

Chapter 4.03 Illustrating Additional Topics about Jesus

This chapter continues to use selections from the gospels to illustrate particular topics about Jesus and Christianity. These points are not in the list of items in his message. The last sections illustrate the Kingdom of God and show that Jesus felt the Kingdom was coming soon.

Jesus and God.

By the early 100s, the Church had solidified the ideas that Jesus was God and he was roughly equal with God the Father. The Church had good reasons for aggressively holding this position. It wanted to stave off other mistaken ideas that led believers far astray. For its time, the Church likely did the best thing. Yet in going down the road of “Jesus is high God”, the Church went against some passages in the gospels and the Church contradicted Jesus himself. I do not argue with any church. I only show that alternative views of Jesus are reasonable. Our era no longer requires this dogma. To accept that Jesus is not God does not undermine the message of Jesus. To insist on his status as God while overlooking his message undermines both his message and his status as God.

Mark 10: 17 – 10:18. * As Jesus was about to begin a journey, a man ran up, kneeled, and asked, “Good master, what do I have to do to get eternal life?” Jesus retorted, “Why do you call me good? No person is [fully] good. Only God is [fully] good.” *

The parallels are Luke 18:18 – 18:20 and Matthew 19:16 – 19:18. Luke follows Mark fairly closely but Matthew alters Mark to avoid the implication that Jesus is not equal to God. Already by 70 CE, doctrine had developed to the point this topic was sensitive. Matthew writes: * Jesus said, “What about good? Why do you ask me about good? One [person] alone is good.” *

Mark 13:29 – 13:32. * “In the same way, when you see all these things happen, you will know that the change is near, at your doorstep. Listen: this generation will live to see it all. Heaven and earth might crumble but my words will endure. But about the exact day, nobody knows that, not even the high angels in heaven, not even the Son [Jesus] but only the Father.” *

The parallel is Matthew 24:34 – 24:36.

Mark felt he could get away with calling Jesus “Son” but not with making Jesus equal to the Father in all respects. Jesus likely insisted he was subordinate to the Father, and to make Jesus equal to the Father was too much against Jesus’ intentions even forty years after he died.

The Gospel of John is not a reliable source for what Jesus actually said but it is a good source for Church ideas about Jesus and God. Chapters eight and nine are especially rich. John wanted to elevate Jesus as high as he could without making Jesus fully equal to God the Father. John’s statements that subordinate Jesus to God the Father would now be heretical if taken at face value, so the churches now have other interpretations. John is not consistent. His struggle was great. The end result is often beautiful. Take him as you will.

John 5:19 – 5:30. * To this accusation Jesus replied, “The truest truth I can tell is this: the Son cannot do anything by himself alone. He does only what he sees the Father has done. The Father does first, and then the Son does it. The Father loves the Son and shows the Son all that the Father has done and does now. The Father will show greater in the future, so as to fill you with awe. As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so [as the acting agent of the Father who has taken over for the Father here], the Son gives life to men as he [the Son] decides. The Father no longer judges anybody but has given full authority to the Son to judge. It is the will of the Father that everybody now should honor the Son as they already honor the Father. To deny honor to the Son is to deny honor to the Father who sent the Son. In deepest truth, anybody who listens to what I say and trusts the Father who sent me already has his hands on eternal life. He will not come up for further judgment. He has already overcome death to gain life. In truest truth, I say that a time is coming, in fact is already here, when the dead will hear the voice of God’s Son and will come back to life. As the Father was the source of all life, so now the Son is the source of all life. He has this from the Father as a gift. As the Son of Man, the Son also has the right to judge souls. Do not boggle at this because the time is coming when the dead in their graves will hear his [the Son’s] voice and arise. The dead who have done right will rise to life while the dead who have done wrong will hear their doom in their ears. I cannot act by myself. I judge as God the Father bids me. My pronouncement is just because my goal is not from my own will but only acts out the will of God who sent me.” *

This passage also shows that early Church followers believed in a general resurrection not only of Jews and of the just but of everybody.

John 8:19. * They asked, “Where is your father?” Jesus retorted, “You do not know me and you do not know my real Father either. If you really knew me you would know who my real Father was too.” *

John 8:28 – 8:29. * Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up [crucified] the Son of Man, then you will know I am what I am. I do nothing on my own. God the Father taught me everything that I say. He who sent me is here with me now, and has never left me by myself...” *

“I am what I am” refers to one meaning of “Yahweh”, that is “I am that I am”, or, in Greek philosophical terms, “I am the ground of being”. It is John’s way of identifying Jesus with God for learned people.

John 8:58. * A disputant asked, “How can you personally have seen Abraham [he died long before you were born].” Jesus replied, “In full truth I tell you, before Abraham was born, already I was [and still am].” *

John 9:37 – 9:38. * If I do not act as God my Father would act, then you [should] not believe me. Even if you do not believe my words, then accept the evidence of what I do, so you can see the Father acting through me, know that he is in me, and I am in him.” * John 12:44 – 12:50. * So Jesus explained loudly [like a man urging a child in danger from him-herself], “When you believe me, you believe in God who sent me rather than in me. When you see me, you see God who sent me. I have come into this world as a light so that anybody who has faith in me [heeds me] does not have to live in darkness. But if anybody ignores me, I personally do not have to judge him. I have not come to judge the world but to save the world. The message in my words sets up a standard that judges automatically at the end of days. I do

not speak out of my own authority but God the Father who sent me gave me the words to speak. I know that in his words is eternal life. What God the Father said to me, that is what I say to you.” *

John 14:6 – 14:12. * Jesus replied, “I am the way, I am the truth, and I am life. No person comes to the Father except through me. If you knew me, you would know my Father as well. In fact, from now on, you do know him because you have seen him.” Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father and we won’t ask you for anything more again.” Jesus said, “Philip, have I been among you all this time and you still don’t know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Then how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? I am not on-my-own the source of what I say to you. The Father who lives in me does his own work in having me speak. Believe me when I say that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. If you do not believe my words, then believe my actions. In deepest truth, I tell you, whoever has faith in me will do as I have done. He will do even more than I have done because soon I will return to the Father [die in this world]. In fact, whatever you ask for in my name I will do for you, so that the Father will be honored through the Son. If you ask anything [sincerely] in my name, I will do it [for you].” *

Jesus and Non-Israelites.

“Israelites” usually meant Judeans although sometimes it included Samaritans and Galileans. See the previous chapter with the passage on the woman from Syria-and-Phoenicia where Jesus calls non-Jews “dogs”. See “Kingdom of God” below.

Matthew 7:6. * Don’t feed dogs what is holy. Do not spread your pearls [on the ground] for the pigs [to admire]. The pigs will only trample on your pearls, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” *

Modern people sometimes do not know what to make of this passage because we are not sure what the pearls are and who the dogs and pigs represent. To Jesus and to other Israelites, pearls were words of the Law while dogs and pigs were non-Israelites. Jesus was saying, “Don’t extend God’s grace to non-Israelites because they are too base to appreciate it. They will only ruin God’s grace and then hurt you.” Jesus meant the Kingdom of God first for Israelites. Non-Israelites were to have only a subordinate role. I disagree with Jesus. Jesus seems not to have understood the Book of Jonah with God extending his grace to the Assyrians. I am glad the Church kept this passage in Matthew, and that the Church forgot the restriction to Jews and the prejudice against non-Jews. I am glad the Church interpreted this passage to mean that God’s wisdom should not be given to fools of any ethnic group and I am glad the Church extended the invitation to all people. I hope Jesus would agree with the change. But we have to see what the passage meant originally and we have to accept that we might disagree with Jesus. Unfortunately, some early Christians interpreted pigs and dogs to mean Jews because Jews rejected Jesus. That is just as bad. I am sorry prejudice against non-Jews by Jews changed into a prejudice against Jews by Christians.

Matthew 10:5 – 10:8. * Jesus sent out the twelve [apostles] with these instructions: “Do not take the road into gentile [non-Jewish] lands, and do not go into any Samaritan town. Go only to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, say clearly, ‘The Kingdom of God is already here for you.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure lepers, and cast out demons. You received [a great treasure] without having to pay for it so you have to give without charging anybody.” *

Jesus, Satan, and Demons.

Jesus believed in Satan and demons. He believed that Satan was responsible for much of the evil in the world. He believed that demons are able to possess a person, even against the person's will. I do not know if Jesus believed in the "heavenly rebellion" version of Satan and demons as in "Paradise Lost" by Milton. I believe none of this about Satan and demons, so I disagree with Jesus. People cause most of the evil in the world. Most cases of possession can be explained psychologically or socially. Jesus probably did go alone to the wilderness and did think he struggled with Satan and evil; but the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan before his mission is entirely made up by gospel writers so I do not cite it or comment on it here.

Mark 1:32 – 1:34. * Just after sunset, they brought to Jesus all the people who were sick or possessed by devils. It seemed as if the whole town was gathered at the door. He healed many people who suffered from a variety of diseases, and he drove out many devils. He would not let the devils speak at all because they knew who he was [and he was not ready yet for other people to know]. *

Mark 3:13 – 3:16. * Jesus went into the hilly country where he called the men that he wanted. Those men he called joined him. [Of the men he called], he named twelve as his particular companions. He sent them out to proclaim his message and to drive out devils. *

Mark 5:1 –5:20. * They crossed the lake into Gerasa. As Jesus stepped ashore, a man rushed at him from the tombs where the man had been living. A dirty spirit possessed the man. Nobody could control him anymore. Often he had been beaten and chained but he shook off the beatings and broke the chains. Nobody was strong enough to defeat him. Day and night without break, the man would wail among the tombs and in the hills and would cut himself with sharp rocks.

When the man saw Jesus, even at a distance, he ran and fell before Jesus. Jesus [immediately saw that a demon possessed the man], and began to say "Out dirty spirit, get out of this man". The demon, through the man, screamed "What are you going to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Highest God? In God's name, please do not torture me." Jesus asked, "What is your name?" The demon said, "My name is Legion because there are many of us". In fact, there was not one spirit but many. The demons begged that Jesus would not send them out of Gerasa.

There just happened to be a herd of about two thousand pigs eating on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Please send us to the pigs and let us go into them". Jesus gave permission. The dirty spirits went out of the man and went into the pigs. The entire herd rushed over the edge of the cliff, fell into the lake, and drowned.

The swine herds took off running. They told the people of the town and the surrounding countryside. All the people came to the site to see what had happened. They saw Jesus and saw the former lunatic of many devils sitting calmly, clothed, and sane. The people who had actually seen the events related the story. The local people were afraid. They asked Jesus to leave Gerasa.

As Jesus was leaving, the man who had been possessed begged to go with Jesus. Jesus refused and

said to him, "Go home to your own people and tell them what God in his mercy did for you". The man went off and told the people of the Ten Towns all that Jesus had done for him. The people were amazed.
*

The gospels writers have the demons know that Jesus is the divine Son of God even though Jesus' disciples do not. This motif is part of a larger theme of only gradually revealing the secret identity of Jesus. It comes from the Church rather than Jesus. I return to it in later chapters.

This episode looks down on Romans, and likely on non-Jews in general. There was no personal name "Legion". The term referred to a particular grouping of Roman soldiers and so meant "Romans" in general. Jews did not raise pigs. Jews looked down on pigs. Pigs were a symbol of foreigners. To send the demons into the pigs only confirmed the identity of all foreigners as "dirty foreign devils". That the pigs rushed into the sea to die is the death that Jews wished for the Roman army in particular and sometimes to all foreigners. Jesus probably did not intend such racial overtones, or at least did not intend them so harshly, so likely Mark took a real incident and added on to it to suit his own desires.

Luke 10:17 – 10:19. * The seventy-two came back overjoyed. They declared [to Jesus] how, "In your name, Master, even the devils submit to us". Jesus said, "I watched as Satan fell, like lightning, out of the sky. Now you know that I have given you the power to crush snakes, scorpions, and all agents of the enemy, and know that nothing will ever harm you". *

Jesus sent either twelve or seventy-two disciples on a mission to bring in the Kingdom of God immediately, which included defeating Satan and his agents. "Seventy-two" is half of twelve times twelve, and it can mean "a sufficiently large group". Both twelve and seventy-two refer to the idealized twelve tribes of Israel. To see Satan fall out of the sky means that Jesus saw the end of Satan's reign over this world. Luke declares that Jesus' mission had succeeded in one of its main goals, to conquer evil.

Wealth.

Evil has not been conquered as long as social injustice remains. Jesus did not like the rich and powerful. Jesus did like the poor. He seems to have thought the poor were morally better than the rich. His attitude does not make full sense because Jesus got support from some rich people and he "hung out" with rich sinners such as tax men. You have to decide if Jesus was hypocritical. The early Church sought support from the rich so it could not afford to condemn the rich and it modified Jesus' condemnation of the rich. Standard Christians today usually seek prosperity and they consider prosperity a sign of God's favor, so they are in the same bind. I do not see how they can rationalize away Jesus' dislike of the rich. If they disagree with Jesus, they need to say so.

The vast majority of people cannot be happy if they are not reasonably secure and have a reasonable amount of wealth on which to raise a small family. The normal pursuit of wealth within limits is a good thing. Even supervised capitalism is a good thing because it allows for many people to have moderate amounts of wealth. I do not know how to fit in these facts with Jesus' teachings. Rationalizations of all capitalism as in line with the New Testament are wrong. Maybe we should not take wealth an idol and we should share when we have enough.

Luke 6:20. * “You poor people are already blessed because the Kingdom of God is yours now”. *

In the King James (Authorized) Version, the text is clearer: “Blessed are the poor”.

Keep the above text from Luke in mind for comparison with Matthew 5:3.

Luke 6:21. * “You hungry people are already blessed because your hunger will be filled and you will be satisfied”. *

Luke 6:24 6:26. * “Too bad for you rich. You had your period of happiness. Too bad for you with full bellies. You will go hungry. Too bad for you who laugh smugly now. You will cry-and-cry and feel sorry for yourselves”.

Mark 10:17 – 10:31. * As Jesus was about to begin a journey, a man ran up, kneeled, and asked, “Good master, what do I have to do to get eternal life?” Jesus retorted, “Why do you call me good? No person is [fully] good. Only God is [fully] good. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not have wrongful sex, do not steal, do not lie, do not cheat or steal, and honor your father and mother.’” The man replied, “But master, I have kept all these rules since I was a child.” Jesus looked directly at him for a while. Jesus’ heart understood the quest in this man. So Jesus said, “You only have one more step to take. Go, sell all you own, give the money to the poor, and thus you will have riches in heaven, and you can follow me.” When he heard Jesus’ words, the man’s face fell to the ground and he stumbled away with a heavy heart because he was rich.

Jesus looked at his disciples and said, “It is really hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.” The disciples were disturbed that Jesus would say this but Jesus pushed further, “My young followers, it really is hard {for people who trust in wealth} to enter the Kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” The disciples were fully discouraged, and grumbled among themselves, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For men it is impossible but not for God because for God everything is possible.” *

The man runs up to Jesus to ask about a spiritual journey just as Jesus is starting on a leg of his own journey. Mark added the last comment about everything being possible with God. Jesus did not say it. It is a way to keep rich people in the Church. The passage in curly brackets is omitted by some texts. In my paraphrase, the sentence does not follow unless the omitted passage is included, so I included it.

Mark 12:38 – 12:44. * A big eager crowd surrounded Jesus. He taught them, “Watch out for lawyers, [doctors, and professors]. They love to walk around in long robes, get respectful nods from people on the street, have the front seats in synagogues [churches and temples], and have the place of honor at banquets. They gobble up the little house of a widow while they say long prayers to look good [they live on public salaries while they give speeches about development and about how other people have to work hard]. God will give them the harshest sentence.”

Once Jesus was standing next to the temple treasury box watching as people dropped their donations [and temple taxes] into the box. Rich people gave obviously large amounts. Eventually a poor widow

slipped in two tiny coins which together would not buy a soda. Jesus gathered the disciples right then and there to say, "Listen up. This poor widow gave more than anybody. The other people gave out of what was left over when they felt they had enough. But she hasn't even enough to live on and she gave all that anyhow." *

This story choked me up as a boy, and still gets me now. It is a powerful statement of the importance of intent and commitment. Jesus did not originate this story. It was told all over the ancient world by various religions. In the version I heard, the village church had a giant bell that could not be rung by human hands. When a donation large enough was given, an angel would ring the bell. Rich people and great kings came from afar to try to ring the bell but with no success. Then one day, without thinking of ringing the bell, a widow dropped in the little penny she had been trying for years to save, and the bell rang for days. I have heard that bell ring but not from anything I ever gave. In the movie "The Magnificent Seven", peasants that want to save their village from bandits give the leader of some hired guns as much money and jewelry as the whole village could scrape together. The leader of the hired guns is moved. He says he has been paid a lot before by rich men but has never before been paid everything.

Luke 12:33 – 12:34. * "Don't be afraid, my little band of followers. Your Father [God] decided to give you the Kingdom [and to use you as the instruments of setting up the Kingdom]. Sell what you own and give to charity. By doing that, you will buy wallets that never go empty. You will have never-ending bank accounts, where no identity thief ever gains access and no inflation ever devalues. Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart." *

Luke 12:15 – 12:21. * Then he told the crowd, "Look out! Fight greed of every kind. Even when a man is rich enough, his wealth does not give him life." Then Jesus told this parable: "Once a man started a chain of low-cost retail stores that did really well. As his business grew, he thought, 'Demand for these goods is heavy. My current facilities are not enough. I have to build larger warehouses. I can use them as receiving facilities for cheap goods from overseas, cut my holding time, and make more profit. Then I can say to myself, Hey good man! You have plenty of goods stored up for many years' business. You can live well on what is in your own warehouses. Take life easy: eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said to the man, 'You fool. You die tonight. You made the money. So who will get it now?' That is how it goes for the fool who amasses wealth alone but remains poor in God's sight." *

Divorce.

This section fits in with discussions of "Family Values" below. Jesus seems to clearly deny any possibility of divorce. I do not think he did so, but, if he did, I disagree with him. In Jesus' day, in practice, only men could initiate divorce. Men used the threat of divorce to control their wives and children. Men often divorced and abandoned a wife when she became middle aged. So divorce was a legal weapon for men. Men had to give their wives a formal note of divorce. The note supposedly helped women because it allowed them to have sex or remarry without being accused of sexual sin (adultery) – a very serious crime. In fact, the note was only another part of male weaponry. Waiving a note of divorce in front of your wife could be a kind of cruel joke. Apparently women did not want equal rights for divorce as much as they wanted to stop men from using divorce as a weapon. To stop that, women wanted to end the easy legal basis for divorce. But divorce did have a basis in the traditional Mosaic Law; and sometimes women needed to divorce a bad husband.

Mark 10:2 – 10:12. * To get him, some disputants asked: “Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife?” Jesus asked, “What did Moses [the Law] command?” They replied, “Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife if he gave her a written formal note to that effect.” Jesus educated them: “Moses set up this rule for you because your souls were narrow and closed then. Instead, look at it this way. In the beginning, God made all big creatures male and female. Because male-female gender is basic to us, [at the right time,] a man leaves his parents to seek a wife and to become one with her [and a woman does the same with a man]. The two separate bodies become one person. Do not use temporary legal convention to rip apart what God fuses together.” When Jesus and the disciples were apart, the disciples asked Jesus about divorce. Jesus said, “Any man who divorces his wife and then marries another woman commits sexual sin against both women. Any woman who does the same to her husband commits the same sin. [Or, any woman who is divorced by her husband and then marries another man commits sexual sin against both men.]” *

Luke 5:18. * “Any man who divorces his wife and then marries another woman commits sexual sin. Any man who marries a divorced woman commits sexual sin.” *

Matthew 5:31 – 5:32. * Jesus spoke, “[In the past], [the Law] told people, ‘A man who divorces his wife has to give her the correct legal note.’ But I say instead, if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than adultery, then [if she has sex with another man even if she marries the other man] the original husband has forced his wife into sexual sin. Any man who marries a divorced woman commits sexual sin.” *

See also Matthew 19:3 – 19:12. Matthew 19:11 – 19:12. * The disciples said to Jesus, “Well, if that is what it means to get married, then it is better never to get married.” To this, Jesus replied, “Not everybody can accept this strictness of relationship but only the people that God wants to get married. Some people are incapable of marriage because of their natural temperaments. Some men cannot get married because they were castrated. Some people renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Let only people accept marriage who can really deal with all it means.” *

Jesus is clear in Mark and Luke. Matthew has Jesus allow an “out”: if a woman has sex with a man other than her husband, the man may divorce the woman. He does not say that a woman may divorce her husband if he has sex with another woman. Matthew likely allowed an out because of pressure from Church members living in the real world. Previously the early Church, including Paul, had provided this out.

We can say that Jesus’ ideals of marriage and divorce actually protect women - like Mohammad allowing a man to have only four wives instead of twenty. Jesus’ rule rights the balance by making men live by the same impossible standards as women. This is true, but it is also an evasion. It allows marriage only for some small minority of ideal humans.

Jesus romanticized marriage. His attitude might be typical of someone thirty years old and still celibate (see “The 40 Year Old Virgin”). It is a good ideal, but it is not realistic and it is not for everybody. We need rules that treat men and women equally but that do not trap them in unrealistic ideals and stereotypes. Modern ideas about divorce and marriage are working their way toward that difficult goal.

The alternative to forbidding divorce is not inevitable promiscuous sex. It is responsible behavior based on real human nature.

When Jesus' style tended toward absolutes, it was usually to open minds and correct an error. I think Jesus did not really demand "no divorce ever" but said that to wake up people and to correct an imbalance in which men dominated. I am not sure what Jesus would have said if he had lived and had to face real couples with problems. I cannot make a case from gospel materials, so you have to decide.

Family Values.

Before citing passages, I explain why this issue annoys me. "Family values" is not really about families but about political power. People that promote stereotyped "family values" really promote an idealized version of the family into an idol. They worship the idol rather than worship God. They use worship of the idol to avoid correctly worshipping God and following Jesus' message. They use worship of the idol as a way to get the state on their side and to attack their enemies, including the poor. It is their Golden Calf. The liberal other side does the same in its way when it promotes the poor and non-Europeans just to gain allies, and when it promotes non-stereotypical families without knowing why those families might be adaptive in their situations or why those families might be bad. All this is blasphemous and hurtful. We need realism and kindness. We need standards of good family behavior regardless of the composition of your family, such as do not have children as a teen, do not have too many children, and personally take good care of all the children that you do have.

We need to believe in higher values than the family sometimes. Thinking of Jesus and Christianity as primarily about family values, and thinking of Jesus as god of the hearth (family), blocks the need for higher values and greater achievements. Even if we have to risk sometimes making mistakes about the family, to worship it inevitably limits us in the way that all idolatry limits us.

Jesus was single and very likely celibate. He was not a family man. He seemed to like children and family life but that does not mean he considered them the only way to be human or the best way to be human. Jesus was waiting for the Kingdom of God. While waiting, apparently he thought celibacy was the best way to live, and many of his followers thought so too. Many early Christians were celibate. Early Christians had to be talked into having families. Jesus did not think people would have the same kind of sex life and families after the Kingdom as they did before. Jesus likely thought people would have real physical bodies of some kind but not as they were then. The new bodies would be transformed and more ethereal. It is not clear if the new bodies would have sex, have children, and live in families. It is not clear what Jesus would have advised people about family life if he knew the Kingdom was to be delayed for a long time. It is even less clear what Jesus would have advised people if he knew that the Kingdom as he wished it might never come. Almost certainly, he would not have raised the family to an object of worship. Definitely, he would not have raised the family to an object of worship to use as a political tool.

Luke 14:25 – 14:26. * Once he told a great crowd: "If anybody wants to follow me but does not hate his father, mother, children, brothers, sisters, and even his own life, he cannot follow me." *

Matthew 10:37 – 10:39. * "Nobody deserves me if he cares more about his father or mother than about me. Nobody deserves me if he cares more about son or daughter. Nobody deserves me if he does not

take up his own cross [overcome his greatest desires and greatest fears] and walk in my footsteps. By keeping his life, a man loses it. By losing his life for me, a man will gain it.” *

Again, Luke is probably closer to the original while Matthew softened the words to make them more acceptable. The reference to “take up his cross” would have been nonsense in Jesus’ time. It only makes sense as a comment Matthew added later to give power to his version.

Mark 3:31 – 3:35. * [Once while Jesus was in a big house], his mother and brothers arrived but could not get in because of the big crowd around the house, so they sent a message to Jesus inside through the crowd. A man said to Jesus, “Your mother and brothers are outside asking for you.” Jesus retorted, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Glancing at the people around him, he continued, “Here are my mother and brothers. Whoever does as God asks is my brother, sister, and mother.” *

The parallel passages are Matthew 12:46 – 12:50 and Luke 8:19 – 8:21.

Luke 12:51 – 12:53. * “Do you suppose that my mission on earth will bring only peace here? Not at all. My coming will bring division. From now on, a family of five will be divided three against two or two against three, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, and mother against son’s wife and son’s wife against her husband’s mother.” *

Matthew 10:34 – 10:36. * “Do not think that my mission here will bring only peace. My mission brings not only peace but also the sword. My coming will set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a son’s wife against her husband’s mother, and a man will find bitter enemies even in his living room.” *

Kingdom of God 1.

Jesus understood the “Kingdom of God” as below. Most of the ideas are taken from Isaiah. Most Jews at the time shared about half the ideas, up to the point indicated.

-Israel would be free of political control by any other state or nationality. Israel would not necessarily dominated other nations but no other nation could dominate Israel, and God would aid Israel in case of conflict.

-God would run Israel. Likely God would run Israel through the Temple priests with the cooperation of the aristocrats.

-Other nations would look up to Israel for moral, religious, and political guidance. Other nations would acknowledge God as the one god, and acknowledge the special relation of God with Israel. Other nations would not feel lessened by being under the dominion of God and the leadership of Israel but would be glad.

-War would end, at least as concerns Israel but probably everywhere.

-Social injustice would end. Some wealth and power differences would continue but no person would be injured by them. Everyone would have a chance. Nobody would fall into hardship through the

conniving of another.

-Most disease and poverty would end.

-The Devil would be defeated. The main sign of the defeat would be the end of social injustice. If social injustice persists, the Devil is not yet defeated.

Not all Jews would have agreed with the following points.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected a resurrection of prominent Jews or the past such as Moses, David, and Elijah, and/or a general resurrection of all Jews, or no resurrection. He did not make a point of it.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected himself to be resurrected in case he should die before the Kingdom came fully, but probably he did.

-People would not die any more.

-People would be transformed to be more spiritual than they are now but not to lose their physical bodies entirely.

-It is not clear if he expected people to continue to feel sexual desire, get married, and have children. I think not.

-People, especially Jews, would change their thinking and behavior to accord with the new way of life of the Kingdom. They would change in accord with Jesus' message. This is the most important point about the Kingdom.

-Jesus expected to be the major instrument by which God would start the Kingdom, and he expected to play a major role. He did not expect to be King but he probably expected to be the major prophet speaking to the Temple priests.

-Anybody who followed Jesus and acted as if the Kingdom were here would already be in the Kingdom and would be like Jesus as an instrument that brought in the Kingdom. Followers would change their behavior to be like they were already in the Kingdom. It is not clear if their bodies would change before the full coming of the Kingdom. Followers both already lived in the Kingdom and brought it in for other people. This is the second most important point.

-All Jews would participate simply by being Jews. It is not possible that any Jew would see the changes and not wish to participate fully as a good Jew.

-The Kingdom was primarily for Jews. All of Jesus' original followers were Jews. Non-Jews could participate as much as they accepted God and the leadership of Israel. They did not have to convert to Judaism, but, if they did not, some benefits were not available, such as close communication with God through Temple priests. I am not sure what all benefits were available or not available to non-Jews. Non-Jews could fully belong by converting to Judaism.

-If any non-Jew did not fully accept the changes, he-she would be excluded. It is not clear what exclusion meant but probably it meant social ostracism, isolation from God as had happened to King David, and then death without possibility of resurrection.

-There was no Hell in the Christian sense.

Jesus was wrong about some of these points, for which see below. The Church changed many of these points, for which see the next three chapters.

Kingdom of God 2.

For Matthew, "Kingdom of Heaven" is the same as "Kingdom of God" because "heaven" is a euphemism for "God". See the end of this chapter for a few more words on the Kingdom of God.

Jesus saw the Kingdom of God two ways. First, the Kingdom was the restoration and rise of Israel. The various groups of Hebrews (Israelites) reunite. Israel becomes free. At least some Hebrews are resurrected. All people recognize Yahweh as the one true God, turn to Israel for guidance, live according to the Law as interpreted by Jesus, live according to the Golden Rule, and love their neighbors. All people are neighbors. Second, the Kingdom exists already in people's hearts, ideals, and current behavior. When people see the ideal and began to act on it, already they are in the Kingdom of God even if the rest of the world is a mess.

To me, the Kingdom also happens in two ways. First, internally, when people understand that the world could be a better place and people actively work to make it better, they are already in the Kingdom. People act according to the message of Jesus. The real world does not have to become a perfect world to reach the Kingdom of God. Whenever a person understands the idea and begins to work toward the idea then that person already has entered the Kingdom of God. Second, externally, as the real world approaches the ideal, it becomes the Kingdom of God. For Jesus' ideal in which Israel leads the world, I substitute the ideals of a better world and good nations. In our times, I think of good nations as pluralistic democracies. When pluralistic democracies work as they should, with decent people, real freedom, and reasonable prosperity, they are as close to the Kingdom of God as we get on this earth. When most people live according to the message of Jesus, then we are in the Kingdom of God whether or not Israel has been restored and even if a lot of dead people are still not resurrected.

I do not believe in any second coming or massive change in the world as in standard Christianity. I disagree with Jesus. Any change in the world will be through science, politics, prosperity, and change in the environment. I hope that change is for the good but it need not be.

People probably will never achieve the ideal as it exists in human minds, and likely should not. The ideal is different in God's mind. If we approach human ideals we also hope that we approach God's ideals at the same time.

Jesus often talked of the Kingdom of God in terms of being invited to a feast. This might be a third way of thinking about the Kingdom. This way of understanding the Kingdom of God has some problems. It is

best to defer talking about it until Part Six of the book. In the meantime, this way of thinking about the Kingdom of God can be taken as a variation on the other two ways.

To begin, a passage on the external Kingdom:

Mark 13:28 – 13:32. * “Learn from the fig tree. When its soft new shoots are breaking into leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all that I have talked about happening, know that the change is near, even at the door. Listen to me. The present generation will live to see everything. Heaven and earth will crumble but my words will never fade.”

“But about the exact hour, nobody knows for sure, not even the high angels in heaven, not even the Son [me], but only the Father.” *

Parallels are Matthew 24:34 – 24:36 and Luke 21:32 – 21:33.

Now we see the internal side:

Luke 17:20 – 17:21. * The Pharisees asked Jesus, “When will the Kingdom of God arrive?” Jesus said, “You cannot tell by looking at external things when the Kingdom of God has come. You cannot say, ‘Oh, look at that! It is here now!’ In fact, the Kingdom of God is already here among you [in your hearts and relations].” * Luke contrived the setting of the Pharisees but the gist about the Kingdom is still true. The two passages contradict each other if they refer to the Kingdom of God in the same way. Only if we see the Kingdom as both inside and outside are they compatible.

You can get a sense of the interior view from the movie “Casablanca”. A friend of mine once was annoyed after seeing the movie because people gave Rick (Bogart) so much credit for “seeing the light” and going off to fight oppression while people overlooked the French freedom fighter who had been doing that already for years. My friend missed the point. Once a person gets the idea then he-she is fine. We do not think a lot about people that already understand. We rejoice when a new person gets the idea. Getting the idea and starting to work is as much the Kingdom as any end point. This conclusion is implied in the stress on intent and in the (contrived but useful) contrast between the rigid, external Jewish Law (system) versus Christian intuition.

Luke 15:1 – 15:10. * Once tax-men and other criminals were pushing in to hear Jesus when the lawyers and Pharisees saw the criminals and so started slandering him. They said, “This guy welcomes sinners and actually eats with them.”

Jesus answered them with a parable. “If a person owns a hundred sheep and loses one of them, he will leave the ninety-nine behind in the [safe] open pasture while he searches for the one lost sheep until he finds it. When he does find it, he is happy. He puts it on his shoulders, and goes around to all his friends and neighbors, showing it off, saying, ‘I found my lost sheep’. [On my authority], I tell you there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

Likewise, if a woman has ten golden earrings [as the basis for her personal wealth and independence] but

loses one of them, she will turn on the light, carefully sweep the rug and under the furniture, and look in every nook and cranny until she finds it. When she finds it, she will call up her friends and neighbors to say, 'Come have some wine with me. I found my lost earring.' [On my authority], I tell you God and the angels feel such joy over one sinner who repents." *

The parable of the Prodigal Son follows in Luke immediately.

See the "Widow's Gift" above. When the widow throws in her two coins, she is already in the Kingdom of Heaven, and so are any people who understand her and are moved to do likewise, even if they not as well. When a few people act correctly, they can stimulate a change in their society. This is the chief way in which the Kingdom grows.

Mark 4:30 – Mark 4:32. * "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? It is like the tiny mustard seed. [In the beginning] when it is first planted, it is the smallest of all seeds. But after it sprouts, it shoots up and grows taller than any other garden bush. It has branches so big that even the birds can settle happily in its shade." * Luke 13:18 – 13:19 repeats the parable of the mustard seed, then goes on with Luke 13:20 –

13:21. * "What can I compare the Kingdom of God to? It is like the spoonful of yeast that a woman mixed into the half-a-hundred weight of flour until all the flour was leavened [rose]." *

Half-a-hundred weight is a lot of flour. Yet a little yeast takes care of it all. In modern terms, this is the idea of a "cell" of dedicated people, focus groups, consciousness-raising, radicalizing, networking, good PR, and "staying on message".

Notice that Jesus tells two versions, one for men and one for women, each story based on what would be clear simple personal experience. Neither version is any better than the other and neither showed either gender in a better light. This duplication was not to keep men and women in their own separate worlds but to bring both men and women into his one world on an equal basis. In his time, this equality and inclusion of women was not unheard-of but was rare. The previous chapter used the parable of the wedding banquet to describe inclusiveness but it can be repeated here to describe the Kingdom of Heaven.

Luke 14:12 – 14:24. * Once at a dinner party, Jesus said to his host [so that everybody could hear], "When you give a party, do not invite [only] friends, family, rich neighbors, [your boss, or influential people]. They will return your invitation, and then you will be fully repaid. When you give a party, ask people who are poor, crippled, lame, blind, [or losers]. In that way, you will become happy. They cannot repay you [so you cannot look for any reward in the normal terms of this world]. You will be repaid when good men arise on resurrection day [by God]."

One of the guests heard this and said to Jesus, "The guests who sit at the feast in the Kingdom of God will be truly happy". Jesus continued with another story. "A man was giving a big dinner party and sent out many invitations. To remind the invitees, at dinner time he sent a servant to their homes to say, 'Please come, everything is ready'. The invitees all excused themselves. One said, 'I just bought some land, and I have to go inspect it, so I'm sorry'. Another said, 'I bought five yoke of oxen [a brand new hybrid car], and I really want to try them out, so I'm sorry'. The next said, 'I just got married. You can see

I have something more important. I'm sorry.' When the servant returned, he reported all the excuses. The master got angry. He told the servant, 'Go out right now into the dirty alleys of our town to bring the poor, crippled, lame, blind, [and losers].' The servant went and returned quickly. 'Sir, I have called all as you ordered, and still we have more room at the table'. The master added, 'Then go out to the highways and the county roads. [When you meet a traveler, farmer, or person of foreign land,] make them come in because I need my house to be full. Alas. None of the people I originally had invited will taste my banquet.'" *

The previous chapter used the parable of the unmerciful servant but it also can be used here to describe the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 18:23 – 18:25. * "Think of the Kingdom of God this way: Once a king decided to settle with his servants. The first man the king saw had run up debts of billions. He could not repay, so the master ordered him sold along with his wife, children, and all that he had. The men fell on his face begging: 'Be patient with me and I will pay the debt.' Pity moved the master to release the man and forgive the debt. No sooner was the man out the door than he ran into a fellow civil servant who owed him only a few dollars. The first man grabbed the second man by the throat and said, 'Pay all you can right now'. The second man fell at the first man's feet begging for mercy saying, 'Be patient with me and I will pay the debt'. But the first man refused and had the second man jailed until the second man [his family] could pay the debt. The other civil servants were shocked when they saw, [and feared for themselves too], so they told the master the story. The master sent for the first man. The master said, 'You scoundrel! I forgave your whole debt when you begged me. You were honor bound to show your fellows the same pity that I showed you.' The master condemned the man to torture until the man could pay the whole debt. That is how God my father will treat you unless you forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." *

The story of the Kingdom below is my favorite because it reinforces lessons from the movie "Casablanca" and from optimistic American culture.

Matthew 20:1 – 20:16. * "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this. A landowner went out early in the morning to hire labor for his vineyard. After agreeing on the standard daily wage, he sent the men off to work. About nine in the morning, he saw some more un-hired workers, so he said, 'Go out in my trucks to work with the others in my vineyard and I will pay you a fair wage'. That was their best deal, so they went. At noon, he did the same thing, and then again at three in the afternoon. One hour before quitting time at sunset, he found another group of men who had not worked all day. He asked them why they were still standing around at the end of the day, and they said because nobody [was interested in them and] would hire them. So he did the same for them that he had done with workers earlier. [They were happy to go to get in wages whatever they could, even for an hour's work.] At dusk, at quitting time, the landowner had his foreman call in everybody to get paid, starting with the last and ending with the first. The landowner paid everybody the same no matter how long they had worked. The ones hired in the early morning expected a bonus but didn't get it. They were not happy, saying 'Hey! You pay the Johnny-come-lately workers as much as you paid us, and we have been sweating out here in the hot sun all day long! [How about a bonus to recognize our hard work and to show how much you value us?]' The owner turned to the leaders and said, 'My old friends, I am not unfair. We had a bargain didn't we? And I lived up to it, didn't I? If I choose to pay the others the same as you, that does not mean I pay you any less. I can do

with my money what I want. You should not get angry because I am big-hearted.' In the same way, in the Kingdom of God, [among the Christians and Jews], the last will be first and the first will be last." *

To get some bad reminders out of the way first: Some original readers of this passage saw the first workers as the non-Christian Jews while the later workers are Christians. Other original readers saw the first workers as the pioneer followers of Jesus, Galileans and Jews, who built the Church and did the hard work while the later workers are the second or third generation Christians, many non-Jews, who took over an established movement and re-shaped it to what they wished. Jews had an agreement with God, the Covenant, and God had lived up to his end. If God wishes now to let non-Jews into the Covenant and to treat them as well as Jews, out of kindness, how has God cheated the Jews? Christians have a right to full benefits while non-believing Jews do not. Likewise, the early Christians had the example of Jesus and the martyrs.

They knew how hard the job would be and what they could expect. They have no complaints if later Christians get the same reward without all the danger and fighting.

Hopefully now we see: The vineyard is the Kingdom of God. To work in the vineyard means to work for the Kingdom and to be in the Kingdom. There is only one wage for working in the Kingdom, which is the highest wage that can be paid. Whenever in a person's life he-she gets Jesus' message and decides to work for the Kingdom, that is when the person is entitled to the full pay, and that is when the person receives the full wage. Whenever in your life you understand the Kingdom of God, then that is when you enter the Kingdom fully. Whenever in your life you understand an idea from math, science, politics, religion, or environmentalism, then that is when you get the idea, get it fully, and cannot get it any better. Whenever in your life you get the Tao, the reality of human existence, the participation of all beings in all other beings, or Enlightenment, you get it, and you cannot get it any better. It does not matter if people before you got it too. People that already understand have no reason to feel jealous of people that just understood. Among people that have been in it for a while, enthusiasm might have faded and the work might seem hard. Among people that have just come in, enthusiasm is high and the work seems like play. But really the work and the reward are just the same and it is what they expected all along. Make yourself useful and do not worry about the reward or about what other people get.

Eschatological Jesus; Big Change is Coming Soon.

Jesus did think there would be a big external change of the world and the change would come soon. As time passed and the big external change did not come, Christians substituted an internal change and membership in the Church for the external change, forgot about the external change, and forgot how quickly it was supposed to come, except when they used it as a threat. The passage about the fig tree continues as below in Mark 13:30. The "abomination of desolation" likely refers to a statue of himself that the Roman Emperor Caligula tried to put in the temple at Jerusalem and which helped start another severe conflict. Jesus could not have used that event as a reference because it happened after Jesus died. I have seen churches in the South put an American flag up above the altar, so I know how some Jews must have felt when Caligula did this.

Mark 13:30 – 13:31. * "I say: the present generation will live to see all of this. Heaven and earth will crumble away but my words will last forever." *

Mark 13:14 – 13:19. * “When you see the ‘abomination of desolation’ seizing a place to which it has no right (you the reader should understand), then Judeans must flee to the hills right away. If a man is sitting on his deck, he should not go back into the house to get anything. If a man is in the yard, he must not return for his coat. Alas for pregnant women in those days and for women with nursing children. Pray [to God] that the big event does not come in winter. Those days will see anguish that has not been felt since the beginning of the created world and will not be felt again.” *

Luke 12:35 – 12:40. Jesus speaks to his disciples: * “Be ready for action, with boots on and the light shining. Be like firemen waiting for the bell to ring. Happy are the pilots and crew when their commander returns to see them ready for action. The commander will lend his own hand, prepare their rations, and suit them up even if it is in the middle of the night or just before dawn. Remember, if the house owner had known when the burglar was coming he would not have gone out and would not have let the burglar break in. Keep always ready because the Son of Man will come when you least expect him.” *

Luke 12:49 – 12:53. * “I have come to set the earth on fire and how I wish I could set the match to it now! Do you think I came to bring universal peace? Not at all. I came to divide people. From now on, in one family of five, three will oppose two and two will oppose three. Fathers will oppose sons and sons oppose fathers. A mother will oppose her daughter-in-law and a wife will oppose her son’s mother.” *

Luke 20:34 – 20:38. * Jesus said, “The [ordinary] men and women of this world go ahead and marry. But the people whom God has judged worthy of a place in the other world and to be resurrected from the dead do not marry. They are not subject to death any longer [so why should they marry and how could they marry]. They are like angels, they are like children of God [Elohim from the Tanakh] because they will be resurrected [and so have eternal life of a different kind]. The truth of resurrection comes out in the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses calls God, ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’. Those people were alive. God is not God of the dead but of the living.” *

Jesus probably did not quote scripture like that. Luke probably added the quotation to emphasize the point. Jesus likely did make the point about people being resurrected and about not having regular physical bodies.

Kingdom of God 3: Useful Images.

This section is not formal theology. It does not try to interpret Jesus or God. It only offers images that might make more intuitive sense of the Kingdom of God for modern people. These images do not come from Jesus but from modern imagination.

Groundhog Day.

In the movie “Groundhog Day”, Bill Murray eventually realizes it is better to be useful and to do good than to keep up a bitchy attitude and annoy people. It takes him a long time to learn how to do good but eventually he really makes people feel better. He saves himself in the process. He quits hating himself. He becomes a loved and useful member of the community. Realizing this is getting into the Kingdom of God. Just the realization and a sincere effort are enough. You are automatically fully in when you see

this. You have to try hard once you get it, but you don't have to be superman. Just getting it makes the trying not so onerous. In one case, Murray tried to save an old drunk derelict but could not. That does not matter. It matters that he tried and that he felt the death of another human in his heart.

"Groundhog Day" focuses on the personal level, and a lot of it is maudlin. Many of us could not be content with only doing good deeds like fixing a flat tire. Some of us want to work on a more systemic level such as curing poverty or saving nature. That is fine too. If you feel the need to work on a system level, but you do not yet know how to work on that level, you should try to find out how. If you feel the need, and you see how, then you should do it. If you do not feel it or see how to do it, do not worry. The point is to see and feel the importance of being useful.

Contentious Angels.

Imagine a group of angels still in heaven, bragging about how successful they could be in any created world. They brag that they could be like Bill Murray no matter what world they were put in. No matter what the world was like, they would discover morality, act in the best way, and act only in the best way. They might be selfish for a little while but they would soon come to their senses, learn how to do good in that particular world, overcome their selfishness, and then do only good. God calls them on their brag. He makes a world for them. But God is smarter than they are. He wants to teach them that they really can fail so they know how hard success is and so they really understand their fellows who succeed and fail. What kind of a world would God put them into? In that world, what would life be like for the angels who did succeed in coming to their senses? Our world is like the training world that angels would need to get the chip knocked off. The Kingdom of God is like the society of angels that come to their senses. I return to this image later in the book.

Video Games.

People tend to project their world into metaphysics and theology. I do not remember who said that, if horses had gods, they would look like horses. "Gulliver's Travels" uses this idea. This subsection does too. That does not mean it is bad. Since the rise of computer simulations, many people have said this world is like a simulation and God is like a programmer. I am not always sure of their point but often enough it seems to be that God and morality do not matter so much after all. The world is not really real. Someday our character will end, and that is that. I can see the point but I disagree. While you are in the game, the game is real. No matter what video game we were in, morality would still be similar. The point is to do well in the game you are in. The point is to play the game as well as you can by the best morality that you know in that game. Just because the world is a game does not mean it is less real. As far as you are concerned, it is as real as real gets. Unless you are God, there is no reality other than the subordinate reality of particular games. If we could discover a greater reality for sure, and we knew what morality was supposed to prevail there, then we could import that morality here. Gnosticism and the "Matrix" movies try to do that. Until then, though, this world is reality even if it is only a video game and we are only characters in the game. While we are here, our task is to play the game by the best morality we know how. Just because it is a game does not mean we can stop playing the game or play by a different morality. Even in the matrix, unless we were Neo, our task would be to act like Bill Murray or Trinity. If in the end our character just ends, then we will not have lost anything by playing it that way.