

# *The Quiet Revolution*

## *Pt. 1*

### **Intro:**

The Jesus movement is indeed a revolution. After its birth in Galilee it had spread rapidly in all directions, becoming a sizable minority group in all of the major powers surrounding the Jews. In time it steadily grew and institutionalised to the point where it possessed more formal manifestations of power. The Papacy wielded tremendous influence over the behaviour of European Kings, and waged wars of its own through holy crusades. As it stands today, it is one of the world's leading religions, and its roots extend to every continent on earth. Considering it began with a handful of Jewish peasants, its history is astounding.

I call this revolution quiet for a number of reasons. Unlike other revolutions, the Jesus movement did not incite a change of Government through violence, or join together from political grievances. While it is true that this movement represented a section of society that did not have a voice in the political process, and espoused a message that had significant political ramifications, it is unique in that its outreach transcended national boundaries and avoided political conflict. Also, for a social movement that flourished as quickly and forcefully as Christianity, there are surprisingly little non-Christian historical sources that account for its growth. From the perspective of ancient governments and modern historians, this revolution was quiet.

In addition, the Jesus movement mirrors the very unfortunate, yet very real, standard formula for a revolution. A political revolution is incited from the incompetence, corruption, or humanitarian abuses of the current political system, ushering in a period of radical political change under a set of ideals and principles that intend to right the wrongs of the past Government. The group of people that are propelled into positions of leadership after the revolution accord themselves authoritative power with the excuse of protecting the spirit of the revolution and making the

necessary changes to better society. In time, every original ideal that the revolution stood for is abandoned, and the new Government begins to look more like the old one each passing day. The historical precedent for this formula is widespread, including Russia, China, Cuba, the USA, and many political uprisings in Africa and Central/South America. The inevitable process was parodied in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and holds true for Christianity. This three part series intends to document the quiet revolution from the person and message of Jesus, the initial balancing act found in the operation and principles guiding the early churches, and a critical look at how the contemporary church has impacted modern history.

### **The social setting:**

It would take too long to thoroughly investigate first century Galilee, or discuss in depth the many ways in which this ancient society differs from our own. Instead, I wish to briefly illuminate several significant concepts regarding the social setting of Jesus that is often neglected. The historical gap between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament gives the impression that Israel somehow leapt from being a sovereign kingdom to an occupied territory under Rome. Nothing could be further from the truth. Israel was occupied quite a long time before that under rulers which inherited different parts of Alexander's conquests. The Jewish culture was to a debatable degree influenced and altered by its Hellenistic occupiers, to the point where Jerusalem was vying to become an official city-state. The gradual trend towards a Greco-Jewish cultural hybrid was one of the main reasons for what was called the Maccabean revolt. The Maccabees succeeded in earning Jewish independence for roughly one hundred years, before it eventually succumb to Roman military authority.

Extreme instability was the climate of Israel's politics, culture, and economy. A diverse range of social groups flourished, including groups of bandits who violently resisted authority and were often slaughtered, eschatological prophets who led multitudes of people into the wilderness and were again often slaughtered, and a group of professional assassins known as the *Sicarii*. This civil unrest eventually led to another revolt, which resulted in the burning of the temple in Jerusalem at 70AD. Jesus existed within this tumultuous period, preceding the second revolt by only a few decades.

In this setting Jesus spoke to a certain type of Jew. Save Jerusalem, Jesus shunned large urban centres in favour of the countryside with its small villages, and on most occasions spoke to lowly peasants who were farmers or fisherman. Illiteracy was common in rural Galilee, and the vast majority were highly uneducated since they lacked the resources to do anything but subsist. Their produce was heavily taxed by a number of external forces, including Rome, the Governor, and the temple. To make matters worse, tax collectors were highly corrupt in this period, and the poor were often cheated. As a result, peasants would work incredibly hard for a large harvest, and in the end would receive just enough to support themselves. It was this social group that were most susceptible to joining a group of bandits, or follow eschatological prophets, as they had most reason to protest outside influence into their society and long for a change of the status quo.

The last point to note is that like all ancient societies, Israel operated under a very harsh and elaborate social hierarchy. The rich dominated the poor, the priests dominated the peasants, the men dominated the women, the free dominated the slaves, and the ceremonially clean dominated the unclean. The worth of a man/woman was judged on economic, social, and religious lines. Women lacked basic legal rights, slavery was abundant, and people were separated into socio-economic classes and treated accordingly. Also present in Israel was what has been called a “holiness culture.” The Torah established what was required in order to be ceremonially pure, and many religious groups (such as the Pharisees) took the rules very seriously. Religious superiority was expressed in numerous social situations, such as public prayer and almsgiving, and the holy were exalted for their righteousness. The temple itself was highly hierarchical, and operated under strict guidelines for the appointing of religious authority. It was in this world that Jesus lived and delivered his good news, and it is important to study him with the social context in mind; not independently of it.

## **The Kingdom of God:**

A significant proportion of scholarship in the historical Jesus agrees that the main theme of Jesus ministry was the coming kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> It is

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<sup>1</sup> Whether this kingdom of God takes a more eschatological or social bent is in contention.

found all throughout the Gospels, and in different forms of passages such as parables, healings, teaching, and prophecy. But what exactly does the Kingdom of God mean?

Through the parables of Jesus it is possible to illuminate several significant characteristics of the kingdom of God. First of all, the kingdom of God begins small but grows rapidly. Take the parable of the wild mustard seed.<sup>2</sup> Jesus compares the kingdom of God to an unwanted weed that begins as a particularly small seed but grows uncontrollably to the point where it will smother the garden. Next, consider the parable of the yeast where again Jesus shocks his listeners by comparing the kingdom of God to an undesirable object.<sup>3</sup> In this case it is leaven, which was considered ceremonially impure and was used as a symbol for moral corruption.<sup>4</sup> The point of the parable is that if a very small amount of leaven is added to the dough, it will very quickly affect the whole batch.

As is fitting for a kingdom that begins in an unexpected and undesirable form, Jesus claimed that the kingdom of God was inaugurated with his existence. This can be deduced from a variety of sources, including John the Baptist proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus claiming in the synagogue that Old Testament scriptures related to the kingdom have been fulfilled, and the famous saying that the “Kingdom of God is within/among you”.<sup>5</sup> Like a wild mustard seed, or a bit of leaven, the kingdom of God begins in a surprising fashion; through a carpenter with no assets or earthly power.

The parables of Jesus were also used to stress the importance of being included in the present kingdom of God. In Matthew 13:44 Jesus likens the kingdom to a treasure found hidden in a field. Once it is discovered, the person should sell all that they own in order to purchase the land and unearth the treasure. In the very next verse, the kingdom is compared to a flawless magnificent pearl.<sup>6</sup> If a pearl merchant chances upon it, it would be wise for him to sell his entire pearl inventory in order to afford it. In these very simple one-verse parables we find examples of the kingdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19, Matthew 13:31-32, Gospel of Thomas logia 20

<sup>3</sup> Thomas 96, Luke 13:20-21, and Matthew 13:33

<sup>4</sup> This is why unleavened bread was used on holy occasions.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 17:21; the Greek word could mean either among or within.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:45, Thomas 76

God being described with such great importance that it is worth doing anything to be included.

From this a very basic understanding of the kingdom of God is deduced. It takes a socially unimpressive form, begins with the ministry of Jesus but is still progressing towards its full form, grows uncontrollably, is present and visible within the world, and is worth anything to attain. The nature of the kingdom of God, and how to belong in the kingdom, was the central message of Jesus, what was called his good news. With a basic framework to work with the question of who belongs in the kingdom of God, and how it interacts with the world around it will be examined.

## The Undeserving Kingdom

*Luke 5:29-31:*

*And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them.*

*But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?*

*And Jesus answering said unto them, they that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick.*

I imagine Jesus delivered this line with more than a hint of sarcasm, for it was the men he was addressing that received the bulk of his criticism. Nevertheless, Jesus often ate with the sick, the outcast, the corrupt, and the undesirables that were shunned in society. It was the physical expression of the most surprising aspect to Jesus' conception of the kingdom of God; that the kingdom was for those who did not deserve it. Consider the parable of the ungrateful servant, a significant tale that speaks on the depth of God's forgiveness, the moral obligation of the forgiven, and also the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> Despite the servant owing an astronomical amount of money, he was forgiven his debts, alluding to the idea that forgiveness is given to those who don't deserve it. Another example is the parable of the prodigal son, which is most often used to teach thriftiness by emphasizing the wastefulness of the son's spending.<sup>8</sup> Instead, evaluate the story with an emphasis on the ending, with the

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 18:23-35

<sup>8</sup> Luke 15:11-32

father's unconditional forgiveness and lavish feast heaped upon the son. The other son, who did not waste his inheritance, protested this feast by pointing out that this prodigal son deserved no good treatment. The reply from the father ignored all past mistakes, and focused on the inherent worth of the son. As seen in these parables, the kingdom of God is given to those who don't deserve it.

Also consider the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd oddly abandons ninety nine sheep in order to find one sheep that went astray. The kingdom of God is for those who are lost. Lastly, there is my favourite among these four examples, the parable of the two men at the temple. It's easy to view this parable through prejudiced eyes, where a taxman and an evil and hypocritical Pharisee go to the temple to pray. Instead, consider how the audience would react to this story as it is being told. The Pharisees, despite their failings, must have possessed a great love for the Law of Moses to take it so seriously, and they would have been much respected among the people for their piety and dedication. Once Jesus describes the taxman who bows his head and asks for mercy, the audience would likely be nodding their heads in agreement. Taxmen were corrupt, and many in the audience would have been cheated themselves. Knowing that the audience would react in this way, Jesus finished the parable by announcing that it was the taxman who was justified. It would have shocked the audience, and it demonstrates how the kingdom is indeed offered to those who don't deserve it.

Now, it is important to understand exactly what is being said. Jesus is not saying that Pharisees were already justified, and that the purpose of his ministry was to bring the sinners in the society closer to the Pharisee's righteousness. This would contradict many passages in the Gospel. Instead, I propose that Jesus is revealing how what their society would consider the lowly and undeserving are the ones that belong in the kingdom of God. This will become clearer with the concept of humility and exaltation, and the parables that condemn those who consider themselves the natural heir to the kingdom of God.

## **A kingdom without status**

There are passages in the Gospels that are rarely heard in a church sermon as they are rarely understood. One such passage is found in the children sayings, which take subtly different forms across the Gospels but retain the same basic point.<sup>9</sup> The proclamation is best expressed in Matthew: “he who does not accept the kingdom like a child will never get into it.” This verse cannot be trivialised, as it is very well-attested in the Gospels and relate to a fundamental requirement to entering the kingdom of God. Most devotional interpretations that I have heard relate this saying to the innocence and virtue of small children, and claim that Jesus is somehow stating that Christianity requires the obedience, innocence, and purity that a child possesses. The error in this interpretation is that it is presupposing values found in modern culture onto a two thousand year old text, and drawing a conclusion based on that.

Instead, consider how this saying would have been heard to first-century Galileans. Historical evidence indicates that children in ancient societies were often treated quite appallingly. In fact, it was common for children to be abandoned by their natural parents, and left to be raised as slaves. This occurred with such frequency that some non-Jewish writers were surprised that Jewish parents did not do the same. This behaviour can be used to illuminate a significant difference in attitude towards children that ancient societies possessed. In the words of John Crossan, “to be a child was to be a nobody, with the possibility of becoming a somebody absolutely dependent on parental discretion and parental standing in the community.”<sup>10</sup> Wendy Cotter adds that in this culture “it is an insult for an adult to be compared to children.”<sup>11</sup>

Ancient society did not sentimentalise childhood, they saw children as without status. Accordingly, in this passage Jesus is declaring that to enter the kingdom of God it must be as a statusless nobody. It is important not to underemphasise the saying, which can be the natural reaction to receiving unexpected information. It is written in every ancient Gospel that possesses historical credibility, is dissimilar to the teaching of the early church (hence it is unlikely that it was written in during the transmission process), and is not said with any conditions attached to it. In one of the most historically reliable sayings of Jesus that we have, Jesus states that the kingdom of God is only for those without status. This

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 18:1-4, Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17, Thomas 22, and a more developed form of the saying in John 3:1-10.

<sup>10</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 269

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Cotter, “Children Sitting in the Agora: Q(Luke) 7:31-35”, *Forum* 5/2, p.70

principle is similar to the preceding parables concerning the undeserving kingdom, and as we shall see is part of a common thread.

## **A kingdom without wealth**

As has been seen, the kingdom of God is given to those who don't deserve it, and it must be entered into like a little child; without status. The economic dimension of this kingdom of God is seen most clearly with the opening statement of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."<sup>12</sup> Even among a crowd of heavily taxed farmers, this statement would have been considered quite radical. The Greek word used here for poor is *ptochoi*.<sup>13</sup> In English the word poor is a broad label given to anyone that is without much wealth, relative to the society in which they live. In Greek, the word that refers to peasants that are forced to work hard in order to subsist is *penetes*. The Greek word used in these verses, *ptochoi*, instead refers to destitution. The destitute in Ancient Israel were the ones without any resources, and would have been the beggars, the outcast, the unclean, the sick, and the enslaved. Not surprisingly, this is the same section of society that would have been considered to lack any status, like little children, and were people who did not deserve the kingdom of God.

Again, Jesus restricts the kingdom of God in a very narrow and straightforward manner, offering no condition, exception, or explanation. To put it into context, the centre of the Christian religion, Jesus, is in very plain Greek stating that the kingdom of God is for the destitute. This must have been an absurd paradox to his farmer audience and the destitute among him, as neither social group felt in any way blessed. The following verses in the Sermon on the Mount offer similar promises to the meek and the mournful. The purpose running through these verses is to give the abandoned and abused people in Israel comfort. You could say that in these verses Jesus takes a side. When his healing ministry and frequent table fellowship is considered, the words of Luke 5:29-31 become quite clear; Jesus came for the sick.

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 6:20, Thomas 54. Matthew 5:3 adds 'in spirit' after *ptochoi* (poor). Whether Matthew is intending to convey the same point, or reports the saying differently does not dilute the version of Luke and Thomas. Especially since the New Testament makes the same conclusion elsewhere (e.g. James 1:9-11, James 5:1-6, and the Eye of the needle sayings: Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25).

<sup>13</sup> The Thomas text has the Coptic word *heke*, but that is the Coptic formulation for the Greek word *ptochia*. Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that the Coptic translator for the Gospel of Thomas found *ptochia* within the text.

If a person says that the kingdom of God is for the destitute, it necessarily follows that the kingdom of God is not for the rich, and this can be found in the famous eye of the needle saying.<sup>14</sup> In this passage we find one of the richer metaphors used by Jesus: “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man enter the kingdom of God.” It is easy to imagine that anti-wealth sentiment was common in the peasant and artisan classes of agrarian Israel, but the fact that it came from Jesus gives it a special relevance. Not only does Jesus condemn the rich and practically forbid them from the kingdom of God, he actually finds the proposition of a rich man entering the kingdom so hilarious that he uses an absurd metaphor to describe it.

This negative disposition towards wealth should not be surprising, as it is taken up in other forms throughout the Gospels. Matthew 6:19-21 contains a warning for amassing or placing any value on earthly possessions. Kloppenborg remarks that this “admonition itself finds partial parallels in contemporary Jewish exhortation to collect heavenly treasures by doing good deeds (especially almsgiving), although the disdain for earthly acquisitions is somewhat peculiar.”<sup>15</sup> Another striking example was when Jesus encourages the lending of capital without expecting interest or the capital itself in return.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, it took the form of a command that was given to a young rich ruler, by instructing him to sell all of his possessions to the poor.<sup>17</sup> According to Jesus, the hesitance in the young ruler excluded him from the kingdom of God. Many today would fear such a command as it would make them destitute, but this was most likely the point.

The amount of wealth that a person possesses was no doubt important to Jesus, and these sayings are the economic manifestation of Jesus opposition to Israel’s cultural values. The rich in Israel would have been considered very blessed (perhaps even by God), the poor were oppressed, and the destitute were deemed worthless. Jesus countered this by claiming that the destitute were blessed, and the rich were excluded from

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 10:23-27, Matthew 19:23-25, Luke 18:24-25

<sup>15</sup> John Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1987), p.221

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 5:42, Gospel of Thomas logia 95, Luke 6:30,34,35

<sup>17</sup> Luke 18:18-23, Mark 10:17-22, Matthew 19:16-22

the most valuable asset.<sup>18</sup> This negative correlation between earthly and spiritual virtue was succinctly expressed when he said “the first shall be last, and the last first.”<sup>19</sup> It marks the first time in this article that Jesus not only blesses the worst off in society, as he does with the undeserving kingdom parables and the little child sayings, but also sharply condemns the powerful in society. As will be seen, it is part of the polemic that led to this execution.

## **A kingdom without hierarchy**

The idea that the kingdom of God was without status extended beyond the socio-economic realm, and included the religious sphere which is taken very seriously in Jewish culture. A great deal of attention is given to the criticisms of the Pharisees relating to the way they adhere to Old Testament law and extend it into every area of life.<sup>20</sup> However, I would argue that there is a more fundamental disagreement between Jesus and the religious authorities surrounding him, and it relates to hierarchy and hypocrisy. It was not just the Pharisees that took the Torah very seriously; for most believed that it was handed down by God. The laws of the Torah are incredibly numerous and often times strict, making adherence to the law a harsh burden. Accordingly, maintaining ceremonial purity became an achievement, demonstrating unrivalled piety and dedication to God. Great respect and status was given to the men dedicated enough to become a Rabbi, and even more to those known for their unforgiving adherence to the laws of Abraham. The line between pious and peasant became so distinct that there emerged what I would call a religious elite.

From what it said in the Gospels, it appears many with religious authority became proud of their position and began to display their affection for God in public. Public prayer, fasting, and almsgiving were common; performed publicly for all to observe and admire. An atmosphere was created that appointed people to religious superiority or inferiority depending on public piety, knowledge and adherence to the sacred laws, and status in society. This, coupled with what was already a strictly hierarchical religious structure of priestly authority yielding only to the high priest, was the context in which Jesus attempted to remove hierarchy from religion.

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<sup>18</sup> Belonging in the kingdom of God, see the parables related to its worth earlier in the article.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 13:30, Matthew 20:16, Mark 10:31, Matthew 19:30, and Thomas 4

<sup>20</sup> Nice examples of this include the healing that Jesus performed on the Sabbath and the supposed impurity of his disciples.

It began with a criticism on the way in which the Pharisees worshipped publicly.<sup>21</sup> In Matthew 6:1-4 Jesus taught to give alms in such secrecy that the other half of your body was not aware of what you were doing. Likewise, in verses 5-7 and 16-18 he extends this principle to prayer and fasting, and considers the attention grabbing spectacles of the hypocrites to be worthless in the eyes of God. There are other examples to be found in the Gospels, and it is clear that Jesus had condemned the method of worship utilised by the religious elite.

Next, Jesus condemns the use of scripture to divide people. In a wonderful passage, Mark 7:14-23, he uses food regulations as an example to condemn the way in which ceremonial purity and impurity exalted and isolated groups of people. Instead, Jesus argues that it is not adherence to the purity laws in the Torah that measures the worth of a man, but rather the inner character. A similar situation can be found in Matthew 23:25-28, where Jesus compares the Pharisees to objects that appear beautiful and righteous on the outside, but are corrupt and ugly on the inside. His revulsion for this interpretation of the Torah was not only taught, but also existentially expressed by choosing to eat with people that were considered unclean, corrupt, or worthless. In essence, Jesus took the next step by condemning the primary form of piety that the religious elite used to express their devotion to God.

In Matthew 23:8-12 Jesus takes the last step by completely removing the religious elite's right to hold religious authority. In 8-11 he condemns the use of titles of honour for a religious position. Titles such as Rabbi and teacher have little meaning to us today, but to place the verse in a modern context it would be the same as Jesus saying "call no man pastor, or reverend, or priest." In verse 12 Jesus gives the religious elite the ultimate insult by implying that they are in fact spiritually inferior to the people around them. He saw these priests as not only corrupt hypocrites, but as parts of a religious institution which encouraged an inauthentic relationship with God and taught an interpretation of the Torah which he considered an abomination.

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<sup>21</sup> I would argue that it was not merely the Pharisees, but all of the mainstream religious groups which was being criticised. The reason that the Pharisees in particular are mentioned so often is because they were the ones found in small villages as well as large cities. A Sadducee, for example, would have rarely been encountered.

Taking this into consideration, Jesus teaches his disciples to avoid a religious hierarchy. In Luke 22:24-27 the disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest.<sup>22</sup> Jesus interrupts their argument and says that the followers of Jesus will not be like the Gentiles, whom have rulers who lord their authority over their subjects. Instead, among his followers greatness will only be measured by the extent that a disciple serves and submits to the others. Jesus disconnected the relation between power and merit, and undermines the entire status structure of the society by claiming that the greatest of people will be those with the least power and authority.

## **A kingdom of unconditional love**

Importantly, the kingdom of God was not merely a social force that accepted and blessed the oppressed, lowly, and worthless in society. The message of Jesus was at its essence a challenge to the self, a challenge that called the individual away from the state of despair and into redemption. It was when this call was universalised that the Jesus movement became an enormously influential social movement which challenged the society's conception of status, wealth, and religion. When examined as the sum total of individuals, the defining characteristic of the kingdom of God is that it is filled with unconditional love. There are a myriad of occasions where Jesus implores the audience to love, and love unconditionally. I will draw on only the passages that have significant implications for the kingdom of God as a whole.

The first virtue of the kingdom of God is its radical philosophy on forgiveness, Matthew 18:21-35 being the main passage in question. It begins reasonably enough, with Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone if they continually wrong him. Now, if someone were to continually wrong another, it implies that there is very little remorse, regret, or care on their part. Peter's question is practically how many times a person should allow someone else to wrong them before developing anger and a desire for revenge. The fact that Jesus specifically replies seventy times seven is of little consequence; the point is that the person should forgive others without a numerical limit. Jesus continues with the parable of the unforgiving servant, which serves as an explanation to his puzzling answer. In this parable, it is discovered that the

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<sup>22</sup> Parallel in Matthew 20:20-28

reason a person is obligated to forgive limitlessly is because God has forgiven much more from them. To accept forgiveness and enter into the kingdom of God, and then proceed to be unforgiving in even one instance displays hypocrisy and ungratefulness. Not only that, the ability to be forgiven of God is taken away. This point is clarified in Matthew 6:14-15, which reinforces the notion that this principle was considered very important.

The second defining characteristic is that the kingdom of God loves its enemies. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:42-47, what is so remarkable about loving family, friends, and those that are respected?<sup>23</sup> What distinguishes the kingdom of God from the society surrounding it is that same unconditional love shown towards its enemies. Considering his rural audience, this was most likely in reference to petty feuding among people in the village. As can be quite easily imagined, the implications of loving your enemies are many. If an enemy were to attack you, Matthew 5:38-41 teaches pacifism by turning the other cheek. Considering the philosophy of radical forgiveness, this makes perfect sense. A person would never hit another that he truly loves, and every hit received would ideally be forgiven; giving no reason to hit in return.<sup>24</sup> Also, if an enemy were to place extreme demands on a person, Jesus advocates a kind of subversive over-obedience. Perhaps as an attempt to satirize oppressors by not merely tolerating demands but exaggerating them and to demonstrate love.

The final defining characteristic of the kingdom of God is that it serves. Earlier it was discussed how Jesus considered service to be greater than authority and power. A significant addition to this idea is given with the parable of the sheep and goats.<sup>25</sup> In this prophecy/story God is judging the world, and separating everyone as a shepherd would his sheep and goats. The sheep were blessed and the goats condemned. Shockingly, and something that I have yet to see fully integrated into any Christian theology, the sole criterion used to discern the sheep from the goats was how kindly they treated the poorest among them. In this parable God considered any loving acts performed for the poor as a loving act performed for God. It is with this parable in mind that I would argue the primary moral imperative of the kingdom of God is service to the poor.

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, Jesus also placed a lot of importance in the way that his followers acted towards one another, see John 13:34-35

<sup>24</sup> 1 Peter 3:8-9 offers a similar idea.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 25:31-46, my favourite parable.

Along with radical forgiveness and loving your enemies, these three virtues were meant to define the heart and activity of his kingdom.

## **A kingdom that transcends family**

I have attempted to illustrate how the message of Jesus came in conflict with the cultural attitudes on status, wealth, love, and religious hierarchy. The next attitude to be discussed is regarding the family, a feature of Jesus that is seldom mentioned and even more seldom understood. Family was undoubtedly a very important concept in the ancient world, with the concepts of bloodlines, ancestry, and kinship linked to a person's worth and status in the society. In Matthew 10:37 and 19:29 Jesus confronts this topic by subjugating the importance of the family for the kingdom of God. He even commends those who leave their family in order to follow him.<sup>26</sup> The parallel passage of Luke 14:26 appears to exaggerate this concept by claiming that a person must hate his family in order to follow Jesus. However, the Greek word here, *miseo*, has been convincingly argued to mean 'love less' in the context. In essence, Jesus is demanding a devotion from his followers that surpasses all earthly ties, including the family.

This principle was demonstrated in his own life by calling his followers his true family.<sup>27</sup> These passages suggest that for Jesus the social support base of the family has been superseded by the kingdom of God. This priority given to the kingdom of God occasionally manifested in leaving the family, but also conflicts within the family. In Matthew 10:34-36<sup>28</sup> Jesus likens himself to a sword that will cause such extreme division in a household that the members of the family will become each others enemies. This is not to do with belief in Jesus, as some have claimed. If you notice the fault lines in the family it is always with a person and a parent, or more generally a member of the family that is of an older generation. The saying is naught to do with belief, with one generation on Jesus side and the other not. It is concerning family hierarchy; speaking against the custom of the older generation having authority over the younger. It is a division caused by domination, and not belief. This passage links Jesus conception of the family with his teachings on radical egalitarianism in society and religion. Accordingly, his view of the family

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<sup>26</sup> I must note here that leaving the family was never a command, but rather something that he encouraged doing only if the family became a barrier to following Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Jesus true family: Mark 3:19-21, 31-35, Matthew 12:46-50, Luke 8:19-21, Thomas 99  
Blessed the womb: Luke 11:27-28, John 13:17, Thomas 79, James 1:25

<sup>28</sup> Parallel passage Luke 12:51-53

reflects the rest of his teaching, and is an important component of the good news.

## **A kingdom in conflict with the world around it**

With a message that challenged many cultural, religious, and ethical attitudes that were prevalent in Israel, it was inevitable that Jesus and his followers would clash with those who benefited from the status quo. For Jesus it was not simply removing the elite's monopoly on religious and social status, but inverting the relationship between the respected and oppressed. In the parable of the tenants in the vineyard, Matthew 21:33-45, there is a dramatic portrayal of Jesus condemning the social groups that considered themselves the natural heirs of the kingdom of God. Likewise, in the parable of sheep and goats mentioned earlier, the goats in the story were evidently expecting favour from God, only to receive condemnation. In all aspects of his life Jesus embraced the downtrodden and either ignored or condemned the 'righteous', through his avoidance of large towns, his healing of the sick and exiled, his table fellowship with sinners, and of course his preaching.

The institution that had grown to protect the religious elite, and give their power legitimacy in the eyes of many, was the temple in Jerusalem and its system of operation. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Jesus encouraged his followers, and to anyone that would listen, to bypass and ignore the power structures existing within society, most notably the temple.

In Matthew 5:23-26 Jesus undermines the legal authority of the temple by encouraging people to resolve conflicts among themselves, and to not use the courts, or synagogue, to solve any problems. On a number of occasions in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus offers a reinterpretation of the Torah, what he called 'fulfilling the law', which undermined the temple's religious authority. Coupled with the earlier mentioned condemnations of the religious elite, it is obvious why Jesus was perceived as a dangerous radical.

The event which probably provoked the religious authorities attempt to execute Jesus was the cleansing of the temple.<sup>29</sup> The everyday Jew, let alone the temple authorities, considered the temple of God as the most holy sites in Israel, and the symbolic centre of the entire religion. Hence, the news that Jesus caused havoc in the temple would probably have angered many.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, from the point of view of his followers it would have been interpreted as a symbolic act of righteous anger. Horsley calls it “A prophetic act symbolising God’s imminent judgement and destruction not just of the building but of the temple system.” Bocum, in comparison, describes it as “a protest against the exploitation of the poor by the temple hierarchy.” I’d argue a combination of the two views, with Jesus upending the tables in the temple as a symbolic act of God’s condemnation and imminent judgement on the highly hierarchical religious institutions. He does this as a representative of a rural movement that have been grossly exploited by the temple system and is seeking to bypass the religious institutions of Israel.

It did not matter to the authorities that the Jesus movement resisted their authority non-violently, as it was nevertheless spreading rapidly across rural Israel and defied every claim of legitimacy they possessed towards teaching the scripture and representing God to Israel. Indeed, its non-violent nature would have made it all the more threatening, and the priests made the worst mistake of all by attempting to destroy the movement by crucifying the leader. Unlike all other messiah movements in ancient Israel, Christianity did not die with its founder. Instead, it spread rapidly in all directions, eventually taking its place as the most influential religion in human history. In the next part of this series, the very early churches will be examined on the basis of their continuance of the ideals of Jesus.

By Timothy Neal

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps one reason they chose to free Barabbas over Jesus?