “Village neighbors became part of a safety net... which could absorb the risks posed by elite policies and practices.”⁴⁵ Peasants could come together in support of one another despite the external threats. Let us consider other communities present in the time of Jesus which were present in the crowds as well. Their position under the Roman Empire is another important historical perspective to consider.

A Political Balancing Act: Pharisees and Empire

For the Jewish people, of which Jesus was a member, “religion was embedded in the political and social fabric of the community.”⁴⁶ Religious association with Judaism added a layer of complexity which is important to remember as a reader of the Sermon on the Mount. “Judaism

⁴² Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 54.

⁴³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 59.

⁴⁴ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 65.

⁴⁵ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 65.

⁴⁶ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach*, (United Kingdom, W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 5.

during the Greco-Roman period included ‘little traditions’ of local groups and families.”⁴⁷ First-century historian, Josephus, documents that the Pharisees were “a recognized group which exercises religious, political and possible educational roles.”⁴⁸ The governing class would have paid attention to their influence over the people and recognized it as an asset for them to harness. To the Romans, knowing that the Jewish leaders had leverage with the peasants helped them slowly gain more power in the communities as they slowly gained more control over the Pharisees.

For the Pharisees, honor, and shame was a key aspect of the social makeup of antiquity. “One’s place in ancient society was determined much more by one’s status and power than by wealth.”⁴⁹ What developed in most situations was the Pharisees becoming closely associated with the 5-7% of the governing class population as active retainers. This meant they were ultimately “dependent on the governing class.”⁵⁰ They also “suffered terribly at the hands of the cruel tax-collectors”⁵¹ along with the peasant class. This coexistence with the empire eventually led to some assimilation of “many characteristics of the Greco-Roman way of life and thought.”⁵² Despite this dependency, the Pharisees could not give a hint of the pressure they faced from those of the ruling and aristocratic classes to maintain their status in the community, and they certainly could not push against them. These Jewish leaders had to maintain a sensitive balance of respect to the authorities and semblance of their culture.

⁴⁷ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 6.

⁴⁸ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 42.

⁴⁹ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 42.

⁵⁰ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 38.

⁵¹ Friedlander, Gerald, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon On the Mount*, (London: G.Routledge & Sons, 1911), 201.

⁵² Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 39.

A primary concern of the Pharisees "was the group sanctification or group holiness of Israel."⁵³ For some Pharisees that engaged with Jesus, the Kingdom of God is near when they are "emancipated from their oppressors" which they understood would come with "revitalizing Israel."⁵⁴ Jesus' open condemnation of the Roman Empire threatened some of the Jewish leaders status and "group holiness of Israel."⁵⁵ Jesus, aligned his teachings, including the Sermon on the Mount, to Jewish "theology and cultural outlook,"⁵⁶ and in Matt 6, is calling attention to the hypocrisy of these few religious leaders within the areas of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. He warned, "Beware participating your piety before others to be seen by them." (Matt 6:1 NRSV) Charity, in the Jewish faith, "hastens the advent of the Messianic age when universal brotherhood will be realized."⁵⁷ Jesus was raising awareness to the wrong practices he witnessed. Their current acts of giving are not the acts that will bring about God's Kingdom. The type of giving they were practicing was to benefit the giver through "honor from contemporaries"⁵⁸ versus the type of righteous giving expressed from God. This dual service to two masters is clearly outlined in Matt 6:19-24 as will be reviewed later. The text calls to no longer trust in the earthly kingdom made with dependence on empire power, but it calls for a return to the Torah practices which God established such as manna (Exod 16), observance of the sabbath (Lev 25), and Year of Jubilee (Lev 25) to ensure limiting poverty.

While decades after Jesus' death, the Matthean community members in and around Antioch still experience much of the same pressures felt during his ministry. The audience of Matthew is understood to be a close collective of marginalized people holding both the teachings

⁵³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 60.

⁵⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 60.

⁵⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 60.

⁵⁶ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 1.

⁵⁷ Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon On the Mount*, 106.

⁵⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 58

and hope Jesus left them and the daily struggles of exploitation and scarcity at the hands of Roman occupation – hence Matthew’s motivation to encourage the community through texts.⁵⁹ In Matthew’s gospel, there is an emphasis on Jewish practices. This is indicative of the research done to conclude that there was a significant number of Jewish members in the population to which Matthew addresses.⁶⁰ “The gospel demonstrates provision to revise communal practices”⁶¹ and does so by establishing the authority of Jesus through qualifying his origins. To form and not inform, Matthew weaves in “Jewish scriptures, traditions, and piety, interpreted by Jesus”⁶² helping to shape identity as a newly formed community facing pressure from those in power and limited resources.

The Jewish audience of Matthew was undergoing a significant transition, being former members of the synagogue and now having to define their beliefs as Jews in the shadow of Jesus’ ministry.⁶³ By the time of Matthew’s gospel, there are indications that the Temple was already destroyed by the Romans (66-70 B.C.E.), so the communities Matthew writes to are “living under the authority of the local rulers in other towns and cities subject to Roman imperial rule.”⁶⁴ Herod had already hastily gotten “rid of the remaining members of the previous (Hasmonean) high priestly family”⁶⁵ and brought in those who he could use for his purposes.

The placement of those associated with Herod, the Herodians (Mark 3:6 NRSV), meant Roman aristocracy managed to control through some “local high priestly elites in Judea.”⁶⁶ The temple was important for the Romans as it was the central location for travelers coming into the

⁵⁹ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 30.

⁶⁰ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 30.

⁶¹ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 12.

⁶² Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 9.

⁶³ Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount?*, 72.

⁶⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 151.

⁶⁵ Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 84.

⁶⁶ Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 45.

cities and locals to give sacrifices. If they were to effectively extract taxes, then the temple would have been a crucial location for them to have influence over.⁶⁷ Again, the situation left the Jewish priests in a balancing act, having to play a political role in keeping Rome content while maintaining influence among the increasingly disquieted communities. What resulted was apparent pollution of the synagogue and holy places through political ties and leverage. This hypocrisy shown by Jewish leadership was opposed by the followers of Jesus creating an even deeper divide and misunderstanding between the two communities. The schism was very much felt in the local communities, and again, the threat was not coming from inside the temple, but rather outside by the Roman rulers.⁶⁸

Considering the pressures of the community at the time of Matthew's writing, it is clear to see the necessity of reengaging the Jewish teachings and their significance. The attempts to work out their faith further concludes, they "understand themselves as a continuation of the renewal of Israel inaugurated by Jesus over against the rulers of Israel."⁶⁹ A particular issue Matthew needed to address was the "need for affirmation of the religious identity of these Christians, particularly vis-a-vis their non-Christian Jewish Contemporaries."⁷⁰ Therefore the language of Matthew would not simply need to be an account of the events on the ground during Jesus' travels, but additionally, serve to support the argument of his authority.⁷¹ The Jewish

⁶⁷ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 62.

⁶⁸ There are scholars like Herzog who provide the perspective that certain "ruling elites portrayed themselves as Yahweh's rightful heirs... their reading of the Torah justified their acquisitive greed." By reviewing such concepts of "ownership... it calls to question these generative themes and undermines their credulity." Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 112-113.

⁶⁹ Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 151.

⁷⁰ Andrie B. du Toit, "Revisiting the Sermon on the Mount: Some Major Issues," *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 3 (2016), 63-65.

⁷¹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

practices alluded to in the Sermon on the Mount reestablish the covenantal promise of God.

Next, we will read further on the sources of Matthew and the gospel's literary context.

CHAPTER 4
LITERARY AND TRADITIONAL CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 6:19-24

The discussion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount would not be complete without an understanding of the sources for the passages and similar sections of scripture that mirror it. Luke's Sermon on the Plain echoes comparable verses and frameworks. The primary reason for this is the shared source for both Matthew and Luke — Q.⁷² Q is a "collection containing sayings of Jesus not in Mark,"⁷³ It is also important to note that while Matthew and Luke reference Q, they authors utilized the texts independently of one another.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is common to see Q materials combined with the sources of Matthew and Luke. In particular, when studying the Sermon of the Mount, the source of verses 6:19-24 are traced back to Q. Luke's Sermon on the Plain reflect these same translations within passages: 12:33-34, 11:34-36, 16:13.⁷⁵ Scholars conclude, that "the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain existed first as separate compositional units before they were incorporated into Q_{Matt} and Q_{Luke}."⁷⁶ Originally these texts were oral with the first attempts to collect them producing the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain.⁷⁷ Again, the redactor "did not 'write' the Sermon as such but composed it by combining various traditional units."⁷⁸ The importance of documenting these writings was for the second generation of disciples to have as reference and to study since they did not have direct

⁷² Miano, *The Word of God and the World of the Bible*, 31.

⁷³ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 7.

⁷⁴ John S. Kloppenborg, *Q the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus*, (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁷⁵ Guelich, Robert A., *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 34.

⁷⁶ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

⁷⁷ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 7.

⁷⁸ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

interaction with Jesus. It is important to remember when reading both Matthew and Luke that these collections of writings sought to be the foundation for disciples of Jesus' teachings.⁷⁹

In Luke, the references used for Matt 6:19-24, are peppered throughout the context of Jesus' ministry, and do not occur solely within Luke 6:20-49 which is traditionally considered the Sermon on the Plain. They are interjected within conversations and in response to those following him which mirrors the hypothesis that they were sayings of Jesus and not spoken in one sitting. Furthermore, "Luke's social and economic isotopy has three thematic groups: The abyss between the poor and the rich; Jesus' solidarity with the poor; ... The ethics of sharing."⁸⁰ These consistencies with the themes in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount emphasize the importance Jesus placed on caring for the most vulnerable. While these topics were similar between the two gospels, the way the information is positioned is different depending on the audiences.

Matthew's Call for Remembrance of Covenant with God and Others

Remembering the Matthean community members somewhere in Antioch, they were no longer connected as closely to established institutions. They were once again responsible for one another, but the temptation to hold tightly to what materials they had was a daily experienced pressure. The Roman authorities could take from them in the form of taxes, loans, and dues. Therefore, Matthew centers on Jesus' reinstatement of covenant economics in Matt 6. These foundational principles expand beyond the notion of obligatory giving. Families relied on one another, so much so that when asked by a neighbor for help, it was a person's duty to give

⁷⁹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 8.

⁸⁰ Rene Krüger, *Luke's God and Mammon, A Latin American Perspective*, Global Bible Commentary, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 397.

without question. “So the family is never isolated... problems become those of every family in the village.”⁸¹ This reciprocal process of giving and thriving in an intentional community was established so that regardless of one family’s current situation there would be insurance that someone could help.⁸²

The incentive to manage one’s resources was so much of a shared responsibility that should another family fall into need, then they might be in the position to provide for them. The resources of one become the resources for all because ultimately nothing is owned by one person. Everything, according to the Hebrew scriptures as we will read, is God’s so then all provisions are a gift. The responsibility to care for such provisions is also a gift from God that must not be taken lightly. To care for one’s neighbor is a responsibility God entrusted to humans. This is a foundational pillar in the Jewish belief structure and the premise from which Godly covenantal economics is established. Abundance is meant to be shared because it was freely given. The Israelites had usufruct (Lev 25:23) over the land and were able to employ it in the use of doing good and not exploitation as was exemplified by the Roman Empire. How was this lived generosity illustrated and instructed by God in Israel’s past? By adhering to Jewish traditions that illustrate God’s sustainable design of provision for creation, we begin to see a model that can be lived as a society where the needs of all may be met through intentional, democratic sharing.

Manna, Sabbath, and Jubilee in Jesus’ Ministry

The concept of Manna is a story from the Jewish community’s past which Jesus is reminding them to practice (Matt 23:23). In Exodus, the Israelites were free from Egypt and awaiting the leading of Yahweh in the wilderness. The people began to grumble about God

⁸¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 86.

⁸² Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 154.

saying, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exod 16:3 NRSV) God heard their murmuring and sent forth provision in the form of food. The food came to the people daily and they could collect enough for their families for each day. Moses warned, “let no man leave any till the morning.” (Exod 16:19 NRSV) If they did, “it bred worms, and stank.” (Exod 16:20 KJV).⁸³ While food miraculously appearing seems implausible, we quickly forget that food from the earth is a natural and cyclical occurrence. While commonplace, the food from the earth is no less a miracle. The story of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness is a reminder that when cultivated properly, the land can produce our biological, daily needs. This reminder of the daily substance we will read is sprinkled throughout references in the Sermon on the Mount.

Further in the Exodus passage, it reads, “six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there shall be none.” (Exod 16:26 NRSV) Therefore, the sixth day was the only day they could gather more than one day’s worth of provisions because on the seventh no Manna would fall, and they were required to rest. The practice of gathering in preparation for rest is a cycle throughout the Jewish calendar and festivals (Exod 16, Exod 20, Lev 23, Deut 5). The observance of the Sabbath is consistent throughout the Torah and is found in the books of the prophets. One instance is in Jer 17:19-27, where Jeremiah is urging the people to heed to Yahweh and not to “bring no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day.” (Jer 17:24 NRSV). Myers concludes, “it should come as no surprise that the archetypal manna story, represents the foundation for Sabbath economics... a central place in Jesus’ consciousness.”⁸⁴

⁸³ The KJV is used here for the interpretation of עֲוֹלָם as worms.

⁸⁴ Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, (Washington, DC: The Church of the Savior, 2002), 27.

The manna story is not just to act as a reminder that it is not our efforts that supply our daily needs, but also, that it is fruitless to try to gather more than that since it will be wasted in the end. Sabbath is a reminder that what we have is enough, and despite how we may feel otherwise, no amount of extra toil will cease this desire. Therefore, we must observe the sabbath and operate as God planned which is insistent on sustainable living. Sabbath is an acceptance of an unearned gift and no-strings-attached grace. “At the root, Sabbath observance is about gifts and limits: the grace of receiving that which the Creator gives, and the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift for a possession.”⁸⁵

The criteria which beget greed and amassing wealth is the belief that one's possessions are their own. Therefore, a person may say, “Since I worked for it, I earned it, and I am worthy of deciding what is done with the money.” Torah reminds the people of Israel something quite contrary to this. Lev 25:23 states, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me, you are but aliens.” (NRSV) Land was a resource freely given to be used to sustain life for a person’s family. The ability to produce food and build shelter was a gift of creation. This was certainly the case for Israel in the land they presided over.

An invasion of Rome was a different sort of exile for the Israelites. Rather than being taken to a foreign land, they were in their familiar settings, but what was familiar was now managed by a foreign entity leaving them vulnerable and alienated despite being in their homeland. Under the empire, “theoretically, the land belonged to the ruler”⁸⁶ introducing an entirely new economy. What is witnessed is the elite families receiving control over territories in Palestine.⁸⁷ As the foundation of this economy was primarily agrarian, the investment in land

⁸⁵ Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, 5.

⁸⁶ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 64.

⁸⁷ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 64.

was guaranteed to produce the wealth needed to sustain their elite livelihood.⁸⁸ The ability to keep control of the land was through goods produced, taxes, and rent paid out by tenants.⁸⁹ The significance of Lev 25:23 is the mention of the Year of Jubilee. This is the year for the fullest expression of Sabbath as Meyers outlines: “releasing each community member from debt (Lev 25:35-42), returning encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners (25:13, 25-28), and freeing slaves (25:47-55).⁹⁰ This was all done to defend against any selfish gains on property and ensure that there was no one in need throughout the community. Jubilee was practiced reminding the people of verse 23 that “the land is mine [YAHWEH].” What was represented by the Roman empire, countered this practice, and exploited the tenants through unethical interest rates and uncapped taxes and dues. Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount have “clear Jubilee overtones”⁹¹ which was a cancellation of debt on a seven-year cadence further representing “against money as a reality”⁹² but as a gift. In the command to “forgive our debtors” (Matt 6:12 NRSV), is the promise of Jubilee.

Jesus’ ministry is firm on renewing trust in God’s economy. Jesus explains “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matt 5:17 NRSV) For “the Torah is much more than law... the law is given within the context of a story. In the story, we meet the God who is creator and redeemer... we find the stories through which Israel understood themselves and their God. And

⁸⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, “The Social World of The New Testament,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, n.p. [cited 4 Dec 2021], Online: http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/article/book/obso-9780195290004/obso-9780195290004-div1-31?_hi=0&_pos=1#match.

⁸⁹ Carter, Warren, *Jesus and the Empire of God: Reading the Gospels in the Roman Empire*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 7.

⁹⁰ Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, 14.

⁹¹ Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, 24.

⁹² Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions: Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 52.

it was through these stories... that make up the ethical tapestry of the Old Testament.”⁹³ It’s a reminder that what they see around them — the accumulation and exploitation of the Roman Empire — will lay waste one day. For they are not the empire that will remain. The empire that is the only true and just one is that of God’s. Godly intention for economic justice is that all have the right to shared abundance.

God’s Economic Covenant

Manna (Exod 16), sabbath (Lev 25), and Jubilee (Lev 25) principles apply closely to one another. Sabbath was established so that all life could flourish through the natural and necessary rhythm of periodic rest. The more work the more one produces. This results in more money, fake security, which there never seems to be enough of, and since there never seems to be enough, it inevitably leads to more work to be done. Sabbath commands the individual to stop working. It frustrates the ability to accumulate more, and when everyone practices it, no one was to worry beyond their daily need. It is when more and more is demanded of resources like time, land, and human power that the natural balance is thrown off. This relentless grasping does nothing for our good except to exhaust and wear down. What is being worked for will ultimately deteriorate, so it is best to practice loosening the grip on earthly materials.

The Israelites stored manna, and it was gone the next day. This is a direct representation of how it will be with our possessions and efforts once we are no longer living, echoing Matthew 6:19-24. The Year of Jubilee was a continual reminder to forgive the debts of others because every person is a usufruct of God’s creation. God does not demand from us a payment to live abundantly on the land and so we should practice the same idea of forgiveness. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ teachings which embody the story of Israel’s past like manna (Exod 16), the

⁹³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God Downers*, (Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 26.

traditions of Sabbath (Lev 25), and the practices of Jubilee (Lev 25), Matthew challenges his community to embrace God's vision for sustainable, communal economics. In this vision, each Jewish community member is a patron of God's land (Lev 25:23), and each should have equal access to the provision it yields. Schottroff, a Jewish scholar, explains, "God's Torah secures the freedom of a free man who owns land, it does so only in order that life in this land may be blessed, when everyone — the unfree, women, foreigners — has a share in that blessing."⁹⁴ Rome sought to own while the teachings of the Jewish faith sought to steward. Moving deeper into the texts of Matt 6, we will begin to understand with greater context the development of Jesus' argument.

⁹⁴ Schottroff. *The Parables of Jesus*. 216.

CHAPTER 5
MATTHEW 6:7-18: KINGDOM OF GOD OR KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Chapter 6 of Matthew is the center of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount address. This chapter raises the subject of God's Kingdom which at the time may have felt very far by a community under the suppression of the Roman Imperial kingdom. "The territory which Rome ruled included "sixty-five million people" with control of the land, waters, and production.⁹⁵ Several key distinguishing features of the Roman Imperial world appear in oral teachings originating during this era. Leaning heavily on the perspective, empire-critical scholar, Warren Carter, provides in his work *Jesus and the Empire of God* the features of Roman rulership is a social hierarchy, land-based wealth, networks of power, rhetoric, public display of good works, patriarchy, military power, blessings of the gods, slavery, non-elites, urban living, food scarcity and disease, elite disdain, and tension for societal change.⁹⁶ The use of rhetoric was often a skill taught to men with elite status.⁹⁷ It was used in the persuasion of a "particular perspective and/or support a course of action... thus a means of accomplishing domination over others in competitive political matters."⁹⁸ Jesus, not being of elite status (Mark 6:3 NRSV), utilized rhetoric-like presentation of ideas in direct competition to the style of presentation typical for those of empire.

The reader of the Lord's Prayer within the Sermon on the Mount needs to consider the effects this presentation of the genre may have had on the followers of Jesus. Again, the reality is the Sermon on the Mount itself was a collection of first attempts to document the oral nature and

⁹⁵ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 6.

⁹⁶ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 6-18.

⁹⁷ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 8.

⁹⁸ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 8.

consistent messaging themes Jesus communicated to his followers.⁹⁹ This does not negate the matter that oral presentation was Jesus' primary vehicle of teaching; therefore, the repetitive symbolism used would have been familiar to the intended audience. Kingdom is such an example of a concept Jesus used frequently. In the vocabulary of the audience, its interpretation would have meant something very specific.

Jesus' use of the word kingdom is found ample times throughout the book of Matthew, but in the Sermon of the Mount, "kingdom" is a term repeated throughout the passage. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:10 NRSV). The Greek word for kingdom is βασιλεύς and it is followed by "of Heaven" or οὐρανός. Οὐρανός can be defined as "vault or firmament of heaven, sky, as the seat of the gods."¹⁰⁰ Commentaries invoke, when spoken in terms of God's dominion, as Jesus does, it would encompass "the will of God to be done both in heaven and on earth."¹⁰¹ Carter agrees that Jesus's mention of God's Empire to come near "evokes Hebrew traditions concerning God as the king who rules over and orders creations and the nations."¹⁰² This is in direct opposition to the propaganda orchestrated by the Roman Empire who claimed their rulership over the territory, or kingdom.¹⁰³

Under Roman rulership, Caesar was a god, and within the ancient world, this was a common understanding and held belief. Scribes commissioned by the Roman Empire constructed his origin in a way that linked his lineage to gods.¹⁰⁴ Any Caesar to follow would similarly

⁹⁹ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ "οὐρανός," *LSJ*, 1273.

¹⁰¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, 33A, (Mexico: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2000), 148.

¹⁰² Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 94.

¹⁰³ Later, when looking closer at Matthew 6:19-24, we will begin to get a clearer understanding of God's Kingdom on earth.

¹⁰⁴ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 41.

represent either a form of “adoption, divine begetting, distinguish biological descent”¹⁰⁵ or a combination of the forms. Anything which threatened Cesar’s divinity threatened the Roman Empire, and as a direct result, would have been considered a risk to their power and control. For those living under territories occupied by Roman Empire, it was best to play by the rules and not resist. This understanding illuminates why language such as kingdom was controversial, and that Jesus’ rhetoric is “politically charged.”¹⁰⁶ The command is to bring God’s Kingdom not to continue in the practice common to Cesar’s kingdom. Jesus’ use of kingdom was an “appeal to a political metaphor assures that his ministry contradicted the dominant kingdom of Rome... clearly, a kingdom that is material.”¹⁰⁷ Jesus was calling for societal change. What is communicated using βασιλεύς οὐρανός in the Sermon on the Mount is a reminder that the Roman Empire will not be eternal because it is a structure made by man’s power. It is calling for accountability to no longer engage in the practices of the Roman Empire because they are not practicing Godly care toward the people. The economy of Rome desired to acquire as much as possible without the concern for the vested interest of others. While Torah forgave debts and promised provision through balanced reciprocity,¹⁰⁸ and Rome simply redistributed money to the wealthier to sustain their material lifestyle.

“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6:10 NRSV) The phrase “be done” in the passage is translated as γενηθήτω¹⁰⁹ which is a form of the Greek word γίνομαι.¹¹⁰ The verb is written differently because it is an imperative, indicating that the translation in Matthew

¹⁰⁵ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 46.

¹⁰⁶ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 94-95.

¹⁰⁷ Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 187.

¹⁰⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. 56.

¹⁰⁹ “γενηθήτω,” *TR Concordance*, Online:

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/inflections.cfm?strongs=G1096&t=KJV&ot=TR&word=%CE%B3%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B7%CE%B8%E1%BD%B5%CF%84%CF%89>.

¹¹⁰ “γίνομαι,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, Online: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1096/kjv/tr/0-1/>.
116.

6:10 is meant to be read as a command. Additionally, it is a divine infliction presupposing it is not a suggestion or appeal. This imperative statement is one voicing a command insinuating that the one giving the command has authority to do so. God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. God's Kingdom is for the present and the future. The charge in the Lord's Prayer is to bring God's heavenly dwelling — God's kingdom — to earth in the present.

The Significance of Daily Bread and the Weight of Debt

“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11 NRSV) speaks directly to the manna story from Exodus by petitioning for the daily provision that is a gift from God. It's a gift of sustained life addressing fundamental human needs. Furthermore, “daily bread” (referring to Exod 16:4) in Greek can also be translated as “forthcoming bread,” and read in its entirety the verse, “Give us this day our daily bread” promises an enjoyment of God's blessing in the present.¹¹¹

Directly proceeding verse 11, “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12 NRSV) echoes the practice of Jubilee. Many of the peasants at the time could have fallen into debt through several different unfair practices, and “late in the first century the numbers of peasants fleeing because of hopeless indebtedness grew so large that it required imperial efforts to keep tenants on land being left unworked.”¹¹² Debt was common given the “demands for tithes, taxes, tribute...” and “once in debt, few peasants could escape.”¹¹³ Debt wasn't sin from which they needed to absolve themselves. It was debt. Again, this illustrates the importance context plays. The instructions, therefore, are to forgive others as they have been forgiven of their indebtedness by God. Requiring interest from neighbors was not endorsed by God. After all, according to the teachings the Jewish community was familiar with, the land was

¹¹¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 59.

¹¹² Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 63.

¹¹³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 63.

not their own. Charging interests and leaving desolate those required to pay back exorbitant amounts of debt, were characteristics of the Roman Empire. The importance of this is only further emphasized in the proceeding following, “but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6:15 NRSV)

Hypocritical Fasting

Verses 16-18 cover the matter of fasting. Carter distinguishes this as the "third act of justice" with almsgiving and prayer being the first two.¹¹⁴ The passage calls to accountability those who fast for outward acknowledgment. Similarly, to Matt 6:2, “whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you... and in the streets, so that they may be praised” (*NRSV*), the call to act out of righteousness, and not personal gains, is stressed. The hypocrites “seem genuine in obeying God, but whose inner motivation (known only to God) is for their own honor.”¹¹⁵ Within an honor and shame-based society, the temptation to act for one’s gain was significant. Additionally, the outward illusion of performing good acts based on genuine care was routinely practiced among the elites of the Roman Empire as well. “Provincial elites often performed and financed public works called *euergetism* (“good works”)... In these activities, elites competed for public honor and favor as clients of... the emperor.”¹¹⁶ Again, outward advancement stirred by competition with those around them was the key motivation for such acts of “public duty.” Lastly, taking the positions of the peasants who were replaced from their land, forced to harvest food for the Roman economy, and unable to secure enough money to feed their families,¹¹⁷ maintaining traditions of fasting would have been difficult. These difficulties indicate that the ones able to fast were in particularly privileged positions – not just because they had the type of

¹¹⁴ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 172.

¹¹⁵ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 170.

¹¹⁶ Carter, *Jesus and the Empire of God*, 8.

¹¹⁷ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 72.

lifestyle that afforded them to be able to practice but also because they had the time to concern themselves with it. Jesus' command, according to Matthew, was for the Jewish leadership to strip away the desire for public acknowledgment but to work together with the people to hold onto the traditions that promote reciprocal care within the community. Moving into the passage of focus, this immediate foreground into the types of challenges Jesus presented to the communities will help navigate the proceeding verses. Jesus was calling for a return to their faith values and a furthering of God's desire for the earth in the present day.

CHAPTER 6
MATTHEW 6:19-24: THE TREASURE IS EARTH

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matt 6:19-20 NRSV) The same Greek term for the word earth in verse 10 appears in verse 19. The command is to “not store up for yourself treasures on earth.” (NRSV) Why would, in one instance, the petition be for “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and then countered with a command to not hold onto the earthly treasures? The emphasis, in this case, is not where your treasures are held, but rather what treasures are held.

Earth is not temporary, but the things of earth are. Moving to verse 20, “but store up for yourself treasures in heaven” (NRSV) where God dwells. The commanded is holding the community accountable. Are your treasures the type of treasure which will last? “Do not store up for yourself... where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal,” (Matt 6:19 NRSV) and again, “where neither moth and rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matt 6:20 NRSV). Guelich explains, “Matthew does not specify the nature of the heavenly treasure or how one goes about storing it in heaven... one’s treasure proved to be secure from any natural or evil destruction.”¹¹⁸ Money and other material riches are not everlasting resources. The means to generate money would come from the land, and the land was in control of the Roman Empire. What were treasures to the diaspora of Matthew’s audience? “The absence of references to Christians groups... until the second decade of the second century suggests how

¹¹⁸ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 327.

unnoticed and inconsequential these groups may have been.”¹¹⁹ They certainly would not have had much access to resources being on the fringe of society and perhaps even rejected by family members.¹²⁰ Whatever surplus Matthew’s audience might have had is being encouraged to share with their community and not held too tightly or fear.

Considering the rhetorical nature of Jesus’ ministry, inspiration from nature was drawn to call remembrance to the stories from Israel’s past. Jesus uses specific language to convey the deterioration of earthly materials. In verse Matt 6:19 NRSV, it reads “where moth and rust consume.” Moth, or σής, “was a well-known destroyer in the ancient world” and witnessed in other texts mainly in Isa 50:9, 51:8 and Job 4:19.¹²¹ The chief victim to a moth’s destruction is fine garments. Guelich and Hagner link this Greek word with the passage in James 5:2 where the poor are forsaken while the rich spend their money on useless materials.¹²² Within the Roman Empire, clothing indicated one’s status in society.¹²³ Rust or βρῶσις in this verse, the second threat to earthly treasures, is a bit more nuance in translation. It directly translates to the “act of eating.”¹²⁴ Guelich offers, “the occasional translation ‘rust’ (ιός) for βρῶσις stands without parallel in ancient literature.”¹²⁵ Hagner suggests, “the linking with moth has inclined some to understand here other organism such as a locust or worm.”¹²⁶ This is not only similar to the type of creature which consumed the manna in the Hebrew texts but also calls accountable the

¹¹⁹ Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount?*, 60.

¹²⁰ Reference of leaving family also represented in Matthew 19:29.

¹²¹ Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 157.

¹²² Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 326.

¹²³ Shamir, Orit ed., “Dress, Hellenistic and Roman Period,” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, n.p. [cited 24 Nov 2021], Online:

http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/article/opr/t393/e38?_hi=5&_pos=6.

¹²⁴ “βρῶσις,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1035/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

¹²⁵ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 326.

¹²⁶ Hagner, *Matthew*, 157.

consumption of the rich. “Citizens of Roman Judea... dressed mainly in wool.”¹²⁷ Wool is a common and popular food item for moths and worms. Rather than giving to those in need out of an excess of abundance, their money was used to buy material goods that helped to elevate their status in society.¹²⁸ The last example of a type of threat to earthly treasures is thieves. Thieves take what is not theirs, or put another way, steal to have more leaving the victim with less. The act of thievery is an act of greed that throws off this balance of equity. Stealing can be executed in several different ways. It can be covertly like a thief in the night, with violence, or with lying to the victim. Who were the thieves to the audience? The Roman imperial presence.

Material riches on earth are only temporary, and while it was tempting to covet after what the Roman Empire had, the command was not to desire the things of earth which will deteriorate or be taken especially if desiring them meant that one might dismiss the provision of God. The promise that God would provide for each person’s need within the community. Caring for each other is the only means by which this provision is achieved. Community and relationships are everlasting. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt 6:21 NRSV) Let your heart remain with the imperishable. Companionship was a gift from God (Genesis 2:18) and where the community of God is, there is God also. Additionally, Hagner offers a metaphorical connection with the heart. The heart is the center of a person’s body and therefore “of a person’s inner being and thus the center of a person’s attention and commitment.”¹²⁹ When a person is focused on their treasures, then they are incapable of looking out for the needs of others. The commandment is the care for others. Matthew’s gospel continues this theme of redistribution and

¹²⁷ Shamir, "Dress, Hellenistic and Roman Period."

¹²⁸ “Social occasions were contests of consumption... the principle applied to the clothes worn... even the size of one’s household entourage could generate competition.” Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 70.

¹²⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 158.

flips the normative to one of “communal governance.”¹³⁰ “Instead of unrestricted patriarchal power, more ‘egalitarian’ structures are proposed.”¹³¹ “Anyone trying to accumulate inordinate wealth imperiled the equilibrium of society and was thus understood to be dishonorable.”¹³² Pursuing an egalitarian lifestyle is not easy and Matthew is not suggesting that it is, but what is clear from the text is that a person’s heart must be singularly focused. There cannot be dual motivations. You cannot chase riches while also trying to provide for the community. While it is possible, to maintain an outward appearance that you are, the lust for money will eventually drive a person to care for only that. This lesson is displayed in a different illustration within the following verses.

The Generous Eye and the Evil Eye

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matt 6:22-23 NRSV). The warning in these verses is to be careful with what one physically sees as it will affect the inner person. Guelich, Hagner, and Carter all make a strong case against the translation of eye in the passage to mean physical health and suggest rather, it means metaphorical good health or poor health. Guelich shares that ἀπλοῦς “does not occur in Greek literature with the expected meaning of ‘healthy.’”¹³³ This lends itself to a more ethical approach to understanding its meaning. “Ancient Mediterranean people believed they could see because light proceeded from their eyes, which worked like a flashlight. It came... from the heart”¹³⁴ To simply interpret the term as “good” or “healthy” is preventing the specificity implied in the overall narrative, and

¹³⁰ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 13.

¹³¹ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 13.

¹³² Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, 42.

¹³³ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 329.

¹³⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 65.

“given the symmetrical structure of the passage, is probably the opposite of the evil eye, namely, a generous eye, as in the cognate adverb ἀπλῶς.”¹³⁵ Envy is a human characteristic warned against in the Exodus as well (Exod 20:17). Envy of the materials of others only breeds further resentment and is cautioned against.

The opposite of such a generous eye would be the evil eye. “The common expression ‘evil eye’ indicates envy, jealously”¹³⁶ which is also supported by the commentary of Guelich and Hagner. So then, if the eye is generous, your body is full of light — light being God’s presence, and God’s presence being generosity. When one has the central focus on God’s will in their life, the anxiety of worldly matters such as materials, wealth, and earthly perishables immediately become less important. Being a light in this way goes beyond the exegetical message of salvation, we are to bring generosity forward as an act of faith in Godly provision, the divine-supplied abundance ensuring one’s daily needs will be met.

Further applying this perspective of light meaning generosity and darkness as covertness, “if then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt 6:23 NRSV) Verse 23 is stating again if we remain fixed on worldly wealth accumulation, it will cast a shadow on our actions. Sharing resources is not presented as genuine, but rather as a quid pro quo. Here again, connecting with an earlier verse in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 6:1-4. When you give of alms, let it “...be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (NRSV) Reward is also translated as “to give back, restore”¹³⁷ Therefore, it’s not about giving to receive praise and acknowledgement. It’s about trusting your gift will meet the needs of others and in response so will your needs be supplied.

¹³⁵ Hagner, *Matthew*, 158.

¹³⁶ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 174.

¹³⁷ “ἀποδίδομι,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g591/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

Two Masters: God or Rome

Verse 24 concludes this portion of The Sermon on the Mount with a firm position. It reiterates what is concluded in the previous statements and reveals boldly in one statement the hypocrisy shown by those working with the empire. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matt 6:24 NRSV) “Being slave is... an image of social shame and humiliation. The image reflects the social location of the marginal and minority community of disciples which lived on the edge of society.”¹³⁸ At the time, it was not rare for a slave to have two masters. Typically, “he is given to two sons as part of a father’s estate.”¹³⁹ The translation of serve, or δουλεύω in the Greek, is “the call for total allegiance.”¹⁴⁰ It is then impossible for one slave to be completely devoted to two masters. At some point, there would be a trade-off and negotiation based on the two master’s priorities. So too, maintaining certain niceties with the Roman rulers to have some semblance of power was a fine line the Jewish leaders at the time had to walk. What Jesus was calling for was the complete removal of Roman control and a full return to covenantal traditions. The acts of exploitation had to be stopped, and there was no way to stand on both sides. The consistent theme of two occurs in multiple instances in this passage; two eyes, two masters, two places— heaven and earth. Jesus is taking very seriously the issue of having multiple interests. His prophetic voice echoes those of the Old Testament prophets. “This is why the central message of the New Testament leads us back to the testimony of God in the old covenant.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 175.

¹³⁹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 65.

¹⁴⁰ Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 332.

¹⁴¹ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. 1*, Translated by J.A. Baker, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961), 27.

Love and Hate: More Than Emotions

The compromise of conflicting priorities is further understood in the concept of love and hate. For a modern-day society, love and hate are generally reflective of an internal state or feeling. Love and hate are both understood as emotional. For an agrarian world that was group oriented, love is best translated as “group attachment.”¹⁴² “In various ways, these groups, kin groups, village, or factions one might join, provided a person with a sense of self, with a conscious, with a sense of awareness supported by others.”¹⁴³ Therefore, if love is attachment, then hate is withdrawal. Put another way, if one attaches themselves to money, they are separating themselves from God and relationships. They are completely removing themselves choosing to depend on their efforts to support themselves and not take part in the type of community that promotes one of care and generosity. The act of choosing devotion and reliance on money versus the communal sharing mirrors “redistributive relations”¹⁴⁴ practiced in large-scale agrarian societies such as Egypt and Rome. This model “involved pooling resources in a central storehouse.”¹⁴⁵ A hierarchical-structured government of elitists would then have control of the redistribution of the resources. It is ironic that the more access to resources the governing authorities had, the more fearful they became. Addressing the matter of anxiety, the chapter then concludes with examples from nature.

Matt 6:25-34: Sustainable Examples in Nature

Matt 6:25-34, this passage concludes the middle chapter of the Sermon on The Mount. To further emphasize the concept of God’s agreement to provide, images from nature such as birds of the air and lilies of the field (Matt 6:26-27) are used to illustrate God’s care for creation.

¹⁴² Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 57.

¹⁴³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 57.

¹⁴⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 57.

¹⁴⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 57.

Furthermore, the teaching helps to show that nature is created in such a way that provision is an innate result. It is sustainable and reciprocal by intention. Verse 25 reads, "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink." (NRSV) "Worry" is translated into several different forms including "anxious," "perpetually uneasy," "take no thought," and other variations. However, using the modern-day definition and understanding of "worry" feels less satisfying than what the passage may have originally intended. The Greek translation is defined as, "to meditate upon."¹⁴⁶ In light of the preceding verses, the author is comparing the concerns of the world, like money, to the sustaining gift of creation from God. Therefore, the Matthean author is reminding the reader to not meditate on money as it is fruitless and will pull you away from community.

The Roman fixation on maintaining their lavish lifestyle was so great that there were not enough resources to go around, and thus what resulted was much of the population left as impoverished. Concurrently, the more they had the more anxious and paranoid of others they became – fearful to give because of what they might lose. This projection of their greed becomes displaced onto others around them which only resulted in more isolation and a tightening to what resources they had. The passage then goes on to read, "the birds of the air; they neither... gather into barns" (Matt 6:26 NRSV) and concludes with "do not worry (μεριμνάω) about tomorrow." (Matt 6:34 NRSV) "Gather into barns" echoes the practice of redistributive relations. What these displays of nature represent is the sustainable provision inherent in the design of creation. It is not a separate action or function, and when followed and lived as intended, abundance is a natural result.

¹⁴⁶ B. F. Westcott, F. J. A. Hort, "μεριμνάω," LSD 44.1.3.

Reading Matt 6:19-24 through the context unveils that the lust for material goods does more than affect an individual's life – it offsets the balance of creation by subjugating groups of people. When this balance is thwarted, it prevents all communities of creation from receiving an adequate portion to abundantly thrive. Abundance is available when resources are not tightly grasped. The singular focus should be on the treasures of God which are those of creation. Two eyes cannot look at two separate objects just as one servant cannot serve two masters. Generous living is achievable and possible and flows forth from a sincere heart that is mindful of the tendency of envy and greed but chooses to focus on the gift of sharing. Generosity is a faith that all needs will be met, and not just met, but sustained in perpetuity through the care and commitment to see others achieve this same promised abundance.

CHAPTER 7
ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY: A MODERN EMULATION OF JESUS RADICAL
ETHIC

Modernizing Jesus requires great care and accountability. William R. Herzog, Biblical scholar, suggests to not deny modernization but to critique our model of evaluation, by raising awareness of the inherent biases in the retelling of Jesus. With all this careful application, it begs the question, are Jesus' teachings truly timeless? I believe the answer lies with understanding what parallel struggles of the Matthean community bears witness today. Agrarian societies under Rome were built to scale production resulting in higher profit and gain for those who held aristocratic status. Their domination and concern for immediate gratification through "plunder of their peasant population"¹⁴⁷ remained shortsighted and prevented any sort of reinvestment back into these communities for sustainable growth. This meant the more they took — the more they had to take, and it perpetuated a cycle where the workers received only a minute fraction of what they produced.

Aspects of this narrative reverberate today. Production becomes the scale from which value is derived. If an individual is unable to "contribute" to society, then they are deemed as "less than." Additionally, as soon as a resource is no longer able to produce (be it land, water, plant, animal, or human) it is discarded. Through modern-day consumption of goods, it is apparent the economic model has lost its ability to attribute any sort of value to something that cannot be exploited or ascertained by greed. Even the taxation system is manipulated by the ultra-elites through loopholes and lobbying, not too different from Herzog's description of societies in the time of Jesus.¹⁴⁸ What resulted from their plunder and taxation, "led to greater

¹⁴⁷ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 65.

¹⁴⁸ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 45.

and greater coercion on the part of elites to ensure that peasants would produce a surplus capable of supporting the status needs and political ambitions of the aristocracy.”¹⁴⁹

Herzog states that “the search for the historical Jesus is engaged research pursued in light of vital interests for the researcher and the church.”¹⁵⁰ This begs the question, what narrative is the modern-day church supposing onto the historical Jesus? Is it that of the “Haves” or the “Have-nots?” Honest critiques of the framework through which Jesus is depicted can help determine with what boldness the church is ready to ask the difficult questions that affect today’s communities.

The thread of humanity’s story is a continuation from these early days, and human nature does not deviate much from the past in which it was birthed. The spiritual wisdom which the Matt 6:19-24 encourages can speak into anyone’s context whether scholar or first-time reader. Yes, the practicalities are subtle, but when we are comfortable and complacent, that can be the biggest threat there is. Storing up resources (Matt 6:26) beyond what we need to the extent that money is managed in a manipulatory way is not the intention. Money is now sent overseas in foreign bank accounts to avoid tax payments. Loopholes in businesses' finances reported as debt and stock validations are strategies used by very clever, well-paid accountants. Giving to charity is incentivized through write-offs. Even the establishment of the church once understood as a service to the community ends up addressing their internal needs with larger and larger portions of their overall tithes and contributions.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 65.

¹⁵⁰ Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 30.

¹⁵¹ Scheitle, Christopher P., *Beyond the Congregation: The World of Christian Nonprofits*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 108.

Sabbath as Contentment

Sabbath commands a day of rest, but any ceasing of production in the current day is frowned upon. Most businesses, retail stores, and factories are open each day of the week. The impact of capitalism is so felt by the culture that it has bled into the fabrics of individual self-worth. Value is now equated to productivity, and when value is interlocked with such a lofty and uncompromising goal, it is difficult to find contentment. If resources like time and land are seen as something to commoditize and maximize, perhaps it's time to reframe productivity.

That is what Sabbath advances. It is commanding rest so that by abiding in that time, we might receive inward contentment. Manna was not collected on the seventh day. This ensured equality and generous allotments of substance for each family in its due time. Covetousness is bred in discontentment. We become anxious when we feel as if we are falling behind or lacking from what others have. The truth of Sabbath is that by allowing for a day to rest the overall productivity is greater.¹⁵² God's design is built to maximize fruitfulness. It is when we become discontent in the abundance given that we forgot to trust, and eventually our efforts reach the point of diminishing returns. If we continue to simply treat the sabbath as only a day of rest, we will miss the entire point. What a modern-day reader may then conclude is that "Sabbath is the alternative to coveting."¹⁵³ It is the choice to not engage in what does not give life and to rather choose life — to rest alongside our brethren and give thanksgiving for what we've been supplied versus working every hour to keep up. (Exod 20:8-11)

When particular care is not taken and the limitations of creation are not considered, the earth experiences injustice. It is an injustice that the earth is forced to produce more than it can

¹⁵² Porter, Jennifer, "Why You Should Make Time for Self-Reflection (Even If You Hate Doing It)," *Harvard Business Review*, n.p. [cited 21 March 2022], Online: <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-you-should-make-time-for-self-reflection-even-if-you-hate-doing-it>.

¹⁵³ Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 23.

sustain. The deterioration of land and raising levels of the seas cannot be ignored any longer. These cries of nature echo the cries of the Israelites in Egypt and those forced to live under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Treasure in heaven, anywhere that God resides, is where we are to lay up for ourselves. God is firstly and always among and in creation. Earth itself is a display of generosity from God, and we are losing it at alarming rates.

Jubilee For a Modern Day

Student debt is an example of how crippling debt can be especially when one is lacking the resources to make good on what is owed. It is nearly impossible to earn a salary job without a four-year bachelor's degree, and “two-thirds of four-year students are graduating with loan debt, on average of up to \$19,200 in 2004.”¹⁵⁴ “Nearly a quarter of all students, according to a 2004 survey, are actually putting their tuition directly on plastic [credit cards]” thus incurring more debt.¹⁵⁵ High School students are faced with a difficult decision when heading for graduation. If prospects for making an average living are dependent on further education, and if the education, in most cases, comes with a high price tag, then getting a loan might be considered a good investment. However, as if the cost of a college degree were not high enough, the amount of interest applied to loans quickly adds to the overall debt amount. What results are adults unable to contribute to society in a meaningful way that could boost the economy because they have a lifetime of payments tied around their neck like an albatross. Furthermore, “the net tax burden, in constant dollars, on future generations (born after 2002) created by the government’s debt... double[s] the taxes paid by current generations.”¹⁵⁶ The Matthean Jesus is condemning this same

¹⁵⁴ Kamenetz, Anya, *Generation Debt: How Our Future Was Sold Out For Student Loans, Credit Cards, Bad Jobs, No Benefits, and Tax Cuts for Rich Geezers — and How to Fight Back*, New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2006, 2007, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Kamenetz, *Generation Debt*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Kamenetz, *Generation Debt*, 159.

type of behavior where debt gets compounded till it is nearly impossible to pay off. “God’s will to forgive is powerless when people harden themselves.”¹⁵⁷ It is imperative for human beings to exemplify this same merciful character that represents the Creator’s righteous nature. It is a “sign of the presence of... God”¹⁵⁸ which will then continue as a living witness for more people to experience and apply in their relationships with others.

Lifting One Lifts All: Cyclical Economics

Giving should produce positive emotions within a person. This is not vanity and without compulsion. The reason giving results in an immediate feeling of joy is because we are wired to give. It is a natural response to an inherent design. When we become fearful, is when judgment is at play in our thoughts. This judgment could be grounded in the fear that a person might not have enough to give. The judgment could be from a bias that the recipient is not worthy of a gift. This is a difficult balance to strike and requires much self-reflection. However, what Jesus is teaching in the message of the Sermon on the Mount is to remember, “...your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6:18 NRSV) This is not why you give, to then be rewarded, but rather it is a promise that should you act in accordance with Godly design, blessings will inevitably come to you. It was designed to be this way. Reverend Dr. Liz Theoharis explains in her book *Always with Us?*, “patronage and charity helped the wealthy to gain a political base and following”¹⁵⁹ during the time of the Roman Empire. “Therefore, rather than viewing the rich of the empire as responsible for the impoverishment of the poor, the rich were viewed as the saviors.”¹⁶⁰ This

¹⁵⁷ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 201.

¹⁵⁸ Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 201.

¹⁵⁹ Theoharis, Liz, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*, (United States: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 101.

¹⁶⁰ Theoharis, *Always with Us?*, 101.

posture situates the giver in power over the one who is receiving charity. As Jesus requested of those hearing his teachings, there cannot be a sense of entitlement to what is solely God's.

Tillich, German theologian, taught that “spirit is not a thing, and neither is economics. Economics is infinitely complex and multifaceted, involving... virtually every aspect of human being. Economics cannot be isolated and made the cause of something intrinsic to it, spirit.”¹⁶¹ Economics like much of the natural world results in a pattern of cause and effect. Godly economics is not materialism, but the physics of cause and effect still applies. There is enough abundance to go around if the physical limits of the resources — of the gift — are respected.

Conclusion: A Prophetic Voice for Today

Finally, hope can be drawn from the agency humanity has to reverse current circumstances. “Since we invented civilization... we can also un-invent it—we can create its alternative... establishing the Kingdom of God in a transformed earth.”¹⁶² Exploitation, stealing, and wrong-doing towards one's neighbor will not do this, and when this is the message of the dominant culture, it is hard to function otherwise. The economy of Rome desired to acquire as much as possible without the concern for others. With a renewed vision of Matt 6:19-24, the intent of Matthew's Jesus can be manifest now and in the future. This happens with the intentional care of our community. We care for one another by no longer amassing wealth for internal personal gains and satisfaction. These types of securities are not sustainable. We care for the community by lifting others and practicing Godly economics. A renewed earth will come to fruition through the efforts of intentional giving and taking seriously the longevity of community and dismissing the fleeting value of treasures on earth.

¹⁶¹ Dorrien, Gary J., *Social Democracy In the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 295.

¹⁶² Crossan, John Dominic, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2007), 242.

Utilizing postcolonial criticism, empire-critical, and social-scientific criticism, the readers of Matt 6:19-24 begins to understand a different perspective of the text. It becomes a message of hope for the everyday lived oppression of those under Roman Empire occupation. The historical setting of Jesus' audience is one where most of the people were considered peasants. Individually, they did not know if they could make enough from day to day to provide for their families. It was only through community that help could be provided if their needs were unable to be met. The other members addressed were the Pharisees who were in the difficult position of having to answer to the Roman powers while also adhering to cultural and religious practices to save face. Matthew writes to remind the 2nd generation Matthean community in Antioch of these teaching of Jesus but also the teachings they have known through their traditions. These traditions and stories are God's provision in the wilderness through manna, the importance of forgiveness in the festival of Jubilee, and the regular practice of the sabbath – not just as a day to rest but as a commandment to obey.

The Kingdom of God is a sustainable kingdom directly opposite to that of the Roman Empire which sought to exploit and squeeze every ounce of resources from the land and people. Matt 6:19-24 is commanding to not hold onto the things of the world which can be destroyed and taken. The verses command us to care for and treasure the things that will last beyond the material. Both eyes must be generous because it is impossible to have two eyes looking in opposite directions just as it is impossible for a servant to serve two masters. A person cannot love and hate. Hate in the context of Matthew meant a cutting oneself off, to rely on self, and deny the collective community. Amassing wealth is hating which is a direct action against a neighbor. Anxiety is where the heart will dwell if it forgets the illustration of nature and God's design. The possessions one has are not their own. They are a gift that is reciprocal and is to be

utilized but not beyond the point of excess. There is always enough to go around if one's treasure is of heaven and not of earthly materials. Matt 6:19-24 is a firm command and warning, but it is also filled with hope and beauty which remains timeless. It is not idealistic and unattainable. The more people believe in their ability to give the more others will come to learn the practice of generosity. In little ways, we can each live abundantly by giving abundantly. The result will be with time a greater manifestation of God's Kingdom on earth for the entirety of creation.

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