

“Yet Even the Dogs Eat the Crumbs that Fall from Their Masters’ Table”: Matthew’s Gospel and Economic Globalization

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1. Economic Globalization and the Church

Economic globalization, a free flow of goods and services across national borders and consolidation of wealth and power through the rapid integration of national economies into one global economic order,¹ is a modern phenomenon that is, in the opinion of many experts, unstoppable. It has created new ties among peoples and nations and transformed the world into an interconnected village. The driving ideology of economic globalization is, as LenkaBula notes, that “disengagement from the global economy is not an option.”² If national economies try to resist this development, they will remain isolated and become uncompetitive on the global market, with detrimental effects on the quality of lives of their citizens. By taking this inevitability as a starting point, the supporters of economic globalization argue that overall, everyone benefits from this process. Even though the poorest countries might not participate in the creation of wealth in the same degree like the developed countries, they are still given a chance to improve the life conditions of their people, which will not happen otherwise. The critics of economic globalization, in contrast, point to the devastating consequences of the global market system that is driven by economic and consumer agendas: accelerated exploitation of the poor, dehumanization of human beings, merciless destruction of natural resources, and unjust distribution of the proceeds. Indeed, one of the most frequently voiced criticisms against economic globalization is that it increases the gap between the rich and the poor by strengthening the superiority of the developed and intensifying the dependency of the undeveloped nations.³ In this way, globalization not only promotes but also reinforces the already existing inequalities between different groups and cultures.

¹ Cf. Puleng LenkaBula, “Justice and Fullness of Life in the Context of Economic Globalization: An African Woman’s Perspective,” Accra 2004, at <http://warc.ch/24gc/rw024/02.html> (accessed October 19, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ Cf. Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2005) and Bob Sutcliffe, *100 Ways of Seeing an Unequal World* (London: Zed, 2001).

The recent data released by the United Nations Development Programme,⁴ United Nations Department of Economic Affairs,⁵ and the World Bank⁶ pointedly illustrate this trend. According to these sources, less than 1% of the world's richest people have more income than 57% of the poorest peoples taken together. 19% of the world population has income of \$1 per day or less and 48% struggle to live on \$2 per day or less.⁷ The gap between the rich and the poor is accelerating. The ratio between the income of the richest and poorest countries was 3:1 in 1820, 35:1 in 1950, and 72:1 in 1992.⁸ According to Forbes Magazine, the number of billionaires in 2008 was 1125, while more than a billion people have to live on less than \$1 per day.⁹

How should the church respond to this development? The opinions vary, from those who believe that the impact of the church is inconsequential, to those who believe that the church could and should become an important voice in the public dialogues about economic globalization. The disillusionment felt by the former is certainly understandable. After all, it is quite obvious that economics and politics are the only two spheres that have a direct impact on the processes that govern economic globalization. Moreover, various examples of the failed projects attempted by some churches to counteract economic globalization are quite disheartening. At the same time, however, economic and political actors in this global drama are human beings whose worldview and understanding of reality is shaped, among other things, by their religious beliefs. In particular, Western consciousness has been influenced, in various degrees, by Judeo-Christian values. Some of the most fervent advocates of the expansion of the deregulated free market are those who believe that human beings are created to rule and exploit the earth, that material blessings are a visible demonstration of God's favor, and that the resulting polarization between the rich and the poor is part of God's created order.¹⁰ If so, then

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005: International Corporation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade, and Security in an Unequal World* (New York: Oxford University, 2005).

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic Affairs, *Inequality Predicament: Report on the World Social Situation 2005* (New York: United Nations, 2005).

⁶ The World Bank, *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development* (New York: Oxford University, 2005).

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005*, 3-4.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 38.

⁹ See Forbes Magazine at http://www.forbes.com/lists/2008/10/billionaires08_The-Worlds-Billionaires-Rank.html (accessed October 19, 2008).

¹⁰ Among the most enthusiastic supporters of economic globalization are the adherents of prosperity theology. LenkaBula, "Justice and the Fullness of Life in the Context of Economic Globalization," notes

alternative theological visions based on different readings of the biblical narrative, offered by the critics of economic globalization, can become an important factor in the discourse about economic globalization.¹¹ Even if the impact of these contributions on public policy might remain modest, the church should not abandon its critical role in society. Only in this way, it can fulfill its task of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.¹²

Christian ethicists and theologians typically address the problem of economic globalization by emphasizing the need for social justice and the ethics of sharing and generosity. James M. Childs, for example, believes that “even when generous behavior is a cover for greed, such as cunning public relations on the part of a business, it is still a testimony to the fact that people admire generosity, even if they are grudgingly willing to accept greed.”¹³ One of the most important contributions in this area comes from liberation theology, which underlines God’s preferential care for the poor. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, among others, accentuate the perspective of the poor as the locus of God’s revelation and liberation.¹⁴ Other voices emphasize human responsibility for the earth and its natural resources. Donal Dorr points out that the church “must help people to explore and develop models of human development which are more sustainable, more respectful of the Earth, more just and more humane than the present approach

that many prosperity churches in South Africa uphold the rich and “often suggest that the poor are poor either because they do not work hard enough or because they are sinners.” An article published on Oct. 3, 2008, in *Time* magazine suggests that the prosperity gospel, which promises material blessings to its followers, may have helped create sub-prime mortgage victims in the current mortgage crisis in the USA.

¹¹ See, among others, Max Stackhouse, ed., *God and Globalization: Theological Ethics and the Spheres of Life*, 3 vols. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000-2002); Max L. Stackhouse, Peter L. Berger, Dennis P. McCann, M. Douglas Meeks, *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); John Coleman, *Globalization and the Common Good: Present Crisis, Future Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005); David Hollenbach, *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2003); see also the contributions to the thematic issue of *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) on theology and globalization.

¹² Cf. Robert W. Wall, “Reading the New Testament in Canonical Context,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 374.

¹³ Cf. James M. Childs, Jr., *Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 82.

¹⁴ Cf. Ignacio Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos*, vol. 1 (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA, 2000), 187-218; Jon Sobrino, “La teología y el ‘principio liberación,’” *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 12 (1995): 115-140; Michael E. Lee, “Liberation Theology’s Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse,” *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003): 226-243.

of development.”¹⁵ Scriptural resources for these ideas are certainly abundant, such as the creation narratives that emphasize human responsibility for the created world, prophetic texts that uphold social justice and the care for the needy, and Jesus’ preaching about the love toward the enemy and generosity toward the marginalized.

In this paper, I wish to explore another venue that can contribute to this discussion—a subversive understanding of power and identity that underlines the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Hierarchical restructuring of power is one of the most fundamental characteristics of a new global humanity and many Christians feel as if they are at the very bottom of the pyramid. In his analysis of this complex phenomenon, Max Stackhouse sees hierarchy as “the very structure of nature—*fallen* nature, from a Protestant theological point of view.”¹⁶ This does not mean, Stackhouse continues, that every form of hierarchy is equally evil. Rather, Christians are called to a “selective approval of hierarchy, where it recognizes genuine excellence,” and “the resistance to any hierarchy that oppresses unjustly.”¹⁷ I believe that a fresh analysis of Matthew’s narrative, which challenges the conventional distribution of power in hierarchical structures, could offer valuable resources in this process. A word of caution is in order. It is anachronistic to expect to find in ancient narratives the ready-made solutions for our modern problems. What we could expect, however, is to find some guiding principles that might inform our understanding of the issues that we are facing today. The following analysis consists of two parts. In the first section, I will consider several key Matthean passages that illustrate how various groups, who are at the bottom of the hierarchical distribution of power that governs the Matthean story world, become empowered. I will argue that in each case, the implied author challenges the conventional distribution of power by inviting the reader to imagine a different, more inclusive community that is based on the principles of justice and fairness. In the second section, I will argue that Matthew promotes a new understanding of the in-group, which is based on a constant self-examination of its members and strife for “better righteousness.” In the conclusion, I will try to relate these insights to the question of how should the church respond to the problems created by economic globalization.

¹⁵ Donal Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power, and the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 126.

¹⁶ Max Stackhouse, “Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era: Reforming Protestant Views,” in *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

2. Challenging the Conventional Redistribution of Power

Jesus' elaboration of the principle of the *lex talionis* in Matt 5:38-42 is frequently understood as a call to the victims of injustices to endure them and not retaliate. Such an interpretation retrieves the original intention of the *lex talionis* as a restrictive measure for personal vengeance and juxtaposes it to Jesus' teaching on nonretaliation, which fulfills the intention of the law because it sets additional, more radical, restrictions to revenge.¹⁸ However, Jesus' exhortations to turn the other cheek to a perpetrator, offer one's outer garment to a person who demands an undergarment, freely go another mile although only one was demanded, and openhandedly give to a person who begs or asks for a loan are anything but passivism.

This is quite surprising given the fact that in the context of asymmetrical relationships, which are presumed in the Matthean story world, submission is the most natural response of an underdog. Luise Schottroff's analysis of different life situations in which the renunciation of vengeance was practiced in antiquity¹⁹ has shown that submission was expected from the inferiors. Submission to injustices was an expression of slavish mentality that was considered most appropriate for lower classes.²⁰ Submissive behavior and acceptance of injustices were the consequences of their dependent state and represented their only way of self-preservation. Yet, the examples enumerated in Matt 5:39b-42 defy this understanding because they illustrate neither submission nor passivism. The victims do not passively accept wrongs done to them, but actively respond by offering to endure more wrongs. Such responses are astounding because they

¹⁸ Cf. Luise Schottroff, "Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belongs to God': A Theological Response of the Early Christian Church to Its Social and Political Environment," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 231; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3 – 7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 276, 285; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1: *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I-VIII* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 540-41.

¹⁹ Luise Schottroff, "Non-Violence and the Love of One's Enemies," in *Essays on the Love Commandment*, trans. Reginald H. and Ilse Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 17-22.

²⁰ See Seneca, *De ira* 2.33.2.

illustrate an attitude that is neither natural nor required by the law. Without doubt “they run directly counter to all human instinct, individual or societal.”²¹

The deeply unsettling nature of the responses of the victims becomes more apparent if one takes a closer look at each of the examples mentioned in Jesus’ response. For our purposes, the first illustration will suffice. It envisions a situation when one person is slapped on the right cheek.²² Even though such an act violates the physical integrity of the offended person, the primary purpose of the perpetrator is not to inflict pain but to humiliate.²³ Moreover, the humiliation of the victim is of an exceptionally grave nature. Unlike Luke, who speaks about a slap on a cheek in general, Matthew specifies that the slapped cheek is the right cheek. In the world where right-handedness was the norm, one could hit another person on the right cheek only with his back hand,²⁴ which was regarded a much greater offense than a slap with the front hand.²⁵ Matthew’s version of the offense apparently assumes that this deed is committed in the context of an asymmetrical relationship – as an act of a superior over an inferior. Passive acceptance of humiliation would, in such a case, be more natural and certainly more appropriate for the asymmetrical power relationships. Yet, Jesus advises none of these. Rather, he counsels

²¹ Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Transforming Nonresistance: From *Lex Talionis* to ‘Do Not Resist the Evil One’,” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 55.

²² Luke’s version of the saying (Luke 6:29a) does not specify which cheek is slapped. The parallel in *Did.* 1:4 follows the Matthean text, while Justin, *Apol.* 1.16.1 is closer to the Lukan text. For an analysis of the relationship between *Did.* 1:4-5, Matt 5:38-42, and Luke 6:27-36 see Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 1, 539.

²³ The Old Testament examples include: 1 Kings 22:24 (Zedekiah slaps Micaiah on the cheek in indignation), Job 16:10 (Job complains that others have slapped him on the cheek to express their contempt), Psalm 3:7 (God’s action against David’s enemies is metaphorically described as striking them on the cheek, which conveys the sense of their total humiliation), Isa 50:6 (the servant of the Lord says that he voluntarily offered his cheeks to those who wanted to humiliate him), Lam 3:30 (a person who faces tragedy should give his cheek to the smiter as a sign of acceptance of insult and reproach). Mishnah (*m. B. Qam.* 8.6-7) specifies that a person who slapped another person must pay 200 *zuz*. However, if he slapped him with the back of his hand, the punishment was doubled to 400 *zuz*. The explanation of the penalty of 400 *zuz*, found in *t. B. Qam.* 9.31, is especially telling: the punishment is required “not because it is a painful blow, but because it was a humiliating one” (Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew: Fourth Division: Neziqin [The Order of Damages]* [New York: Ktav Publishing House Inc., 1981], 58).

²⁴ This does not mean that a slap with a left hand is ruled out, but also in this scenario the insult will be more humiliating than a slap with an open right hand. Cf. *1 Esdr.* 4:30, which narrates how Apame, Darius’ concubine, slapped the king with her left hand.

²⁵ The section on penalties in *m. B. Qam.* 8.6-7 (see the previous footnote) indicates that the rabbis regarded a backhanded slap twice as offensive as a frontheaded slap.

the injured party to take initiative and turn the other cheek also.²⁶ This surprising gesture of the victim achieves two goals. First, it shows that the victim was able to restore his injured dignity. He has refused to be humiliated. Second, he has created a new situation which forces the perpetrator to react. Walter Wink believes that this act robs the perpetrator of the power to humiliate. If his intention was to disgrace his inferior by hitting him on the right cheek with his back hand, he can no longer do that. He would have to slap him on the left cheek with his front hand and, by doing so, recognize him as his equal.²⁷ But is this really so? Will a slap on the left cheek really be a dignity restoring act? Would the perpetrator really be unwilling to hit again? He certainly could refrain from further humiliating the victim. But he could slap him again, this time on the left cheek. A slap on a cheek always humiliates. There are no guarantees that the perpetrator will not strike again, even if the next slap might be less humiliating than the first one. He might even understand the turning of the other cheek as a provocation and hit harder than the first time.²⁸ If he decides to hit again, injustice will be doubled.²⁹

Since the text presumes that the perpetrators are not the members of the community of Jesus' followers, the latter are not in a position to correct wrongs through some disciplinary measures, such as those described in Matt 18:15-20. In this situation, the responses of the victims are the only means of addressing injustices. They enable them to restore their lost dignity and start acting not as inferiors who are forced to endure humiliation out of necessity, but as equals or even superiors who freely offer to suffer more wrongs. Furthermore, their readiness to suffer

²⁶ Even though this teaching is certainly unique and without parallels in Jewish writings, the idea of voluntary martyrdom was not new; see Isa 50:6, Lam 3:30.

²⁷ Walter Wink, "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way (Matt. 5:38-42 par.)," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 105-106.

²⁸ Davies and Allison offer another possibility: "having been hit on the right cheek by the weaker left hand, the disciple offers his left cheek to be hit by the even stronger right hand" (*Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 1, 543).

²⁹ See Schottroff, "'Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belongs to God,'" 231. Although Schottroff does not pay much attention to the character of the first slap as a backhanded slap that is more offensive than the openhanded slap, her analysis is still valid. The question of the degree of disgrace is irrelevant here. The main issue is that humiliation could be repeated and thus doubled. Betz's explanations are especially helpful here. In his view, "turning to the striker the other cheek as well is a provocative invitation to receive a second strike. . . . The gesture exposes the act of the offender as what it is: morally repulsive and improper. In addition, it doubles the renunciation of violence by the person insulted; and finally, it challenges the striker to react with comparable generosity. A person who would ignore the gesture and strike again would reveal that person as an uncivilized brute" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 290).

additional damages exposes covert injustices as injustices. It is very difficult to recognize unfairness when it becomes embedded into the economic and political system that gives it a form of legality. Even the victims of injustices could internalize them to such a degree that they start developing “both servile actions and a servile mentality.”³⁰ Injustices must be seen and acknowledged as such, before any restoration of justice could take place. If so, then Matt 5:38-42 challenges the existing redistribution of power by giving the victims a new sense of dignity and empowering them to act and expose the existing injustices.

Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon, narrated in Matt 15:21-28, offers another example that challenges the conventional distribution of power. A non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite, approaches Jesus asking for help for her sick daughter. Her request, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon,” resembles a similar request by two blind men, “Have mercy on us, Son of David” (Matt 9:27), found earlier in the Matthean narrative. In that instance, Jesus readily fulfilled the petition and healed the blind. In chapter 15, however, the Matthean Jesus surprises the reader, because his initial reaction to the plea of the Canaanite woman is silence. It becomes clear in the next scene that Jesus’ non-responsiveness represents, in fact, a blatant refusal. His disciples, apparently annoyed by the cry of a foreigner, ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus’ response to their request clarifies that he has no intention of healing the daughter of a non-Jew, because he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). However, the woman, who might have overheard his words, still does not give up. She comes closer, kneels before Jesus, and asks again, “Lord, help me!” This time, Jesus has to respond directly to her, and when he does, he only reiterates his earlier point: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

There is no doubt about who are the children and who are the dogs in this saying. And there is also no doubt about who has more right to a greater share in the presumed limited amount of bread on this imaginary table. Yet, this conventional understanding of spiritual privileges, which governs the Matthean story world, is accentuated in the narrative only to be subverted. Its repudiation starts with a shrewd and slightly defiant observation of the woman: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She challenges the view that

³⁰ Wink, “Neither Passivity nor Violence,” 111.

Israel has the exclusive right to God's favor. She turns the analogy between the children's bread and Israel into an analogy between the master's table and God's gift,³¹ which enables her to find room for a hope that even she, an undeserved Gentile, might get a little something from the abundance of the privileged. Yet, despite the shrewdness and apparent effectiveness of her response, it still reveals a servile mentality that accepts the world as it is. The woman does not challenge the status quo, which privileges one group over the other, but only seeks to survive under these conditions.³²

Jesus' response, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire," does not simply acknowledge her point of view. Rather, it uses it as an occasion to expand the limits of God's grace beyond the nation of Israel. By fulfilling her request, Jesus allows her to share in the blessings originally reserved only for Israel. With this, he refutes her second-class status and gives her a dignity of a child, which proleptically points toward the great commission at the end of the gospel when the risen Jesus charges his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).³³

A further development of this theme can be found in Matthew's parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1-14). The Matthean text represents an allegorized version of an earlier version of the parable, preserved in Luke 14:16-24 and the Gospel of Thomas 64. The Matthean adaptation contains a number of incongruities on the story level, which seem to make sense only on the spiritual level. A king prepares a marriage feast for his son and sends the servants to call the invitees. In this context, they are the king's clients who owe him allegiance. They however, refuse to come, which is, as Warren Carter notes, "tantamount to rebellion."³⁴ Yet, the king does not give up and sends his servants again. This time, however, some of the invitees not only ignore the invitation, but also mistreat and kill the servants. The king, in turn, punishes them by

³¹ Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium* (WUNT 215; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 69-70, notes that this reformulation shifts the accent from a static understanding of salvation—as a possession—into a relational understanding of salvation—as a bestowed gift.

³² Even though the answer of the Canaanite woman anticipates the universal scope of Jesus' mission, which will be realized after his resurrection, her argument still endorses the status quo situation that presumes the fundamental difference between Israel and the nations in the salvation history; cf. Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker*, 68.

³³ The healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman is therefore an exceptional, *extra ordinem* event in Matthew's narrative; cf. Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker*, 70.

³⁴ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 434.

destroying these murderers and burning their city. At the end of this military endeavor, the king declares that the wedding meal is still ready and decides to invite anyone who is willing to come. And so they come, both good and bad. None of this corresponds to the conventions that governed social interactions in the ancient Mediterranean world.³⁵ It is therefore not surprising that Matt 22:1-10 has often been interpreted as an allegory of salvation history—an account of God’s election of Israel, Israel’s rejection of God’s gracious gift, and Israel’s replacement by the Gentiles.³⁶

Yet, a straightforward identification of the first group with Israel and the second group with the Gentiles is problematic. The broader context of Matthew’s Gospel does not confirm the presupposition that the mission to the Gentiles started after the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather with Jesus’ resurrection (Matt 28:16-20). Also, it is not certain that Matthew’s church had abandoned the mission to the Jews. Chapter 10, which is addressed to Matthew’s contemporaries, seems to suggest that such a mission was still on the agenda of the Matthean community. In view of these objections, it is more likely that the second group refers not to the Gentiles but to the church—a boundary-crossing community that is not defined through ethnic categories. This identification, however, should not obscure the fact that at the beginning of Matthew’s parable, this group of guests was not supposed to be invited at all. They do not belong to the circle of the king’s clients and dignitaries. The invitation of the king gives them a new status, which subverts the conventional notion of power and privileges. Like in Matt 15:21-28, the privileges envisioned here are religious privileges, but Matthew shows that they are not static, because in the kingdom of heaven, “the last will be first, and the first last” (Matt 20:16).

The conventional distribution of power is most poignantly questioned in the parable of the judgment of the nations (Matt 25:31-46). In this story, both the righteous and the unrighteous experience a big surprise. The former are praised because they gave food to Jesus when he was hungry, gave him drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, clothed him when he was naked, visited him when he was sick, and came to him when he was in prison. The

³⁵ Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, 196, raise a number of questions that Matthew’s version of the parable leaves unanswered: “Why is the king’s invitation so roundly refused? Why are his servants killed? Do all the rebellious rejecters live in one city? Why is an entire city burned to the ground for the misdeeds of a few?”

³⁶ Cf. Jochim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, ⁸1972), 69, 176; Jon Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles: Argus Communications, 1975), 117-118.

latter are condemned because they did not give food to Jesus when he was hungry, did not give him drink when he was thirsty, did not welcome him when he was a stranger, did not clothe him when he was naked, did not visit him when he was sick, and did not come to him when he was in prison. The most astonishing thing, however, is that the members of neither group realized that they were performing, or not performing, these acts. The Son of Man must explain to them how this could have happened without their explicit knowledge. His answer in each case is the same: when they did, or did not do, these things to “one of the least of these” who belong to his family, they did it, or did not do it, to Jesus himself.

The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this text is enormous.³⁷ All interpretations can be grouped, broadly speaking, into “restrictive” and “universalist.” The latter is, in my view, better supported by Matthew’s theological and literary context. One of the central aspects of this parable is our inability to perceive the true character of our acts. Yet, the reader is not left without the guidance as to what counts as the service to Jesus and what does not. Through a fourfold, almost tedious repetition, the implied author seeks to commit to memory that the service to Jesus is equal to the service to the people who occupy the lowest level in social hierarchy—the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. This list does not correspond to the list of afflictions experienced by Christian missionaries found in Matt 10:9-31, such as acceptance or rejection, persecution, flogging, legal indictments, betrayal, and hatred.³⁸ Rather, as Davis and Allison note, this is “a list of mundane deeds of mercy—what the rabbis called *gēmīlūt hāsādīm*.”³⁹ Yet, a delimitation of the scope of these acts to only the acts of mercy is not completely justified by the plot of the parable. After all, charity is expected in most human societies, but in Matt 25:31-46, everyone is quite surprised by the expectations of the Son of Man. If, however, the Matthean Jesus identifies the needy with all who are in distress and invites his followers to “ignore distinctions between insiders and outsiders,”⁴⁰ the surprise of all involved becomes plausible. It is indeed counterintuitive to cross the social boundaries and act contrary to the conventional distribution of power. Yet, Jesus alleges that those who will be declared righteous on the judgment day are those who disregard the prevailing understanding of

³⁷ Cf. Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers – Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretation* (SBL Diss. Series 114; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

³⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 4:8-13; 2 Cor 6:1-10; 11:27.

³⁹ Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, 425.

⁴⁰ Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, 429.

societal hierarchies by serving its neediest members. In the words of Davies and Allison, “Matthew offers that beyond the injustice and disorder of this world is the order and justice of another, which fact guarantees that the actions—even ordinary actions—of human beings matter and have consequences: people are truly responsible.”⁴¹

3. A New Understanding of the In-Group

According to many interpreters, Matthew’s gospel was written for a Christian community that was threatened by the Jewish synagogue⁴² and, as increasingly recognized in recent studies,⁴³ the imperial Rome. Within this historical framework, Matthew’s stress on the subversive nature of Jesus’ proclamation gives the marginalized community a new dignity and reminds the readers that the current power structures do not have the last word. In addition, the conflict with the synagogue and the imperial Rome serves as a catalyst for the identity formation of the Matthean church. This is achieved not only by denouncing the opponents,⁴⁴ but also by turning inward and demanding better righteousness from its own members. Indeed, the Matthean Jesus tells his disciples that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20). The righteousness that Jesus expects of his followers is not limited to the mere fulfillment of the requirements of the law but fulfills the will of God that stands behind these requirements. The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount show that Jesus’ demands claim the entire person, not just his/her outward behavior. His followers should not only satisfy moral obligations but also be internally transformed.

⁴¹ Ibid., 432.

⁴² Although Matthean scholars agree that Matthew’s community was in conflict with the Jewish synagogue, there is less agreement with regard to the degree of separation between these two rivaling communities. Cf. J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 6-34, 150-161; Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Jewish-Christian Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11-26; Davies and Allison, *A Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 1, 78-90; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36-51.

⁴³ Cf. Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001); John Riches and David C. Sim, eds., *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context* (JSNTSup 276; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁴⁴ Cf. Judy Yates Siker, “Unmasking the Enemy: Deconstructing the ‘Other’ in the Gospel of Matthew,” *PRS* 32 (2005): 109-123. Siker argues that Matthew constructs the identity of his Christian community by deconstructing the identity of his Jewish opponents. In her view, “identity carries with it the specter of non-identity. In many ways, identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion or deconstruction of the ‘other.’ What better place to find an articulation of such non-identity than in the polemic of an author?” (p. 123)

This inner transformation is vividly illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt 18:23-35. The latter functions as a response to Peter's question about how often should he forgive his brother who sins against him. The term "brother" indicates that the question presumes the relationships within the community of Jesus' followers. Jesus' parable consists of three scenes. In the first scene, a king forgives enormous debt to one of his servants who is unable to repay it. In the second scene, the servant who had just been released from his incredible debt encounters one of his fellow servants, who owes him a much smaller amount of money. The first servant, who now finds himself in the position of power in relationship to one of his peers, refuses to behave like the king from the first scene and forgive the debt. In the third scene, he is brought back to the king, who revokes his initial act of clemency and punishes the servant by delivering him to the jailers until he pays all his debt. With this parable, Jesus points to an analogy between divine and human forgiveness. "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" asks the king (18:33). Someone who has experienced divine forgiveness cannot remain unchanged. Divine mercy makes a claim on a person and expects an adequate transformation. If the transformation does not take place, divine mercy will be revoked. In terms of power distribution, this parable serves as a clear warning that those who experience upward movement in hierarchical structures should not insist on their own rights. Rather, they should be compassionate toward those who are below them and forego their own rights and privileges.

A related message can be found in the Matthean addition to the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:11-14). Matthew narrates how a king, who had just filled the wedding hall with the people from the streets, comes to take a look at his new guests and discovers a man without a wedding garment. He asks for an explanation and does not get any. Vividly agitated, he summons his servants and orders them not only to remove the man from the wedding hall but also punish him by casting him "into the outer darkness" (22:13). The entire scene lacks coherence on the story level. It is puzzling how a man, who had just been brought in directly from the street, could have been expected to wear a wedding garment. Yet, the story apparently presumes the inexplicable. It seems that all guests were properly dressed except this man, because the king was clearly surprised when he saw him. This guest has offended the king like the elite leaders who have rejected the invitation to come to the wedding feast.

This appendix to an earlier version of the parable plays an integral part in its present context. Following the suggestion of Andries G. van Aarde,⁴⁵ Matt 22:1-14 can be divided into two complete narrative lines. The first narrative line includes the commission of the servants to bring the invited guests to the wedding feast, their refusal, and their punishment by the king. The second narrative line includes the commission of the servants to bring whomever they find on the streets, the acceptance of these, initially uninvited, guests, and the punishment of the man who came to the wedding without a wedding garment. The parallel structure of both narrative lines points to an analogy between God's rejection of the Jews who did not accept Jesus—which has already happened—and God's future rejection of some members of the church who in like manner appear to be unworthy of the invitation to participate in the messianic banquet. Matt 22:11-14 thus offers an interpretation of the original parable of the great meal in a different setting. It contains a message for the church that has already established its self-understanding over against its Jewish opponents. This self-definition is now called into question. Matthew warns his readers that a positive response to God's call is not sufficient to guarantee eschatological salvation. Jesus' followers must be transformed by striving for righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of their Jewish counterparts. If this transformation does not take place, they will be rejected like the Jews who have not accepted God's gracious invitation in Jesus.

4. Conclusion

If Mark can be called “a master of surprise,”⁴⁶ Matthew can be even more. In the world governed by military and political power and divided across ethnic and religious lines, Matthew's Gospel offers a new vision of human relationships. On the one hand, it encourages the underprivileged to work for a change of conventional hierarchies that favor the privileged. It restores the lost dignity of the inferiors and calls them to actively participate in the creation of just relationships. It empowers the downtrodden by giving them hope that they can have equal share in the abundance of God's grace. And it appeals to those in power to become attentive to the needs of the distressed and serve them as if they were serving Jesus himself.

⁴⁵ Andries G. van Aarde, “Plot as Mediated through Point of View: Mt 22:1-14 – A Case Study,” in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during His Visit to South Africa in 1985*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 66-68.

⁴⁶ Cf. Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

At the same time, Matthew issues a warning that those who reverse their status and find themselves in the position of power should not replicate unjust relationships. They should not seize the opportunity and start behaving like their former superiors. Rather, they should be transformed by grace shown to them and strive for righteousness that exceeds the ethical standards of their opponents. If they fail to do this, they will be held accountable and eventually be condemned by God as unworthy.

Matthew's dynamic message of encouragement and accountability offers valuable resources to Christian communities that might be discouraged by the complexities of economic globalization. The churches who relinquish their responsibility to address injustices fail to live up to the higher standards of righteousness advocated by Matthew's gospel. Withdrawal and passivity are not the options, even in the direst circumstances. Delimiting the church's task to merely lessening the casualties of the system is not sufficient in the global world in which we live. The churches as communities and ordinary Christians as individuals should engage in seeking the alternative models of production and consumption that will be less exploitive of the poor and more respectful of the environment.

The concrete forms of these alternatives depend on the particular circumstances of individual Christian communities. In some cases, this could take place through the promotion of the decentralization of power and more participatory style of decision making. In other cases, this could take place through the rise of knowledge that shapes the moral sensibilities of market societies in order to promote the ideas of sharing and generosity. In democratic societies, Christians have various opportunities to participate in the formation of social policies and/or elect the political structures that support the economic order which aims at serving the general well-being instead of serving just a few at the top. Even if the churches as institutions have limited political power, individual Christians, as the participants in global economy, might find themselves at various levels in the hierarchical structures that influence the decision making. Economic order is not a separate entity, but an entity in which we all participate. To those who are at the bottom, Matthew's Gospel declares that they should not fall into passivity but censure economic policies that serve self-interest. To those who are at the top, Matthew's Gospel declares that they should not forget their responsibilities toward the underprivileged and their obligation to promote economic policies that implement the principles of fairness and care for the needy.