A PHENOMENAL UNDERSTANDING OF LAW AND THE NATURE OF SIN

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Moses is often referred to as the lawgiver. Our idea of law, however, does not come from Moses but rather from our parents and society. In our early acquisition of language we are given words and then gradually taught what those words mean by being given examples or instances to which those words referred. Through this process we acquire the concepts that eventually create our understanding. Our concept of law was not a difficult concept to form since we were supplied with many instances by our parents who, for the sake of order, established laws to govern our behavior. If we broke their laws, we were punished for our disobedience and our disruption of the order they attempted to impose. Even if we were not punished in a traditional sense, we knew of their disapproval by the way their affection for us changed. As we grew older we experienced another law governing the larger environment that extended beyond home and family. It too was established for the sake of order and violations of it resulted in disapproval and punishment. There were even police and judges whose only job was to enforce this law and punish violators. When we went to school we learned that it was law that controlled the physical universe, or so claimed Isaac Newton. Violators of this law were punished by nature itself. Thus, it was easy for us to get the idea that everything was for the sake of order, and punishment was the consequence of disobedience to that order.

It is no wonder that when we come to God we imagine that he too must have a law that he wishes to impose upon us. In fact, his law must be the greatest of laws and have the greatest of punishments attached to it. We read the Bible and sure enough we find law, and a wrathful God ready to pounce on anyone who violates his intended order.

Jesus, however, tells us that God is a loving father who awaits the prodigal’s
return with open arms (Luke 15:11-32). He tells us that God is preparing a banquet to which all are invited, and the only ones who do not attend are those who imagine that they have better places to be (Matt. 22:1-14). According to Jesus, the sovereign of the universe is a loving and approachable father and not a law to which we must conform or suffer the consequence.

True, Jesus does also speak of a judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). There is a consequence to rejecting the relationship God has for us, but that consequence does not follow from our failure to live up to certain precepts God has established. It results instead from our not repenting and returning to God. The prodigal son could choose to remain with the pigs (Luke 15:1-32). If he did, we very likely would reason that he got what he deserved and it was God’s judgment upon his wicked ways. But such a hellish existence would not be the result of God’s will but his own will. Jesus tells us that God is the loving father of the prodigal who requires nothing more of the son than that he return to his father.

If this is true, however, how do we square this picture of a loving father with all the Old Testament rhetoric about law and retribution? If God is both the loving father of the prodigal and a wrathful God who demands justice for all infractions of his law, how do we approach such a God. Anyone who has had an earthly father of such a nature knows that they are not approachable and we stay at a great distance. Since so many have had such earthly fathers, with whom they stay at a distance, they have the same distant relationship with God. This is not what God intends, but how are we to approach a God who seems to be capable of being both a loving father and a wrathful judge who punishes any and all deviations from his precepts?

One traditional way to resolve this dilemma was to understand the atoning work of Jesus as a payment for human sin. According to Anselm (AD 1033), God’s honor was offended by sin and Jesus’ death was necessary in order to satisfy God’s offended honor. God’s wrath was therefore taken out upon Jesus instead of us. A variation of this view was also held by Thomas Aquinas and later the reformers. The reformers added the idea that divine law required punishment for sin, and Jesus agreed to suffer that punishment in man’s place (Weaver 151). Since this satisfaction theory was endorsed by both Thomas Aquinas and the reformers, it became the view of both mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism. Over the last two centuries, however, there has been opposition to that dominant view.

The rivalists of the 19th century were “embarrassed by the Calvinistic doctrine of penal substitution” (Hicks 154) which leaves us with a god whose honor is greater than his love for his son—a god who must be appeased even at the cost of his son’s life. This view that emphasizes God’s honor undermines the greatness of God’s love. It gives us a picture of an exacting god who really doesn’t love us, but must be bought off. Consequently, some 19th century theologians rejected the idea that the atonement was a matter of God’s wrath (Hicks 145-146). Paul Peter Waldenstrom held the view that the fall of man took place in man alone and that “the fall of man did not cause any change in the heart of God” (Gustafson 192). Sin is a matter of human beings turning away from God, but sin does not cause God to turn away from human beings, so there was no need for restoration on God’s part. In fact, “the atonement reveals God’s
presence with us in our sinfulness" (Duff 30). This is a very different perspective from seeing the atonement as involving "some inability on God's part to look upon the sins borne by Christ" (Duff 30). Such 19th century views certainly painted a more attractive picture of God, but where, in such views, is the payment that Scripture seems so clear about? Jesus says that he came in order "to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28 & Mark 10:45). So where is the ransom or payment of which Jesus speaks?

One way to understand this is by realizing that with forgiveness there is always a payment although it is not necessarily to any specific person. When one person does harm to another, and the relationship between them is damaged or destroyed, someone must pay if that relationship is to be restored. There is, however, an option concerning who will pay for the offense. It could be, as in the case of justice, that the guilty pay for the harm they have done to the innocent and to the relationship. In some cases, justice may bring restoration to the relationship. The other option is for the innocent, who has suffered the harm, to be willing to absorb that hurt and not demand retribution. The harm the innocent willingly suffers is able to restore the relationship in so far as the harm to the relationship comes to an end with the innocent's willingness to pay for the offense of the guilty. The guilty are then able to enjoy the relationship because payment has been made on their behalf by the innocent. Thus, a payment is made but it is not to a specific person.

Imagine someone taking a friend's credit card without permission and using it to go on a great vacation. In realizing that the thousands of dollars they had charged to their friend's account has hurt their friend and damaged the relationship, they realize that in order to restore the relationship that offense must be paid for. One way to pay for the offense and thus restore the relationship is through justice, whereby the guilty party compensates the innocent friend for what they have done. If, however, the guilty party is unable to compensate their friend and pay back the money, the only other possible means of restoring the relationship is through forgiveness. In such a case the relationship is restored by the innocent party being willing to forgive the guilty party. In restoring the relationship through forgiveness rather than justice, the innocent must be willing to pay for what has been charged to his account and no longer treat the friend as guilty. Thus, in a sense, forgiveness is also the fulfillment of justice in that with forgiveness the offense is paid for but not by the guilty party. The innocent's willingness to suffer for the offense and not hold the guilty responsible restores the relationship because payment has been made on behalf of the guilty party by the innocent.

Or consider the example of adultery. The one who is hurt is innocent, but if that person truly forgives he is saying that he is willing to endure that hurt without requiring retribution or some type of payment on the part of the guilty. The innocent, injured one takes on all of the hurt and treats the guilty as if no wrong had been done. The relationship is restored, and the guilty are able to enjoy that relationship as if nothing ever happened. Of course, something did happen, but the innocent is willing to pay for it, for the sake of restoring the relationship. In fact, the relationship may be even better, at least to the extent that the guilty party realizes that the innocent cherishes the relationship to the extent that he is willing to pay dearly to preserve it.
In both of these examples, the solution of forgiveness seems unappealing to us. It is unfair that the guilty are free from the consequences of what they did and can enjoy their relationship with the innocent as if the offense never took place, while the innocent must suffer the pain of the offense. No one likes pain, but the fact that it is the result of injustice makes it especially difficult to accept. The reason we find injustice so hard to bear, however, follows from the fact that we generally conceive of ourselves as innocents and imagine that we would never do such a thing to a friend or lover. We readily imagine the injustice being done to us. If we imagined ourselves as the guilty party, we would not find the kind of injustice entailed in forgiveness so unappealing.

Unfortunately, few imagine ourselves as the guilty party, and even fewer are willing to suffer much pain in the interest of restoring and preserving a relationship with someone who has hurt us. Fortunately, God is just such a person and the atoning work of Jesus is just such an act of forgiveness. Such an understanding of forgiveness gives us a way to understand how God can be, at the same time, just and demand payment for an offense, and forgiving in his willingness to be the one who pays for the offense.

Another point, however, that needs to be factored in to his idea of atonement is that in Christian theology the Father and Son are united within the oneness of a triune Godhead. If God is three persons yet one, how can we understand the Father’s wrath being poured out on Jesus for the sake of satisfying the Father’s honor? If the Father and Jesus are one, then by the Father pouring his wrath upon Jesus, he is in fact pouring his wrath upon himself. Since they are one, the punishment leveled upon Jesus is equally leveled upon the Father as well. Of course, in a very real sense that is exactly what does happen when God decides to forgive human beings for our rejection of the relationship he desires to have with us, all three persons of the Godhead, and not just Jesus, suffer the hurt without demanding that the guilty pay. The point, however, is not simply that atonement is essentially about forgiveness. More importantly, it gives us a way to understand that God has always loved us and has not merely changed his mind once his honor had been satisfied. If that is the case, however, and God has always loved us—if God is the prodigal’s father of whom Jesus speaks—how are we to understand the revelation of a wrathful God?

Of course, it is possible to understand the wrath that is attributed to God in Scripture as a revelation of whom human beings think God is rather than a revelation of who God actually is. Kant had shown us that the most we can ever know is a phenomenal world or reality as we conceive it. We bring something to our experience of the world, and our minds are not blank slates that simply record an objective reality. We must interpret what is given and we do so with an existing understanding. If all we can ever get to is a phenomenal and perspectival understanding of the world, it stands to reason that the only understanding we can ever have of other persons is also phenomenal and perspectival. Since this is especially true of the person of God, it is no wonder that our initial encounter is with a God of wrath intent upon law and order. This is certainly the God we anticipate for it is the God our experience with authority has prepared us for. Therefore, it is quite natural that this is the way God is depicted in Scripture. Since the Bible is a revelation of the relationship between human beings and God, it quite appropriately begins with an initial understanding of God intent upon law and punishment.
A Phenomenal Understanding

Furthermore, it may be good that our initial understanding of God is one of law and order since that seems a necessary condition for the development of a human identity. Contemporary psychology tells us that children initially need to conceive rules or law as absolute and inflexible. Indeed, such certain boundaries provide the kind of security from which a human identity might initially develop. As necessary as this may be as a starting point, however, part of the maturation process into wisdom is our realization that not all rules are hard and fast. Not all laws are like those that govern mathematics. There are soft rules that are meant to be aids when we wish to form paragraphs when writing or drive a ball when playing golf. Such maturation into an understanding of soft rules should help us to better understand God and our relationship with him. For many of us, however, since we spend little time developing our relationship with God, we retain our childish understanding. We imagine that God, like our parents or our society, wants to maintain order and therefore the more rigid the law the better. But God is certainly not about order and control, as should be obvious from the state of the world. Unlike most parents, our legal system, and even some scientific views of the universe, God does not insist upon order ubler alles and force conformity to his dictates. In spite of this fact, that is where most of us begin in our understanding of God. If, however, we enter into a relationship with God, we do in time come to see who God truly is and not who we had wrongly anticipated him to be. The nature of this relationship by which we are transformed resembles something like a dialogue through which our understanding will change as we allow God to influence our perspective.

The Nature of a Dialogue

If God is to correct our perspectival understanding of who he is through something like a dialogue, we must believe that the dialogue begins in a misunderstanding. That is, we must suppose that our original understanding is a misunderstanding or there is nowhere for the dialogue to go. That is the nature of all genuine dialogues. The Platonic dialogues always begin in misunderstanding, not because that is Plato's style but because that is the nature of a dialogue. This is especially true of a personal dialogue, where an interlocutor wishes to reveal something about him or herself. When a person wants to express who he or she is to another person it always requires dialogue, and in that dialogue we always too quickly suppose that we know what the other person is trying to communicate. If it is an honest dialogue, of any real depth, when it becomes apparent that the other person does not really understand the intentional meaning that is trying to be conveyed, the party that is trying to express him or herself corrects the other party's understanding. This process is repeated over and over again hopefully bringing the interlocutor ever closer to what is trying to be expressed. Since our understanding changes with each round of the dialogue, it does not matter much where we start. The starting point will always be wrong even though some starting points may be less wrong than others. This is especially true when the other person in the dialogue is God. A dialogue with God begins, not when we come to know who God is, but when we desire to know who God is. In fact, it is inconceivable that we could know God in anything but a minuscule way prior to a long ongoing dialogue.
God is certainly willing to meet us where we are at in our misunderstanding, and from that point he/she begins to correct that misunderstanding. Our first understanding of God is always a misunderstanding since whatever God reveals to us is always convoluted with our understanding of what is revealed. True, God’s word might be perfect but the human understanding into which it is given is certainly not. Thus, whatever God speaks to us is always misunderstood to greater of lesser degrees.

Descartes thought that it was essential that we begin with absolute certainty, and we have inherited the Cartesian legacy, but God thinks that it does not matter where we begin, since whatever understanding we begin with will eventually be shown to be wrong. In time God will show us that he is more wonderful than we can think or imagine. The transformation of our understanding is progressive but gradual in spite of some milestones. The trick is to stay in the dialogue and pay attention to how God, through his Spirit, the circumstances of our lives, and the Scripture, is bringing us to an ever greater understanding of who he is and who we are.

Of course, what human beings want is often very different from what God wants. What we want from his Spirit, the circumstances of our lives, or the Scripture, is to confirm what we learned in Sunday school forty years before. We do not want a challenging, dynamic, and ever greater understanding of who God is. In that regard, we are all conservatives who want to maintain the status quo. What we want is to know God the way we know mathematics. We want our knowledge of him to be certain and predictable. Our ego desires closure and the kind of finality we find in mathematics, so we imagine that God must have equipped us with an ability to know objectively and with certainty, and not through the filter of an all-too-human understanding.

This also contributes to the misunderstanding we have of the Scripture. We imagine that the Bible presents the kind of objective truth we desire. In fact, however, the Bible depicts the kind of ongoing, progressive dialogue through which God wishes to reveal himself. It begins with the almost universal misunderstanding that God loves what he loves and hates what he hates. If we happen to do what he hates, he is angered and must be appeased. We imagine that our only hope is to put our sin or that which we believe God hates on someone or something else. In the Old Testament there was the scapegoat (Lev. 16:8-10) upon which the sins of the people could be placed in order that they would no longer remain upon them. The idea of the scapegoat took other forms as well. Human sacrifice, which was still widely practiced in early Biblical times and eventually came to be replaced by animal sacrifice, was also a form of scapegoating, as was seeing other people as the cause of one’s own sin. If others are the cause of our sin, they must be destroyed in order for us to be right with God. Our initial understanding is that sin must be eliminated in order to find God’s favor.

With Job we see the attitude that continues to prevail within the primitive understanding from which we almost all begin. Our initial understanding is almost always that good things happen if we do what is pleasing to God and bad things happen if we do things that anger God. Of course, the very explicit point of the book of Job is that this is not a correct understanding of who God is, although it is an understanding that seems quite prevalent throughout the Old Testament and continues to the present day.
Throughout the Old Testament, the Scripture continues to reveal who human beings think God is and how wrong that interpretation is, but we never seem to get it. We say that kings have a divine right to rule, but the Bible says it was the will of human beings and not God that created kings (1 Sam. 8:4-9). The Pharisees claimed that Moses spoke for God when he established a law concerning divorce, but Jesus tells us that the law was given because of the hardness of man’s heart (Matt. 19:8). Human beings are constantly misinterpreting God’s communication and then claiming that their misinterpretation is God’s intentional meaning. Of course, there are always some who eventually come to a better understanding of who God is. The Bible, however, chronicles all sorts of people, at all sorts of places in their process of coming to know who God is, and it is not always easy to know who are close to a mature understanding and who are at primitive stages in their dialogue with God.

Thus, the question is not whether the Judeo-Christian Scriptures are inspired. The question is rather what does it mean to be the inspired word of God. For a long time that was taken to mean that the words of Scripture revealed a portrait of who God objectively was. The same was thought about reality in general. The belief was that we were able to perceive and conceive the world as it actually and objectively was. Much has occurred to change that over the last two centuries. Today, we realize that we can only get to a phenomenal understanding of the world, and, of course, the same is true concerning our understanding of God.

Given this fact, much of the Scripture must be understood as human beings trying to explain their experiences of God with a very inadequate human understanding. In order to overcome this fact, God became a man and thus provided us with a human perspective of God that is more than a mere human perspective. That is, it is the perspective of one who knows, as God wishes us all to eventually know, that he is the beloved Son of God. Thus, Jesus, in being both man and God, is not just a revelation of who God is but he is also the ultimate revelation of who man understands God to be. God became a man and thus provided a more perfect revelation. Abraham, Moses, and David all had an understanding of who God was but it was an understanding much like our own at different stages in our walk with God. Jesus is the ultimate, mature revelation of a man who knows he is ultimately one with God. What Jesus reveals is that the Scriptural revelation is progressive and that the early revelation was merely a primitive stage in our journey to understand who God is. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that what the ancients understood as God’s ultimate standard was not an ultimate standard at all but merely a first step toward knowing God.

You have heard that it was said to the people of long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Matt. 5:21-22 NIV)

In verses 27, 33, 43 of the same chapter, Jesus repeats the phrase, “You have heard that it was said,” after which he corrects or brings further understanding to the command. In some cases he outright contradicts what had been said as when he says, “love your enemies (Matt. 5:43-44).” The ancients certainly thought it was permissible
to hate their enemies. In fact, God told them to hate their enemies, or so they thought. Now Jesus tells them to love their enemies. One common way to understand this is that the enemies we are to love must be enemies of our own tribe only, and thus we can continue to hate those in other tribes. Thus, we can understand the Old Testament killing of enemies and Jesus prescription without a contradiction. But that is to compromise Jesus’ words. He means all enemies and the reason it appears to be a contradiction is that the Scripture is a progressive revelation that represents man’s unfolding understanding.

The words of Jesus represent the ultimate revelation, and what Jesus reveals is that God’s law is different than we suppose. Since God’s purpose is to make us into the image of his son rather than to establish order, his laws are more like rules intended to guide and direct us into the transformative journey he has for us. God’s law is different from that of our parents, the police, and Isaac Newton. It is not given to meet a need for order within God but to meet a need for transformation within us. It is not some moral standard that God insists upon and is offended if that standard is not followed. Of course, it does involve morality, but it is not primarily about morality. The intention of the law is to aid human beings in their quest for a right relationship with God and the transformation that comes out of that relationship. The law is meant as a blessing to guide us into the fullness of life.

THE NATURE OF GOD’S LAW

In order to have an intimate, dialogic relationship with God, we do not need much in the way of an initial understanding of who God is, but we do need some sort of understanding of who we are. Upon coming out of Egypt, the Jewish people had no such sense of identity. Their enslavement and assimilation in Egypt had caused them to lose any sense of who they were as a people. The first step in gaining such a sense is to establish boundaries that provide dimensions from which an identity might be formed. In order to accomplish this, God allowed Moses to give a law or set of boundaries that are essential to the founding of an identity. Moses’ boundaries are not primarily moral rules for the sake of order but extend to all sorts of amoral social practices which include dietary laws, laws concerning property rights, laws concerning religious festivals and animal sacrifices, laws concerning what the priests can and cannot wear, laws concerning the poor, laws concerning finance, and a host of other sundry laws.

Of course, there is a moral element as well and that moral element does provide a measure of order necessary for people to live together socially. Our perverted, human notion of law, however, attempts to read all of the law as moral and about crime and punishment. We imagine that the breaking of the law is what angers God, just as our breaking of the law angered our earthly parents.

This is the understanding that Jesus wishes to destroy. Not that he wants to destroy the law and customs of the Jews—that was a blessing from God intended to give the Jewish people an identity and a place from which to enter a dialogue with God. What he wants to destroy is the understanding that the law is the ultimate end for which man was created. When the Pharisees question Jesus about breaking the law concerning the Sabbath, Jesus tells them that the “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the
Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Of course, this is true not simply concerning the law of the Sabbath but the law in general. Man was not made for the law, and the law has no objective value in itself. The law is an instrumental end and not an end in itself. The ultimate purpose of God’s law is not to establish a moral order that is somehow pleasing to God. Rather the law provides boundaries from which we might develop a sense of identity and personhood that would allow us to enter into a personal dialogue with God.

We all begin with law. As children, we needed law to provide boundaries and a sense of security but that is not the end for which we were created. It is merely a starting point from which we might begin this transformative dialogue through which we eventually discover who we truly are and who God truly is.

In the course of any truly intimate relationship, we come to see that who we think we are is not who we really are. In true and intimate relationships the illusion of who we pretend to be is destroyed and a much more realistic self is discovered. The illusion of who we are is the self that we want everyone to see. It is the good self that is created by the idea of law and our attempt to conform to that law. We need to begin with a sense that we are good since our experience tells us that we will only be loved if we are good and conform to the law that our parents, society, and God set before us. Without such a belief in our own goodness, we can never believe that anyone, and most especially God, could love us. Since we begin with the understanding that God is like us, and only loves what is good, we must begin with a sense that we are somehow good in God’s sight. Keeping the law can certainly give us that sense, just as the idea of a scapegoat can. But, whether we enter into relationship with God through the law or the idea of a scapegoat, the important thing is that we enter into that transformative dialogue that will eventually reveal to us that we are not good, and God’s love for us is not due to our being good, but due to the greatness of God’s love. When we truly come to see the greatness of God’s love, we realize that it did not matter where we began our relationship with God, but only that we did begin. The trick is to enter into a dialogue and stay in that dialogue. If we stay in relationship, God will eventually reveal to us who we truly are, with all of our warts, and who he truly is: a father whose love for us is greater than we can think or imagine.

The point then is not law for the sake of order, but law for the ultimate sake of relationship by which we come to know him and be made like him. Consequently, sin, or what separates us from God, is not a break in God’s moral order but a break in the transformative relationship God desires for all his children. Many things can cause that break in relationship. For many of us, violations of the Ten Commandments cause us shame and our all-too-human idea is that our disobedience to God’s commandments makes him unwillingness to love such imperfect creatures as ourselves. We can therefore come to falsely believe that God no longer desires to be in relationship with us because we have done what is displeasing in his sight. This was very often our experience with human authority, so it is quite natural that we expect the same from God. With God, however, it is always we who end the relationship. Furthermore, we do so not only because of our limited human understanding of the nature of God’s love, but also because of all the things Jesus warns us of in the Sermon on the Mount.
THE NATURE OF SIN

Sin, which is what takes us out of God’s presence and destroys our relationship with him, comes in two quite distinct forms. As we saw above, we remove ourselves from God’s presence and sever our relationship when we erroneously believe that what we have done is so great an offense that God’s love and forgiveness is not sufficient to overcome such an evil. But we also sever our relationship with God and remove ourselves from his presence when we choose other sources of life, identity, and meaning apart from God. Our great sin or offense is not that we disobey God’s precepts but that we do not accept him as our lover and source of life and meaning. Instead of choosing God, we choose other things to love that give us so much less that what God offers. Our great sin, and what causes us to live apart from the relationship God has for us, is that we love other things more than God. This is the concept of sin that Jesus seems to be setting forth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-7.27).

In the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus says is very different from what anyone had previously imagined had been God’s standard for righteousness and sin. Of course, Jesus is quick to say that he is not doing away with the law but fulfilling it. When we see what he says, however, it is obvious that the fulfillment of the law means that the law was just the first step toward a right relationship with God. The law had told us that we were not to murder, but Jesus tells us we are not to even be angry with our brother (Matt. 5.21-22). The law told us not to commit adultery, but Jesus tells us, we are not to even have lustful thoughts (Matt. 5:27-28).

At first this might seem simply a stricter law—indeed, a law even more impossible to keep than the Law of Moses. Of course, that would not be good news. Furthermore, as Jesus goes on in the Sermon on the Mount, we see something very different is going on. He tells us that we are not to make oaths (Matt. 5:27-28), and we are not to seek retribution that had been the idea of justice for the culture to which he was speaking (Matt. 5:27-28). We are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-44), and when we give alms, pray, or fast, we are not to do it to be noticed (Matt. 6:1-18). Finally, he tells us that we are not to seek earthly treasure, worry, or make judgments concerning others (Matt. 6:19-7.2). What a strange set of dictates. They do not seem to be moral in nature, so what are they?

It would seem that what Jesus is pointing out, and warning us of, are all the false sources of identity—the things that give meaning and motivation to so many, but in the end are disappointing sources of life. This is the real sin. What actually separates us from God is that we seek life and meaning apart from God. God is not in all of our thoughts, but rather, our time and attention are fixed upon hosts of things that are the gods of this world. They are the things that we worship and attempt to draw life and meaning from. These are the things that cause us to turn away from the living God, and these are the things that Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not the act of murder that separates us from God and the life he has for us. We sin, and are separated from God, when the source of our energy—the thing that motivates us—becomes anger rather than God.
You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and any one who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Matt. 5:21-22)

For many of us, our anger is our god and the source of our energy and life. It is what motivates us to do the things we do. Athletes and other competitors often find strength and motivation in anger, but Jesus tells us that God is to be our source of strength. Jesus lived his life with God as the source of his strength and motivation rather than anger, and he tells us to do the same.

Likewise, Jesus says, You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28).

Our contemporary culture sees nothing wrong with imagined infidelity, but Jesus condemns it. There may be several reasons behind this but certainly one is that imagined infidelities can serve as a source of energy and life rather than God. It is not that the act of adultery so displease God that he turns away from us in disgust, but rather we turn away from God as soon as our imagination begins to draw its life and energy from the god eros rather than the Father God Jesus is revealing. The popularity of pornography is evidence of the fact that eros becomes our god, not when we commit adultery, but simply when we allow the thoughts of such conquests to be the thing that gives us energy and direction.

The third thing that Jesus mentions in the Sermon on the Mount is that we are not to make oaths. Moses had given prohibitions against the breaking of oaths that we have sworn (Deut. 7:8 & Num. 30:2), but now Jesus tells us we should make no oaths at all.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” But I tell you, Do not swear at all. .. for you cannot make even one hair white or black. (Matt. 5:33-36)

Pledging allegiance to anything other than God would have been seen as idolatry to the first century church because they took this teaching seriously. Our culture today is quite different, and we think that it is noble to keep our word and promises even when those oaths cause us to end up on the side of evil. Of course, breaking our oaths is a problem as well. Thus, Jesus tells us to promise our commitment to no one or no thing but God. But the bigger problem with swearing oaths is that it, like anger and lust, is something we are quick to identify with and use as a source of energy and motivation. We boast to others and take pride in giving our word, as if there was power in our words and their ability to control circumstances. Jesus tells us that we are not in control over the circumstances of our lives and thus to swear to do this or that is a false witness and a boast in a power we do not have. We would like to think that we are men or women of our word and, once given, our word is enough to
motivate us to do what we have sworn. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we see what a lie that is and how powerless our sworn oaths are. Jesus reminds us of that powerlessness and that we cannot make one hair white or black (Matt. 5:36). Of course, we love the illusion of power within ourselves and therefore swear oaths, as if we were able to will to do this or that. Therein lies our sin or our separation from a God who wishes us to draw our power from him rather than ourselves.

Jesus next addresses our idea of retribution.

You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. (Matt. 5:38-39)

The Mosaic Law had allowed for retribution, but it seems that it, like divorce, was hardly God’s ultimate standard. Ultimately, retribution is a source of sin and separation from the fullness of life God has for us. Indeed, many of us find our energy and motivation in retribution and reaction to the sins of others. For many of us, retribution provides our souls with energy and purpose, but it is God who wishes to give us life and meaning. The heavenly standard is that we would not need retribution to motivate us, but, with God alone as our source of energy and strength, we could turn the other cheek because our strength comes not out of a reaction to injustice but from a power on high which is willing to pay for the injustice of others.

The next thing Jesus tells us probably goes farther beyond what Moses had given in the law than anything else Jesus ever said. It is a commandment whose revelation the people of the Old Testament were in no way ready to receive, just as we are still not ready to receive it today. Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemies.”

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:43-44)

This is not merely a difficult commandment, it is impossible, a priori. Enemies are by definition people we do not love. If we love our enemies, the idea of an enemy would lose its meaning. Of course, that is just the point, but is it humanly possible? Perhaps Jesus could ask us not to take revenge upon our enemies or maybe even not to hate them, but to love them seems beyond the realm of human possibility. Indeed, the only way this is at all humanly possible is if we are connected to an incredibly loving and forgiving God as the source of our being and identity. That is what is behind this command to love our enemies and it is what is behind everything Jesus is telling us in the Sermon on the Mount.

Following the command to love our enemies, Jesus then begins to command us concerning religious activities. Giving to the needy is to be done in such a way that you do not gain recognition from men. Thus, it is not enough that you give, but you must give with the right attitude and that right attitude is that you give without a desire for recognition (Matt. 6:1). This may seem strange since previously Jesus said, “let your
light shine before men, that they might see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Obviously, giving with the intent to be seen before men is not a good deed, and is not righteous. Indeed, it is intent upon bringing glory to ourselves, but the real problem with giving for the sake of recognition, and the reason it is sin, is that it makes prestige and reputation among men our motivator rather than God. We seek to be made into the image of the great man rather than the image of God.

There is a similar situation with the religious practices of prayer and fasting. Like alms giving, it is to be done in secret in order that no one but God knows. It is not enough that we pray and fast, but we must do it without being motivated by a desire for reputation or esteem. That is the sin. It is that we desire to be who human beings think we are rather than being who God says we are. This is sin and requires repentance, for it separates us from a God who desires to be our ultimate source of worth.

Jesus then warns us concerning our attachment to earthly treasures.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. (Matt. 6:19-20)

We easily become attached to the things of this world and very easily they, rather than God, become the things from which we attempt to draw life. Many people, especially successful people, draw their energy from their treasure and the things they have accomplished in this life. Jesus tells us that such treasures are a fleeting source of worth and we will soon be disappointed if we put our hope in them rather than God.

Jesus next tells us not to worry. Certainly being frightened is not a sin, but as we allow what scares us to remain in our lives and become worry, we certainly do sin and are separated from God. The opposite of the kind of faith Jesus is calling us to is anxiety. When we are anxious about many things, our attention is not on God. With worry at the center of our being, God is not in all of our thoughts, and it is not God, but worry, that energizes and defines us. In so far as worry is at the center of so many lives, it certainly is the thing that separates us from the living God, and the identity he has for us.

Finally, Jesus says, “do not judge” (Matt. 7:1). But that is exactly what we most want to do. What is behind so much of our theology is a desire to have a standard by which we can judge the saved from the unsaved, the godly from the ungodly, the moral from the immoral. We think we can judge good from evil, but the truth is that our concepts are all-too-human. We do not know the wheat from the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). Indeed, if God’s true standard for righteousness is being revealed here in the Sermon on the Mount, our concepts of sin and righteousness are so far off that any judgments we make are likely to be in error. We are certainly lost in our own human conceptualization of reality, but we are not hopelessly lost, for now comes the good news. Following this impossible standard that Jesus has just set forth, he reveals the good news that all we need do is to ask and it will be given to us.
Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matt. 7:7-8)

In light of all that Jesus has said, what we need to ask for is that God would give us a spirit of repentance in order that we can turn from these false gods and find the God who is the true lover of our soul. In this world we will always face these false gods and false sources of life. What we need is a grace that will allow us not to tire of repentance in order that we continually turn away from those false sources of identity in order that we might find our true identity in God. God is willing to give us the ability to turn again and again from those things that promise so much and give so little, if we are willing to live in a state of almost constant repentance. Jesus tells us that we simply have to ask, and it seems obvious from all that he says in the Sermon on the Mount that what we need to ask is that repentance would fill our soul and we would live in a constant state of turning away from all those things that so easily entrap us and keep us from drawing our strength and energy—our life and meaning—from God alone.

The good news that we have received and are to preach to others is that God is not calling us to obey a moral law of endless requirements. He is calling us to a relationship, and all we need to do to establish that relationship is repent and turn from the false gods which surround and engulf us. We do not need to find him, he finds us, but we only become aware of having been found when we turn from those false gods and idols that capture our attention and prevent us from having God as the source of our being.

Of course, in order to turn from the things of this world that so easily capture us and hold us in their sway, we have to see a need to do so. Most people are content with the gods of this world. They like the life that comes from their lust, anger, and even their worry. They are happy with their earthly treasure and the reputation they have taken so long to acquire. Their wealth, power, and prestige give them their social standing and in that they find meaning and purpose for their lives. This is what defines them, and they see no reason to turn from such things, but Jesus tells us at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount that the truly fortunate or blessed ones “are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3).

Jesus came “to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Consequently, if the poor are the fortunate ones for whom Jesus has good news, the rich must not be fortunate—for them what Jesus has to say is not good news. True, the rich may enjoy their wealth, power, and prestige while the poor have nothing in this world, but in their poverty the poor have little else as a source of identity but God alone.

Thus, the truly fortunate ones are the poor in spirit who lack a rich identity in the things of this world, for it is in our detachment from the things of this world that we at least have a better opportunity to become aware of our true identity in God. Unfortunately, most of us are not poor in spirit. We feel good about ourselves and are proud of how much we have accomplished, all the good we have done, all the evil we have avoided. But if we consider what Jesus says, we see that we have stored up
treasures on earth, sought the approval of men, and proudly stood in our own judgments. Truly, the poor in spirit are the blessed ones, for they, and they alone, have nothing but God as the source of their identity and self worth. They are certainly freer from many of the sources of the false self that the rest of us find so difficult to escape. The beatitudes go on to say that the blessed ones

are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matt. 5:4-5:8)

Only when we mourn the loss of all that others hold dear, do we find the God who is the only true source of comfort and joy. Equally, it is not the self-righteous who are meek but those who realize their sin and separation from God. They, and they alone, “Hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6), for those who are satisfied and content with their own righteousness have no need to mourn or hunger and thirst. The only truly blessed ones are those who are full of mercy, for they will be shown mercy (Matt. 5:7). Our cultural understanding of this verse is that God shows mercy in exchange for us having shown mercy to others, but merciful might also be understood as those who are full of mercy. The only way to be truly full of mercy is to have seen our great need for mercy, and having received mercy from God, we are then able to extend it to others. These are the only ones who are truly full of mercy. Finally, our ability to see God is conditioned upon our being able to repent and turn from all those other gods who stand in the way and prevent us from seeing him. This is the purity of heart of which Jesus speaks. It is that we would be pure and have a single source of life and identity in God.

The Beatitudes, and what follows them in the Sermon on the Mount, are linked in that what follows explains why the poor in spirit, the mournful, meek souls who hunger for righteousness and mercy are blessed. If we accept what Jesus is setting forth as God’s true standard, we realize how poor in spirit and in need of mercy we really are. In light of what Jesus says, a humble state of repentance, in which we seek God’s mercy, is the only blessed place.

Of course, those who do not accept what Jesus is setting forth as God’s ultimate standard, but are confident that they can achieve their own righteousness by following some set of religious principles or practices, are not the poor spirited, meek, and mournful souls Jesus tells us are blessed. In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees probably kept the Mosaic law better than any group of Jews who had ever lived. They took great pride in that and believed they were living according to God’s ultimate standard. What Jesus reveals, however, is a deeper spiritual life of faith. Of course, the Pharisees resisted and wished to stay where their identity was well founded. They were good at keeping the law, and what Jesus was calling them to was a life of repentance and radical faith in the mercy of God.

Today, we are often not those poor spirited, meek, and mournful souls but, like the
Pharisees, we have a confidence in our doctrinal beliefs or good behavior that we are sure will provide salvation.

The Pharisees were religious reformers who carried out every detail of the Law. Their outward religion would dazzle you, but inside they were blinded by their own self-righteousness.

The tax collectors were social outcasts, hated by all. Jesus tells a story about the tax collector and the Pharisee. The tax collector is ashamed of his sin. The Pharisee is proud of his virtue. But God prefers the sinner, overwhelmed by his wretchedness, who trusts in God alone.

The Pharisee is much more common than you think. Many Christians try to lead “good, Christian lives” and are proud of themselves for it. They may pray, tithe, and lead moral lives, but inside they are attached to their own ability to live the Christian life.

You have hidden (or not so hidden) pride at your own strength. You take pleasure in seeing yourself as strong and good and righteous. But whom are you trusting, and whom are you looking at in all of this? Yourself! You want to know the good feeling that comes with being right with God. You need to empty yourself, not fill yourself up. Follow God by the dim torch of faith, not by the light of your own understanding and abilities. Do not be proud of your apparent ability to live the Christian life. Your ability to do that will soon prove to be an illusion. Trust in God alone. (Fenelon 143)

The Christian life of faith is not an absolute certainty in this or that doctrine but rather a hope in the greatness of God’s mercy. That kind of faith can only come about when we no longer have any hope in ourselves, but are forced to live in that blessed place of repentance and trust in the mercy of God. This is the narrow gate that Jesus tells us is the only way to eternal life (Matt. 7:13-14).

**Work Cited**


