

SERIES ON THE TEACHINGS OF A GALILEAN SAGE:  
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. PART II

## JESUS: THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF A SOCIAL DEVIANT

Above: "Sermon on the Mount" – Hungarian artist Kalroly Ferenczy depiction of a pastoral scene, Budapest, 1896



*Previously, in this Series ...*

PREFACE & SUMMARY OF PART I [Skip to the commentary, next page, if you prefer.]

In Part I, we began this current series on the ethical teachings of the historical Jesus, as recorded in three chapters of Matthew's gospel, commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7, and Luke's corollary being Luke 6). The passages are certainly familiar. Many of us have passed this way many times before. But now we do so again for several reasons. And it may provide us a new perspective to see again with new eyes.

First, many of these passages are considered by a predominant number of modern biblical scholars to be the closest thing we have to what the historical Jesus may actually have said; before the various gospel traditions extrapolated whatever original source material they had with their own interpretations, imaginations and application to their own particular set of circumstances.

This allows us the additional progressive thinkers of the Christian faith tradition opportunity to then examine the core teachings, wisdom sayings, parables and aphorisms of this Galilean sage; while bringing our own interpretations and imaginations to bear on these passages; unfettered or unencumbered to some degree by what so quickly became the more familiar and well-trod path of orthodoxy.

Instead of according the historical Jesus with a messianic title, and the establishment of yet another institutional and hierarchical religion – two things in which Jesus himself seemed to have little interest -- we can instead reconsider to what extent Jesus' core teachings deviated radically from both the conventional thinking of his time (and ours); as well as the "salvation" business that regarded his deviant message as a meddlesome nuisance at best, and heresy at worst.

In the first commentary in this series we considered the so-called "beatitudes." We can reasonably guess these welcome words of comfort and reassurance were originally addressed to those who would have been personally familiar with the short end of the stick when it comes to gross economic disparity.

The commentary took us on a little art history tour with contemporary artist David Hockney's reinterpretation of Claude's depiction of the Sermon on the Mount; where Jesus and his inner circle were pictured perched high above the milling crowd below. Then we took a look at Los Angeles artist, Romero Gomez' reinterpretation of some of Hockney's famous works; where Gomez places the otherwise-invisible domestic workers in his renditions of those affluent California lifestyle settings Hockney loves to paint.

The beatitudes introduce us to a 'Jesus Ethic,' and a particular vision of equitable justice simply understood as each person having *enough*. Such divine governance as Jesus envisioned would certainly appear to be contemporaneously worthy of consideration by virtue of its absence today. While the

economic gap may now be a chasm – as Gomez’ “Domestic Scenes” would suggest – it would also seem evident we cannot afford to ignore each other’s presence and interdependence.

In this series we skip the passages about being “salt of the earth,” and “light to the world;” as well as those instructions on anger, resolving disputes, lust, adultery, divorce and the swearing of oaths. Many of these instructions are reiterations of what would have been familiar religious legalisms, only with exaggeration. Jesus employed the use of parody to repeatedly make his point; e.g. “pluck out your eye” or “chop off an arm” if you might be tempted to ogle or touch whatever or whomever you shouldn’t!

Instead, we turn to something far more difficult and challenging: non-violent passive resistance. While it would seem completely against our human nature, a Jesus Ethic is based on the notion it is fully within our human capacity to turn the other cheek and love your enemy. And furthermore, that it is actually a self-distortion of our human nature to accept endless, reciprocal violence as the “default” in human nature.

In a Jesus Ethic, it is not a matter of overcoming our “natural instincts” by the gift or blessing of some external, divine intervention or redemption. Both the answer and the capacity lie within. Embracing a Jesus Ethic is always an inward journey. And these teachings we explore are the pathways.

## JESUS: THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF A SOCIAL DEVIANT

*“Don’t react violently.”  
“Turn the other cheek.” And,  
“Love your enemies.”*

Matthew 5:39,44

Recently, crowds took to the streets from Kiev, to Bangkok and Caracas. Then again, the social world order seems to erupt in chaos and violence on a regular basis. Regimes hold on to political power at all costs, while those who are more often than not economically oppressed – as opposed to just ideologically of a different mindset -- demonstrate and confront government forces with little more than their willingness to stand in opposition; and, in hopes outside forces might be willing to join their struggle, and match entrenched power with equal force by those others who have their own national interests at stake.

Seeing no good viable options, for its part, Washington habitually “urges restraint” by all parties involved. With every “teaching moment,” the world’s most powerful nation continues to relearn the same hard lesson. Economic sanctions meant to coerce and cripple certain threats or imbalances of power are preferable to military assistance or outright intervention; particularly when we can’t figure out which anti-government faction to back, and tilt the balance of power in our favor.

But whether it comes down to action or inaction on the part of the U.S., it all too often seems to have similar disastrous results. Despite all the blood and treasure expended in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade, chaos and violence continue unabated. And, in the absence of direct intervention, Syria’s civil war continues to turn a nation and people that have been around since biblical times into a wasteland of destruction and refugees in flight on a massive scale.

If all this seems like pure political commentary, consider this: The socio-political landscape in first century Palestine, CE, wasn’t much different. The practical means by which the imbalance of power was wielded by some over others may have been rather primitive by today’s technological standards; but the end game was the same.

*If all this seems like pure political commentary, consider this: The socio-political landscape in first century Palestine, CE, wasn’t much different.*

And, in the context of the Matthean texts commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, the itinerant Jewish peasant teacher and sage who would long be remembered as uttering such impractical non-sense as “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemy,” was the same historical figure that was executed as an insurrectionist, not a “resurrectionist.” As I’ve put it bluntly elsewhere, Jesus didn’t die for our sins, but because of them.

Clearly, the earliest legends of what Jesus said and did that would subsequently be recorded in what became known to us as *evangelion* (the *good news* of the canonical and non-canonical gospels) sought a way to somehow explain away his suffering and death as a divinely orchestrated redemptive act. An entire theological proposition about expiation and atonement subsequently arose to dominate religious beliefs systems within the Christian faith tradition.

However, as a way of understanding how this may have originally evolved, we should bear in mind the kind of chaos and violence in which these gospels were written in the aftermath of the Empire’s destruction of Jerusalem and quashing the Jewish rebellion in 70 CE. To the ancient way of struggling to make sense of such historical events, the role of competing gods (Rome’s Caesar versus the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in this case) was the standard framework for such an explanation and understanding when routinely people took to the streets to protest and long for change.

But the historical Jesus who lived and died in the midst of such chaos and violence would have never imagined such a theological extrapolation be applied to himself. He had no messianic complex; despite the title that would subsequently be accorded him as “the Christ;” and with the subsequent words attributed to him as the one and only salvific son of God. Despite what would become a core tenet of orthodox Christianity, his life and death was not an apocalyptic in-breaking of some other-worldly Divine; interceding to set things right and offer personal salvation to right believers. The point bears repeating.

Instead, his ethical teachings such as those recorded in that collection of wisdom sayings, aphorisms and parables known to us as the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7), comprised a worldview that *deviated* so radically from what was taken to be the accepted norm of conventional thinking and routine religious posturing that it was – and remains – at odds with what we all too willingly concede to be “just the way things are” when it comes to “human nature.”

In this regard, not only was Jesus a true social deviant to the normal ways human beings have long been accustomed to thinking and acting – dismissing our actions as just human nature -- but his teachings reveal to us an alternate view of a fuller humanity of which we are presumably capable. Consequently, it is not so much a matter of enlisting the help of some divine strength to overcome our own human wretchedness (often a common theme in certain Christian theologies); but rather something inherent in our own human nature.

*In this regard, not only was Jesus a true social deviant to the normal ways human beings have long been accustomed to thinking and acting ... but his teachings reveal to us an alternate view of a fuller humanity of which we are presumably capable.*

Certainly, the heart of the gospel message has often been understood as counter-cultural, counter-intuitive and paradoxical: Lose yourself to find yourself. Leave the many for the sake of the one who is lost. Or, unconditional forgiveness for one who breaks all the rules beats meritorious observance of the rules every time, etc.

So too, the “*you have heard it said / but instead I say to you*” literary formula attributed to Jesus in so many of these ethical pronouncements that he refers to a “fulfillment” of the Law might be considered at least radical in their re-application. But there’s more to it than that.

What Jesus' teachings actually propose is a complete deviation from what is all too readily assumed and accepted to be the default condition of what constitutes who we are as human beings; as well as the kind of world we shape for ourselves as a result of this misbegotten *default* view of human nature. The wisdom teaching of the Galilean sage is a direct refutation of the accepted norms of conventional wisdom about the way things are; and not just naïve and wistful thinking about the way we all wished they could be.

*The wisdom teaching of the Galilean sage is a direct refutation of the accepted norms of conventional wisdom about the way things are; and not just naïve and wistful thinking about the way we all wished they could be.*

To try to understand the stark distinction and contrast of these two different "wisdom" traditions, we can try a little reflection, interpretation and application of our own; just as the earliest followers of Jesus Jews might have done. To try to then understand Jesus' *deviation*, of what does the common *default* world consist?

Here's one example. Nation states draw arbitrary borders. Then it seems to be a matter of human nature that human beings on one side of the border tend to think the grass looks greener on the other side, and dammit they're often right. So those who have *more* "naturally" favor border security, and call it immigration reform. It's only human nature to protect what you've got, if what you've got is more than what someone else has, right?

Meanwhile, on the other hand -- and the other side of the globe -- certain members of certain tribes who come from the same Abrahamic tradition advocate a two-state solution, with one tribe building a wall to keep out the other. Why? Because historical reality clearly suggest it is self-evident the two religiously-driven tribes cannot abide each other, or imagine living in peace together. After all, they're only human, right?



And yet, when NASA's *Curiosity* rover recently sent back a "selfie" of our planet from 99 million miles away, the pin dot identified in the night sky that scientists pointed to as Earth could not delineate any walls or borders. Even the International Space Station – that habitable artificial satellite of international cooperation in low Earth orbit – seems to be an exception to the default assumptions we make with regard to "just the way things are." Ironically, it seems, the very idea we might escape the *default* view of the way things are is literally out of this world!

One could argue that self-interest and self-survival is "natural instinct" and not learned behavior; that it's just a matter of what it means to be inherently "human." But then how do we explain the exceptions, like Jesus? Are they all simply inhuman Divines or those holy human aberrations we end up calling saints; simultaneously admiring them as extraordinary, commendable and impossible to imitate or replicate?

How can one refrain from striking back if one is struck? One might say reciprocity is instinctive. If struck, a counterblow of equal measure, at least, instinctively follows. More learned biblical commentators than I have pointed out that in Jesus' day "an eye for an eye" was considered progressive thinking when it came to meting out equitable justice under the law. The "lex talionis" restricted retaliatory acts measure for measure. In many respects, little has changed, of course. But given the too few examples we actually do have to the contrary, what is taken as instinctive retaliation is arguably learned behavior; and not necessarily human instinct that we must always be bound to respond the same way.

As such, it is not so much a matter of overcoming our human nature, as it is a matter of reclaiming what it means to be truly human. Grasping an understanding of the implications of all this is essential to the teachings of a Jesus ethic; namely, that the divine governance of which Jesus continually expressed and demonstrated for us in his words and ways is to be found within the human self.

The *Sermon on the Mount* is a compilation of teachings drawn from source materials and assembled by the gospel writer, or writers, that began with a series of series of pronouncements that were intended to console and encourage those who found themselves oppressed and in abject poverty. As such, we might do well to consider the fact that had we been contemporaries of the Galilean sage, he might not have been addressing us! But to such as these, Jesus the social deviant offers an alternative response to the social world order from his day to our own.

*It is not so much a matter of overcoming our human nature, as it is a matter of reclaiming what it means to be truly human. Grasping an understanding of the implications of all this is essential to the teachings of a Jesus ethic; namely, that the divine governance of which Jesus continually expressed and demonstrated for us in his words and ways is to be found within the human self.*

In the sections of his “sermon” that follow, Matthew’s Jesus returns once again to matters of economic justice, charity and earthly possessions. He does so in such a way that will unavoidably leave each of us asking our selves – what he’d call our true “selves” -- if he’s talking about us.

He’ll do so not from the default positions of the have’s and the have-not’s, with borders and walls and power plays; but from a place of deviation that lead to an inward journey that his teachings tell us are an inherent and universal part of what it means to be truly human. In contemporary terms, you might call it the ultimate “Selfie.”

The “selfie” phenomenon is not a modern invention with the advent of the smart phone. Self-reflection is probably as ancient a practice as human existence itself. It can however be a matter of depth perception.

It is then the inward journey of the deeper self and the further consideration of the outward manifestations of self in the physical world we have to share that we’ll explore in Part III of this series.

© 2014 by John William Bennison, Rel.D. All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more commentaries by John Bennison from the perspective of a Christian progressive go to

<http://wordsnways.com>

<http://thechristianprogressive.com>