



Credible Catholic

# CREDIBLE CATHOLIC

## Big Book - Volume 4

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS



Content by: Fr. Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.

# **Credible Catholic Big Book**

## **Volume Four**

### **The Significance of Jesus**

**Fr. Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.**

**As dictated to Joan Jacoby**

**Edits and formatting by Joey Santoro**

**Editor's Note:** Much of the material presented in this volume was originally published by Ignatius Press in *God So Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus*. It is reprinted with permission.

**To read more, you can find the book at the following link:**

**<https://www.ignatius.com/God-So-Loved-the-World-P1017.aspx>.**



**This Volume supports The Catechism of the Catholic Church,  
Part One – The Profession of Faith**

**NOTE:** All teachings in the **Credible Catholic** materials conform to the **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** and help to explain the information found therein. **Father Spitzer** has also included materials intended to counter the viral secular myths that are leading religious people of all faiths, especially millennials, to infer that God is no longer a credible belief. You will find credible documented evidence for God, our soul, the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Catholic Church, as well as spiritual and moral conversion.

**Part One** from the CCC is titled, ***THE PROFESSION OF FAITH***. The first 5 Volumes in the *Credible Catholic Big Book* and *Credible Catholic Little Book* fall into Part One. **Part Two** of the CCC is titled, ***THE CELEBRATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY***. This is covered in Volumes 6 through 12. **Part Three** of the CCC is ***LIFE IN CHRIST*** and information related to this topic will be found in Volumes 13 through 17. *Credible Catholic Big and Little Book* Volumes 18 through 20 will cover **Part Four** of the CCC, **Christian Prayer**.

The Big Book can also be divided into two major movements – the rational justification for God, the soul, Jesus, and the Catholic Church (Volumes 1 through 6), and life in Christ through the Catholic Church (Volumes 9 through 20). If you would like a preview of this dynamic, please go to Volume 6 (Chapter 7) at the following link – [Chapter 7 – Where Have We Come From and Where are We Going?](#)

**We all need to be Credible Catholics. St. Augustine said** in his work, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*,

*"Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens and other elements... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; ...If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven..."*

**If we don't respond to these secular myths, who will?**



## Table of Contents

*NOTE- References to “section(s)”, throughout all volumes, refer to the “sections” denoted by Roman numerals under each Chapter title.*

### **CHAPTER ONE: SEVEN COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL MAJOR RELIGIONS** **6**

---

### **CHAPTER TWO: HOW JESUS CHANGED THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS – FOUR UNIQUE ASPECTS OF HIS REVELATION** **9**

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### **CHAPTER THREE: JESUS’ PROCLAMATION OF GOD’S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE – ABBA AND THE FATHER OF THE PRODIGAL SON** **14**

---

- |             |  |           |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| <b>I.</b>   | <b>Love as the Highest Commandment</b> | <b>14</b> |
| <b>II.</b>  | <b>Jesus’ Address of God as “Abba”</b> | <b>17</b> |
| <b>III.</b> | <b>The Parable of the Prodigal Son</b> | <b>19</b> |
| <b>IV.</b>  | <b>Conclusion</b>                      | <b>23</b> |

### **CHAPTER FOUR: JESUS’ LOVE OF THE POOR, THE SICK, AND SINNERS** **25**

---

- |             |  |           |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| <b>I.</b>   | <b>Jesus’ Love of the Poor</b>               | <b>25</b> |
| <b>II.</b>  | <b>Jesus’ Love of the Sick and Possessed</b> | <b>27</b> |
| <b>III.</b> | <b>Jesus’ Acceptance and Love of Sinners</b> | <b>30</b> |

### **CHAPTER FIVE: JESUS’ UNCONDITIONAL LOVE – THE PASSION AND THE EUCHARIST** **34**

---

- |            |  |           |
|------------|--|-----------|
| <b>I.</b>  | <b>The First Part of the Plan: The Last Supper</b>                     | <b>35</b> |
| <b>II.</b> | <b>The Second Part of the Plan: Suffering, Death, and Resurrection</b> | <b>39</b> |

<b>CHAPTER SIX: WHO DID JESUS SAY HE WAS?</b>	<b>47</b>
I. Jesus as the Exclusive Preexistent Son of the Father in the Synoptic Gospels	48
II. How did Jesus know He was the Exclusive Son of the Father?	56
III. Jesus is Emmanuel	60
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: WHO GOD IS NOT</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT:</b>	
<b>THE UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS' SALVATION</b>	<b>66</b>
I. New Testament Passages in Favor of God's Universal Offer of Salvation	67
II. New Testament Passages That May Imply a Restricted Offer of Salvation	70
III. Christian Doctrines of God's Universal Offer of Salvation	72
IV. Why Should Christians Evangelize?	74
<b>CHAPTER NINE:</b>	
<b>THE EFFECT OF JESUS' TEACHING ON WORLD CULTURE</b>	<b>75</b>
I. The Social-Political Implications of Jesus' Teaching on Love	76
II. The Christian Impact on Social Equality and Roman Slavery	81
III. Christian Impact on Social Welfare and Healthcare	83
IV. The Christian Impact on Education	87
V. Conclusion	92
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>93</b>

## **Chapter One**

### **Seven Common Characteristics of all Major Religions**

[Back to top](#)

The German historian of religion, Friedrich Heiler, after a lengthy study of world religions, synthesizes seven major common characteristics of the world's religions:

1. The transcendent, the holy, the divine, the Other is real.
2. The transcendent reality is immanent in human awareness.
3. This transcendent reality is the highest truth, highest good, and highest beauty.
4. This transcendent reality is loving and compassionate – and seeks to reveal its love to human beings.
5. The way to God requires prayer, ethical self-discipline, purgation of self-centeredness, asceticism, and redressing of offenses.
6. The way to God also includes service and responsibility to people.
7. The highest way to eternal bliss in the transcendent reality is through love.

Heiler was a friend and colleague of Rudolf Otto, and both believed (along with Mircea Eliade) that all authentic religions are a public expression of the inner awareness of the sacred (the irreducible pre-reflective experience of the numinous).

We can infer two central dimensions of God's revelation to humanity from these studies. First, God makes himself present to every human being – seemingly at the very moment human beings come into existence – being given a transphysical soul by him.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, God inspires all major authentic religions to publicly express the inner awareness of their participants with common characteristics that reveal his guiding hand. Were there no common source of these seven characteristics, their common public expression in the world would be highly unlikely -- for public expression is subject to huge variations in cultural, political, and societal outlooks. Since most religions do not glean their traditions from mutual borrowing,<sup>2</sup> we are compelled to conclude that these common characteristics originated from God's interior presence to all human beings. Clearly, God cares about and manifests himself to all individuals and cultures.

There is one difficulty that needs to be redressed even as we acknowledge God's universal revelation and care. The world's major religions differ considerably on the interpretation of the above seven common characteristics, and in several cases, some of the characteristics are elevated above others or even mitigate others. This gives rise to the question, "Are the seven common characteristics of religion – with their many and varied interpretations in each religion – all there is to God's revelation? Did he give us something more? Did he try to sort through the differences among religious expressions? Did he give us something definitive?"

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<sup>1</sup> Very young children have genuine religious experiences that have been studied in multiple forms (e.g. Robert Coles of Harvard University).

<sup>2</sup> See McKenzie 1965, p. 754.



As noted in Chapter 2, there are many questions about God – particularly his heart – that science and philosophy (reason and experience) cannot answer. Many of these questions cannot be answered with a common voice from the world’s religions. For example, “Does God grant eternal life? If so, what is that life like? Does God redeem suffering? If so, how? Does God answer prayers? Does he heal us interiorly? Is he *unconditionally* good and loving? Does he inspire and guide us? Can we be eternally separated from God? What is our path to salvation?”

These questions provoke us to ask – “Wouldn’t a good and loving God want to answer these questions *definitively* so that we might have clarity and hope in our journey with others toward his salvation?” It seems both reasonable and responsible to believe that *He would*. This provokes yet another question, “How would he provide this definitive revelation of himself? Would he do it by means of a prophet or a priest – or would he do it *himself*?”

This leads to yet another question, “What kind of a God would want to bring his definitive revelation to us *himself* – to leave the domain of the unrestricted and unconditioned to enter the domain of the restricted and conditioned?” The sacrifice that such a God would have to make to deliver his message personally would be so great that the only plausible explanation of his action would have to be love – he would have to be at his core self-sacrificial love – or better, unconditional self-sacrificial love.

Now here is the interesting point -- Jesus’ message is that he is the Son of God – and his message is that God is unconditional love and that he as the Son of God is also unconditional love. This gives us a remarkable *internal* validation – for if he really is the Son of God (as he claimed) then he would have made an unconditionally loving self-sacrifice to be with us and reveal himself to us – which is perfectly consistent with what he says about himself and his Father – namely, that they are unconditional love. Does the internal consistency of his divinity, his unconditional love, and God’s unconditional love have *external* validation?

As we saw in the previous volume, He gives three external validations of his divinity -- his resurrection in glory, his gift of the Spirit of God, and his miracles by his own authority. He also gives three external validations of being unconditional love -- his love of sinners and the marginalized, his miracles of healing the sick, the dead, and the possessed, and his complete self-sacrifice on the cross for humanity (see below in this volume).

When we put together the pieces of the puzzle – both the internal and external validations, we can approach reasonable and responsible belief that he is the unconditionally loving Son of God – Emmanuel – “God with us.” Of course this cannot be done on the basis of evidence alone. We must be moved to this conclusion in our hearts -- we must already be convinced that love really does hold out our ultimate meaning, dignity, and destiny – as well as that of our fellow human beings. And we must also desire to pursue that life of love with the divine One who reveals himself to us. If this is the disposition of our heart, then the evidence will be sufficient to move us to faith. But if we do not have this disposition of the heart, no evidence in the world – not even a miracle in our midst -- would convince us that Jesus is the Son of God – the definitive revelation of God given to us in person through a self-sacrificial incarnation, death, and resurrection.

You – the reader – must examine your own reasons of the heart. Do you think that love (*agapē* – defined below) holds out your ultimate meaning, dignity, and destiny? Are you willing to pursue that life of love with and through Jesus Christ – the Lord of unconditional love? If so, do not be surprised if you are already moved to faith in him.

Some readers may feel uneasy about considering the question of an *ultimate* revelation because it seems to suggest that one religion is better than another – or at least has access to a revelation that the others do not. Isn't this inconsistent with an unconditionally loving God who would not show favoritism in the manifestation of His love? Clearly an unconditionally loving God does not show favoritism – He does not love one culture or religion more than another.

However, the question about the particularity of a personal and ultimate revelation is not about favoritism. It is about the *necessary* conditions for The Divine to become *personally incarnate* (“embodied” and subject to space-time particularity). If God wants to be incarnately present in the human condition, He will have to enter into a *particular* place and time, because humanity is conditioned by space and time. Furthermore, He would have to enter into a human culture which would undoubtedly have a religion, because human beings live in *particular* cultures with *particular* religious traditions.

Why would God want to do this? Why would He want to be *personally incarnately* present which would force Him to choose a particular place, time, culture, and religion? Jesus answers this question on behalf of Himself and His Divine Father by revealing that they are *unconditional* love. He, as Divine Son, wants to be with us *as we are*, because this will enable us to directly apprehend (in both mind and heart) His empathy, compassion, affection, forgiveness, patience, support, and willingness to give Himself totally to us. His intention goes beyond the needs of our heart's appropriation of His personal love; He wants *to give Himself unconditionally* to us – in the restrictions of our space and time, our embodiment, cultural limitations, suffering, debilitation, and death. He wants this because He views self-sacrifice as gift of self, and views unconditional gift of self as unconditional love. He wants to love us concretely and completely – not just to *show* us His love, but to *infuse* that love into us – as a light that will overcome darkness, a fullness that will overcome emptiness, a companionship that will overcome alienation and loneliness, an unconditional goodness that will break the spell of evil, and open the path to eternal unconditional love with Him. If the unconditionally loving God really wants to do all this, He will have to become incarnate, and if He becomes incarnate, then He will have to choose a particular place, time, culture, and religious tradition.

This leaves God with only two choices: He can incarnate Himself at *one* particular place, time, culture, and religious tradition for the redemption of *all* times, places, cultures, and religious traditions – *or* He can incarnate Himself over and over and over again for every time, place, culture, and religion not only in the world, but in the universe. If we suppose that one complete self-sacrifice is enough--not only for the world but for the universe--then the unconditionally loving God will have to pick a particular place and time to incarnate Himself, and in so doing, overcome any possible thought of favoritism or preference.

How might He make this selection amidst so many good and beautiful cultures, religions, times, and places? One can only speculate about this, but it seems that He might pick a religion in which a sense of His love and care has been increasingly revealed (such as the patriarchs and

prophets of Judaism). He would also pick a culture and time that would have access to logic, philosophy, and systematic methodology that would optimize the use of reason (such as the Hellenistic culture). At the same time He would pick a place and time that had connections to the rest of the world, and could provide the infrastructure to spread the good news far and wide (such as the Roman Empire).

Similarly, the unconditionally loving God would want to pick a cultural setting that was *humble* (and even humbled) – not powerful, glorious, arrogant, and proud. He would also want to choose a place within that culture that was equally humble – a small town with religious significance, but not the central point of a religion. He would also want to choose a place in that town that was humble – like a stable or cave – to make his appearance, and choose a humble mother and father, and be surrounded by humble people like shepherds. It seems to me that if an unconditionally loving God were to become incarnate, and to give Himself completely to humanity, in one particular place, time, and culture, He would do it in the most humble and unobtrusive way possible – in a stable in the town of Bethlehem in Israel.

If the unconditionally loving God picked Israel – with its prophetic preparation, Hellenistic influences amidst Roman roads and infrastructure, He could work through their religious and philosophical apparatus to articulate and spread the good news about His unconditional love and to help us follow the path of that unconditional love in humility, gentleness, compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

We can be sure that if an unconditionally loving God did this, He would not have done so because He loved one group more than another. Rather he would have done it to meet *the necessary condition* of incarnation – a *particular* place, time, culture and religious tradition – so that He could reveal Himself personally and ultimately, and more importantly *give* Himself completely to His beloveds *throughout the world for all time*.

## **Chapter Two**

### **How Jesus Changed the History of Religions – Four unique aspects of His Revelation**

[Back to top](#)

As noted above, all major world religions (according to Heiler) believe that the supreme transcendent power is both good and loving. This general belief is interpreted quite differently in each of the major religions. Some subordinate love to justice and the moral law, some hold that the Deity's love is oriented towards a group rather than towards individuals, and some define love in a very restricted way.

Jesus' teaching on the love of God is quite distinct. First, He proclaims the *unconditional* love of God, and places it at the center of his teaching, making all other teachings and doctrines subordinate to it. He also defines love in a special way which requires Christians to find a



distinct word to describe it (*agapē*). In these two respects, Jesus appears to be quite distinctive in the history of religions. Jesus proclaims the unconditional love of God through several distinct teachings. First, He teaches His disciples to address God as *He* does – as “*Abba*” which means “affectionate, understanding, trustworthy father” with connotations of childlike delight – e.g., “daddy” (see Chapter Three below). Secondly, He identifies God the Father with the father in the Prodigal Son Parable – who is unconditionally forgiving, compassionate, and humble (see Chapter Three below). Thirdly, He says that the whole law and prophets are summed up in the commandments to love God and neighbor. Inasmuch as *Torah* (the Jewish law) reflects the heart of God, love must be the essence of God’s heart.

Jesus places this radical doctrine of love (his definition of love and his proclamation of God’s unconditional love) at the very center of His teaching – making all other teachings subordinate to it. The combined effect of these proclamations is a distinctive recasting of love into the primary end or goal of every individual – and even of history and culture.

With respect to Jesus’ definition of love, Jesus is primarily concerned with the *interior heart* of love. This is most manifest in the Beatitudes (interior attitudes of love) which are placed at the *beginning* of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (showing the priority of the interior disposition of the heart -- in care and compassion). Jesus gives several examples in His parables and actions to illustrate this love. The most notable Parable, the Good Samaritan, portrays a foreigner whose *heart* is moved with *care* and *compassion* toward a Jewish man (an enemy of the Samaritans) who has been beaten severely by robbers (Lk 10:25-37). The most notable action in Jesus’ life is His love for sinners (see below Chapter Four) and His self-sacrificial death on the cross (see below Chapter Five).

Jesus then shows how these interior attitudes should manifest themselves in exterior actions – love of enemies, prayer for those who hate us, turning the other cheek, forgiving one another seventy times seven times (an innumerable number of times), having mercy on the marginalized, ignored, and displaced, loving sinners and even criminals – which He declares is imitating God’s love in its perfection (see Mt 5:43-45 and Lk 6:35-36). The combination of these teachings in a single doctrine of love is distinctive in the history of religions.

This distinctive and radical interpretation of the meaning of love and God’s unconditional love has the peculiar effect of not only subordinating fear to love, but also of removing fear and dread from our relationship with God. This removal of the fearful and dreadful is central to the teaching of St. Paul. For example, in the Letter to the Romans, Paul says:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘*Abba, Father*’ (Rom 8:15).

The Second Letter to Timothy states:

‘For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (II Tim 1:7).

This viewpoint is also central to the teaching of St. John:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1Jn 4:18).

This subordination of fear to love (including the elimination of fear) has its origin in Jesus, and is reported in several passages of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus tells the synagogue official whose child is about to die, “Fear is useless – what is needed is trust” (Mk 5:36). He tells His disciples not to worry about any dimension of their *temporal* lives:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear..... Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? .....And why do you worry about clothes?.... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ (Mt 6:25-31).

He also exhorts His disciples not to fear anything from the *spiritual* domain:

And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna. Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid [of anything]; you are worth more than many sparrows (Mt 10: 28-31).

Though some religions exhort their followers to control fear and to expect peace in the afterlife, Christianity seems to be distinctive in creating an antithesis between fear and *love* and asking its followers to replace fear with *trust* in the unconditionally loving God. This has a remarkable effect within the Christian mystical tradition. Christianity shares several common features with other religions’ mystical traditions – e.g. the dimensions of mysteriousness, unity with the totality, joy (bliss), and the beauty of the sacred. However, in the Christian mystical tradition, a loving relationship with the unconditionally loving Deity is the overriding feature which gives rise to unity, joy (ecstasy), and beauty (glory). For this reason, Christian mystics associate the experience of God with being perfectly at *home* through an unconditionally loving Divine Being.

Evelyn Underhill wrote extensively about Christian mysticism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She was familiar with mysticism in non-Christian traditions, but wrote far more extensively on the personal love intrinsic to the Christian mystical tradition. She was not interested in objective approaches to religious experience (such as William James and Rudolf Otto) preferring instead to take a personal psychological approach that incorporated elements of her own religious experience with well-known Christian mystics ranging from Jan Ruysbroeck and Meister Eckhart to St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. In her classic work *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, she contrasts the abstract knowledge of God from metaphysicians and theologians with the personal loving connection with God in Christian mysticism:

In mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a *personal passion*. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram — impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is *lovable, attainable, alive*.<sup>3</sup>

This point is brought home through the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Carmelite mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, who links the personal love of the Deity with the ecstasy of mystery:

The *loving exchange* that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this *love* to anyone who thinks I am lying. On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied. I desired neither to see nor to speak... [I]t seems the Lord carries the soul away and places it in *ecstasy*; thus there is no room for pain or suffering, because *joy* soon enters in.<sup>4</sup>

Saint John of the Cross, another Carmelite mystic and companion of Saint Teresa of Avila, writes that the unconditional Love of God is manifest most profoundly in the infinite One making us like an equal by at once coming to be with us and raising us up to Him. His love is at once affectionate, humble, and gentle:

...[S]ince He is the virtue of supreme *humility*, He *loves you* with supreme humility and esteem and *makes you His equal*, gladly revealing Himself to

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<sup>3</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 16 (italics mine).

<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Avila 1976, p. 194.



you in these ways of knowledge, in this His countenance filled with graces, and telling you in this His union, not without great rejoicing: ‘*I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.*’<sup>5</sup>

The idea of God being supremely humble, supremely gentle and affectionate, and making us His equal (fundamental dispositions arising out of His unconditional love) is distinctive to Christianity, though some religions address these characteristics in God, they are not viewed as the central essence of God or the core of our relationship with Him.

Christian mysticism does not find its culmination away from the world. As Christian mystics move into a deeper relationship with God (including ecstatic union), they do not pull away from the world into a rarified, passive, and exclusive domain. Rather, as Underhill asserts, the Christian mystic is self-creative,<sup>6</sup> and above all a “doer.”<sup>7</sup> The more Christian mystics experience the love and ecstasy of the Divine Lover, the more they are inspired to serve all of God’s beloveds – even to the point of trial, suffering, and death in imitation of Jesus. This is certainly evidenced in the lives of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross who reformed the Carmelite Order, and as a result, experienced considerable trial, sacrifice, and suffering. This is also evident in the lives of other mystics, such as Jan Ruysbroeck, who was involved in fighting controversial teachings in Brussels and who later became a Prior of a monastery he founded; and the life of St. Augustine, who in addition to writing an encyclopedia of theological, spiritual, and polemical works, was involved in fighting controversies and served as Bishop of Hippo. The same holds true for St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Hildegard of Bingen, and St. Ignatius Loyola – to mention just a few. The centrality of contemplation leading to action (instead of to passivity and reclusiveness) appears to be peculiar to Christian mysticism. No doubt other mystical traditions speak of mystics as being active, but not in the same central way as Christianity.

In sum, Jesus brings the revelation of God’s love to its ultimate and unconditional fulfillment – by proclaiming the *unconditional* love of God, by defining love as “*agapē*” (compassionate, forgiving, self-sacrificial love of all humankind – friends and enemies), and intimating the completion of the mystical life through loving action in the world. As will be seen below, these distinctive features of Jesus’ revelation changed the course of history and culture – leading closer and closer to the recognition of the intrinsic dignity and unique goodness and lovability of *every* human being who Jesus associates with God:

...whatever you did for any of these least ones, you did for me (Mt 25:40).

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<sup>5</sup> John of the Cross 1979, p. 613 (italics mine).

<sup>6</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Underhill 2012, p. 16.

## Chapter Three

### Jesus' Proclamation of God's Unconditional Love

#### *Abba* and the Father of the Prodigal Son

[Back to top](#)

Jesus taught His disciples and the crowds in His own familiar Semitic way. He did not speak in the logical and conceptual discourse of Greek culture. Unlike Paul, He did not use syllogistic arguments or formulate circumstantial cases. Rather He used two devices that were familiar to Semitic culture (commandments and names) and one device peculiar to Himself (Parables). His revelation of the unconditional love of His Father follows this pattern, and so we see three anchors of that revelation:

1. The revelation of God's highest commandment – “*agapē*” (Section II.A).
2. The *name* of God – “Abba” (Section II.B).
3. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Section II.C).

### I.

#### Love as the Highest Commandment

[Back to top](#)

Perhaps the most explicit statement of Jesus' belief in love is found in His proclamation about the highest commandment:

‘Love [*agapēseis*] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love [*agapēseis*] your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).<sup>8</sup>

In this remarkable passage, Jesus changed the history of religion in two unique and vital respects:

1. He proclaims love to be the highest commandment upon which all other commandments (and virtues) depend.
2. He connects the love of God with the love of neighbor.

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<sup>8</sup> This commandment is proclaimed in all three synoptic Gospels, though the context in which it occurs varies. Mark presents the scribe favorably and Luke has the scribe give the commandment. Matthew sees the “lawyer” (a unique use of this term in Matthew, normally referred to as “scribe”) as hostile, attempting to test Jesus. Matthew alone recounts the final phrase, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” By indicating this, Matthew intends to reconfirm Jesus' proclamation of love as the first and *greatest* commandment. See Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28.

With respect to the first point, Jesus' proclamation to "love the Lord your God..." as the first and greatest commandment has a superlative character ("first and greatest") surpassing the typical rabbinical use of a "heavy" (important) commandment. According to McKenzie:

The rabbis counted 613 distinct commandments in the Law, of which 248 were positive precepts and 365 were prohibitions. These commandments were distinguished as "light" and "heavy" according to the seriousness of the subject.<sup>9</sup>

Though love of God was considered to be heavy (important) in rabbinical interpretation, it was never elevated to the level of the "*first and greatest*" commandment upon which the whole of Torah depended. Viviano notes: "The rabbis said that the word hangs on Torah, Temple service, and deeds of loving-kindness... Matthew makes the law itself depend upon deeds of love."<sup>10</sup>

The second point, the connection between Love of God and love of neighbor, is equally important in the history of religion. When Jesus connects the second commandment ("love your neighbor as yourself") to the first, He elevates the second commandment from a moderate prescription to the second heaviest, tying it to the heaviest commandment. According to McKenzie:

The novelty consists in placing Lv 19:18 on the same level [as Deut 6:5], making it equally "heavy." To this arrangement of the two commandments so that they become effectively one there is no parallel in Jewish literature. The *T. Issachar* (5:2 [APOT 2, 327]), often quoted in this connection, does indeed urge the love of God and of the neighbor; but these are not stated as the two greatest commandments of the Law, nor are they so explicitly given equal weight.<sup>11</sup>

The unification of the two commandments to love implies that the love of God leads to the love of neighbor, and that the love of neighbor, in turn, leads to the love of God. The two loves interact with and build up one another. The First Letter of John views this complementarity in a "necessary reciprocal" way:

If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also (Jn 4:20-21).

Saint Paul confirms this in the Letter to the Romans:

...[H]e who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments...are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rm 13:8-10).

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<sup>9</sup> McKenzie 1968, Vol.2, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Viviano 1990, p. 666.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie 1968, Vol. II, p. 101. See also Charles 1913.

We may now treat the key point of this Section – namely that Jesus’ revelation of the greatest commandment of the law is simultaneously a revelation of the heart and core identity of God. The identification of law with the inner disposition of God is common in Wisdom literature. According to McKenzie:

The post-exilic scribes identify the law with Wisdom (BS 24; 39:1-11) and find in it all knowledge, human and divine...The rabbis included the Torah among the beings which existed before creation.<sup>12</sup>

In the teaching of the post-exilic rabbis (with which Jesus is familiar<sup>13</sup>), Torah is a reflection of Wisdom, and Wisdom is a reflection of the core identity of God – so much so, that Wisdom was thought to be a perfect image of God from whom it originates:

For [Wisdom] is a reflection of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness (Wisdom 7: 25-26).

Inasmuch as Wisdom is a perfect reflection of God, and Torah is a perfect reflection of Wisdom, the *greatest* commandment of the law (upon which *the entire* law depends), must likewise be a reflection of the core identity, power, and glory of God. Inasmuch as Jesus inextricably connects the commandment to love our neighbor to the commandment to love God, He includes the love of neighbor in “the first and greatest” commandment upon which *the entire* law depends. Hence, God’s core identity, power, and glory reside most purely and excellently in His love. We can see the full impact of Jesus’ declaration of “love” as the first and greatest commandment by replacing the word “wisdom” with “love” in the above passage from the Book of Wisdom.

For Love is a reflection of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into love. For Love is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness (adapted from Wisdom 7: 25-26).

There is another reason for believing that Jesus’ proclamation of “love as the greatest commandment” indicates that God is love. It stems from the implausibility of Jesus asking us to become something which He (and His Father) are not. It is unthinkable that Jesus, who exemplified the height of authenticity, would be inauthentic (and even hypocritical) in asking us to conduct ourselves in a way that He does not conduct Himself. The Gospels of Matthew

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<sup>12</sup> McKenzie 1965, p. 499.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ parables reflect his knowledge of Wisdom parables (which have a moral significance). We may infer from this that Jesus was acquainted with Wisdom literature beyond knowledge of the parables. See Mullins 1949, pp. 335-339.

The reverence for the law as the reflection of God is embraced by Ben Sira, who in turn, is embraced by the Sadducees. Jesus was quite familiar with the Sadducees’ viewpoint, and so would have been acquainted with this reverence for the law. Jesus uses the term “wisdom” to refer to “God’s comprehensive wisdom” in Matthew 11:19/Luke 7:35 and Luke 21:15.

(Chapter 5) and Luke (Chapter 6) bear this out, showing that *agapē* is the essence of God's perfection.

The final passage in Matthew 5 concludes the first part of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus arguably gives an extensive definition of *agapē*. The Beatitudes are the essential *positive* interior attitudes from which *agapē* springs – humble-heartedness, gentle-heartedness, desire for holiness, compassion for the marginalized, forgiveness, purity of heart (authenticity), and the desire to bring peace. After elucidating these *positive interior* prescriptions (Matthew 5:3-12), Jesus goes further to indicate the attitudes and behaviors that are *contrary* to *agapē* (proscriptions of both interior attitudes and exterior actions – Matthew 5:13-48). Though these teachings build upon the positive interior explanation of *agapē* (and are in a sense secondary to them), they are nonetheless essential to Jesus' explanation of it. He teaches that *agapē* does not grow angry or hold another in contempt, that it is chaste and honors the spouse, that it does not seek retribution, and allows compassion/mercy to supersede justice, and that it loves and prays for enemies. After this discourse, Jesus says, "I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father... Therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:45, 48). There can be little doubt that this phrasing indicates that the perfection of God consists in His love of enemies,<sup>14</sup> which is confirmed by Luke's rendition of the passage (also following the admonition to love enemies) which says, "Be merciful (compassionate) as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Yet is love of enemies the *only* attribute that characterizes God's perfection (*agapē* /compassion)? For Matthew and Luke, love of enemies is the *highest expression* of God's perfection/ *agapē*, but all the other attributes of *agapē* given in Matthew 5 must also be included in it, because they are foundational for it. Being humble-hearted, gentle-hearted, compassionate, forgiving and peacemaking as well as refraining from anger, contempt, and retribution are essential for taking the final and highest step of *agapē* – loving enemies.

This means that if God's *agapē* -perfection consists in love of enemies, it also consists in the attributes essential for this highest expression of love. Therefore, God must be perfectly humble-hearted, gentle-hearted, compassionate, and forgiving, and He must also be perfectly free from anger, contempt, and the need for retribution. Jesus not only tells us that love is the highest commandment, implying that God is perfect love (*agapē*); He teaches us what this perfect *agapē* is like from its interior positive core to its highest external expression.

## II.

### Jesus' Address of God as "Abba"

[Back to top](#)

"Abba" is the Aramaic emphatic form of 'ab – "father" employed as a vocative (as an address). McKenzie notes that Aramaic epistles show that it was a familiar address used by children,<sup>15</sup> which could have the meaning of "my father," or even a more intimate address, such

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<sup>14</sup> See McKenzie 1968 II p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> See McKenzie 1965, p. 1.



as “daddy.” The implications of childlike trust and affection should not be written out of the term when Jesus uses it to address the Father. Moreover, Jesus taught His disciples to address God as “*Abba*.” Paul is aware of this, but needs the help of the Holy Spirit to use it of God because of its high degree of familiarity (see Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). In addition to its explicit use in Mark’s Gospel (14:36), Jeremias sees other implicit references to “*Abba*” in the New Testament: “...we have every reason to suppose that an *Abba* underlies every instance of *pater (mou)* or *ho patēr* in his words of prayer.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus’ address of God in this intimate way is exceedingly unusual – so much so that for several decades it was thought to be unique to Jesus himself. As Jeremias notes:

...in the literature of Palestinian Judaism *no evidence has yet been found* of “my Father” being used by an individual as an address to God.... It is quite unusual that Jesus should have addressed God as “my Father”; it is even more so that he should have used the Aramaic form *Abba*.<sup>17</sup>

Quite recently some rare instances of rabbinical use of *Abba* have been found.<sup>18</sup> Though this use of “*Abba*” is not unique to Christianity (as Jeremias conjectured) it is exceedingly rare in Judaism by comparison to its prolific use in Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The probable reason for this is the presumptuousness that the Israelite elders must have felt in addressing God (who is the “Master of the universe” and the “Master of history”) with a possessive (*my* Father) in a childlike manner.

What might we conclude about Jesus’ revelation about the heart of the Father from His highly unusual address of God as *Abba*? He must have viewed God at once as gentle and affectionate, trustworthy and patient, compassionate and forgiving, and completely concerned with the protection, welfare, and advancement (toward salvation) of all His children – just like a perfectly loving Father. But how can we be sure that Jesus *really* intended this? The Parable of the Prodigal Son makes this interpretation unmistakable (see below Section II.C).

In Semitic culture, a name is not merely a linguistic label and designation of a particular person (as it frequently is in contemporary Western culture). It has meaning, and frequently expresses the heart, mind, characteristics, identity, and nature of the person. According to Rabbi Paysach Krohn,

In Judaism, a name is not merely a conglomeration of letters put together as a convenient way to refer to someone. Ideally, it is a definition of the individual - a description of his personality and an interpretation of his traits. It may even be a portent of the person's future, or perhaps a prayer that the person bearing this particular name shall live up to the potential expressed in the name.<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, Jesus selects the name of Peter (“rock”) for His first apostle Simon (“you are rock and upon this rock I will build my church...” – Mt 16:18). Jesus reveals that His name

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> See Wright 1996.

<sup>19</sup> See Wright 1996, p. 649.

<sup>20</sup> Krohn, 1986.

from the Father is “the Beloved Son” (“My Son, the Beloved One”<sup>21</sup>) because it reflects His character, identity, and essence with the Father. His disciple John names himself “the beloved disciple” because the love of Jesus is the most important and defining characteristic in his life. Thus Jesus’ name (and address) of God as “Daddy” – “affectionate, wise, trustworthy, loving, compassionate, Father” describes the heart, mind, and essence of God.

### III. The Parable of the Prodigal Son [Back to top](#)

Jesus concretizes His revelation of the Father’s love in the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son. This Parable may be considered one of Jesus’ primary revelations of God the Father’s *unconditional* Love.

In the *Parables of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias identifies Jesus’ motive for telling the Prodigal Son Parable (along with the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin Parables). He notes that some of Jesus’ detractors were accusing Him of unjustifiably seeking fellowship with sinners. Jesus justifies His actions by noting that His conduct is completely commensurate with His Father’s (*Abba*) who is absolutely concerned for sinners, and is capable of justifying even those who have abandoned and shamed their families, countrymen, the law, the covenant, and God:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is therefore not primarily a proclamation of the Good News to the poor, but a vindication of the Good News in reply to its critics. Jesus’ justification lies in the boundless love of God.<sup>22</sup>

Three preliminary considerations should be made before retelling the parable as a first century audience would have understood it. First, Jesus intends that the father in the story be a revelation of the heart of God the Father. The parable would be more aptly named The Parable of the *Father* of the Prodigal Son. Secondly, notice that the younger son has committed just about every sin imaginable according to the mindset of Second Temple Judaism (the religious context in which Jesus was operating), and so he has absolutely no basis or merit for asking the father to receive him back into the household – even as one of the servants. Thirdly, the older son in this story represents the Pharisees and those who are trying to remain righteous according to their understanding of the Jewish law, and so we can see that Jesus has not abandoned them, but he desires to give them everything he has – so long as they come back into the house.

Now we may proceed to a retelling of the parable. A father had two sons, the youngest of whom asked for his share of the inheritance. This would have been viewed as an insult to the father which would have shamed both father and family (because the son is asking not only for the right of possession, but the right of disposal of the property which legally does not occur until the death of the father<sup>23</sup>). Nevertheless, the father hears the son’s request and acquiesces to it. He

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<sup>21</sup> “*ho huios mou ho agapētos*.” See the revelation of the Father at Jesus’ baptism (Mk 1:11, Mt 3:17, Lk 3:22) and transfiguration (Mk 2:7, Mt 17:5).

<sup>22</sup> Jeremias 1972, p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> See Jeremias 1972, p. 128-29.

divides his property and lets his son go. Remember the father in the story is Jesus' revelation of God the Father.

The son chooses to go to a foreign land – probably a Gentile land, indicated by his living on a Gentile farm with pigs. Whether he started there or simply ended there is of little consequence. His actions indicate a disregard for (if not a rejection of) his election and his people, and a further shaming of the family from which he came.

Then the son adds further insult to injury by spending his father's hard-earned fortune on dissolute living (violations of *Torah*) in the gentile land. This shows the son's callous disregard for (if not rejection of) God's law, God's revelation, and perhaps God Himself. Furthermore, he manifests his callous disregard for his people, the law, and God before the entire Gentile community – bringing shame upon them all.

Just when it seems that the son could not possibly sin any more egregiously, the foreign land finds itself in a famine. The son has little money left, and is constrained to live with the pigs, which were considered to be highly unclean animals. The son incurs defilement not only from working with the pigs but actually living with them! He even longs to eat the food of the pigs which would defile him both inside and outside. This reveals the son's wretched spiritual state, which would have engendered both disgust and revulsion from most members of Jesus' First Century audience.

The son experiences a “quasi-change” of heart, not so much because of what he's done to his family, country, people, election, law, religion, and God, but because of the harshness of his condition (“How many of my father's servants have more than enough to eat...”). He decides to take advantage of what he perceives to be his father's merciful nature by proffering an agreement to accept demotion from son to servant (even though it was the father's right to reject and even disown him altogether). The son then makes his way back home.

The father (who is the God-*Abba* figure in Jesus' Parable) sees him coming while he is still on his way (possibly indicating that the father is looking for him) and is so completely overjoyed that he runs out to meet him (despite the fact that the son has so deeply injured and shamed both him and his family). When he meets his son, he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The kiss is not only an act of affection, but also a sign of forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> The son's list of insults, injuries, and sins is incapable of turning the father's heart away from him. The father is almost compelled to show unrestrained affection toward him. The son utters his speech of quasi-repentance/quasi-negotiation: “Just treat me like one of your servants....” Instead, the father tells the servants to get him a robe, which not only takes care of his temporal needs, but is also a mark of high distinction.<sup>25</sup> He then asks that a ring be put on his hand. Jeremiah indicates that this ring is very likely a signet ring,<sup>26</sup> having the seal of the family. This would indicate not only belonging to the family, but also the authority of the family (showing the son's readmission to the family in an unqualified way). He then gives him shoes, which again takes care of his obvious temporal need, and inasmuch as they are luxuries, signifies a free man who no longer

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<sup>24</sup> See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> See Jeremiah 1972, p. 130.

has to go about barefoot like a servant or slave.<sup>27</sup> He then kills the fatted calf (reserved only for very special occasions) and holds a feast. This is a further indication of the son's readmission to the family by being received at the festal family table.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus' audience probably felt conflicted (if not angered) by the father's "ridiculously merciful" treatment of his son, because it ignored (and even undermined) the "proper" strictures of justice. The father's love/mercy seems to disregard the justice of Torah. This does not deter Jesus, because He is convinced that God the Father treats sinners – even the most egregious sinners – in exactly the same fashion, that is, with a heart of unconditional Love.

Jesus continues the story by turning His attention to the older son who reflects a figure of righteousness according to the old covenant. He has stayed loyal to his father, family, election, country, religion, law, and God. Furthermore, he has been an incredibly hard worker and seems to accept patiently the father's frugality toward him ("You did not so much as kill a kid goat for me"). Most of Jesus' audience probably sympathized with this older son's plight when the father demonstrated his extraordinary generosity to his younger son. By all rights, the father should have either rejected or disowned the younger son, and if not that, he certainly should have accepted the younger son's offer to become a servant – but an unqualified re-admittance to the family appeared to be an injustice (if not a slap in the face) to his loyal son.

The father understands the son's difficulty with his actions and goes outside to literally "plead" with his son – virtually begging him to come back into the house (an almost unthinkable humiliation for a father at that time). He begins by giving his older son all his property, addressing his older son's need for justice: "You have been with me always, and everything I have is yours." Then, he gives him an explanation which did not fall within the mainstream interpretation of the law: mercy must take precedence over justice and love take precedence over the law, for that is the only way that the negativity of sin and evil can be redressed and overcome – "Your brother was lost and is found; he was dead and has come back to life."

This Parable coincides precisely with Jesus' address of God as *Abba*, and "love as the highest commandment," because the only way in which they can make sense together is through the logic of unconditional Love in the heart of an unconditionally loving God.

We may now consider more deeply the four main movements of this Parable because they bring to light Jesus' understanding of God – His Father. The first movement of the Parable is the younger son's heartless and shameful treatment of his father (who represents God the Father). He tells his father that he is as good as dead to him and is only interested in his money. He then proceeds to the land of the Gentiles, rejecting his people and election – further dishonoring his father and family. Jesus keeps building up the younger son's deficits to make sure that the audience knows that the younger son's heartlessness and dishonor have reached the ultimate level and that there is almost nothing objectively redeeming about him. So he says that the son squanders all the money on dissolute living – further dishonoring his father, his people, Torah (the law), and God before the Gentiles. Jesus continues to increase the younger son's deficits by saying that the land experienced famine, and the boy was forced to live with the pigs

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<sup>27</sup> See Jeremias 1972, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> See Jeremias 1972, p. 130.

which are exceedingly unclean animals. The boy not only touches the pigs, he lives with them, and longs to put pig food inside of him – rendering him impure both inside and outside. Jesus' audience would not only have been dismayed by the boy's heartless and evil conduct, but also disgusted by his impurity.

Once Jesus has finished describing the son's seemingly irredeemable character, he begins the second movement of the Parable. He implies that the son is in such great pain that he would do just about anything to get some relief. The son probably thinks that the father has disowned him, but in order to get relief from his pain, he decides to take a chance that the father might accept him back in a qualified way. He devises a plan to ask the father to forgive him and take him back into the household as a servant (a demotion from son to slave); so he proceeds toward his homeland and the family farm.

Before proceeding to the third movement of the Parable, we should examine what Jesus' audience probably thought about the son's plan. They probably would have believed that the end of the story would be the father justifiably sending out a delegation to inform the son that he had been disowned and had no further right to be on his property – “if you wanted to live in the land of the Gentiles, and throw away everything I have given you, then go back to ‘your’ people – your way of life and your “religion.”

But the story takes a completely unexpected turn. Remember the father in this story is Jesus' revelation of *Abba*. The father sees the boy coming from afar – as if he has been looking for him, and when he catches sight of him, he runs out to meet him overwhelmed with love and joy. He shows no anger at the son for his heartlessness and dishonor. He has not stopped loving – unconditionally loving – his son for a single second, and that love has caused him to feel immense worry for his son's welfare. The mere sight of the boy causes the father's worry to dissipate, and he does not want to lose a single second in radically accepting his son back into the house.

Jesus then continues the story – the father's first action is to throw his arms around the boy and to kiss him. His affection for his son has not diminished at all. It is as if he had done nothing to humiliate and dishonor his father and family. Rembrandt painted a remarkable portrayal of this scene (called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*). In it the father has a look of tremendous relief, love, compassion, and joy. He also has both a masculine and feminine hand with which he is embracing his boy.

The son now takes out his rehearsed lines – “Father, I have sinned against you, and I no longer deserve to be called your son. Just treat me like one of your servants.” However, the father is not interested in the rehearsed lines, and certainly has no intention of treating the boy as a slave. He knows there is no time to be lost so the first word out of his mouth is “Quick!” He asks that the best cloak be brought out for him. Recall that cloaks were worn by only people of high rank, and so the father is asking that his son be treated, as it were, like royalty. He then asks that sandals be given to him to take care of his temporal needs and to show that he is no longer a slave, but a freed man. He then proceeds to give the son a signet ring (explained above) indicating that he belongs in the family one hundred percent. He has not lost a scintilla of his

former status as son. The father is so overjoyed that he kills the fatted calf (the very best animal he has) and begins to celebrate a feast. Remember this is your God.

A fourth movement of the parable now begins. Jesus indicates that the older son (who has been faithful to his father and has worked hard on the farm without benefit of his brother's labor while his brother was squandering the family fortune in a foreign land) hears the music and merriment, and asks one of the servants about it. The servant indicates that his brother was back, and that his father is overjoyed, and has killed the fatted calf. The older son (who represents the Pharisees) is justifiably indignant and hurt. He feels like he has received no reward for his fidelity and labors throughout his brother's absence, and even worse, that the father has shown his heartless and irresponsible little brother greater favor than himself – "You never gave me so much as a kid to celebrate with *my* friends."

At this juncture Jesus indicates that the father comes out to meet his older boy. He says that the father implores him. The Greek word here is "parakaleō" which has a multifaceted meaning. It means first to call to one's side in order to give comfort or consolation to someone who is intimate, and it also carries the meaning of begging, pleading, beseeching, or entreating – which puts the person making the request in a humble, weak, or even servile position. Why did Jesus use a word in Aramaic that would be translated by this Greek word? He wants to establish how God the Father feels toward the Pharisees who have been loyal to Torah (and the Old Covenant) for many years. So how does God feel toward them? He feels like they are intimates – and that he can call them to his side in order to give them consolation. He is not beneath making the humble gesture of begging or pleading with them to come back into the house, because he loves them deeply and appreciates their loyalty. To demonstrate this, he makes an absolute pledge to them – "You have been with me always, and everything I have is yours. Now, come back into the house, for these sinners were lost and are found; they were dead and have come back to life." The father is willing to give these loyal servants everything he has (*before* he dies) to demonstrate his love and gratitude to them.

Though Jesus has confronted the Pharisees with their hypocrisy and self-righteousness – particularly when they imply that sinners are not welcome to God's Kingdom, he wants to assure them that his Father loves them unconditionally, and will bestow His Kingdom upon them. Interestingly, Jesus does not give an ending to this part of the Parable – He does not say whether the older son goes back into the house because He does not know how each Pharisee will react to His invitation to the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the invitation to God's Kingdom remains unconditionally open to their acceptance of it.

#### IV. Conclusion [Back to top](#)

Jesus' proclamation of the Father's unconditional love (*agapē*) is central not only to His teaching, but also to the writings of St. John and St. Paul. The Gospel of John can be considered an elaboration of the love of God and Jesus. Early in the Gospel, John teaches:



For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3: 16-18).

As if this were not enough, Jesus proclaims (through His prayer to the Father) that the Father's love for Jesus' disciples is *the same* as His love for His own Son:

Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:23).

In his first Epistle, John clearly states the central doctrine of Jesus' teaching:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1John 4: 7-10).

St. Paul also recognizes the unconditional love of God in Jesus' words and actions:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or the sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

St. Paul tries to express the super abundance of God's love for us in the Letter to the Ephesians:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this *love* that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the *fullness of God* (Ephesians 3: 14-19; italics mine).

The New Testament writings on love are by no means limited to the passages cited above from the teachings of Jesus, St. John, and St. Paul; however, the above passages are sufficient to show that Jesus intended to proclaim that God's love has absolutely no conditions or imperfections. Though God's love has no conditions, there is one important condition to our receiving it from Him – we must want it enough to make it our own.

If we truly want this life of love, then we will enter into it – which means putting our trust in Him, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, and having compassion on those in need. We may fail again and again in our attempts to follow Jesus, but we can always continue to return without limit<sup>29</sup> until we reach the end of our journey with Him. Jesus does not leave us with this simple command, He gives us several gifts to help us – the gift of His Spirit, His Word, His Church, and His body and blood (the Eucharist). When we combine His teachings with His gifts, we can see five dimensions of His path to salvation – genuine repentance for our transgressions, entering into a relationship with His Father, joining a church community (for which He lays the foundation), being faithful to His Word, and following the Holy Spirit.

As the reader has probably already surmised, Jesus’ teaching on love does not stop at the love of His Father; it includes His own love – not only expressed in words, but in action – particularly the consummate gift of Himself in complete self-sacrifice. This two-pronged teaching on love establishes His identity and relationship with His Divine Father – they are *both* unconditionally loving.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Jesus’ Love of the Poor, the Sick, and Sinners**

[Back to top](#)

#### **Introduction**

Jesus was greatly concerned for the suffering and the weak – not only those who were suffering physically (the sick and the poor), but also suffering spiritually. He wanted to show them a way to make their suffering positive (for themselves and others), but also to assure them of redemption in His Kingdom of unconditional love. Beyond this, he wanted to be personally present to them, to identify with their suffering, and to give them the Holy Spirit to help them interpret and benefit from it.

#### **I.**

### **Jesus’ Love of the Poor**

[Back to top](#)

Jesus makes it a point to be with the poor and give alms to them,<sup>30</sup> and to ask his followers to care for the poor as if they were caring for him – “For truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Care for the poor is not simply central to his ministry and teaching; it is integral to bringing the Kingdom of God to the world. He proclaims this as the first Beatitude in the Gospel of Luke, and makes it the

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<sup>29</sup> When Jesus says in Mt 18:22, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” he is referring to a perfect prime number times 10 times a perfect prime number, which is virtually *endless* in Jewish numeric symbolism. If Jesus asks this of us, we can be sure that this is central to His heart and the heart of His Father.

<sup>30</sup> “Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the feast’; or, that he should give something to the poor.” (John 13:29).

culminating moment of the end time (the definitive coming of the Kingdom) in his message to John the Baptist:

Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor (Mt. 11: 4-5).

Jesus moves “the good news for the poor” from first place in the prophesy of Isaiah to last place in his message to John to indicate to him that the culminating act of the coming of the Kingdom will be the consolation of the poor. John P. Meier writes in this regard:

...the climactic action of Jesus in bringing in the end time, the action Jesus keeps to last in his list, is not any healing but rather the proclamation of good news to the poor—the good news spoken of in Is. 61:1, the good news Jesus quite literally proclaims to the “poor” in his first Beatitude in the great Q Sermon (Matt 5:3/Luke 6:20).<sup>31</sup>

Jesus had more than a “soft spot in His heart” for the poor, more than feelings of empathy and compassion for them; He felt that their salvation and the alleviation of their suffering was integral to the Kingdom of God, and promised that the consolation of the poor will come when the Kingdom of God is fully realized. Apparently, Jesus did not expect the suffering of the poor to be completely alleviated until His Kingdom is fully actualized.

Furthermore, Jesus encourages his disciples to imitate his example and help the poor in their midst – particularly by giving alms to them. He praised Zacchaeus for doing so (Luke 19:8-10). In carrying out this key responsibility, Christians actualize His Kingdom in the present moment. Those who help the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned will also inherit “the Kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world” (Mt. 25:34).

Jesus also thought that heartlessness toward the poor put people in grave spiritual danger. He states that callousness toward the needy will be the basis for separating the righteous (sheep) from the unrighteous (goats) in Mt 25:31-41. He attributes the chasm between Lazarus and the rich man to the callousness of the rich man’s heart in Luke 16:23ff. For this reason, he makes the cultivation of a compassionate heart central to Christian spiritual life (in the central commandment, the fifth Beatitude, the Good Samaritan, and many other texts).

It might be thought that Jesus’ concern for the poor was not as intense as implied above, because He tells his disciples who are criticizing a woman for anointing His head with expensive ointment, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me” (Mt 26:10-11). Jesus here is not telling his disciples to be less concerned about the poor, but rather to appreciate the act of compassion done by the woman.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, if concern for the poor had not been central to Jesus, the apostles would never have protested that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds

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<sup>31</sup> Meier 1994, p. 401.

<sup>32</sup> “In pouring this ointment on my body she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mt 26:12-13).

given to the *poor*. For Jesus, concern for the poor is always central, but in different situations it may not be the highest priority.

Jesus' concern for the poor is not "clinical" – and it does not arise out of a mere sense of obligation or duty. It comes from a deep empathy for all human beings, which is grounded in their intrinsic goodness and lovability. When the needs of these "beloveds" are not met, and they are impoverished or marginalized, Jesus' *heart* goes out to them in precisely the same way as the Good Samaritan's.

## II.

### Jesus' Love of the Sick and Possessed

[Back to top](#)

Jesus' exorcisms and healing miracles were not performed primarily to show his divine power and authority. This is only a consequence of his main purpose –to usher the Kingdom of God into the world. An integral part of bringing God's Kingdom is the banishing of Satan and liberating the world from his dominant dark power. Jesus thought of his many ministerial activities as carrying out this purpose – including preaching the word, exorcizing the possessed, healing the sick, caring for the poor, healing sinners, and most especially, his self-sacrificial death. These activities, not only bring about God's Kingdom and break the power of Satan, but also express God's love (*agapē*). For Jesus, the recognition of the unique goodness, lovability, and transcendent mystery of each individual that leads to genuine care for them is the power that breaks Satan's grip on the world and establishes God's Kingdom. This leads Jesus to fill his ministerial day not only with preaching, but with a considerable number of exorcisms and healings.<sup>33</sup> When he is not actively involved in these "works of God," he befriends and ministers to sinners (see below Section II.C).

Jesus' miracle working is quite unique in the ancient Jewish and Hellenistic world. Three major features distinguish his ministry from that of other so called "miracle workers"--his genuine concern for the sick person – both physically and spiritually, his desire that there be faith in the petitioners, and that the healing miracle point beyond itself -- to God's love, God's Kingdom, and the banishing of evil. For the moment, we will focus only on the dimensions of love and faith in these miracle stories. This is best accomplished by taking two concrete examples from Jesus' unique ministry:

1. The healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus and
2. The raising of the only son of the widow of Nain.

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<sup>33</sup> There can be little doubt that Jesus performed many exorcisms and healing miracles. Even his opponents did not dispute this – instead they tried to explain his prolific ministry as a consequence of magic or demonic possession, as Wright notes: "...we must be clear that Jesus' contemporaries, both those who became his followers and those who were determined not to become his followers, certainly regarded him as possessed of remarkable powers. The church did not invent the charge that Jesus was in league with Beelzebul; but charges like that are not advanced unless they are needed as an explanation for some quite remarkable phenomena." Wright 1996, p. 187. Furthermore, Jesus' ministry of exorcism and healing are attested by non-Christian sources (see the previous for a list of non-gospel sources of Jesus' miraculous healing power by Raymond Brown, John P. Meier, and Luke Timothy Johnson as well as virtually all New Testament sources).

Let's begin with the healing of Bartimaeus:

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road (Mk. 10:46-52).

The geographical and chronological specificity, as well as Bartimaeus' use of pre-resurrection Semitic titles for Jesus indicates that the details in the story are probably historically accurate. We are presented with a scene in which Jesus attracts a large crowd as he enters into Jericho. A blind man on the side of the road, Bartimaeus, who few respect because of his infirmity, discovers that Jesus is passing by. He has heard about Jesus' healing power, and uses an ancient Jewish term of respect, "Son of David" to cry out to Jesus, asking him to have pity on him. People in the crowd rebuke him and tell him to be quiet while others barely notice him – *but Jesus hears his pleading*, which causes him to stop. Much to the surprise of the crowd, Jesus asks that this seemingly insignificant invalid be given special attention – and brought to him. The crowd changes their "tune" and tells him to "cheer up and come over to see the teacher." Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he can do for him, and using another Jewish term of respect, he says, "Rabbi, I want to see." When Jesus sees Bartimaeus' belief, he has compassion on him, and heals him with these words, "Go now, *your* faith has healed you." Bartimaeus cannot help himself – he follows Jesus and His disciples.

Jesus' compassion is evident in this passage. He seems to be the only one who doesn't ignore Bartimaeus or treat him like a "second class citizen." Instead, Bartimaeus' pleading attracts his attention, and compels him to stop, and do something for him. In Jesus' view, Bartimaeus is in the grip of the power of evil, but not because he has committed a sin (as explained above, Jesus rejects this Old Testament interpretation of suffering). He is already moved with compassion before healing him, but he first wants to see Bartimaeus' faith (his trust in the mercy of God). When Bartimaeus responds, "Rabbi, I want to see," Jesus knows that Bartimaeus not only trusts in the mercy of God, but believes that Jesus is the instrument of that mercy -- or better, that Jesus *is* the mercy of God. Once the healing has occurred, Jesus gives Bartimaeus the credit – "Go now, *your* faith has healed you."

Though this healing miracle attests to Jesus' divine power and authority, it is by no means the central point. Jesus is not interested in calling attention to *himself*, or astonishing anyone with apparent magic or supernatural power. He is interested in healing *Bartimaeus* – the one who is gripped by the power of evil. Jesus cannot help himself – Bartimaeus' pleading captures his attention, and causes him to move toward freeing Bartimaeus from the darkness that grips him. Jesus does not pray to God to heal Bartimaeus, but rather cures him by *his own*

healing power<sup>34</sup> (the power of God's mercy), and interestingly, uses Bartimaeus' trust in God's mercy to actualize the healing. Jesus sees himself as "the compassion or mercy of God," and if anyone trusts in his divine compassion, they are healed from the power of evil. Notice that the attention is not fixed on "Jesus wielding power," but rather on "Bartimaeus trusting in Jesus as the mercy of God." The whole dynamic is one of compassion – compassion for Bartimaeus (as a result of his pleading and infirmity) and Bartimaeus' trust in Jesus as "the compassion of God."

Let us now turn to another miracle – the raising of the son of the Widow of Nain:

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother (Luke 7: 11-17).

As with the Bartimaeus story, the geographical and chronological specificity of this story indicate that the details are likely to be historically accurate.<sup>35</sup> We are here presented with Jesus coming into a very small (and insignificant) town with a large group of disciples. Coming out of the town gate, is a funeral party with a young man on a bier who is the only son of his widowed mother. Jesus sees the scene and intuitively feels the tragic turn of events in this woman's life. He recognizes her anguish at the loss of her son, and realizes that without the support of her son she is probably destined for a life of abject poverty. The woman is weeping – and once again, Jesus cannot help himself. The story specifies that Jesus is moved by a visceral sense of compassion (*esplagchnisthe* – the same word used by Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan). He asks the woman to stop weeping because he intends to put an end to her pain by raising her son to life. This is very uncharacteristic for Jesus who normally waits for a person to ask him for a miracle – that is to trust that he is "the mercy of God." Jesus knows that no one would ask for such a miracle, because "raising the dead" would not have been thought possible even by a great prophet. So Jesus touches the bier, and the bearers stop. Jesus does not touch the young man, but instead raises him by his authoritative word -- "Young man, to you *I say*, Arise." Once again, Jesus does not pray to *God* to raise the young man, but rather raises him by *his own word* – "To you, *I say* arise."<sup>36</sup> Jesus then gives the young man back to his mother.

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<sup>34</sup> As noted in the previous volume, this action of Jesus is decidedly different from the Old Testament prophets who do not heal by "their own" authority and word. They pray to God to intercede *through them* to heal a sick person. This is particularly important with respect to the only two Old Testament prophets who raised the dead—Elijah and Elisha. Again we see that these two prophets pray to God to use them as intermediaries—as instruments of His power to raise the dead. As will be seen in the next miracle story, Jesus raises the widow's son by *his own word* alone -- "Young man, I say to you, Arise." This is true for all the New Testament stories where Jesus raises the dead.

<sup>35</sup> The town of Nain was so insignificant that many scholars doubted its existence until recent archaeological findings confirmed it. Why mention such an insignificant town unless this remarkable event had actually taken place *there*?

<sup>36</sup> See above, note 14.



Though Jesus clearly manifests divine power and authority in raising the dead by his own word, the emphasis is on his compassion (*esplagchnisthe*). Inasmuch as God alone has power over life and death,<sup>37</sup> Jesus manifests divine power; however, this power is inextricably connected to his deep compassion, showing that the power of God is unmitigated compassion for the needy. Jesus' care and compassion for this widow (a stranger) is what causes the dead to be raised through him. He shows himself to be the son of the *loving* God by revealing at once that he possesses God's power, and that his power arises out of *compassion*.

In sum, Jesus' unique ministry of healing shows his empathy, sympathy, and compassion for those in need. He cannot resist the pleading of Bartimaeus or the sadness of the Widow of Nain. Their obvious need for help moves his whole being with compassion (*esplagchnisthe*), and so his loving compassion becomes the power through which the needy are healed. In the case of Bartimaeus, Jesus waits until Bartimaeus expresses his trust in him as "the mercy of God" (which typifies the majority of Jesus' healing miracles). Jesus' compassion overrules sickness and death, and breaks the grip of Satan over the world, establishing God's Kingdom.

### III.

#### Jesus' Acceptance and Love of Sinners

[Back to top](#)

Joachim Jeremias indicates that many of the original followers of Jesus were sinners. Jesus associates them with "the poor" and orients His mission to alleviating their poverty:

If we are to gain a clear picture of the people to whom Jesus brought the good news, our starting point must be the fact that, when we look at the various designations of the followers of Jesus as they are given in the gospels, we come to know these people from a double perspective. They are repeatedly called "publicans and sinners" (Mark 2.16 par.; Matt. 11.19 par.; Luke 15.1), "publicans and prostitutes" (Matt. 21.32), or simply "sinners" (Mark 2.17; Luke 7.37, 39; 15.2; 19.7). The deep contempt expressed in such designations shows that these phrases were coined by *Jesus' opponents*; Matt. 11.19 par. Luke 7.34 confirms that explicitly.<sup>38</sup>

To whom does the term "sinner" refer? Wright notes that it could refer to a large group of people ranging from non-Pharisaic Jews ("light sinners" who the Pharisees held to be technically sinners because they did not agree with their interpretation of *Torah*) to the wicked who deliberately flouted the law, like prostitutes (who would be considered "heavy sinners").<sup>39</sup> Tax collectors were considered to be particularly egregious sinners because they were collaborators with Rome, dishonest, and rapacious. Wright calls them "the moral equivalent of lepers."<sup>40</sup> It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus associates with all of these individuals and groups and enjoys table-fellowship with them.

<sup>37</sup> In Genesis 1, it is clear that God provides the "breath" of all living things, and that God creates human beings in his own image (Gen 1:27). In Genesis 2, God creates man by his own breath (spirit) -- 2:7.

<sup>38</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 109. See also McKenzie 1968, pp. 83-84. See also E.P. Sanders, 1985, pp. 174-209.

<sup>39</sup> See Wright 1996 p. 266.

<sup>40</sup> Wright 1996 p. 266.

Recall that Jesus associated the father of the Prodigal Son with His Father (*Abba*) and that the Prodigal Son represents both individual sinners and perhaps also Israel (conceived as a sinful nation). Jesus reveals that His Father not only forgives the sins of the egregiously sinful son, but also restores him back to his former dignity and condition, and even re-opens the family (the kingdom) to him. Yet Jesus does far more than *preach* the forgiveness and salvation of repentant sinners; He also associates with them, welcomes them into His company, and even eats with them. Dining (particularly table fellowship at a banquet) indicates not only friendship, but also familiarity and kinship.

Jesus' welcoming of and table fellowship with sinners incites the Scribes and Pharisees to criticism and disdain:

And as He sat at table in [Levi's] house, many tax collectors and sinners were sitting with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many who followed Him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to His disciples, "Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mk 2:15-16).

The Pharisees' contempt is clearly manifest when they simultaneously accuse Jesus of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Mt. 11:19). It may also be seen in the attitude of the Pharisee who upon observing a woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair thought, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Lk 7:38-39). We hear this familiar refrain of the Pharisees once again when Jesus asks Zacchaeus if He might stay at his house: "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Lk 19:7).

Thus, Jesus endures not only ostracization by the official religious leaders, but also their contempt, insult, and disdain. This could not have been a comfortable religious or social position for Jesus. So why did He put Himself in this position? Because He could not resist any sinner who turned to Him.

The rationale for His peculiar sacrificial behavior is quite clear: "Those who are well have no need of a physician; only those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17). Jesus manifests a deep sympathy and affection for sinners when He explains why He receives and eats with them:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing (Lk 15:4-5).

Jesus also acknowledges the love that sinners can manifest when they have been respected and loved. He believes that this love is tantamount to "a righteousness which surpasses that of the observant scribes and Pharisees." In response to the Pharisees' criticism of the woman who

has washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, Jesus says to Simon, the Pharisee:

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little. And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven (Lk 7:47).

Jesus forgives sinners and promises them righteousness and salvation. This is evident in the above passage, and is even more clearly manifest in a passage which suggests that sinners will enter the kingdom of heaven before even the strictly observant Pharisees:

Amen I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you [Pharisees]. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him..." (Mt 21:31-32).

Jesus clearly reveals the forgiveness and salvation of sinners in the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. He asserts that the tax collector is justified (made right before God and destined for salvation), but the Pharisee is not. Why? Because the tax collector humbly begs for the mercy of God, but the Pharisee tells God that he has done everything right, implying that he has made *himself* righteous:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus *with himself*, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted (Lk 18:9-14).

Jesus not only associates with and befriends sinners; he believes in them and defends them. He shows himself to be *honored* in going to the house of Zacchaeus (a tax collector), and when Zacchaeus welcomes him, and reforms his life because of him, Jesus calls him "a son of Abraham" (a member of the chosen people) even though he is an outcast in the eyes of the Pharisees. Jesus calls the tax collector, Matthew, to be one of his disciples. This is an extraordinary honor, and as if this were not enough, he goes to Matthew's house to enjoy table fellowship with him and his friends (many of whom were tax collectors and sinners). When challenged by the Pharisees about this, Jesus defends them by saying:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt 9:12-13).

Jesus honors the sinful woman who washes his feet with her tears in a similar way. Simon the Pharisee is thinking to himself that Jesus could not be a prophet if he allows a sinful

woman to touch him, but Jesus responds that the woman has conducted herself in a better manner than Simon because of her great love, and Jesus reveals here a central truth – “I tell you, then, the great love she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven (Luke 7:47).

We can now see how Jesus thinks and feels about sinners. Instead of *excluding* them from the religious community and the Kingdom of God, he wants to *include* them – in everything. He believes in them and sees their dignity – amidst the many problems in their lives. He invites them to repentance, and recognizes this repentance in a variety of ways – in Matthew’s decision to follow him, in Zacchaeus’ decision to reform his ways, and in the tax collector’s simple prayer, “Have mercy on me for I am a sinful man.”

Jesus’ strategy is to love and honor these sinners. When they see that he is “a prophet and more,” they believe his promise that God loves them and includes them in the Kingdom, and that God rejoices in their return – like the father of the Prodigal Son or a shepherd finding his lost sheep. This gives them hope, a sense of their own dignity and lovability, and a belief in their inclusion in the Kingdom of Heaven (counteracting the negative effects of the Pharisees). He believes that many of them will respond in gratitude and love to God, which will provide the conviction and spiritual power to begin the process of reforming their lives.

Jesus also *defends* sinners, both directly and indirectly. Sometimes he will tell the Pharisees that a particular sinner is justified in the eyes of God such as the woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7), Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9: 10-13), the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 1-11), and Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10). Sometimes he defends sinners indirectly by means of parables, sayings, and polemic. For example, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32), the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15: 1-7), the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21: 25-30), and the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple (Luke 18: 9-14). Some of his sayings include his forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery, “Nor do I condemn you” (John 8:10), and his promise of salvation to the good thief on the cross – “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43). His polemic in defense of sinners is extensive: he claims that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom before the Pharisees (Matthew 21:31), that the Pharisees place heavy burdens on people’s shoulders that they do not lift a finger to budge (Matthew 23:4), and his most telling polemic:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to (Mt 23:13).

Here we see the opposition between Jesus’ and the Pharisees approach to the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees attempt to exclude everyone who is “underserving” while Jesus tries to include everyone who is willing to turn to God in trust.

Given the disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees, and his rough rhetoric towards them when He defends sinners, one might legitimately ask whether He loved the Pharisees. Jeremias indicates that in fact He did, and was very concerned about their salvation, and so he

oriented the last part of the Prodigal Son Parable toward them (represented by the older son).<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Jesus seeks out the Pharisees who do not reject Him out of hand. He dines at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Mt 26:6-13), speaks with Nicodemus at great length (John 3:1-21), and was befriended by Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the Sanhedrin) who asked Pilate for Jesus' body and gave him his own prepared tomb (see Mark 15:43 and John 19:38). Jesus patiently endures the insults and disdain of the Pharisees, and reserves his harsh rhetoric to those who are "preventing sinners from entering the Kingdom." Furthermore, many early converts to Christianity were Jewish Scribes (very likely including Matthew the Evangelist). Matthew writes his Gospel to attract Jewish religious leaders to Christianity. We must assume that some of this impetus came from Jesus Himself. In view of this, it seems evident that Jesus loved and was concerned for the Pharisees, and that his harsh rhetoric was directed at their salvation as well as the defense of sinners unjustifiably harmed by their exclusionary interpretation of *Torah*.

In sum, Jesus was drawn to sinners because He recognized their goodness and dignity, their potential for salvation, and their need "for a physician." He respected them, believed in them, and loved them – in the same way that the father of the Prodigal Son loved *both* of his sons. He not only cared for sinners, He felt affection for them, and attributed that same care and affection to His Father.

## Chapter Five

### Jesus' Unconditional Love – the Passion and the Eucharist

[Back to top](#)

Jesus set His face resolutely toward Jerusalem in the midst of His disciples' warning about impending persecution because He had a plan – a plan to give away His unconditionally healing and reconciling love to the world for all generations. The first step of the plan would unfold at the Last Supper. The second part would bring the plan to completion in His suffering and death. As noted above (Section I), Jesus interpreted this self-sacrificial act through the Fourth Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah:

Though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.  
After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.  
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the  
strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the  
transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Is  
53:10-12).

Jesus interpreted His self-sacrificial death as a gift or libation for sinners and transgressors. He wanted to take the darkness and negation of all their sins upon Himself, and to

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<sup>41</sup>See Jeremiah 1972, pp 129-131.

make reparation for it by the gift of His unblemished life. His plan was to make traditional sin offerings and the Pascal sacrifice into an offering of himself by replacing the sacrificial animals with his own body and blood. He would do this at the celebration of the Passover with his disciples. After the supper, he would allow himself to be taken captive by the Jewish authorities and be persecuted by the Roman authorities – actualizing the symbolic sacrifice of the night before. When the sacrifice was completed, he would have given himself completely to humankind, which he interpreted as an act of *unconditional* love.<sup>42</sup>

## I.

### The First Part of the Plan: The Last Supper

[Back to top](#)

Jesus' Eucharistic words explain the first part of His plan to love the world into redemption.<sup>43</sup> Jeremias attempted a reconstruction of the original tradition of Jesus' Eucharistic words from the four New Testament traditions: I Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; and Luke 22:17-20. Notice that there are two distinct strands of tradition: The Mark-Matthew strand (constructed for liturgical purposes) and the Paul-Luke strand (constructed for a Gentile audience). Jeremias prefers the Mark-Matthew strand for the rite over the bread (body) and the Paul-Luke strand for the rite of the wine (blood). Using literary constructions and Semitisms as clues to resolve other differences within each strand, Jeremias concludes that the rite of the Last Supper probably took the following form.<sup>44</sup>

Jesus gathered with His disciples before the feast of the Passover and indicated to them that He longed to celebrate this Passover with them, but instead of doing so, fasted while the other disciples celebrated.<sup>45</sup> After drinking one of the four Passover cups while they were eating the Passover meal (or an adapted Passover ritual), Jesus initiated the ritual of the bread, identifying it with His body: "Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take; this is my body.'" Then, after the completion of the Passover meal, Jesus initiated the ritual of the wine which He identifies with the covenant in His blood. He took a cup of red wine, gave thanks, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This cup is the covenant in my blood<sup>46</sup> which is poured out for [the] many."<sup>47</sup> Sometime either prior to or after this (perhaps both), Jesus gives a command to repeat the ritual: "Do this in remembrance of me."

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<sup>42</sup> See John 15:13 – "No greater love has a man than this than to lay down his life for his friends." St. Paul also understands this when he says in Romans 8:32-35: He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up for us all*, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* (Rm 8:32-35).

<sup>43</sup> This thesis and the contents of this section are explained in great detail in Joachim Jeremias' work *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. It is also explained in an excellent article by Betz 1968-70, pg. 257.

<sup>44</sup> See Jeremias 1966, pp 171-173, 208-209, 223-224, and 238-243. See also Meier 1991 pp 334-337.

<sup>45</sup> See Jeremias' convincing argument in 1966, pp. 208-09.

<sup>46</sup> Though Jesus identifies the red wine with the "covenant in His blood," it is clear from the red wine, the parallelism with the bread, and the use of "this cup" that Jesus is identifying the red wine with both His *blood* and the covenant in His blood. Jeremias notes that the color of the wine is significant here: "The *tertium comparationis* in the case of the bread is the fact that it was broken, and in the case of the wine the red colour. We have already seen...that it was customary to drink red wine at the Passover.... The comparison between *red wine* and blood was



When He says, “This is my Body which will be given up for you,” the Greek word used to translate His Hebrew (*zeh bašari*) or Aramaic (*den bisri*) was *sōma* instead of *sarx*. *Sarx* means “flesh” and would certainly refer to Jesus’ *corporeal* body given on the cross, while *sōma* is much broader and refers to the *whole* person (mind, soul, will, as well as corporeal body). Thus, *sōma* is much like the word “body” in “everybody” or “somebody” in English. It might, therefore, be roughly translated as “person” or “self.” If we substitute the word “self” for “body” in the Eucharistic words, we obtain “This is my whole self given up for you.” This is remarkably similar to Jesus’ definition of unconditional love in John’s Gospel -- “gift of one’s whole self” (“greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” – John 15:13). Thus, in the Eucharist, Jesus is not only giving us His whole self – His whole person – He is also giving us His love, indeed, His *unconditional* love – that is, a love which cannot be surpassed.

This unconditional love is corroborated by the gift of His blood (which, according to Jewish custom, is separated from the body of the sacrificial offering). When Jesus offered His blood separately from His body, He showed Himself to be making an intentional self-sacrifice.

Blood (the principle of life for the Israelites) was the vehicle through which atonement occurred in sin or guilt offerings. Jesus’ reference to His sacrificial blood would almost inevitably be seen as the blood of a sin-offering – with the notable exception that the sin-offering is no longer an animal, but rather, Jesus Himself, “the Beloved One of the Father.” Jesus humbled Himself (taking the place of an animal – a sacrificial sin-offering) to absolve the sin of the world forever.

Jesus goes beyond this by associating Himself with the paschal lamb. He intentionally coordinates His arrival in Jerusalem with the Passover feast so that His sacrifice will be associated with that of the Paschal lamb. He loved us so much that He desired to become the new Passover sacrifice, replacing an unblemished lamb with His own divine presence.

The blood of the Passover lamb (put on the doorposts of every Israelite household) was the instrument through which the Israelite people were protected from death (the angel of death passing over those houses) which enabled them to move out of slavery into freedom (from Egypt into the Promised Land). When Jesus took the place of a sacrificial animal, He replaced the worldly freedom offered by the Passover--freedom from slavery in Egypt--with an unconditional

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common in the Old Testament (Gen. 49.11; Deut. 32.14; Isa. 63.3,6), further Eccl 39.26; 50.15; I Macc. 6.34; Rev. 14.20; Sanh. 70a, etc.” (Jeremias 1966, pp. 223-24).

<sup>47</sup> Mark-Matthew reports “poured out for many” but Luke reports “poured out for *you*.” Jeremias holds that “for the many” is the more original on the basis of linguistic grounds, namely, “for the many” is a Semitism while “you” is not. Jeremias attributes the replacement of “the many” by “you” as having a liturgical purpose where each worshiper feels him or herself to be individually addressed (by “you”), which would not happen with the indefinite “the many” (See Jeremias 1966, pp. 172). The Greek “*to pollōn*” (“the many”) is an unusual expression, and is probably an attempt to translate a common Semitic expression referring to “all.” This is explained below in this section.

and eternal freedom from sin and death. Thus, He made His self-sacrifice the new vehicle for protection from *every* form of sin and death for all eternity by outshining sin and darkness with His unconditionally loving eternal light.

There is yet a third dimension of Jesus' use of blood which He explicitly states as "the Blood of the covenant." A covenant was a solemn promise that bound parties to a guaranteed agreement. When Jesus associates His blood with the covenant, He is *guaranteeing* the "absolution from sin," "freedom from slavery and darkness," and eternal life given through His unconditional love. By referencing the Blood of the *covenant*, Jesus makes a solemn and unconditionally guaranteed promise to give us eternal life and love. If we put our faith in him, trust in his promise, and try to remain in His teachings, His unconditional love will save us.

Jesus intended His sacrifice on the cross to be universal (see below Chapter Eight), and to be the power of love and salvation for all humankind; but He did not stop there. He also provided a way for us to receive His unconditionally loving presence (body, mind and soul) throughout the rest of history. He intended to make His loving presence within us a power of peace, reconciliation, healing, and transformation. He did this by making the actions and words of His Last Supper into a ritual, using the simple phrase, "Do this in remembrance of me." This phrase requires explanation.

We need to understand the first century Jewish view of time and memory to grasp the significance of Jesus' ritual (now known as the "Eucharistic celebration"). In this view, time is not an unalterable physical property (as in the "space-time continuum" of the Theory of Relativity). Rather, time was seen as a surmountable and controllable dimension of *sacred* history.<sup>48</sup> As Eliade notes, sacred history was seen as superseding profane history (physical history), and through ritual and myth, prophets and priests could return to the sacred time of history as if profane time were not relevant.<sup>49</sup> First century Judaism was no exception to this. Religious authorities believed that the celebration of the Passover Supper was a return to the sacred events of the Exodus, and that reliving this sacred moment would bring them close to the sacred reality (God/Yahweh), which would, in turn, sacralize them – make them holy.<sup>50</sup>

As Jesus enters into the sacrificial meal with His disciples, He brings this view of time and history with Him.<sup>51</sup> When He says, "Do this in *remembrance* of me," He does not mean, "call it to mind." His view of "remembrance" (translated by the Greek term "*anamnesis*") did not separate "mind" from "heart," or separate a "mental remembrance" from a "ritual reliving."<sup>52</sup> For Him, the instruction to "do this in remembrance of me," meant "reengage in this ritual and relive

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<sup>48</sup> Eliade phrases it this way: "In *imitating* the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythical hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time" – Eliade 1975. First Century Jewish views of time follow Eliade's general form.

<sup>49</sup> Eliade 1971.

<sup>50</sup> Jeremias quotes O. Michel, noting, "God's remembrance is, namely (this is an important fact to which O. Michel called attention), never a simple remembering of something, but always and without exception 'an *effecting and creating* event.' When Luke 1.72 says that God remembers his covenant, this means that he is *now fulfilling* the eschatological covenant promise." Jeremias 1966, p. 348. See also Betz 1968, pp 260-261.

<sup>51</sup> See Betz 1968, pp 258-262.

<sup>52</sup> See Jeremias 1966, p. 348 and Betz 1968, p 260-261.

the reality of me in it.” To relive Jesus’ ritual is to return to it – with Him *really* there. Johannes Betz summarizes this as follows:

*Anamnesis* in the biblical sense means not only the subjective representation of something in the consciousness and as an act of the remembering mind. It is also the objective effectiveness and presence of one reality in another, especially the effectiveness and presence of the salvific actions of God, in the liturgical worship. Even in the Old Testament, the liturgy is the privileged medium in which the covenant attains *actuality*. ¶ The meaning of the logion [“Do this in remembrance of me”] may perhaps be paraphrased as follows: “do this (what I have done) in order to *bring about my presence*, to make really present the salvation wrought in me.”<sup>53</sup>

It is difficult for us, as 21<sup>st</sup> century scientifically oriented people, to enter into Jesus’ perspective, because we really have to think about it since it is so dissimilar from the way we conceive time and reality. Nevertheless, if we are going to understand what He was doing, we will have to make the effort – otherwise, His words and actions will be completely masked by our inapplicable worldview.

The best historical research indicates that Jesus believed He would be *really* present to us in *every* reliving of His Last Supper ritual until the end of time. This intention not only stems from His view of history, time, and ritual, but also from His conviction that He would be raised from the dead,<sup>54</sup> and would be present to us in His risen form throughout the rest of human history. Betz characterizes it in this way:

... *the bodily person of Jesus is present in the supper*, not however in the static manner of being a *thing*, but as the Servant of God who in his sacrificial death affects the salvation of us all and more precisely as the sacrificial offering of the Servant who delivers himself up on the cross. The *real presence* of the *person* is there to actualize the presence of the sacrificial deed and is united with this in an organic whole. The Eucharist becomes, then, the abiding presence in the meal of the sacrificially constituted salvific event “Jesus”, in whom person and work form an inseparable unity.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Betz 1968-70, p. 260.

<sup>54</sup> Jesus had a strong conviction in the resurrection, following Second Temple Judaism. In this regard he sided with the Pharisees and not the Sadducees (who did not believe in a resurrection – accepting only the *Torah* – the first five books of the Old Testament). Jesus makes clear his belief in a personal resurrection which supersedes that of Second Temple Judaism (a merely bodily resurrection) which is evident in his passion predictions (which include the phrase “and rise again on the third day”) as well as his assertion that he would rebuild the Temple in three days (found in two independent sources – Mt 26:61, 27:40 and Jn 2:13-22). If Wright’s interpretation of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin is correct, then Jesus must have said something to warrant the charge of “blasphemy” which probably included his belief in being the eschatological judge who would return to judge the world – “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). This presumes his resurrection as more than a “resuscitated corpse.”

<sup>55</sup> Betz 1968-70, p. 260.

When Jesus approached Jerusalem knowing that He faced persecution and death, He had a plan to save all humankind throughout history by His act of total self-offering (unconditional love). His plan went further – He intended to initiate a ritual to be re-lived by his disciples throughout the rest of history. He would be really present in His self-sacrifice (body and blood), as well as in His risen form, and would convey through this presence, His healing, forgiving, and transforming love to anyone who received His body and blood in this ritual. He would convey the love of complete self-gift; the forgiveness and healing of the ultimate sin-offering; the liberation from darkness, evil, slavery, and death in the ultimate Passover sacrifice; and the eternal life of love in the blood of the new covenant. His plan was to love us unconditionally – both universally (in His complete self-offering in death) and situationally (in the celebration of His Last Supper). After His resurrection in glory, the early Church believed that He was the unconditional love of God with us – who is still with us until the end of time.

## II.

### **The Second Part of the Plan: Suffering, Death, and Resurrection**

[Back to top](#)

There is very strong evidence in favor not only of Jesus' Passion and death, but also for most of the details in the passion narratives. Aside from the fact that the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus and the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus assert the fact and time of Jesus' crucifixion without qualification, the application of historical criteria to the passion narratives indicates considerable concern for history.<sup>56</sup> In response to contentions that the apostles abandoned Jesus (and knew little about his trial, manner of execution, and burial), Raymond Brown explains:

Yet as we move back from the Gospel narratives to Jesus himself, ultimately there were eyewitnesses and earwitnesses who were in a position to know the broad lines of Jesus' passion. He was accompanied in his ministry by a group of disciples known as the Twelve, and there is no reason whatsoever to doubt that the arrest of Jesus was the occasion of his being separated from them. It is inconceivable that they showed no concern about what happened to Jesus after the arrest. True, there is no Christian claim that they were present during the legal proceedings against him, Jewish or Roman; but it is absurd to think that some information was not available to them about why Jesus has hanged on a cross. The whole purpose of crucifixion, after all, was to publicize that certain crimes would be severely punished (That is the sense in which I include "earwitness": hearing what was publicly said about the condemnation of Jesus). The crucifixion itself was public, and nothing suggests that the burial was secret.<sup>57</sup>

Does this apply to Jesus' dying words recounted in Mark's Gospel (Mk 15:34)? It is difficult to deny, because the lamentation ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") could have been very apologetically unappealing – and difficult to explain to a Gentile audience.

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<sup>56</sup> See for example, Raymond Brown 1994(b) pp 10 – 16.

<sup>57</sup> Brown 1994(b) p. 14.

Why would Mark include it unless it was historically accurate? Furthermore, Mark's version of the dying words is a northern Galilean dialect of Aramaic ("*Elōi, Elōi, lama sabachthani*").<sup>58</sup> This would have been the dialect in which Jesus learned the Psalms from his mother when he was a child, which connects the recounted words to Jesus – not to Mark.

Jesus gives us the interpretation of His passion through these dying words. The Marcan version of the final words is to be preferred over the Matthean one, because it is probable that Matthew tried to "clean up" Mark's Aramaic citation of the divine name ("*Elōi*")<sup>59</sup> with the more proper Hebrew version of it ("*Ēlī*"), which would have been recited in the synagogue.<sup>60</sup>

These dying words must be seen within the context of the psalm from which Jesus derived them. They are the first line of Psalm 22, which refers to the *whole* psalm (like a cantor who, by giving the first line of a psalm, informs the congregation of the *whole* psalm they are to recite). Brown points to a well-known hermeneutical principle in this regard:

...a New Testament citation of a specific Old Testament passage supposes that the readers will be familiar with the context of that passage and so understand implied references to that context.<sup>61</sup>

In the case of Psalm 22, the context speaks of trust in God, vindication, and salvation for the world.

So if we consider "*Elōi, Elōi, lama sabachthani*" to be the dying words of the historical Jesus, and if we apply Brown's hermeneutical principle to Jesus Himself (implying that Jesus expected informed listeners to be familiar with the context of that passage and understand implied references to that context), then it seems likely that the dying Jesus was praying the whole of Psalm 22 to His Father while giving His listeners an insight into how He interpreted His sacrificial death through that prayer. Mally notes in this regard:

As a quotation of an Old Testament Psalm, it can hardly be taken literally as an expression of real despair or dereliction. Rather, Jesus applies to himself an Old Testament passage that sums up the suffering of the upright individual who turns to his God in the stress of hostile opposition and its ensuing depression. In using the Psalm, Jesus does not express the feeling that his life's work has failed and that God has therefore abandoned him; he identifies himself with a biblical

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<sup>58</sup> See Brown's linguistic analysis of the likely dialect of Jesus' dying words (in Mark) in Brown 1994 (b), pp. 1051-1052. Notice that Matthew, who was writing for a sophisticated Jewish audience, renders Jesus' Aramaic version in correct Hebrew.

<sup>59</sup> The Aramaic version is "'Ēlāhī, 'Ēlāhī, lēmā šēbaqtanī." Mark's "*Elōi*" is a common Greek transliteration of the Aramaic "'Ēlāhī." (See Brown 1994(b), p. 1052.). Thus, Mark's rendition is very probably his Greek transliteration of an *Aramaic* version of the Psalm.

<sup>60</sup> Recall that Matthew is writing for a well-educated Jewish audience, and was trying to convince them of the Messiahship of Jesus. He knew the appropriate Hebrew form of the Psalm and changed Mark's Aramaic "*Elōi*" to the Hebrew "*Ēlī*." See Brown 1994(b), pp. 1051-1052.

<sup>61</sup> Brown 1994(b), p. 1050.

precedent, the persecuted upright man *who has trusted in Yahweh*, and found in him *the source of his consolation and ultimate triumph*.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, Jesus' reference to Psalm 22 is an expression of trust and confidence in the Father that His suffering will result in the triumph of His mission. As noted in the previous section, that mission is actualized for all future generations through the gift of His presence and unconditional redeeming love in the Eucharist.

A closer look at the Psalm may give a deep insight into Jesus' thoughts and feelings at the time of His crucifixion. According to Murphy, the Psalm may be divided into three parts:

1. "2-22, the complaint, with repeated requests, descriptions of suffering, and expressions of confidence (4-6; 10-11)."<sup>63</sup>
2. "23-32, thanksgiving, in which the community is invited to share (23-27)."<sup>64</sup> and
3. "the worldwide redemption and worship of Yahweh (28-32)."<sup>65</sup>

Each part will be presented in turn. Recall that *Jesus* is praying every part of this Psalm and so when we reference "the Psalmist" below, we are also referencing Jesus' intention.

*1. Complaint, repeated requests, descriptions of suffering, and expressions of confidence.*

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from the words of my groaning?  
Oh my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I have no rest.

Then, the Psalmist shifts perspective, as he does several times throughout the Psalm, and introduces the theme of God's holiness and grandeur, worthy of praise and *trust*. (Remember that this is also Jesus' intention as he is praying the entire Psalm):

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the praise of Israel.  
In you our fathers put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them.  
They cried to you and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.*

The Psalmist then turns back to the deplorable nature of his condition:

But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by men and despised by the people.

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<sup>62</sup> Mally 1968, Vol. II, p. 58. [italics mine]

<sup>63</sup> Murphy 1968, p. 579.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:  
“He trusted in the Lord;  
let the Lord rescue him.  
Let Him deliver him  
since He delights in him.

The uncanny resemblance between the Psalmist’s words and the events taking place around Jesus give one pause. After describing the insulting words of the crowd (who believe that the Lord will not fulfill the trust of the Psalmist), the Psalmist shifts back to his fervent trust in the Lord:

Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me trust in you;  
even at my mother’s breast.  
From birth I was cast upon you;  
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

Having renewed his trust in the Lord, the Psalmist makes an earnest petition for help:

Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.  
Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.  
Roaring lions tearing their prey  
open their mouths wide against me.

Then the Psalmist uses the same words seen in the suffering servant song (Is 52:13-53:12) and Jesus’ Eucharistic words:

I am *poured out* like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint.  
My heart has turned to wax;  
it has melted away within me.  
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

In continuing his description of his suffering to Yahweh, the Psalmist again describes events uncannily similar to Jesus’ crucifixion:

Dogs have surrounded me;  
a band of evil men has encircled me,  
they have pierced my hands and my feet.  
I can count all my bones;  
people stare and gloat over me.

They divide my garments among them  
and cast lots for my clothing.

The Psalmist makes another earnest petition for God's help and consolation:

But you, oh Lord, be not far off;  
oh my Strength, come quickly to help me.  
Deliver my life from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dogs.  
Rescue me from the mouth of the lion;  
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

*2. Thanksgiving, in which the community is invited to share.*

The Psalmist (and Jesus) then reaffirms his trust and confidence in the Lord, as if to say that he will *live beyond* his current persecution to bring the praise of the Lord's name to all who fear him:

I will declare your name to my brothers;  
in the congregation I will praise you.  
You who fear the Lord, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

The Psalmist then gives his reason for his confidence in God, and his belief in his future:

For he has not despised or disdained  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help.  
From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;  
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

The Psalmist then moves into a prophetic, and even messianic tone, speaking of signs of the new Jerusalem; messianic signs which Jesus says, when quoting the prophet Isaiah, are being fulfilled in Himself:<sup>66</sup>

The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
they who seek the Lord will praise Him –  
may your hearts live forever.

*3. The worldwide redemption and worship of Yahweh.*

The Psalmist (and Jesus) then confidently suggests *universality* of salvation arising out of Yahweh's mercy:

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<sup>66</sup> See Matt. 11:5ff and Lk 4:18ff, referring to Is 61:1ff.



All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the Lord,  
and *all* the families of the nations  
will bow down before Him,  
for dominion belongs to the Lord  
and He rules over the nations.

The Psalmist then suggests that Yahweh's salvation will extend to all those who are raised on high, and those who are in the grave (people of the past), as well as to all future generations:

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before Him –  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.  
Posterity will serve Him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.  
They will proclaim His righteousness  
to a people yet unborn –  
for He has done it.

This Psalm on the dying lips of Jesus is quite remarkable. In the midst of recounting events quite similar to His crucifixion, the Psalm expresses His mind and heart as He cries out for help, as He is overwhelmingly confident in that help, and as He sees the ultimate result of that help in a salvation that will not only reach to the ends of the earth, but to all future generations on the earth, and even to those who have died in the past. Thus, the Psalm connects Jesus' torment with His *confidence* in the Father as He looks beyond His suffering, beyond Jerusalem, beyond the present age, and beyond earthly existence, to a redemption which will take hold in the life of God Himself.

Jesus' Eucharistic words are not only consonant with those of the Psalm, they give the Psalm's words ultimate meaning and reality; for they provide the vehicle through which Jesus' person and love will save *universally and eternally*.

Notice the parallels between the Fourth Suffering Servant Song – Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (see above, Section I), the Eucharistic words of Jesus (see above, Section I), and the dying words of Jesus (Psalm 22). Each one of them speaks of the persecution and death of a good and just person who does not deserve to be punished or killed. Each figure (the suffering servant, the Psalmist, and Jesus) believes that this undeserved persecution and death can be made into a self-offering (self-sacrifice) which acts as a perfect "sin offering" (the sacrifice of an animal for the remission of sins – see above Section I). The fact that the sin offering is no longer an unblemished animal, but an unblemished and innocent human being makes it a perfect offering – so much so that the Psalmist, Isaiah, and Jesus see it as initiating *universal* salvation. In His Eucharistic words Jesus uses Isaiah's Fourth Suffering Servant Song to describe his sacrificial action: "poured out his life unto death ... for He bore the sins of the many/all."

We must pause for a moment to discuss the *universal* implications of Jesus' Eucharistic words—"poured out for *the many*."

Recall from Section I above, Jeremias' justification for preferring the Mark-Matthew tradition ("poured out for the many") to the Paul-Luke tradition ("poured out for you"). If he is correct, then Jesus very likely said "poured out for the many." In Jesus' Aramaic, this phrase probably means "poured out for *all*." Jeremias has done an exhaustive study on the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:12, and has concluded as follows:

While "many" in Greek (as in English) stands in opposition to "all", and therefore has the exclusive sense ("*many, but not all*"), Hebrew *rabbim* can have the inclusive sense ("*the whole, comprising many individuals*"). This inclusive use is connected with the fact that Hebrew and Aramaic possess no word for "all."<sup>67</sup>

When *rabbim* is accompanied by the definite article, it almost always means "all." Though Greek—unlike Aramaic and Hebrew-- has a distinct word for "all"--namely, "*pantōn*," many Greek translators did not use this word but chose instead to literally translate the Hebrew with its definite article—to *pollōn* ("*the many*"). *To pollōn* ("*the many*") is a very unusual expression in Greek, and its use to translate Jesus' Eucharistic words very probably reflects the Greek translator's use of a Semitism—translating a Hebrew phrase into a very unusual Greek phrase. Hence, the use of "*to pollōn*" in Mark and Matthew very probably referred to Jesus' use of *rabbim* with a definite article, meaning that Jesus said "poured out for *all*."

This is further corroborated by a phrase in 1 Tim. 2:6 which hearkens back to Isaiah 53:12--"He bore the sins of many, "which Paul uses as a background for: "who gave himself as a ransom for *all*"—using the Greek word *pantōn* ("all"). Mark translates the same phrase as Paul in 10:45-- "to give his life as a ransom for many." Jeremias does not see this as problematic, rather. He thinks that Mark is using the inclusive sense of "many" which Paul translates directly into "all" (*pantōn*):

Of especial importance for our passage is Mark 10.45 par., *lutron anti pollōn* "a ransom for many". That *polloi* has here the inclusive meaning "all" is shown by the reference in Mark 10.45 to Isa. 53.10-12, as well as by the parallel in 1 Tim. 2.6: *antilutroon huper pantōn*, "a ransom for all". Just as Mark 10.45, so also our passage Mark 14.24 [Jesus' eucharistic words] is to be interpreted in the inclusive sense. *Pollōn* is therefore a Semitism.<sup>68</sup>

The evidence appears to be overwhelming. When Jesus uttered the Aramaic expression hearkening back to Isaiah 53:12, he said it in an inclusive way—meaning "poured out for *all*." Jesus intended that his sacrificial death be for *everyone*—for all time—which is precisely what he envisioned when reciting the last part of Psalm 22 as his dying words:

*All the ends of the earth*  
will remember and turn to the Lord,  
and *all the families of the nations*

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<sup>67</sup> Jeremias 1966 p. 179

<sup>68</sup> Jeremias 1966, p. 181-82.

will bow down before Him,  
for dominion belongs to the Lord  
and He rules over the nations.  
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before Him –  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.  
Posterity will serve Him;  
*future generations* will be told about the Lord.  
They will proclaim His righteousness  
to a people *yet unborn* –  
for He has done it.

Jesus also utters his Eucharistic words in a *prophetic* way at the Last Supper. In so doing, His words reach out to the historical events of His persecution and death which will fulfill them. We can now understand the extent to which Jesus saw His love as redemptive. It would lead to *universal* redemption, and would allow generations of people to re-enter the mystery of his “whole self” poured out in unconditional love. Johannes Betz summarizes the significance of Jesus’ words and actions as follows:

Taking on alien guilt [the guilt of other people] meant taking on also the necessity of death. As his life went on, Jesus thought more frequently of his death and spoke more frequently of it to his disciples.... It was for Jesus not something that merely happened to him, but a conscious and willed deed to which he assented as a necessity in the history of salvation, and on which he freely decided (Lk 12:50). His total readiness for the death which was the mission of the Servant of the Lord is also expressed in the logion of the ransom (Mk 10:45), and the prophecies of the passion (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:32ff).... His death is total dedication and the deepest fulfillment of his being.... Unlike the *cultic* sacrifices, there is no separate *gift* which stands for the offerer and symbolizes his dedication to God. Here the offerer himself functions as *gift* in his own person and accomplishes the sacrificial dedication by the real shedding of his blood. Jesus must have been sure that God would accept this sacrifice, his body, and hence that God would fill it with new life. Thus the death of Jesus brings with it the resurrection as an inner consequence, as an essential part of it, regardless of the difference in time between the two events.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Betz, 1968-70, p. 258. Italics mine.

## Chapter Six

### Who Did Jesus say that He Was?

[Back to top](#)

At this juncture, it will come as no surprise to learn that Jesus considered Himself to be the exclusive preexistent Son of the Father. Though Jesus was explicit about this to His disciples (see below Section I.B), He was more cryptic about it in public—particularly, in front of the religious authorities who would have found it blasphemous, and used it as an excuse to accuse and persecute Him. Thus, Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” in its full apocalyptic sense the preexistent heavenly judge of the world—to indicate His special relationship with the Father (see below Section I.A).

Jesus used other clues to indicate publicly His divine origins. Three of them are particularly important for describing His divine mission and identity. First, He refers to His mission as bringing the very kingdom of God to the world in His own person. Who can do this except God Himself—or His Son? Secondly, He proclaims that He has come into the world to definitively defeat Satan and to bring eternal life (see Volume 14, Chapter Two). Again, who can do this except God Himself—or His Son? Thirdly, Jesus raises the dead by His own power and authority, showing that He has God’s power (the power over life and death) in and through Himself. Jesus could not have done this without sharing in the Father’s divine power and authority. Though these clues gave ample evidence of His divine origins to those who “had eyes to see” (particularly, the religious authorities), they could not be used by the religious authorities to accuse Him of blasphemy. Ironically, many of His less educated followers did intuit His divine origins through mind and heart.

**Editor’s Note:** The historical-exegetical evidence for these three claims of Jesus are given in *God so Loved the World: Clues to Our Transcendent Destiny from the Revelation of Jesus*, pp. 258-265. You may want to order it at: <https://www.ignatius.com/God-So-Loved-the-World-P1017.aspx>.

Bearing this in mind, we may now proceed to examining the scriptural evidence for Jesus’ explicit claim to be the exclusive preexistent Son of the Father and the probable sources for Jesus’ awareness of this exclusive Sonship. We will explain it in three sections:

1. The scriptural evidence for Jesus’ explicit claim to be the exclusive preexistent Son of the Father (Section I).
2. The sources for Jesus’ awareness of His divine identity (Section II).
3. The Apostolic Church’s recognition and expression of Jesus’ divine identity (Section III).

## I.

### **Jesus As the Exclusive Preexistent Son of the Father in the Synoptic Gospels**

[Back to top](#)

There are three major synoptic texts revealing how Jesus understood his identity (which have stood the test of rigorous historical scrutiny):<sup>70</sup>

1. “The Son of Man” (Section I.A)
2. “No one knows the Father except the Son...” (Section I.B.1)
3. The allegory of the Wicked Vintners (Section I.B.2).

#### **I.A**

##### **The Son of Man**

Raymond Brown, among many other scholars, attests to the likelihood that Jesus used the title “Son of Man” for Himself. Two reasons are generally offered for this. First, “Son of Man” is used 80 times in the Gospels by comparison with relatively few uses of titles like “Messiah,” “the Lord,” or “Son of God.” As Brown asks:

Why was this title so massively retrojected, being placed on Jesus’ lips on a scale far outdistancing the retrojection of “the Messiah,” “the Son of God,” and “the Lord”?<sup>71</sup>

Such massive retrojection makes little sense if Jesus did not use the title favorably of Himself. Secondly, there are only four non-Gospel New Testament uses of “Son of Man” by comparison with the 80 Gospel uses. Brown again asks:

...if this title was first fashioned by the early church, why has it left almost no traces in nonGospel NT literature, something not true of the other titles?<sup>72</sup>

The answer almost certainly has to be that “Son of Man” was no longer useful in the post-resurrection Church. The theology of the New Testament (outside of the gospel references to Jesus) had evolved because the disciples had witnessed the Lordship of Jesus in the resurrection, his gift of the Holy Spirit, and his miracles (particularly raising the dead). They had already concluded, as Jesus had told them, that He was the exclusive Son of the Father. In light of all this, it would have made little sense to refer to Jesus (anachronistically) as the “Son of Man.” They needed titles that better reflected his resurrection in glory and gift of the Spirit, such as “the Son of God” and “the Lord.”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps the more difficult question is, “How did Jesus intend the title ‘Son of Man’ when He used it of Himself during His ministry?”

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<sup>70</sup> There are many other mentions of Jesus’ Divine Sonship in the New Testament. I have chosen these three, because there is significant agreement among mainstream historical scripture scholars about the likelihood of their origin in Jesus and their significance for revealing His view of Himself. These texts are sufficient to ground the historicity of Jesus’ view of Himself as “the preexistent exclusive beloved Son of the Father.” Other texts may enhance these three, but for our purposes, they would only “gild the lily.”

<sup>71</sup> Brown 1994(a), p. 90.

<sup>72</sup> Brown 1994(a), p. 90.

<sup>73</sup> See above notes 1 & 2.

It should first be noted that “Son of Man” can have rather mundane meanings (e.g., “human being” – as in the 90 addresses to Ezekiel which mean “O human being”). But this is not the way that Jesus used it of himself, because he intimates that it has an apocalyptic meaning that hearkens back to “the Son of Man” in Dn 7:13-14:

...there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

As noted above, Jesus’ most straightforward use of “Son of Man” in this apocalyptic way occurs in Mk 14:61 ff where Jesus responds to the interrogation of the high priest with an almost verbatim recitation of the passage from Daniel:

...the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” And Jesus said, “I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.

The parallels between Dn 7:13-14 and Mk 14: 61-62 (which is very likely historical<sup>74</sup>) shows the strong likelihood that Jesus used “Son of Man” in an apocalyptic way, signifying that he is the emissary sent by God to judge the world at the end of the age. It is irrelevant whether the author of Daniel actually intended such a meaning, because subsequent interpreters of it did. Jesus and some of his followers were well aware of these apocalyptic interpretations. These interpretations continued after Jesus’ lifetime – see, for example: I Enoch – 50 AD and IV Ezra 100+ AD.<sup>75</sup>

Brown notes that M. Stone sees “*pre-existent* Messianic indications” in the four Ezra passages concerned with Daniel 7:

The man is interpreted as the Messiah, precreated and prepared in advance, who will deliver creation and direct those who are left.<sup>76</sup>

From this, Brown concludes:

All this evidence suggests that in apocalyptic Jewish circles of the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD, the portrayal in Dan 7 had given rise to the picture of a messianic human figure of heavenly *preexistent* origin who is glorified by God and made a judge.... Jesus, if he was familiar with apocalyptic thought, could have used “Son of Man” terminology. He need not have read the Parables of *I Enoch*, but only have been

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<sup>74</sup> As noted above, Wright believes that this text is probably historical, because it explains why the authorities had to invent the legal charge of “blasphemy” during Jesus’ trial. See Wright 1996, p. 551.

<sup>75</sup> See Brown 1994(a), p. 95.

<sup>76</sup> Brown 1994(a), p. 95 referring to Stone 1990, p. 397.

aware of some of the burgeoning reflection on Dan 7 that gave or would give rise to the presentation of the Son of Man in the Parables and of the man in *IV Ezra*.<sup>77</sup>

Recent scholarship on the historical Jesus shows that Jesus was aware of and moved by a Jewish apocalyptic mindset, and that he applied this to himself – not only in his use of the title “Son of Man,” but also in his belief that he was the final judge of Israel and the final judge of the world itself.<sup>78</sup>

If recent scholarship is correct, then Jesus used the term “Son of Man” to refer not only to His present Messiahship, but also to His *preexistent* Messiahship (as implied in the apocalyptic interpretations of the Daniel passage). He very likely thought of himself as the preexistent emissary of God sent into the world to be its final judge.

### **I.B The Only Beloved Son**

Jesus gave many *indirect* indications of His divine power and authority which implied His awareness of being the Father’s only begotten Son. For example:

1. Exorcising, healing, and raising the dead by His own authority alone (see Volume 3, Chapter Six).
2. Referring to himself as the apocalyptic “Son of Man,” implying that He is the *preexistent* Judge of the world (see above).
3. Teaching His disciples to address God in the same way he did – as “*Abba*” (see Chapter Three, Section III.B).
4. Preaching that He was bringing the kingdom of God and vanquishing Satan by His own power and authority (see below Section II).

Jesus was undoubtedly aware of his divine power to exorcise, heal, and raise the dead. If he were not, he would never have attempted to use it in a public way in which he could have been easily exposed as a fraud (i.e., by failing in his attempts to exorcise and heal by His own word and authority).

Jesus believed that the source of his divine power was his relationship – Sonship – with his Divine Father (*Abba*). He viewed this relationship as a deep, loving communion that existed prior to his appearance in the world. Can this be historically validated? In addition to Jesus’ apocalyptic use of “Son of Man” (implying “preexistence with God”), there are two passages from the Synoptic Gospels which have undergone substantial historical testing and validation by mainstream scholars:

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<sup>77</sup> Brown 1994(a), p. 95-6. Italics mine.

<sup>78</sup> As Wright notes, “The ‘Jesus Seminar’ has rejected Jewish eschatology, particularly apocalyptic, as an appropriate context for understanding Jesus himself, and in order to do so has declared the Marcan narrative a fiction. The ‘Third Quest,’ without validating Mark in any simplistic way, has placed Jesus precisely within his Jewish eschatological context, and has found in consequence new avenues of secure historical investigation opening up before it” Wright 1996 p. 81. For a summary of the rationale for Jesus’ use of apocalyptic, see Wright 1996, p. 81; and Meier 1999, pp. 459-487.

1. Jesus' proclamation, "No one knows the Father except the Son..." (Mt 11:25-27 and Lk 10:22).
2. The allegory of the Wicked Vintners (Mk 12:1-12).

There are many other references in the New Testament to Jesus' preexistent Divine Sonship, but these two almost certainly originated with Jesus and are sufficient to show that he had an awareness of himself as the only begotten Son of His Divine Father (and saw this Sonship as the source of his divine power).

### I.B.1

#### "No One Knows the Father Except the Son"

In Mt 11:25-27 and Luke 10:22, we encounter a Q Logion<sup>79</sup> which some have characterized as a "meteor from the Johannine heaven"<sup>80</sup> because of its direct reference to Jesus' exclusive Sonship:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one [fully] knows<sup>81</sup> the Son except the Father, and no one [fully] knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

This prayer and proclamation is a Q logion which predates Matthew and Luke, and probably originated with Jesus. Joachim Jeremias provides evidence to support this. Recall from his study of "*Abba*" (Chapter 2, Section III.B) that "*Abba*" used in the context of prayer is virtually unique to Jesus, and that continued use of this address (and its Greek translation) indicates that Jesus is its probable source. Jeremias also specified, "...we have every reason to suppose that an *Abba* underlies every instance of *pater (mou)* or *ho patēr* in his words of prayer."<sup>82</sup>

This is precisely what we find in the above Q logion (the later part of which is a prayer),<sup>83</sup> where the Greek translation for "*Abba*" is used not only once, but twice — (1) in Mt. 11:25 (Lk 10:21a) where *pater* is used without the definite article in a prayer context which is

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<sup>79</sup> Recall that the Q source was a compilation of Jesus' sayings translated into Greek which both Matthew and Luke used in their Gospels. It is a very early source of Jesus' sayings.

<sup>80</sup> McKenzie 1968, p. 83. The reason for this comment is that John has a developed Christology which speaks frequently about the exclusive relationship between the Father and the Son while the Synoptics do not. The occurrence of this passage as a Q Logion (an early source of Jesus' sayings) indicates that it did not arise after a long period of theological reflection (as John's Gospel), and so it seems to have come from a time close to Jesus himself. When one considers the number of "*Abba*" references in this passage, it can be traced back to Jesus — and gives us an insight into what he thought about himself (see the analysis below in this section).

<sup>81</sup> In Luke, "*ginōskei*" ("knows"); in Matthew, *epiginōskei* ("fully knows").

<sup>82</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 65 (Italics mine).

<sup>83</sup> See The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia 1988. Entry under "*Abba*." See also Chapter 5, Section II.B. for a specific quotation of this confirmation with respect to Mt. 11:25 and Lk. 10:22 (the Q logion under consideration).



translated as a vocative “*Abba*,”<sup>84</sup> and (2) in Mt 11:26 (Lk 10:21b) where “*ho pater*” is used as an articular nominative indicating a vocative “*Abba*.”<sup>85</sup> The vocative use of the Semitism “*Abba*” in this Logion points to Jesus as its source, because this address to God within prayer is virtually unique to Jesus and is used almost exclusively of Him.

This passage shows that Jesus believed himself to be the *exclusive* Son of the Father because it uses three references to “*the Son*” (in which the definite article implies exclusivity) – “*ton huion... ho huios... ho huios*.”

Furthermore, Jesus claims within the prayer that all things have been given over to *Him*. As McKenzie notes, “*panta*” (“all things”) probably refers to all revelation, and “...this is a direct contradiction of the Jewish claim to have the complete revelation of God in the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>86</sup> Jesus claims to have greater revelation than the Law (a divine prerogative), which implies that “the Son” in the next line (who fully knows the Father) refers to Him.

Despite the textual indications that Jesus is the source of the Logion, some scholars hesitate to ascribe it to Jesus because its claim to Sonship is uncharacteristically straightforward and developed. Jesus generally avoids straightforward references to himself as “exclusive Son of the Father” – except to his disciples. As noted above (Section I.A), he prefers to use the title “Son of Man” for Himself, and only *indirectly* indicates His Divine Sonship. If He had expressed this to the crowds and religious authorities, it would have resulted in a premature end to His mission.

We should not infer from Jesus’ cryptic and implicit references to his Divine Sonship that he did not know it. As noted previously, this would have made his ministry of miracles and his bringing the kingdom inexplicable. Furthermore, Jesus took it upon Himself to complete the mission reserved by scripture to Yahweh alone (see below Section II.C). He would never have done this without recognizing his divine Sonship. As Wright notes:

If it is true, as I have argued, that [Jesus] acted upon a vocation to do and be for Israel and the world what, according to scripture, only Israel’s *God* can do and be, then we may legitimately enquire whether we have any clues as to what generated, sustained, or at least centrally characterized that vocation. When, asking that question, we discover that Jesus seems to have addressed Israel’s God as “father” in a way which, even if not completely unique, is at least very remarkable, we may be near to an answer. And when we find a passage like [the

<sup>84</sup> “*pater* (“father”), the Greek vocative (Mt. 11:25 par. Lk 10:21a; Lk. 11:2; 22:42; 23:34, 46; Jn. 11:41; 12:27f.; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24f.)”—The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia 1988. Entry under “*Abba*.” See also Chapter 3, Section II.B., for the full quotation.

<sup>85</sup> “*ho pater*” (“the father”), the articular nominative used as a vocative (Mk. 14:36 [*Abba ho pater*; cf. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6]—correct Greek form, since the second member of a compound address is always in the nominative [Robertson. p. 461]; Mt. 11:26 par. Lk. 10:21b—incorrect Greek usage, and therefore in all probability a Semitism, since the articular nominative constitutes the vocative in both Hebrew and Aramaic [Turner, p.34])”—The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia 1988. Entry under “*Abba*.” Note that the use of “*ho pater*” is incorrect Greek usage in Lk 10:21b (which Luke intentionally preserves) indicating an underlying Semitism for the reasons mentioned above.

<sup>86</sup> McKenzie 1968, p. 83.

Q Logion – Mt 11:25-27/Lk 10:22] – then we may be confirmed in this deduction.<sup>87</sup>

The above Q Logion indicates Jesus' awareness of being the exclusive Son of the Father and that this relationship – which brought with it divine authority and power – was the source of his ministry of exorcism, healing, and raising the dead that brought the kingdom of God and the fulfillment of the mission reserved for Yahweh alone. If we had no record of this Logion, it would present an historical conundrum because everything about Jesus' ministry indicates that it should have been recounted in the Gospels and their sources.

What did Jesus mean by his prayer and proclamation? First, he says that he has special access to the Father and special knowledge of the Father – the access and knowledge which only a son could have – a familial access and knowledge which penetrates to the heart. We must understand the Semitic sense of “knowing” to appreciate this. McKenzie states:

The Israelite *knew* with the *heart*, and Hebrew has no word which corresponds exactly to our “mind” or “intellect.” ... In general it may be said that in Hebrew, to know is to experience; experience develops into acceptance or possession.<sup>88</sup>

Jesus had an intimate experiential knowledge of the Father which was so close that He could know the Father in His heart just as the Father knew Him. This claim suggests being in loving union with His Father, which in turn, suggests a sharing in the divine *life*. As McKenzie notes the idea of “life” also entails the idea of “fullness of power,”<sup>89</sup> and so sharing in the divine life is also sharing in the fullness of power. One would be hard-pressed to find a clearer Semitic statement indicating “loving unity with the Father” and “sharing in the Father's life and fullness of power.”

As the context of the Logion indicates, the prayer is addressed to the Father while the proclamation is for the benefit of the disciples. It could not have been addressed to other audiences because if it were overheard by the religious authorities, it may have resulted in a persecution of Jesus before his appointed time.

For Jesus (and His Semitic interpreters), “knowing the Father as the Father knows Him” implies union with the Father, which implies sharing in the life of the Father, which in turn, implies sharing in the Father's “fullness of power.” It is not a far stretch from there to the early Christological hymns (which make use of Hellenistic philosophical concepts<sup>90</sup>) – such as “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6 – “*morphē Theou*”), “being equal to God” (Phil. 2:6 – “*to einai isa Theō*”), and to identification with God (John 1:1 “and the word was God” – “*kai Theos ēn ho*

<sup>87</sup> Wright 1996, p. 649-650 (Italics mine).

<sup>88</sup> McKenzie 1965, p. 485. Italics mine.

<sup>89</sup> See McKenzie 1965 p. 507.

<sup>90</sup> The early Church was aware of Hellenistic philosophical terminology through later Wisdom literature – particularly the hymns to Wisdom in Sirach and the Book of Wisdom. See, for example, Wis. 7:25ff – “For [wisdom] is an aura of the power of God and a pure effusion of the glory of the Almighty.... For she is the refulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of His goodness. And she, who is one, can do all things, and renews everything while herself perduring...”

*Logos*”). These Christological hymns and their references to Jesus’ Divinity are examined below in Section III.

Did Jesus claim to be the exclusive Son of the Father? To his disciples, He did – and he interpreted this exclusive Sonship as sharing in the Father’s life (and the fullness of his power). To the crowds, Jesus claims to be the preexistent Son of Man who comes from God to judge the world and initiate the New Age. To his adversaries, Jesus claims to be the only begotten beloved Son who comes as final prophet and judge of Israel (in The Allegory of the Wicked Vintners – see the following subsection). Jesus tailored each of these identity statements for his three audiences. Though the phrasing of each statement is different, they all imply exclusive Sonship and a sharing in God’s life and power. Let us now turn to the allegory of the Wicked Vintners.

### I.B.2

#### The Allegory of the Wicked Vintners (Mk 12:1-12)

This Allegory portrays the history of Israel, where the owner of the vineyard (symbolizing God) sends several servants (symbolizing the prophets) to the tenants of the vineyard to obtain his fair share of the produce. The tenants beat and/or kill the servants. Finally, the owner sends his “beloved son” (*huion agapēton*) who they also kill. The implication is that the owner had only one son (“he had one” – *ena eichen*) which the allegory later describes as being “the heir” (*ho klēronomos*). Wright believes that this Allegory was not only spoken by Jesus, but was deliberately self-referential.<sup>91</sup>

Some exegetes have challenged the historicity of the story because it is more like an allegory (with many points of connection between symbol and reality – e.g., the owner = God, the servants = the prophets, the beloved son = Jesus) than a parable (which has a more general point of connection—frequently a single one). Jesus spoke mostly in parables and rarely in allegories.<sup>92</sup>

Just because Jesus uses parables *most* of the time does not mean He *has to* use parables *all* the time. Jesus was aware of many examples of allegory in Old Testament writings and was certainly capable of effectively using them in an appropriate context. His use of allegory here reflects an exception to his usual parabolic style. The allegory is not about the kingdom of God (as with most parables), but rather, about the judgment of Israel.

So what does Jesus mean by this allegory? Wright and other scripture scholars see it as an interpretation of his cleansing of the Temple (i.e. driving out the money changers and vendors

<sup>91</sup> See Wright 1996, pp. 497-501. See the analysis given below in this subsection.

<sup>92</sup> The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) also has allegorical features (e.g., the father = God, the older son = the righteous representative of the old covenant, the foreign land represents the Gentiles, etc.). Wright sees an even deeper allegorical base in this parable with various symbols representing the history of Israel (See Wright 1996, pp. 125-131). Some exegetes have contended that the Parable of Prodigal Son did not originate with Jesus because of its use of allegory and its single attestation (special Luke only). However, as Wright points out, the evidence for historicity is quite telling (Wright 1996, p.51), and Jeremias has identified several Semitisms and other features that would have to have come from a Jewish author who was writing to a Jewish audience (unlike Luke who was a Gentile, writing for Gentile audiences). See Jeremias 1972, pp. 128-131. Even the Jesus Seminar’s Dominic Crossan believes that it is historical (See Wright 1996, p. 51).

from the Temple area), which initiates His prophetic and final judgment of Israel. The allegory symbolically represents the history of Israel's rejection of the prophets culminating in Jesus' rejection by the Jewish authorities which will result in God's cleansing action (the destruction of the Temple).<sup>93</sup>

Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple must be considered within the context of his prophetic mission. Jesus saw himself as a prophet in the line of Elijah – and much more. In the allegory, he defines himself as the *final* prophet who will render definitive judgment on Israel.

In Israel, prophets render judgment, issue warnings about impending disaster, call to conversion, and speak of the vindication of the just. Inasmuch as Jesus saw Himself as the *final* prophet (bringing the prophetic tradition to its completion and fulfillment), His Temple cleansing action called Israel to its "*final* repentance," and predicted a "*final* disaster" if Israel did not repent. If this disaster were to befall Israel, it would lead to a new "Jerusalem," and then to the salvation of the Gentiles through it.

Why did Jesus believe he was the final prophet and judge of Israel – the one to bring the Old Jerusalem to its close, and to initiate the New Jerusalem? He says it clearly in the allegory – He is the only beloved Son of the Vineyard owner (God the Father). His belief in His Divine Sonship warrants his mission as final prophet and judge of Israel, which in turn, justifies his cleansing of the Temple. The Temple cleansing was not an act of spontaneous rage, but rather, a prophetic gesture to initiate the time of judgment and destruction which would open the way to the New Jerusalem. If Jesus did not believe in his Divine Sonship (and Messiahship), he would not have considered himself the final prophet and definitive judge of Israel, and if he did not believe this, he would not have cleansed the Temple.

If Wright has correctly interpreted this allegory, then it is likely that Jesus claimed to be God's only Son. His adversaries knew they were being judged, and most likely understood the implications of Jesus' temple cleansing. Though Jesus does not directly identify himself as "the only beloved Son" in the allegory, his use of the allegory to interpret His Temple cleansing made the identification clear for anyone who wanted to see it.

So who did Jesus think that he was? So far, we have seen four dimensions of his self-understanding:

1. The one who possesses divine authority and power within himself (see above).
2. The preexistent Son of Man who comes to judge Israel and the world (Section I.A).
3. The exclusive Son of the Father who shares fully in the Father's life and power (Section I.B.1).
4. The final judge of Israel as the Father's beloved Son (Section I.B.2).

Is there any other indication of Jesus' claim to be the exclusive Divine Son besides these sayings and actions? There is, and it is integral to His mission – to bring the Kingdom of God, to

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<sup>93</sup> See Wright 1996, pp. 497-501.

vanquish evil, and to initiate the New Age – the mission reserved by Scripture to *Yahweh* alone.<sup>94</sup>

## II.

### **How did Jesus know He was the Exclusive Son of the Father?**

[Back to top](#)

In light of the above scriptural evidence from the synoptic gospels as well as the three divine elements of Jesus' mission (to bring the kingdom of God in His own person, to defeat Satan by His own power, and to raise the dead by His own power and authority), there can be little doubt that Jesus believed Himself to be the exclusive preexistent Son of the Father. Yet we must ask ourselves the question, how could He be so sure of this divine status? As a reverent practicing Jew to make such a claim falsely would have been an outrage and blasphemy. He must have been sure of His divine identity, otherwise His claim would have been unthinkable as a reverent Jew.

There are two historically validatable sources of Jesus' awareness of His divine Sonship and three more subtle ones. The two validatable sources of Jesus' awareness are:

1. His power to exorcise, heal, and raise the dead by His own authority.
2. His ability to impart power/authority on His disciples to work miracles in His name.

With respect to the first validatable source of Jesus' awareness of His divine identity, recall from Volume 3 (Chapter Six) that Jesus performed exorcisms, healings and raising the dead by His own power and authority. In doing this, He differentiated Himself from Old Testament prophets who did not claim to have the power of God within themselves, but rather called upon God to use them as an intermediary for His healing power. The evidence for this is overwhelming, because it is present in virtually every miracle narrative from all five independent sources of the gospels (Mk, Q, Mt special, Lk special, and John).

Furthermore, Jesus' miraculous power is virtually historically indisputable not only because of substantial multiple attestation, but also because His adversaries (particularly the religious authorities) did not dispute His power or His widespread reputation for successful exorcisms, healings and raising the dead. Rather they accepted the fact that He was successfully performing miracles, but attributed them to the power of Satan. If Jesus did not know that He had divine power residing in Himself, it would have been foolhardy to perform miracles in His own name, for if God's power was not really in Him, the miracles would have failed, which would have been quite embarrassing—and noticeable. If Jesus really did have this divine power within Him independently of appealing to the Father, it must have occurred to Him that He shared in the Father's divine power and authority—a key dimension to His divine Sonship.

The second validatable source of Jesus' awareness of His divine Sonship is similar to the first. Jesus not only has divine power within Himself, He is able to communicate (give) that

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<sup>94</sup> For Wright's analysis of "the mission reserved by Israel to *Yahweh* alone" and his Old Testament sources for this, see Wright 1996, pp. 463-464 and 649-653. His conclusions are given below in Section II.C.

power to His apostles and disciples to do miracles in His name on special missions. Mark 6:7 attests to this as follows, “And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power/authority [*exousia*] over the unclean spirits.” The apostles efforts to perform miracles were successful – “So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mk 7:12-13).

Luke also attests to Jesus giving this power to both the apostles (Lk 9:1-9) as well as 72 additional disciples (Lk 10:17-20) “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you power/authority [*exousia*] to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Given the overwhelming evidence for Jesus performing miracles by His own power and authority, as well as the overwhelming evidence for Jesus missioning His apostles, and the multiple attestation of the apostles having miraculous power through the name of Jesus, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus really did have the power to communicate His miraculous (divine) power to His apostles and disciples to work miracles *in His name* (not by their own authority). Again, if Jesus really did possess this ability to communicate miraculous power to His apostles and disciples through *His* name—as distinct from the name of God (*Yahweh*)--we may reasonably infer that He believed that this divine power resided in Him independently of appealing to God (His father), and therefore that He shared in the Father’s divine power as a son.

When did Jesus come to know about divine power residing within Himself? We do not know, but it is quite probable that He appropriated His identity well before His baptism in the Jordan by John. If we assume that Jesus became aware of his power to heal as a young man, He would have naturally integrated it into other indications of His divine identity during childhood and young adulthood. We might infer three such indications from scriptural references that are less historically validatable than His autonomous miraculous power and the ability to communicate it to others:

1. He was likely told by His mother about the miraculous nature of His conception.
2. The intimate life of prayer with the Father that characterized His ministry was likely a part of His prayer during childhood and young adulthood confirming what His mother likely told Him about His conception.
3. He may have had an experience of the Holy Spirit inspiring Him (like other prophets) and residing within Him (not like other prophets) before His baptism by John in the Jordan.

Despite the fact that the virginal conception of Jesus is fairly well-attested in scripture and defended as historical by exegetes such as N.T. Wright, skepticism continues to surround the virginal conception of Jesus mostly because it seems “fantastic” to modern interpreters. These problems are redressed very thoroughly in the next volume (Volume 5, Chapters Five and Six). For the moment, we will borrow a few details (from Volume 5, Chapter Six) to ascertain the evidence for historicity of the virginal conception. Readers seeking a much more thorough response to various modern objections will

want to read Chapters Five and Six of Volume 5 and the entirety of N.T. Wright's excellent article "Suspending scepticism: History and the Virgin Birth."<sup>95</sup>

In brief, what is the evidence for the historicity of the virginal conception? The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke are quite different because the former focuses on Joseph while the latter focuses on Mary. In that sense, they are complementary. Amidst the obvious differences, there are four points of agreement, all of which concern the virginal conception:

1. Mary did not have relations with a man – i.e. Joseph (Mt. 1:18, 25 and Lk. 1: 34).
2. The conception of Jesus takes place through the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:18, 20 and Lk. 1:35).
3. Jesus' true Father is the first divine person (Mt. 1: 23 and Lk. 1: 35).
4. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God – Emmanuel (Mt. 1:23 and Lk. 1:35).

There are other similarities – such as the name of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem – but the above four core similarities point directly to the virginal conception of Jesus.

Evidently, there are two early Palestinian traditions that form the basis of Matthew's and Luke's narratives. Luke's tradition may have been grounded in the testimony of Mary. It is more difficult to link Matthew's tradition to Joseph. Nevertheless, these two distinct oral traditions have the above four core similarities all related to the virginal conception. Mary was well-known to the apostles (see Acts 1:14) – and probably the evangelists – and it is difficult to believe that these four critical similarities could have made their way into the earliest very distinctive oral traditions about Jesus' birth without having Mary's or apostolic testimony as their ultimate source and confirmation. Since it would be very difficult to believe that Mary could have been mistaken or deceitful about her virginal conception, it is reasonable and responsible to believe that this is precisely what happened.

If we accept this, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that Mary mentioned the very special nature of Jesus' conception to Him when He was still quite young, and beginning to experience interior feelings and intuitions of intimacy with His Divine Father. Mary's revelation of His conception through the Holy Spirit would have made His feelings and intuitions more intelligible. At this point, He would have been calling God, "His Father," recognizing Himself as the Father's beloved Son.

Most children have genuine religious experiences<sup>96</sup> that open them to their transcendent purpose and identity as well as the presence of God (see Volume 2, Chapter Three). If the Lord can do this with most every child throughout the world, why would He not have made His presence known to His only begotten Son far more profoundly and paternally? Why would He not have initiated this process from the time of Jesus' conception – in His transcendent human soul even prior to the development of His brain? Why would He have waited? Personally, I cannot adduce a single reason He might have had to do this, and so I am led to conclude that Jesus' profound proclamation that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son..." Had its origins from the time He was conceived in Mary's womb. I

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<sup>95</sup> N.T. Wright, 2011, "Suspending scepticism: History and the Virgin Birth" in *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Religion and Ethics* (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/12/28/3398969.htm> ).

<sup>96</sup> See Robert Coles 1991, *The Spiritual Life of Children*.

believe His use of a child's reference to His Father – *Abba* – also has its origins in Jesus' early life and throughout His childhood. If this is the case, then Mary would have recognized His profound feelings and intuitions of His Divine Sonship, and would have begun to explain the remarkable unique conception through which He came into the world through her free assent – “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38).

There is one other possible source of Jesus' awareness of His divine Sonship—recognized inspiration by the Holy Spirit. It is positively remarkable that Jesus had no attested rabbinical education. Indeed it does not seem his education extended beyond His parents' instructions on prayers, the prophets, and the law—and some synagogue teaching. Yet His familiarity and interpretation of the law and the prophets was so profound that people—including the religious authorities—addressed Him as “rabbi” (a title of acknowledged expertise in scripture) at the inception of His ministry. If we infer that this expertise came mostly from self-teaching, we may adduce the presence of the Holy Spirit in His life.

Furthermore, Jesus has a prophetic and apocalyptic interpretation of Himself and His mission which is clearly indicated by the title He chooses for Himself—“the Son of Man” (see above I.A). This probably means that Jesus (prior to His baptism by John) had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit that not only impelled Him toward His baptism at the beginning of His ministry, but prepared Him for His mission to the Jewish people and the world—to bring the kingdom of God in His own person, to defeat Satan, and to open the way to an eternal life of unconditional love with Him and His Father. Perhaps this is why Luke portrays Him as able to proclaim with sublime confidence in the synagogue at Nazareth that Isaiah's prophesy (Is 61:1/58) has been fulfilled in their presence:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:16-21)

When we combine these three implicit sources of His awareness of divine Sonship with the explicit ones—His possession of the divine power to exorcise, heal, and raise the dead by His own authority as well as His ability to communicate to His disciples that power to work miracles *in His name*, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus had overwhelmingly good reasons to proclaim His divine Sonship to His disciples, and ultimately to the world.



### III. Jesus is Emmanuel [Back to top](#)

In the foregoing section, we gave an initial answer to the question, “Who did Jesus think he was?” He thought He was a prophet in the line of Elijah – and much more – the final prophet and definitive judge of Israel, the bringer of the kingdom of God, the vanquisher of Satan, the preexistent Son of Man, the final interpreter of the Law, the unconditional lover and savior of humankind, and the exclusive beloved Son of the Father who shared in the fullness of his Divine life and power. His consciousness of this identity arose out of His intimate relationship with the Father (manifest in the Q Logion Mt 11:25-27 and Luke 10:22 discussed above – and His address of God as “*Abba*”), His awareness of possessing the Spirit of God within Himself (manifest in His proclamation of being the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-3), His possession of the power of God within Himself (manifest in His exorcisms, healings, and raisings of the dead by His own authority and word), His awareness of being the *one* missioned to confront and defeat Satan (manifest in Satan’s confrontation with Him during the temptations (discussed in Volume 14, Chapter Two), and his understanding of these four divine prerogatives through the Scriptures of Israel. He was so confident in His pre-existent and exclusive Sonship with God His Father that He took on and completed the mission reserved by Israel to *Yahweh* alone, and proclaimed that He knew the Father as the Father knew Him. Everything He experienced about Himself – His intimate relationship with the Father, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the power of God working through His word and authority, and His victories over Satan – made Him aware of this exclusive Sonship. He could not avoid it and so He turned to the Scriptures of Israel to interpret His identity and mission. He knew He was Emmanuel – the unconditionally loving God with us.

When the apostles and early witnesses saw his risen glory and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, they knew he was precisely who he claimed to be – the Exclusive Son of his Heavenly Father. As they proclaimed his Divine Sonship and used his name in their ministry of healing and miracles, they formed the Church that would spread throughout the world – open to *all* who desire it – who believe that love is the meaning of life, and unconditional love, their redemption and fulfillment.

Shortly after Jesus’ resurrection (prior to the writing of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians), Scribes within the new Christian Church created a liturgical hymn to express their belief in Jesus-Emmanuel.<sup>97</sup> They professed his divinity and equality with the Father as well as his unconditional love manifest in His coming to be with us, humbling himself, and giving himself to us in complete self-sacrifice:

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<sup>97</sup> Though this hymn is presented in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, it predates the writing of that Letter by several years and is not of Pauline origin. This is indicated by a probable Aramaic background for the hymn which is later translated into technical (philosophical) Greek by early Christian scribes. See the work on the Aramaic background of the Philippians Hymn in Lohmeyer 1928 and Fitzmyer 1988.

Though, being<sup>98</sup> in the *nature of God*,<sup>99</sup> [Jesus] did not count *equality with God* a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the nature of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

The italicized words in the above hymn (“nature of God,” “equality with God,” and “Lord”) indicate the early Church’s belief that Jesus shared in the Father’s divine life and power from all eternity, and that this life-power is unconditional love (indicated by the underlined words – “emptied himself,” “nature of a servant,” “humbling himself,” and “death on a cross” – which are all associated with Jesus’ and the apostolic church’s use of *agapē*). This affirmation reveals the central belief of the Christian Church – that the God of power and creation (*Yahweh*) is also the God of affectionate, humble, and compassionate love (*Abba*). This profession of God’s unconditional love explains why the Son of God would want to be with us in a perfect act of empathy – face to face and peer to peer. In view of this remarkable revelation, we no longer have to fear the strict justice and retribution of the wrath of God;<sup>100</sup> we can look forward to the unconditionally loving God helping us to remain on the path to his heavenly kingdom where his unconditional love will be actualized with all those who seek him with a sincere heart.

The evidence used to substantiate this claim – mostly from Jeremias, Brown, Meier, and Wright – represents the most contemporary historical study of the New Testament by mainstream scholars. It carefully applies historical criteria, situates Jesus within His First Century Palestinian milieu and tries to understand comprehensively the kingdom he believed himself to have brought – not only through his ministry and self-sacrificial act, but also through the resurrection and vindication he anticipated.<sup>101</sup> This should be sufficient to reasonably

<sup>98</sup> The present participle, “*Huparkōn*,” is better translated “being” than “was.” This term signifies “being in substance,” that is, “what something is.” When combined with “*morphē*” (“form”), the combination is best rendered, “nature.” See the following note.

<sup>99</sup> The term, “*Morphē*,” in classical Greek frequently indicates substance or nature (“what a thing is”). However, in biblical Greek it generally indicates “fashion” (“outward appearance”). Though the New Testament usage should generally be preferred over the classical, an exception should probably be made in this case, because of the context. The previous note indicated that “*Huparkōn*” means “being” in the sense of “what a thing is.” The hymn’s author intends the two words “*Huparkōn*” and “*Morphē*” to be taken together which probably indicates more than mere outward appearance. Does the combination indicate “nature”? There is reason to believe this because of the terms’ proximity to “equality with God.” The latter expression (literally, “to be equal to God”) reinforces “*Morphē Theou*.... *Huparkōn*” indicating that the author intended something close to a classical rendition of *Morphē* – namely, “nature.”

<sup>100</sup> As Paul notes, Jesus saves us from “the wrath of God” – see Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10 and 5:9. Paul considers this Old Testament theme to be a corollary of “God’s justice” (Rm 2:4-5), and so he sees the compassion and mercy (*agapē*) intrinsic to Jesus’ self-sacrificial act as overcoming strict justice, which enables us to be saved.

<sup>101</sup> At the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates his resurrection in Heaven during the rite of the wine/blood – “I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:22-25). This phrase appears in the Mark-Matthew tradition as well as the Lucan tradition, though the Lucan tradition has different phrasing, “I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Lk 22:17). This amounts to a double attestation and has a very probable Semitic origin, indicating historicity. There are other indications of Jesus’ anticipation of his resurrection and vindication which can be historically corroborated,

substantiate not only Jesus' belief in his Divine Sonship, but also the reality of his identity as Emmanuel – “the unconditionally loving God with us.”

Some readers may be wondering how God (with an infinite nature) could become incarnate in a finite nature (a man). The Christian Church long ago responded that the infinite *nature* of God did not become human (finite), for that would have been a contradiction. It asserted, instead, that the *person of the Son* – the second person of the Trinity, became human. This gives rise to the question about the distinction between the *nature of God* and the *person of the Son*. “Nature” refers to the infinite being or power of God (of which there can be only one – see Lonergan’s proof of only one infinite power in Volume 2, Chapter 3, Sections III & IV). In contrast to this, “divine *person*” (e.g. the Son) is like a “distinct self-consciousness” (self-awareness) that makes use of the *one* infinite power source (nature of God). The Son (the second self-consciousness making use of the one infinite nature) becomes man – but not the infinite nature of God. This is explained in detail in the Appendix to this volume.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the introduction to this Volume, we noted that reason alone would not be sufficient to understand our transcendent nature and destiny. Though reason can establish the existence of a unique unrestricted act of thinking which creates everything else in reality (see Volume 2 – Chapter 3 and Appendix II) and the likelihood that this Divine Being is also perfect love, justice/goodness, and beauty (see Volume 2 – Chapter Four), it leaves many questions unanswered – particularly about our relationship with this unique transcendent entity. Some of these questions are: What is His love and goodness like? How does He manifest it without undermining our freedom? Why would a perfectly loving God allow suffering? Why would a perfectly good God allow evil? What is God’s purpose in suffering? How do we enter into the cosmic struggle between good and evil? How should we pray? Does God answer prayers? How does God inspire us and how can He guide us without undermining our freedom? What is our eternal destiny like? Is there any possibility of being separated from God – even eternally? How does God judge? Is God’s kingdom open to all?

We conjectured that if reason could not answer these questions, then God Himself would have to do so through self-revelation. We presumed that God would make this revelation available to all peoples and cultures (through a multiplicity of religions), and we showed that this expectation is fulfilled in Friedrich Heiler’s seven common elements of world religions.<sup>102</sup> We then asked whether God would want to manifest himself *personally* and *ultimately* – to be with us in a perfect act of empathy – face to face and peer to peer. We reasoned that He would want to do this if He were *unconditional love*, which led to the obvious question – is He?

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such as, his selection of Psalm 22 as his dying words, his siding with the Pharisees against the Sadducees on belief in the resurrection, and his prediction about the Temple – “destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19 and partial parallel Mt 26:61).

<sup>102</sup> See Heiler 1959, p. 140-155.

To answer this question, we first reasoned that if love is our most positive power – capable of leading us to our highest purpose, fulfillment, and destiny – then it would be inconceivable that the Creator of our nature would not be loving. We reasoned further that if we have a desire for *unconditional* love, the only source of that desire would be an unconditionally loving entity – a perfect unity – God (see Chapter 2, Section I). Inasmuch as an unconditionally loving God would *want* to be with us in the most perfect way possible – in the most perfect empathetic relationship – then He would want to be with us *personally* and *ultimately* – face to face and peer to peer – not only to show us the way to love (*agapē*), but to give that love to us definitively.

This led to a final question – “Is Jesus the unconditionally loving God with us?” In Volume 3 and this volume, we laid out the evidence in favor of Jesus’ Divine Sonship – from the vantage point of his unconditional love, his revelation of the Father’s unconditional love, his resurrection in glory, his miracles by his own authority and power, his gift of the Holy Spirit, and his claim to be the exclusive son of the Father.

This evidence has been historically corroborated to a high degree, and is sufficient to ground the likelihood that Jesus is the unconditional love of God with us. However, as we have noted before, evidence is not enough to move us to faith – to turn to Jesus as our salvation and to seek the answers to life’s ultimate questions from him. Faith requires two additional movements of the heart:

1. A recognized *need* for his redemption and salvation, arising out of a perceived darkness, emptiness, self-alienation, and incompleteness within ourselves.
2. An affinity of the heart for his proclamation of *agapē*, arising out of an interior conviction that selfless love is truth, goodness, and beauty itself.

If we sense no darkness, emptiness, incompleteness, or self-alienation within ourselves (that is, if we believe that we are perfect light, perfect fullness, perfect love, and perfect authenticity), then we will have no need for redemption through Jesus’ healing love and grace, and if we feel no need for him or his love, the evidence for his divine Sonship will simply be interesting, but irrelevant. Furthermore, if we have no affinity for love as Jesus defined it (*agapē*), or we view love as negative, as mere sentimentality, weakness, or dependency – then Jesus’ revelation of God as unconditional love (and his promise of a kingdom of unconditional love) will be either irrelevant or repulsive. In either case, the evidence for Jesus as Emmanuel will be insufficient to move us to faith. However, if we do feel a need for his redemption and salvation, and an affinity for love as he defined it (*agapē*), then the evidence will become probative, and will give us the freedom to move toward a relationship with him that will confirm not only his divine Sonship, but the power of the Holy Spirit who will lead us through suffering and evil to the fullness of life with His Father.

Consider the implications of this conclusion. If Jesus is Emmanuel, then God really is unconditional love, and his Son has come into our reality to be with us in a perfect act of empathy and to give himself to us in a complete act of self-sacrifice. If Jesus is Emmanuel, then we can be sure of God’s unconditional salvific intention – that his sole intention is to bring each of us into his kingdom of love; that if we turn to him – even in our darkest hours of sin, he will forgive us and bring us back to himself just as the Father of the Prodigal Son. We can be sure

that the only way we could be separated from God in his eternity is if *we* freely choose it. Thus, if Jesus is Emmanuel, then we can be sure that we are on the way to the unconditionally loving God's salvation so long as we keep choosing that God as our Sovereign, keep returning to Him in our darkness, and try to follow the loving example of His beloved Son. If Jesus really is Emmanuel, then we can have unconditional hope in an eternity with the God of unconditional love and joy. As St. Paul states:

...eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and heart has not imagined what God has prepared for those who love him... (1Cor 2:9).

No truth could be more important than this. If Jesus is Emmanuel, he is not only the fullness of revelation; he is the way, the truth, and the life that we must endeavor, no matter how imperfectly, to follow.

We are now in a position to answer the question with which this Volume is primarily concerned – “What is our transcendent *destiny*?” If Jesus truly is the unconditionally loving God with us – for which there is abundant evidence – then the answer to this question, which lies beyond the bounds of reason, can be answered. Throughout the previous volume and chapters of this volume, we have discovered clues to the answer, and now they have been assembled by Emmanuel Himself. This was the topic of the previous section.

## Chapter Seven

### Who God is Not

[Back to top](#)

Each of the above false notions of God can appear to be reasonable, appropriate, and credible. Once they gain credibility in our minds and hearts, they are hard to change—at which point they do incalculable harm to our spiritual lives, and those of the people we touch. They are particularly deleterious during times of suffering, because they close us off to God, making prayer impossible and grace unreachable.

If you the reader find yourself susceptible to one or more of these false notions of God, I would suggest reviewing the rebuttals provided above. We may briefly summarize them as follows.

The “angry god” is present in the Old Testament, but Jesus never mentions it in the gospels. Nevertheless, this idea seems to be implied by four New Testament expressions, or actions of Jesus. Closer scrutiny reveals that these expressions and actions indicate the opposite of an angry god. St. Paul was not implying that God is angry but that Jesus came to *save* us from the “wrath of God”-- the negative judgment we justly deserve for our deeds. Jesus’ use of “*Gehenna*” and “wailing and grinding of teeth” does not indicate that God is cavalierly condemning people to hell, but that He is warning us not to pursue the path of self-absorption, hard-heartedness, domination, and self-idolatry that could induce us to *choose* hell. Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple was not a manifestation of spontaneous rage, but a carefully planned prophetic action designed to replace the old Temple in Jerusalem with the new universal Temple in Himself – which had as its ultimate objective, the salvation of the world. Jesus’ harsh tone

toward the Pharisees was not a manifestation of antagonistic, resentful, or retributive anger, but the use of a well-known prophetic method (practiced by John the Baptist and Old Testament prophets) to engage the Pharisees in a debate about their doctrine and authority and to warn them about the spiritual peril of their self-righteousness. All of these actions and expressions point to the love of Jesus and His Father – not to an angry god.

Since the “payback god” is a subspecies of the “angry god,” its justification proves false for the same reasons. God is no more interested in paying us back for mistakes made and sins committed than the father of the Prodigal son. He is not interested in vengeance at all – but in forgiveness 70 x 7 times.

Though the “domineering god” -- who wants to show us his superiority and make his authority felt — has roots in the Old Testament, it is completely absent in the New Testament. Jesus’ teaching directly conflicts with this view – particularly the name “*Abba*” and its connection to the Father of the Prodigal son, His advocacy of humility and gentle-heartedness, and His admonition to His disciples not to make their authority felt. The character of His ministry also contradicts the domineering god. The Christian mystical tradition has long embraced this -- as expressed by St. John of the Cross: “I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.”

The “terrifying god” also has roots in the Old Testament, but not in the way that Jonathan Edwards (the eighteenth century Puritan preacher) would suggest--“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.” The Old Testament is filled with references to Yahweh’s love of His people and the New Testament is centered on proclaiming the God who unconditionally loves us. There is no indication in the New Testament of God being uncaring or indifferent to our salvation. Indeed, everything in the preaching and actions of Jesus *militates against* these ideas, and shows God’s intense and unconditional love for us and desire for our salvation.

Though the “stoic god” does not have roots in either the Old or the New Testament, it seems to make sense in light of contemporary cultures’ admiration for the stoic virtues—rationality, strength, self-discipline, and courage/fortitude. Though Christianity has held to the importance of these virtues, it has never made them primary, because they are subordinate to *agapē* -- care, compassion, empathy, humility, and self-sacrifice for the good of others. Christians have long recognized that stoic values without *agapē* as their end and perfection lead almost inevitably to every kind of indignity, callous marginalization and persecution. If we attribute only stoic virtues to God, we risk creating the belief that God is rational but devoid of emotion; helpful but without compassion; tough-minded but without gentle-heartedness; and superior without being humble-hearted. If we believe that of God, then we will also believe He expects this of us -- which is spiritually disastrous because He expects precisely the opposite according to Jesus.

Since the “disgusted god” is a subspecies of both the “domineering god” and the “stoic god,” its justification proves false for the same reasons. In view of this, we should not think that God is more concerned with “harder, faster, better, and best” than with *agapē* -- compassion, care, empathy, humility, and self-sacrifice. God has but two principal concerns – leading us and

others to His eternal salvation. He helps us toward this salvation with a humble, gentle, compassionate, and understanding heart, which has no trace of disrespect, disdain, or disgust – but only a perfect parent’s undying love.

In conclusion, if you the reader find yourself believing in one of the above false notions of God, review the rebuttals of them – and find a good Spiritual Director who can help you affirm the spiritual goal given to all Christians in the Letter to the Ephesians:

.. May Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to *him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think*, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:17-21).

## **Chapter Eight**

### **The Universality of Jesus’ Salvation**

[\*\*Back to top\*\*](#)

If God is truly *unconditional* love (*agapē*) as Jesus has revealed, then He would not condition or restrict that love to any particular group of people, but rather, would offer it universally to every human being. It would be a contradiction to assert at once that God is unconditional *agapē* (unconditional humble-heartedness, gentle-heartedness, compassion, forgiveness, authenticity, and peacemaking) – *and* that God condemns people who do not recognize His Son for no other reason than a lack of opportunity to know him meaningfully. If God is not to hold the blameless to blame, then his intention must be to offer salvation to everyone who seeks him with a sincere heart.

Furthermore, if God is unconditional *agapē* (as Jesus defined it), then that love would be unconditionally compassionate and forgiving. This means that God would not reject repentant sinners (someone who has strayed from the path of love, but is trying to get back onto it); rather, he would do everything possible to bring sinners back into his life and love.

Well then, did Jesus really believe that God offers salvation to everyone who seeks him with a sincere heart? We will need to examine three sources of teaching from Jesus and the Christian Church:

1. New Testament passages in Favor of God’s Universal Offer of Salvation (Section I).
2. New Testament passages which imply God’s restricted offer of salvation (Section II).
3. Contemporary documents from the Christian Church concerning God’s universal offer of salvation (Section III):

- The Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Church -- *Lumen Gentium*

- Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World -- *Gaudium et Spes* .

## I.

### New Testament Passages in Favor of God's Universal Offer of Salvation

[Back to top](#)

Jesus' Eucharistic words provide an important insight into his intention to offer salvation to *all* people, because they can be traced back to him (through his Aramaic phrasing). Recall that the more original tradition of Jesus' Eucharistic words comes from Mark-Matthew ("Poured out for the many") instead of Luke ("Poured out for you"), because the former is a Semitism, and the latter has been altered for liturgical purposes.<sup>103</sup> Recall also that "*to pollōn*" ("the many") is an unusual Greek expression which attempts to translate the Hebrew "*rabbim*." In Hebrew, there is only one word for both "many" and "all" – namely, "*rabbim*." The only way of distinguishing these meanings is the presence of the definite article. If the definite article is present, "*rabbim*" is translated "all," but if the definite article is absent, it is translated as "many."<sup>104</sup> In the case of Jesus' Eucharistic words, a definite article does precede "*pollōn*" ("*to pollōn*") in the Mark-Matthew tradition. This means that it should be translated "poured out for *all*." This is confirmed by 1 Timothy 2:6 in which the phrase from Isaiah 53:12 is translated, "poured out as a ransom for *all* (*pantōn*)."<sup>105</sup> In view of this, we should prefer an inclusive translation for Jesus' Aramaic Eucharistic words -- "poured out for *all*"<sup>105</sup> (see the explanation in Chapter Five above).

If this analysis (of Joachim Jeremias) is correct then Jesus unambiguously stated his will to save everyone through his passion and death. This is confirmed by Jesus' selection of Psalm 22 for his dying words. Mark recounts a very likely version of Jesus' last words – "*Elōi, Elōi, lama sabachthani*" ("my God, my God, why have you forsaken me" – Mk 15:34). This rendition of the first line of Psalm 22 is probably a northern Galilean Aramaic dialect (the dialect in which Jesus probably learned this Psalm from his mother as a child), and so it manifests not only what is in Jesus' mind, but His heart. Recall also that the first line of the Psalm represents the *whole* Psalm, and there is an expectation that Jesus' audience will recognize the Psalm upon hearing the first line (just as a cantor expects the congregation to recognize the Psalm from his recitation of the first line).

The parallels between Jesus' crucifixion and the torments described by the Psalmist are uncanny (verses 6-8; 12-18), but that is not the only reason Jesus chooses this song for His dying words. He intends that His Father (and the bystanders) hear three other themes – His trust in His Father (verses 3-5), His belief that His Father will vindicate His death (verses 24-26), and that this vindication will lead to the salvation of the *whole* world (verses 27-31). Thus, Jesus' dying words are not a cry of forsakenness and despair, but a song of trust in God, a belief in his final vindication and an offer of salvation to the *whole* world.

Let us look more closely at the last point. The final part of the Psalm runs as follows:

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<sup>103</sup> See Jeremias 1966 p. 179.

<sup>104</sup> See Jeremias 1966 p. 179.

<sup>105</sup> See Jeremias 1966 p. 179.



*All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
will bow down before him,  
for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations.  
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.  
Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.  
They will proclaim his righteousness,  
declaring to a *people yet unborn*:  
He has done it! (Ps 22:27-31)*

The Psalmist believes that God will not only vindicate his suffering, but that his suffering will be joined to God's final victory in which *all* the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord. The Psalmist goes even further – it is not just people of the time of vindication, but also those who are deceased since the beginning of humankind (“*all* who go down to the dust will kneel before him”) and all the people of future generations (“future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a *people yet unborn*: He has done it!”).

This Psalm is one of the clearest statements of God's universal offer of salvation in the Old Testament, and it would make no sense for Jesus to have selected it as His dying words unless He was in agreement with the Psalmist's belief in the universality of *Yahweh's* final vindication. Jesus's view of Himself as the preexistent Son of Man was to be the final judge of Israel (which He initiated through the cleansing of the Temple). Thus Jesus saw Himself as the vehicle through which *Yahweh's* final vindication would come – not just to Israel, but, as the Psalm indicates, to the *whole* world for *all* time. Jesus selected Psalm 22 precisely because it gave His suffering and death a *universal* eschatological significance. He was initiating the final age through His suffering and death, and He desired and intended that this final judgment not be condemnation, but salvation for the whole world for all time.

God's intention to save *everyone* who seeks him with a sincere heart is also supported by several passages of scripture in Special Matthew (sources used by Matthew alone), Special Luke, and John.

- *Mt 18:14* -- “*It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*” This passage which occurs after the Parable of the Lost Sheep, is concerned with God's intent to save all sinners, but does not specifically address God's desire to save people of every time and nation. Yet one must ask, “If God's intention is to lose no one – even the greatest sinner – would that not extend to those who do not know Jesus (simply because of an accident of birth)? Sinners are culpable for what they have done, but people who do not know Jesus because they had no opportunity to hear or understand him are not culpable. If God's intention is

to lose no one who is *culpable*, why wouldn't it extend to those who are not culpable?

- *Lk 3:6* -- “*All people shall see the salvation of God.*” This phrase comes originally from the prophet Isaiah (Is 40:4-5) and is placed by Luke on the lips of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Jesus. Luke includes this passage from Isaiah in his gospel precisely because it shows God's desire to reveal his glory to the *whole* world. As a Gentile, Luke is especially sensitive to this. What does “seeing God's glory” mean? For Luke, “God's glory” is manifest perfectly in Jesus – particularly his salvific self-sacrifice. Luke's belief in Jesus' offer of salvation extends beyond this passage throughout his whole Gospel – indeed, it is one of his key themes, beginning with the infancy narratives until the end of the *Acts of Apostles*.<sup>106</sup> Luke did not say how *all* people will be able to see Jesus' salvation, because he knew well that many people would not hear about Jesus before they passed from this world. Did Luke believe that everyone would be given a chance to see the salvation of Jesus – in this life or the next? If he did not, his belief in God's universal offer of salvation would be contradictory.
- *Jn 12:32* -- “*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.*” In this passage Jesus is addressing the crowds about the meaning of his death – that it will be his and the Father's glorification. This glory has two dimensions – (1) the end of Satan's reign (“the Prince of this world will be driven out”), and (2) all people will be drawn to Jesus. This passage implies that Jesus will offer His salvation to everyone, by drawing everyone to Himself. Yet John, like Luke, must have known that many people would die before hearing about Jesus. Is there some way in which John's rendition of Jesus' universal offer of salvation can come to pass? Evidently he thought so.
- *Jn 17: 2* -- “*For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.*” In this passage from the Priestly Prayer of Christ, Jesus acknowledges that his Father has given him authority over everyone in the world so that he can give eternal life to *all* of them – that is, to *all* people. Again, John must have known that much of the world would not have heard of Jesus before dying. How could Jesus' authority to give eternal life to *all people* be brought to fruition under this circumstance? Jesus must have made some provision for those who had no possibility of hearing about him during their lifetime – otherwise the universal claim in this statement would be impossible.

In conclusion, there is considerable evidence for Jesus' offer of salvation to all people for all time. The Aramaic version of Jesus' Eucharistic words (“poured out for all”) strongly supports this; so also does His selection of Psalm 22 for His dying words. Furthermore, there is multiple attestation of this theme in special Matthew, special Luke, and John, and Luke makes it central to his Gospel. If Jesus did not intend His offer of salvation to be universal, then these passages would be difficult to explain – if not unintelligible. Yet there are also some passages which seem

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<sup>106</sup> See Karris 1990 p 686.

to go against this theme. (see below I.B.). Is the New Testament contradictory or can these seemingly non-universalistic passages be explained?

## II.

### New Testament Passages That May Imply a Restricted Offer of Salvation

[Back to top](#)

There are two particularly prominent passages that seem to contradict those in the foregoing section:

- Acts 4:12: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”
- John 14:6: “No one comes to the Father, but by me.”

At first glance, one might think that these passages mean that if someone has not heard of the name of Jesus or acknowledged belief in Jesus, then that person will not be saved. However, we must ask whether these passages, like many others in the New Testament, have an inclusive or exclusive meaning. The exclusive meaning was given immediately above (i.e., if you have not heard of the name of Jesus, or do not believe *for any reason*, you are excluded from the kingdom of heaven).

However, there is another way of looking at the same passages, namely, that the *name* of Jesus (Acts 4:12) and Jesus Himself (John 14:6) constitute *the way* in which we *are* saved. It does not say *who* is saved or *not* saved by Jesus (or His name). Could Jesus (or Jesus’ name) save someone who has not even heard of the name of Jesus? These passages do not answer these questions, but the seven passages listed and explained in I do (Mark 14:24-Matthew 26:28, Mark 15:34 / Psalm 22, Matthew 18:14, Luke 3:6, John 12:32, John 17:2, and 1 Timothy 2:6).

When we see the above disputed passages in Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 in the context of these other passages, an inclusive interpretation appears more appropriate. Thus the passage from Acts would mean that Jesus has provided the way for all human beings to come to the Father, but it does not restrict salvation only to those who profess the name of Jesus.<sup>107</sup> Similarly the passage from John should be read, “I am the only way to the Father,” but it does not restrict Jesus’ saving activity *only* to those who *profess* His name. When both passages are interpreted inclusively, they affirm that Jesus is the *one* and only *savior* of the world, but they do not restrict that saving activity only to those who profess His name.

Another problematic passage in the Gospel of John is also open to an inclusive or exclusive interpretation:

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<sup>107</sup> This passage can be misunderstood if we do not bear in mind the Semitic and Christian use of “name.” A contemporary audience is likely to see “name” in a nominalistic way and so believe that someone must profess the name of Jesus in order to be saved. But this is not the Christian view, which sees the name of Jesus to represent His salvific action and power (see the previous chapter). Thus the passage in Acts should be interpreted as, “we are saved only by the power and salvific action of Jesus,” but it does not specify whether someone must profess that name in order to be saved by it. See McKenzie 1965, pp. 604-605.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn [*krinē*] the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not condemned; He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:16-18).

The exclusive interpretation is obvious: “not believing *for any reason whatsoever* warrants condemnation.” But does the Johannine author really mean “for any reason whatsoever?” John’s usage in other parts of the Gospel indicates the contrary, where both belief *and unbelief* require an act of the will. If this is the case, then “not believing,” here, would mean *refusal* to believe in Jesus’ name<sup>108</sup> (but *not ignorance* of it).

This might seem unusual from the vantage point of contemporary English usage, because non-belief seems to denote the contrary of belief, which could mean not believing because of ignorance (e.g., not having heard about Jesus because of being born before the time of Jesus, or being born into a culture where missionaries had not gone, or never having heard missionaries in a culture where they had gone, or never having understood missionaries in a place where one heard them, etc.). But it is very unlikely that the Johannine author is using “non-belief” in this sweeping sense, because this passage indicates that God’s primary intention is to *save the world*.

This inclusive interpretation is confirmed later in the Gospel (John 12:47-49):

If any one hears my words and does not keep them, I do *not condemn* [*krinō*] him; for I did not come to condemn the world but to *save* the world. He who *rejects* [*athetōn*] me and does not receive my words has a judge [*krinonta* – the one accusing]; the *word* that I have spoken will be his judge [*krinei*] on the last day.

This passage indicates that Jesus’ *word* is the judge. Yet how could Jesus’ word be the judge unless someone has heard it? Indeed, in this passage, Jesus indicates that the condition for being judged *is hearing* his word (“**If** any one hears my words...”). We also see in this passage that Jesus’ intention is to *save* the world (not to condemn it), and that condemnation comes only from *rejecting* His word (“He who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge...”). Condemnation clearly does not come from *not hearing* His word. Therefore, condemnation does not come through Jesus, but from *rejection* of the word that the listener has heard.

The two problematic passages in John (Jn. 14:6 and Jn. 3:16-18) must be interpreted in an inclusive way if they are to be consistent with the above passage (John 12:47-49). If they are interpreted in an *exclusive* way, the blatant contradiction in the Gospel would be quite baffling. Furthermore, an exclusive interpretation would contradict the two affirmations of God’s universal offer of salvation in John’s Gospel (mentioned above in I – John 12:32 & John 17:2). If this interpretation is correct, then the Johannine author is not referring to “unbelief out of ignorance,” but only “unbelief arising out of explicit rejection of the word heard and understood.”

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<sup>108</sup> See the previous note on “name” as the “power and salvation of Jesus.”

In John's Gospel, refusal to believe in the name of Jesus entails a refusal to renounce the world. As McKenzie notes, "When the preaching is uttered, and in particular when Jesus presents Himself, one refuses to believe only because one refuses to renounce the world."<sup>109</sup> Thus, "unbelief" in John's Gospel has a very refined meaning – "a refusal to believe in the word of Jesus which comes from a refusal to renounce the world." Therefore, the Johannine author is not saying that people who never heard of Jesus will be condemned ("a crass doctrine of predestination"<sup>110</sup>), but rather a warning that those who refuse to renounce the world will likely refuse to believe in the saving power and action of Jesus, and that this rejection of the Word can lead to the path to condemnation.

In sum, the above three disputed passages (Acts 4:12, John 3:16-18, John 14:6) are best interpreted in an *inclusive* sense. They are not meant to exclude those, who through no fault of their own, have not heard the word of Jesus. This inclusive interpretation is consistent with the inclusivity of Jesus' Eucharistic words, His dying words, and the five passages on universal salvation mentioned above (Matthew 18:14, Luke 3:6, John 12:32, John 17:2, and 1 Timothy 2:6). In light of this, it is reasonable to infer that Jesus' intention was to offer salvation to *every* person seeking God with a sincere heart. This interpretation is verified in subsequent Christian doctrine.

### III. Christian Doctrines of God's Universal Offer of Salvation [Back to top](#)

The universality of Christ's offer of salvation has been a part of Christian theology throughout the centuries, and explicitly surfaced in controversies surrounding the necessity of baptism for salvation. This doctrine seemed to run contrary to the universality of Jesus' offer of salvation because all people prior to the time of Jesus could not have been baptized and all people who had not heard or understood the word of Jesus would likewise not be baptized. St. Ambrose was one of the first Church fathers to address this problem in his funeral oration for Emperor Valentinian II, who was assassinated before he was officially baptized: "Should he not acquire the grace for which he longed? Certainly: As he desired it, he has attained it . . . His pious desire has absolved him."<sup>111</sup> This is further confirmed by St. Augustine in his tractate *On Baptism Against the Donatists*: "I find that not only suffering for the sake of Christ can replace that which is lacking in Baptism, but also *faith and conversion of the heart* (fidem conversionemque cordis)."<sup>112</sup>

Baptism by desire was implicitly acknowledged by the Church before St. Ambrose and Augustine because it believed, in accordance with Jesus' teaching, that the Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and holy men and women were with God in Heaven (as implied by Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah during the Transfiguration and implied by Jesus' Parable of

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<sup>109</sup> McKenzie 1965, p. 271

<sup>110</sup> McKenzie 1965, p. 271

<sup>111</sup> Ambrose 1955. *De obitu Valent* 51, 53.

<sup>112</sup> St. Augustine 1955. *De Baptismo Contra Donatistas Libri Septem* IV 22, 29.

Lazarus and the rich man in which Abraham is the representative of Heaven). Furthermore, Jesus uses the implicit resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to counter the Sadducees refusal to believe in it:

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living (Matthew 22:31-32).

Evidently, an exception to “baptism by water” had to be made for the holy men and women of the Old Testament, and this may have provided Sts. Ambrose and Augustine with the rationale to formulate “baptism of desire.” This was further formalized by St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>113</sup> and the Council of Trent which affirms that we are saved by “the washing unto regeneration or *the desire for the same*.”<sup>114</sup> The Catholic Church formalized the universality of Jesus’ offer of salvation in the Second Vatican Council and promulgated it in its Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)<sup>115</sup> and its Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium Et Spes*). *Lumen Gentium* states:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.<sup>116</sup>

*Gaudium Et Spes* reinforces and expands the understanding of Jesus’ universal offer of salvation as follows:

The Christian is certainly bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as one who has been made a partner in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ, he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection. All this holds true not for the Christian only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since *Christ died for all*, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>117</sup>

These teachings of the Second Vatican Council are reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which specifically affirms that “Christ died for all”:

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<sup>113</sup> “Some have received the invisible sanctification without visible sacraments, and to their profit; but though it is possible to have the visible sanctification, consisting in a visible sacrament, without the invisible sanctification, it will be to no profit.” Since, therefore, the sacrament of Baptism pertains to the visible sanctification; it seems that a man *can obtain salvation* without the sacrament of Baptism, by means of the invisible sanctification” ( Aquinas 1947 Summa Theologica III, q68, a 2 – italics mine).

<sup>114</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer 1965, #796.

<sup>115</sup> A dogmatic constitution is the highest infallible document in the Catholic Church.

<sup>116</sup> Flannery 1975, p. 376; *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II (section 16).

<sup>117</sup> Flannery 1975, pp. 923-24; *Gaudium et Spes*, Chapter I (section 22). Italics mine.

Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery. Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.<sup>118</sup>

In sum, the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament are consistent with what would be expected of an unconditionally loving God, namely, that God would not condemn anyone because of an accident of birth (being born prior to the time of Jesus, or being born in a culture that has not heard of or does not understand Jesus, etc.). Rather, Jesus' (and God the Father's) intention is to save all people of good will; that is, those who "seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience." This is validated by the doctrines of many Christian churches, and is an integral part of the dogma of the Catholic Church.

At this juncture, one might be tempted to ask, "Well, if everyone of good will can be saved, what is the point of Christian evangelization?"

#### IV. Why Should Christians Evangelize? [Back to top](#)

It is not to counteract a heartless god who would capriciously condemn someone for being born at the wrong place or time, but precisely for the opposite reason – because God *does* have a heart, and people deserve to know it; because God does *not* condemn people for an accident of birth, and people deserve to know *that*; and because God *does* have a universal intention to save, and people deserve to know that. Everyone deserves to know that there is no ultimate tragedy in this world, because all suffering will be redeemed in God's unconditional love; that our destiny is to be with God and one another in perfect love and joy forever; that every human being possesses a uniquely good, lovable, transcendent nature which deserves justice and compassion irrespective of social, economic, political, or educational status; and that every good work and act of love in which we participate will reverberate throughout the kingdom in God's eternity. These truths can make the difference between a life of hope or a life of despair, a life of ultimate purpose or merely superficial purpose; a life devoted to *agapē* or indifferent to it; a life that builds up the common good and the kingdom of God or one that undermines them.

This is not the only reason why Christians would want to share the good news about Jesus Christ. Jesus gave us tremendous gifts not only to help us on our journey to salvation, but also to build his kingdom and to engage in the struggle against evil. Some of these gifts include

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<sup>118</sup> *Catechism of Catholic Church* 1997. Par.1260.

the presence of the Holy Spirit within us,<sup>119</sup> the New Testament scriptures, the Church community, the Holy Eucharist, and the teaching tradition of the Church. As noted above, non-Christians do not have to have these gifts in order to be saved. Nevertheless, these gifts help us freely appropriate a loving identity (in imitation of Jesus' *agapē*), be disciples of hope, love, and joy for the world, contend with the forces of evil, and buildup the common good in the kingdom of God – which adds countless layers of meaning to our lives. Well then, why should Christians evangelize? Not because they fear that God will condemn those who have not heard of Jesus, but because Jesus is their source of ultimate purpose, destiny, dignity, hope, love, and joy. If Christians really believe this, they will not be able to stop themselves from sharing Jesus' word – for it can change the contours and horizon of everything we do and strive for on our way to the kingdom of unconditional love.

## Chapter Nine

### The Effect of Jesus' Teaching on World Culture

[Back to top](#)

Jesus' teaching on love changed the course of world history. Its social-political benefits were so vast in the West that they spread to the furthest parts of the globe – not only through the missionaries, but through international political organizations, international courts, and international non-governmental organizations.

Jesus' highly distinctive teaching on love of God and neighbor (Section I) had three profound socio-political effects:

1. The ideal of social equality and the diminution of slavery in the ancient world (Section II)
2. The rise of public healthcare, hospitals, and welfare (Section III)
3. The rise of public education (Section IV)

If these three developments had not taken root and proliferated in Western and global culture, we would live in a world with vastly more social inequalities, a world even more subject to disease and poverty, a far less educated world, and a world with fewer rights and aspirations toward justice. There were of course other causes of this positive social momentum besides Christ's teaching on love, but without this radical teaching, the other causes would have had considerably less foundation on which to build. The source of this momentum is captured in St. Paul's prayer for the Christian Church:

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<sup>119</sup> The Holy Spirit also works in and through non-Christians. As the above section of the Pastoral Constitution of the Church (*Gaudium et Spes*) clearly states: "We must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery." Christians have a special partnership with the Holy Spirit through baptism which is termed "indwelling" (see 1Cor 3:16, 1Cor 6:19, 2Cor 6:16, 2Tim 1:14, Acts 6:5, Eph 5:18, Rom 8:11, Gal 4:6, and Jn 16:13). This indwelling enables us to recognize in the depth of our hearts that God is "Abba" (see Gal 4:6), to know and desire God's heart of love (*agapē* – see 1Cor 13), to abide in peace beyond all understanding (Phil 4:7), and to receive the inspiration and guidance to edify and build the kingdom of God and the human community.



And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

There is of course, a danger in writing about this positive social momentum – namely, that there have been (and are) countless Christians (including clergy) who have not lived up to, and even undermined, Jesus' teaching on love, because of cowardice, lack of resolve, selfishness, narcissism, and every other form of the seven deadly sins (gluttony/drunkenness, lust, sloth, greed, anger, envy, and pride). I count myself among this group, and know well, with St. Augustine that “there but for the grace of God, go I.”<sup>120</sup>

Yet we cannot let this darkness block out the light and goodness of a teaching, a Spirit, and a Church that has already done immense good for the world. We cannot fail to be inspired by the individuals who truly put it into practice, for this will obscure the light and leave us forgetful of the power to overcome the darkness. If we focus on the darkness alone, we will never find our way out of it. Jesus tells us, “I am the light of the world,” and if we look for this light, find inspiration in it, and try to put it into practice – however imperfectly – we too can join our predecessors in foiling the prophecy of Edmund Burke: “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”<sup>121</sup>

## I.

### The Social-Political Implications of Jesus' Teaching on Love

[Back to top](#)

In Chapter Two above, I described five aspects of Jesus' teaching on love that were quite distinct if not unique in the history of religions:

1. God is not only loving; he is *unconditionally* loving (like the father of the prodigal son who Jesus addresses as “*Abba*”).
2. Love is the highest commandment in which summarizes all commandments and virtues.
3. Jesus defines love through the Beatitudes – humble-heartedness (“poor in spirit”), gentle-heartedness (“meek”), zeal for souls (“hungering and thirsting for righteousness”), forgiveness and compassion for the marginalized (“the merciful”), purity of heart, and peacemaking. The elucidation of forgiveness is found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the elucidation of compassion for the marginalized is found in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

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<sup>120</sup>St. Augustine was probably the first to succinctly express this sentiment in his *Confessions*: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death [sin] but thy grace alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord?” This was later rephrased into its current form, but the precise attribution is unknown.

<sup>121</sup> This phrase is popularly attributed to Edmund Burke, but it cannot be found explicitly in his writings; it may have come from one of his many unpublished speeches. He did say in *Thoughts on the Cause of Present Discontents*, the following: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”

4. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable and complementary – and the Golden Rule (do the good for others you would want done to you) brings the Silver Rule (avoid unnecessary harm) to completion.
5. “Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to *me* [Jesus].”

Jesus places this distinctive teaching on love at the heart of his Gospel message, and further teaches that it must begin with an interior transformation that allows us to spontaneously feel compassion for those in need – and indeed for everyone (like the Good Samaritan). This interior transformation will naturally manifest itself in exterior actions that Jesus describes throughout his preaching.

Jesus then shows how these interior attitudes should manifest themselves in exterior actions: love of enemies, prayer for those who hate us, turning the other cheek, forgiving one another seventy times seven times (an innumerable number of times), having mercy on the marginalized, ignored, and displaced, loving sinners and even criminals. Jesus says that these actions represent the heart and perfection of his Father.

Jesus extends his teaching on love into the domain of ethics (incipiently political theory) in three other distinctive ways:

1. The Golden Rule (that he interprets in an ethically maximalistic way) – Section I.A.
2. The intrinsic *transcendent* dignity of *every* human being – Section I.B
3. The ranking of each individual person over the law itself – Section I.C.

These distinctive extensions of Jesus’ teaching on love enabled the Christian church to be the agent of considerable social reform which ultimately resulted in such social and legal doctrines as the intrinsic dignity of all human beings, universal inalienable rights, social altruism, and the prioritization of justice and human dignity over the positive law and the power of the state.

Let us begin with the Golden Rule.

### **I.A**

#### **The Golden Rule and Ethical Maximalism**

Though many contemporary thinkers use this phrase to refer to any doctrine of ethical reciprocity, I am using it here in the restricted sense proposed by Jesus – namely, “Do the good for others that you would want done for you.” This view must be sharply distinguished from the silver rule which emphasizes only the avoidance of harm (“Do not do unto others what you would not want done to you” – that is, “avoid harms to others that you do not want done to you”). The Golden Rule should also be distinguished from reciprocity doctrines that are essentially reprisal, such as the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”). It should also be distinguished from reciprocity doctrines that are essentially ethical pragmatism – “do the good for others, so that others will do good back to you.”

Non-Christian religious traditions do not have an explicit and central teaching of the Golden Rule in the maximalistic sense mentioned above. They emphasize the negative or pragmatic reciprocity doctrines – namely, the silver rule, the *lex talionis*, and ethical pragmatism.<sup>122</sup> Most religions emphasize the silver rule (though *lex talionis* and pragmatic reciprocity continue to be influential in some modern religions). The Silver Rule is mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament two times (Tobit 4:15; Sirach 31:15). It can be roughly translated as, “Do not do a harm to others that you would not want done to you.” This is generally termed “ethical minimalism” because it places the emphasis on avoiding harm rather than doing good.

When Jesus removed the “nots” from the silver rule, He converted it from “ethical minimalism” to “ethical maximalism.” We might rephrase the Golden Rule as follows: “Do the good for others that you would want done to you.” The emphasis is no longer on merely avoiding harm, but also on doing good (beyond the avoidance of harm). Evidently doing the good for others entails avoiding harm, but it also entails much more – namely any good that you would want done to you. There is really no limit to these goods, and so the Golden Rule might be viewed as “open-ended altruism.”

Jesus not only emphasized the Golden Rule, but also made it *central* to His ethical doctrine. He removed all the negative competitors to it (such as the silver rule), and explicitly repudiated the *lex talionis*:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also... (Matthew 5:38-39).

Jesus’ positive ethical maximalism has its origins in His doctrine on love. He asks us to imitate the Father’s love of enemies (Matthew 5:44-48), to forgive everyone from the heart (Matthew 6:12), not to judge others negatively (Matthew 7:1-5), to consider *everyone* our neighbor – worthy of compassionate love (like the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37). When we look at these teachings collectively, we can see Jesus’ underlying viewpoint that love, mercy, and compassion are higher than justice (which is derived from the Silver Rule). Love and mercy (from which the Golden Rule is derived) go beyond justice (the Silver Rule), and advocate for a positive, altruistic, and compassionate social order. This emphasis had a profound effect on the social-political development in the West, particularly with respect to the development of universal public healthcare and welfare (Section III), universal public education (Section IV), and on the development of economic rights and social responsibility (see Volume 17). The influence of these doctrines spread to the rest of the world in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as exploration and migration grew.

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<sup>122</sup> See W.A. Spooner 2000 “The Golden Rule” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* ed. by James Hastings (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), Vol.6 pp 310-312. There is one possible exception to this, in the Indian Epic *Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva* 167:9, which says, “Hence, (keeping these in mind), by self-control and by making dharma (right conduct) your main focus, treat others as you treat yourself.” This positive phrasing is not central to either the Epic or the ethical doctrines of ancient India which emphasize the silver rule and ethical pragmatism.

## I.B

### The Intrinsic Transcendent Dignity of All Human Beings

Another distinctive extension of Jesus' teaching on love is the intrinsic *transcendent* dignity of *every* human being – particularly the lowliest and most challenged. Jesus establishes this principle by identifying every human being with himself – indicating that he is not only present to every human being, but imparts his own divine dignity upon them:

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me... Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me (Matt 25:40, 45).

Though there is precedent for the idea of divine dignity in human beings in the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly Genesis 1:27 – “In His image and likeness He created them...”), this is truly an extraordinary teaching, because Jesus elevates the *ontological* teaching in Genesis to a *moral and ethical imperative*. He accomplishes this by combining the ethical dimension of “treating others justly and compassionately” with the ontological dimension of our sharing in His divine status. Thus, He is not only saying that human beings have a quasi-divine status (created in the image and likeness of God), but also that to mistreat a human being is the same as mistreating Him (the divine Son).

Three aspects of this ethical doctrine had a profound effect on social-political theory. First *every* human being has a divine-like status in virtue of being created in God's image and being adopted by Jesus. This lies at the foundation of the doctrine of social equality (Section II) and the doctrine of universal inalienable natural rights (Volume 17). Secondly, since human beings have this divine-like dignity in virtue of God, they are not given it by any human authority. Thus our dignity is *intrinsic* -- that is it belongs to us in virtue of our creation by God and adoption by Jesus. Thirdly, no human authority (such as a state or court) can remove, negate, or abuse that intrinsic divine-like dignity without having a just cause for doing so (such as self-defense). Negating anyone's intrinsic dignity is tantamount to human authority suppressing divine authority.

As will be seen below, this doctrine of universal intrinsic transcendent dignity will have several major effects: the end of the coliseum's atrocities, the eventual end of slavery in the Roman world, the ultimate end of slavery of Indians and blacks in the New World, and the development of the doctrines of social equality and inalienable rights.

## I.C

### Individual Dignity and the Law

One of the more radical passages in Jesus' teaching occurs in Mark 2:23-28 in which Mark tells of Jesus' disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath which incites the Pharisees to ask Jesus, “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” The Pharisees believe they have caught Jesus in the violation of *God's* law, because they assume that the Sabbath law is virtually absolute, and that it cannot be compromised for any humane reason.

Jesus contradicts their interpretation of the law by implying that God is more interested in compassion (and taking care of the needs of human beings) than he is in the strict observance of the law; so he tells them about King David's violation of the law (eating the bread reserved for the priests) to assuage their hunger (a humane reason). He then comes out with a statement that will shake the foundations of state authority for centuries: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

The Sabbath here represents the law (*Torah*) itself. This implies that the law was not created as a higher reality independently of human beings, but rather as a subordinate reality for the good of human beings. The law has no purpose apart from the human beings it is intended to serve. This means that the law cannot be an absolute above human beings, and that the needs of human beings can create legitimate exceptions to the practice of the law. This is precisely why David had the right to feed his men bread reserved for the priests (a violation of the law).

This idea of valuing individual human beings (and their needs) above the law is so disturbing to the Pharisees that Jesus needs to justify it beyond making an appeal to David's actions. He makes the extraordinary claim that "the Son of Man" has authority even over the Sabbath [the law]. The Pharisees may not have been clear on what Jesus meant by this, but many of them were familiar with Daniel 7:13-14 in which the eschatological "Son of Man" would come on the clouds and be given divine authority and judgment for all time:

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

The Pharisees may have recognized Jesus' reference to the "Son of Man" in Daniel, but may not have been certain that he was using his title to refer to himself. Nevertheless his disciples knew, and after his resurrection believed that he had made this utterance with divine authority (like that given to the Son of Man). As a consequence they initiated the Christian doctrine that the law was not absolute, was not higher than human beings, was made for human beings, and could have legitimate exceptions when humane need required it.

This doctrine had a significant impact on the course of history, especially with respect to the elimination of slavery in the Ancient and New World, the development of the doctrine of social equality (Section II), and the development of the doctrine of inalienable rights (Volume 17). When Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), He is saying that the law (represented by the Sabbath) is subordinate to the good of human beings. He uses his authority as the Son of Man (the divine judge of Daniel 7:11) to proclaim: "For the Son of Man has authority even over the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28).

The implications of Jesus' ethical imperative which equates the treatment of each individual with the treatment of Himself, and the social-political imperative that each individual

has more intrinsic dignity and value than the law itself is quite distinctive in the history of religions. Once again, it seems to emanate from Jesus' teaching about the unconditional love of God; for if God loves us unconditionally, then each of us must be *unconditionally lovable*, implying a supreme dignity and value. Immanuel Kant later described this supreme value in his categorical imperative that each human being must be treated as an end in himself.<sup>123</sup>

Jesus' teaching on the unconditional love of God changed the social fabric of the world with an incredible momentum. Prior to the time Constantine legalized Christianity (313), the rapidly growing Christian community had already begun a vigorous process of humanizing the harsh, unequal, stoic culture of the Empire. This process began in the Christian community itself, but soon spread into the wider culture. This occurred in three major areas:

1. The equality of all people and concomitant diminishment of slavery (Section II),
2. The initiation of social welfare programs from hospitals and healthcare to care for widows and the poor (Section III), and
3. Education of community members and the public (Section IV).

This process began with the Christian community itself, but rapidly spread into the larger culture, and when Constantine legalized Christianity, he incorporated many of its institutions into the Roman civil and social structure. Though these humanizing factors waxed and waned during the barbarian conflicts with Rome and their subsequent conquest of it, Christian social institutions made their way back into the social and cultural fabric through the monasteries.

We may now turn to each of the three Christian social transformations of Rome and the new culture of the Early Middle Ages.

## II.

### **The Christian Impact on Social Equality and Roman Slavery**

[\*\*Back to top\*\*](#)

The Roman Empire exemplified the opposite values of Christianity. Rome embraced the Augustan hierarchical social view which accorded peerage to the top rungs and almost nothing to the bottom ones. The very bottom rung, of course, were slaves which constituted over one third of the Roman population and were oppressed in every imaginable way – including the Roman coliseum which regularly massacred them.<sup>124</sup>

Almost immediately after the arrival of Saints Peter and Paul to Rome, the Christian resocialization of the Empire began. Jesus' teaching about the unconditional love of God (e.g. the father of the Prodigal Son), His admonition to imitate Him and the Father in compassion (e.g. the Good Samaritan), and His identification of Himself with every person, most especially the poor (e.g. "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me") forms the basis for St. Paul's proclamation of social equality within the Christian community:

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<sup>123</sup>Immanuel Kant 1993 *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed) trans by James W. Ellington pp. 6:213-4.

<sup>124</sup> It is estimated that 700,000+ people died in the coliseum, most of whom were slaves, gladiators and enemies of the state, such as Christians. It was one of the most bloody and barbaric displays of cultural decadence in the west.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3: 26-28).

For Paul, being baptized into Christ is to receive the highest attainable status – “children of God and clothed with Christ.” This means that all Christians have equal status, which Paul makes explicit, by saying that there are no class distinctions (such as slave or free person), no religious distinctions (such as Jew or Greek), or any gender distinctions (male or female). This radical notion of equality is made customary within Christian communities by the leaders of the Christian church. This spills over into the larger culture which initiates a reconfiguration of the Roman social hierarchy by giving the lowest rungs social status, education, and the essentials of life and health. According to Koester,

This is a sociological formula that defines a new community. Here is a community that invites you, which makes you an equal with all other members of that community which does not give you any disadvantages. On the contrary, it gives even the lowliest slave personal dignity and status. Moreover, the commandment of love is decisive. That is, the care for each other becomes very important. People are taken out of isolation. If they are hungry, they know where to go. If they are sick, there is an elder who will lay hands on them to heal them.<sup>125</sup>

Some historians have questioned Christianity’s commitment to the elimination of slavery because of Paul’s letter to Philemon, in which Paul sends Philemon’s slave, Onesimus, back to Philemon. This has apparently provoked the question of why Paul would do this if he were against slavery. In brief, it can be safely said that Paul was not in favor of slavery – indeed the letter to Philemon reveals that he held precisely the opposite view. However he was not in a position to take on the institution of slavery while sitting in a Roman prison.

Instead Paul takes an indirect approach to showing Philemon that Onesimus has the same dignity as both Paul and Philemon before Jesus (they are both children of God and “brothers in the Lord”). On this basis, Paul calls Onesimus “his son,” and asks Philemon to treat him accordingly (1:10). He heightens the sense of Onesimus’ dignity by referring to him as “his heart,” indicating not only the love of a son, but the love of a peer. Paul continues building his case by shifting the focus from him (Paul) to Philemon – indicating that he is sending Onesimus back as a *brother* (equal) to Philemon (“[You have him back] *no longer as a slave* but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” -- 1:16) . Finally, Paul tells Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he

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<sup>125</sup> Helmut Koester 1998 “The Great Appeal: What did Christianity offer its believers that made it worth social estrangement, hostility from neighbors, and possible persecution?”

(New York: WGBH Educational Foundation) [pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/appeal.html](http://pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/appeal.html)  
See also Helmut Koester With James M. Robinson 1971 *Trajectories through Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress. Reprinted, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006.

were Paul himself: (“So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me” – 1:17).

Paul’s argument to Philemon is hardly an indictment on Paul or Christianity regarding the permitting of slavery. Rather, it is a strong testimony to the intrinsic transcendent dignity of Onesimus – stated precisely as Jesus taught it. As Christians took this doctrine (that every slave has the dignity of sons, brothers, St. Paul, and Jesus) into their communities, it would give every slave a sense of immense dignity that would inevitably be communicated not only to other slaves, but also to their masters.

As Christianity spread throughout the Empire, its view of social equality and mutual care begins to seep outside of the Christian community into the larger culture. This had several long-term effects: the significant diminishment of slavery, the end of massacres in the coliseum,<sup>126</sup> social equality within the family, and the initiation of a public welfare system (see below).

The Middle Ages were initiated by the invasion and conquest of the barbarians which had the effect of bringing non-Roman and non-Christian social and cultural views to Europe. This meant that the Church and the Christian community had to restart its program of social equality and social welfare. The fall of the Roman Empire left Europe without a fundamental unifying power and bureaucracy which placed power into the hands of feudal lords (landowners who could provide military protection). Feudalism brought with it a class of serfs who were not slaves (property to be owned and disposed of by their masters), but rather, peasants who belonged to the land. If a feudal manor changed hands, the serfs would continue to work the land on which they had been situated. Though serfdom was a difficult existence, it certainly was not slavery. Serfs could not be treated as property and had the rights to protection from the lord, just treatment, and subsistence from the land on which they worked. The monasteries and churches in various locales would provide healthcare, assistance, and education to serfs (see below).

Feudalism (and serfdom) came to an end when the major powers and bureaucracies of Europe grew strong enough to unify large areas and societies into the countries we recognize today. Christian influence affected the social and cultural views of these emerging nations through political theory (see Volume 17), education (see below Section IV), and the social welfare and health systems (see below Section III).

### **III.**

## **Christian Impact on Social Welfare and Healthcare**

### **[Back to top](#)**

Care of the sick and needy was of great importance to Jesus. He carried out a prolific ministry of healing the sick – particularly outcasts such as lepers and the possessed. He admonished His disciples to care for the sick and the poor, and indicated that helping them is the same helping Him. He holds up the feelings and actions of the Good Samaritan as the exemplar

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<sup>126</sup> Though Christians were at first persecuted in the coliseum, their social influence, particularly on Constantine, ultimately led to the end of the massacres and blood sport.



for His followers. These words and example were formalized within the Christian community. As Luke notes in the Acts of the Apostles:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need (Acts 2: 44).

The ministry to the poor was so important that when Paul separated from Peter, James, and John (working with Jewish converts in Jerusalem) to work with the Gentiles, the one request the three founders made of Paul was to “remember [prioritize] the poor” (Galatians 2:1).

Paul also created a network of Jewish and Gentile churches to provide for the needs of the Jerusalem Church which experienced considerable deprivation. He speaks often of this collection in several of his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; Rom 15:14–32). In 1 Corinthians, he reveals that he has also asked the Galatian church for this offering, and specifies the process by which he intends to collect and distribute the gifts of the Gentiles:

Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me (1 Corinthians 16: 1-4).

There were, of course, many poor within the gentile church, and Paul expects that they will be taken care of through the ordinary methods explained in the Acts of the Apostles. The reason for asking an additional sacrifice of the gentiles for the Jerusalem church seems to have been their far greater need. Many of the Jerusalem converts have lost their social and financial status as the early Church separated from the synagogue, and Paul felt the call of Christ to help and serve them.

James believes so strongly in the mandate of Jesus to help the poor that he claims faith without works is dead:

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2: 14-17).

Prior to the arrival of Christianity in Rome, social welfare was not widespread – and it certainly did not affect the lowest rungs of the social order. Some wealthy Romans, who mostly embraced the stoic philosophy of Seneca and others, built centers of public good works, but they did this only out of a sense of duty or the desire for recognition by peers. The idea of loving a person in the lower classes (or recognizing a unique intrinsic dignity in them) was quite foreign. Furthermore, love and compassion were considered weaknesses in the predominant stoic

philosophy which advocated that compassion *not* be felt by the wise and strong man. Seneca phrases it this way:

The sage will console those who weep, but without weeping with them, he will succor the shipwrecked, give hospitality to the proscribed, and alms to the poor, ... but in all his mind and his countenance will be alike untroubled. He will feel no pity...His countenance and his soul will betray no emotion as he looks upon the withered legs, the tattered rags, the bent and emaciated frame of the beggar. But he will help those who are worthy, and, like the gods, his leaning will be towards the wretched...It is only diseased eyes that grow moist in beholding tears in other eyes. (*De Clementia* 2.6-7)

Christianity turns this philosophy upside down, because Jesus taught that compassion is the highest of all the virtues – exemplifying God’s perfection. He also taught that every human being – particularly the lowest – had an eternal transcendent dignity reflecting His own dignity. As a result, serving the sick and the poor with empathy, love, affection, and joy became characteristic of and central to the Christian way of life. For Christianity, this view and love of others was more than a philosophy; it was an ethos generating a passionate spirit within the community. This passionate spirit had the effect of changing the *philosophy* of “charity with a cold heart” into a *spirit* of compassion for uniquely good and lovable others which shows itself in good works done joyfully and lovingly.

This spirit of loving and joyful service was not restricted to the wealthy, wise, and strong, but rather was “the way to life” for every human being. Thus, all Christians and Christian communities took upon themselves the mission to serve not only community members, but also the sick and needy on every rung of the social ladder. This led to a proliferation of healthcare services, small hospitals, orphanages, and social welfare networks for widows and the poor.

As the Christian church grew in influence throughout the Roman Empire (throughout the third century), these charitable works became formalized and institutionalized, and extended far beyond the Church community. According to Koester:

[There was] increasingly in the Christian churches, in the time up to Constantine, the establishment of hospitals and some kind of health service, we have a clear establishment of social service - everything from soup kitchens to money for the poor if they need it. We have the very important establishment of the institution of widows, because a widow in the Roman society who had lost her husband and did not have money of her own was at the very bottom of the social ladder. One of the first welfare institutions we find in the church was all the widows who were recognized as virgins of the church. Considered particularly precious possessions of the church; they were paid by the church and therefore were rescued from utter poverty in most instances.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Koester 1998.

The historian Geoffrey Blainey noted that this early healthcare network was the beginning of the social welfare system.<sup>128</sup> This dedication to public healthcare and welfare was progressively integrated into the Roman Empire after Constantine legalized Christianity in 313. In addition to local Church communities, the monasteries took up the charge to take care of the needs of non-Christian people, and prioritized their resources for this effort. *The Rule of St. Benedict* (written at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century) which became a model for all other monasteries requires that “the care of the sick is to be placed above and before every other duty, as if indeed Christ were being directly served by waiting on them.” This apostolic emphasis led to the profusion of Christian hospitals and healthcare (for everyone in need) throughout the Middle Ages.

In 1204, St. Francis of Assisi brought Christian service to the poor and sick to an even higher level. He started what was to become the first of many religious orders dedicated to compassionate and joyful service of the needy. His intention was not merely to tend to their exterior needs, but also to their interior needs, so that even the most marginalized and neglected would know that they are loved by God and humanity. He hoped to be God’s instrument for bringing a peace beyond all understanding (Philippians 4:7). His prayer (which he left as a model not only for the Franciscan order, but for all Christians) sums up the Christian mission to every human being of every station of life:

*Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

The example of the Franciscan mission led to an even greater proliferation of Catholic charities and healthcare institutions – going far beyond the monasteries. Imitating St. Francis’ itinerant style, dozens of holy men and women started new hospitals, relief works, soup kitchens, and religious orders devoted to service of the poor and needy. Approximately fifty religious orders of sisters were founded specifically for this purpose. These works expanded so rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the Catholic Church has become the largest global healthcare provider in the world today, running over 26% of the world’s healthcare facilities (including 18,000 clinics, 16,000 homes for the elderly and those with special needs, and 5,500 hospitals, with 65 per cent of them located in developing countries) as well as huge relief agencies (such as

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<sup>128</sup> Geoffrey Blainey *A Short History of Christianity*

Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services). The mission is still the same – the humble, loving, joyful service of every human being’s bodily, psychological, and spiritual needs in the imitation of Jesus.

#### **IV.**

### **The Christian Impact on Education**

[Back to top](#)

We might think it unusual that Jesus’ teaching on love would provide the impetus to build the largest non-governmental educational structure in the world, but this is precisely what happened. The Christian dedication to loving service lies at the heart of its interest in education. Jesus’ teaching on the intrinsic, transcendent dignity of every human being manifests the worthiness of every person to be educated. Inasmuch as respect for others is the condition necessary for “being found worthy of education,” the Romans disdain for people in the lower strata prevented them from investing in it.

The Christians, however, came at it from the opposite point of view, and saw education as a path to realizing Jesus’ vision for all people. Education could lift the lowly to the status which is their true dignity in the eyes of God. It could also break down the hierarchical social structure of Rome and begin the process of instituting the Christian vision of social equality.

There were many educated Jewish scribes and gentile converts in the early Church who understood the benefits of both religious and secular education. St. Paul possessed a unique synthesis of Jewish (religious) and Greek (secular) learning which he synthesized and contributed to the early Church’s initial formulations of theology.

As a young man, Paul was sent to Jerusalem for his education and attended the school of one of Israel’s most respected Rabbi’s, Gamaliel, the son of the Rabbi, Hillel. The Hillel School of Learning was balanced, allowing Paul to synthesize the best of Jewish education with other philosophies of the day, most notably stoicism, wisdom speculation, and other forms of Hellenistic thought. Paul saw the complementarity of Jewish and Greek thought and used both his sacred and secular learning to create the seminal theological and philosophical synthesis at the foundation of Christian education. It is likely that Paul and other educated Christians (both Jewish scribes and Gentile professionals, such as Luke) encouraged and inspired the education of Christian community members.

Within a few decades after the arrival of Christianity in Rome, the Church’s educational efforts began to spread, and it may have attracted additional converts. As Christian schools began to develop in the third century, the Roman bureaucracy hired Christians into its ranks, because they were among the few people capable of reading, writing, and rhetoric. Koester notes in this regard:

...We find that in administration of the last pagan emperors, before Constantine, at the very end of the third century, a large number of the people in the imperial administration are Christians, because they could read and write...which constituted a big problem with the persecution of the Christians because they were

thrown out of their office first when the persecution began, and suddenly the government didn't work anymore.<sup>129</sup>

When Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, Christian schools began to proliferate, giving rise to a great synthesis of Christian religious and Greek philosophical thought. The seeds of this synthesis can be found in the Letters of Paul and the Gospel and Letters of John, but they found a remarkable new depth in the Church fathers from Ignatius of Antioch (d 107) through Augustine of Hippo (d 430). Augustine created one of the most elaborate theological and philosophical syntheses in western history. He was familiar with Plato's (and Platonic) philosophy as well as Old and New Testament scripture, and he influenced the Christian philosophy of education by elaborating the complementarity of faith and reason. In his *Confessions*, he testifies that reason puts us on the road to faith, while faith elevates our reason beyond its natural limits – without restraining or confining it. In one of his sermons, he states, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe.”<sup>130</sup>

Augustine created a master synthesis of philosophy and theology – including tractates in epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, ethics, Christian scripture, Christian systematics (e.g. the Trinity and Incarnation), and a variety of other subjects. He also developed the initial Christian philosophy of education beginning with his work *The Teacher* and concluding with his later work *Reconsiderations*. This philosophy of education encouraged dialogue and dialectic within the classroom and delineated the many styles of students and learning. It became a model for Christian education prior to the barbarian conquests.

The barbarian conquests interrupted both Christian and secular education throughout Europe. Schools were destroyed, libraries were burned, and a general disdain for education took over the continent for nearly one hundred years. However, the Irish monastic movement, as Thomas Cahill put it in his popular account, “saved civilization.”<sup>131</sup> The Irish monks copied hundreds of Latin and classical manuscripts, and later translated neoplatonic works from Greek into Latin<sup>132</sup> preserving them from extinction. Through the efforts of Saints Columban and Columba, they began a concerted missionary movement, using their monasteries as a place to educate and minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of local residents. Schools began to spring up around the monasteries which enabled a significant number of people to learn classical and Christian education for the first time. Between 575 and 725, the Irish started over 150 monasteries – many of them quite large. They first educated new European (non-Irish) members of their community, and then used their well-qualified monks to be teachers of the general population.<sup>133</sup>

About one hundred years after the arrival of the monastery schools, certain Bishops instituted cathedral schools (associated with a specific diocese). These were establish mostly to teach the sons of nobility who had an interest in serving the Church, but eventually the

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<sup>129</sup> Koester 1998.

<sup>130</sup> St. Augustine *Sermon* 43:9.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Cahill 1996 *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor).

<sup>132</sup> John Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa translated the works of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite from Greek into Latin which brought neoplatonic thought into post-barbarian Europe. These kinds of texts lay at the foundation of higher education in the Irish monasteries.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Gallagher 1995 *The Irish Monastic Movement* published in *The Federalist* Newspaper.

curriculum expanded to meet the needs and desires of people who wanted to serve in the bureaucracies and governmental agencies initiated in the pre-Carolingian era. In 789, Charlemagne issued a general admonition requiring schools to be established in every monastery and bishopric in which children can learn to read so that “psalms, notation, chant, computation, and grammar be taught.”<sup>134</sup> This led to a proliferation of monastery and cathedral schools and to the standardization of the seven liberal arts: grammar, astronomy, rhetoric, music, logic, arithmetic, and geometry. This primary and secondary education was later complemented by courses in literature, philosophy, and theology, as well as courses in medicine and law (for those seeking employment by the expanding governmental system).

As European unity and bureaucracy developed, so did the need for higher education in Europe. Eventually, some of the larger and more prestigious cathedral schools developed into universities where the faculties of philosophy (progenitor of natural science and humanistic studies), theology, medicine, and law were combined in a single locale.

The rise of medieval universities occurred under the auspices of the Catholic Church, because as historian, Lowrie Daly states “the Church was the only institution in Europe that showed consistent interest in the preservation and cultivation of knowledge.”<sup>135</sup> Some newly formed secular universities arose out of the need for additional faculties of government law and medicine, but the Catholic Church was committed to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Though it was careful to assure orthodoxy in faith, it gave significant latitude to creativity in reason and natural knowledge. The philosopher, Edward Grant, put it this way:

What made it possible for Western civilization to develop science and the social sciences in a way that no other civilization had ever done before? The answer, I am convinced, lies in a pervasive and deep-seated spirit of inquiry that was a natural consequence of the emphasis on reason that began in the Middle Ages. With the exception of revealed truths, reason was enthroned in medieval universities as the ultimate arbiter for most intellectual arguments and controversies...The creation of the university, the commitment to reason and rational argument, and the overall spirit of inquiry that characterized medieval intellectual life amounted to a gift from the Latin Middle Ages to the modern world...though it is a gift that may never be acknowledged. Perhaps it will always retain the status it has had for the past four centuries as the best-kept secret of Western civilization.<sup>136</sup>

Medieval universities were anything but “dark” and “constrained by Church laws;” they were fertile fields of creativity and questioning which arose out of a firm conviction that reason did not threaten faith, but complemented it (since they arose from the same source – the intelligent and loving God).

The great medieval universities of Oxford, Paris, Bologna, and Salamanca flourished, but they became overcrowded, and so various religious orders within the Church started additional

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<sup>134</sup> Pierre Riché 1988, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press), p. 191.

<sup>135</sup> Daly, Lowrie J. 1961 *The Medieval University: 1200-1400* (New York: Sheed and Ward). p. 47.

<sup>136</sup> Edward Grant 2001 *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). p. 152.

universities in smaller cities. This trend continued through the Protestant Reformation, particularly with the Jesuits who were opening new universities throughout Europe and the New World. Protestants also started universities in Europe and the New World, and the combined effect of Christian education was brought to new heights. Though many of these universities became secularized within a century, many remained faithful to the mission of exploring faith and reason as envisioned by Augustine,<sup>137</sup> Aquinas,<sup>138</sup> Erasmus,<sup>139</sup> and John Henry Newman.<sup>140</sup>

Some have contended that the Catholic Church stood in the way of the development of natural sciences (and that the medieval university was antithetical to its spirit). As we have seen, Edward Grant holds the contrary, believing that the medieval university embraced the essential commitment to free inquiry, creativity, and the whole range of reason – “the best kept secret in western civilization.” Grant’s view is supported by the involvement of dozens of priests in the development of the natural sciences. For example, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543, the originator of the heliocentric universe and its mathematical justification -- 1540) was a Catholic cleric.<sup>141</sup> Nicolas Steno (1638 – 1686, a Catholic Danish Bishop) was one of the founders of modern stratigraphy and geology. The Augustinian monk and abbot, Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), was the founder of modern genetics. Monsignor Georges Lemaître (a Belgian priest and colleague of Albert Einstein) is acknowledged to be the founder of contemporary cosmology (the Big Bang Theory in 1927).<sup>142</sup> There are many other Catholic clerics who were integrally involved in the foundation and development of the natural sciences.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> In his works *The Teacher* and *Reconsiderations*, Augustine sets out the complementarity of faith and reason, and uses it as the ideal for Christian education. As he noted, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe.” This ideal became a model for education in Europe for nearly 800 years.

<sup>138</sup> Much of St. Thomas’ work exemplified a synthesis of philosophy and theology (e.g. the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*), which Etienne Gilson termed “the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas.” Though Aquinas believed that philosophy had its own proper methodology and objectives (apart from theology), he believed that the two methodologies could complement each other, and move intellectual pursuit beyond the domain of natural reason alone. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he states: “Although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless that truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith...” (Aquinas 1991 Book I Ch. 7, Section 1).

<sup>139</sup> In his work *In The Education of a Prince*, Erasmus stands in stark contrast to Nicola Machiavelli who said it was better for the prince to be feared than loved. Erasmus held that it was better for the prince to be loved, and that this love should be cultivated through a well-rounded education – including deep study of the New Testament. Thus, Erasmus made the ideal of faith and reason the foundation for just and humane political theory.

<sup>140</sup> In his work *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman (who founded the Catholic University of Ireland) espoused five major principles of Catholic higher education: (1) the cultivation of the love of knowledge for its own sake, (2) the teaching of natural theology (metaphysics and the philosophy of God) as the highest science – in which the human mind soared to ultimate principles, causes, unities, and the necessary highest being, (3) commitment to the complementarity of faith and reason, (4) commitment to the moral life (and the belief in the objectivity of virtues and moral goods), and (5) the commitment to the common good as complementary to the service of faith.

<sup>141</sup> Copernicus was a devout Catholic who took minor orders as a Catholic cleric and was a canon lawyer within the Catholic Church, but he did not proceed to ordination as a priest.

<sup>142</sup> Though Fr. Lemaître was too humble to assert the primacy of his discovery over that of Edwin Hubble (two years later), Lemaître is widely acknowledged today to be the true founder of the Big Bang theory – one of the most rigorously established theories in contemporary physics. The theory has undergone many modifications since the time of Fr. Lemaître (1927), but the general theory of the expanding universe remains the same. See Livio 2011 and Plotner 2011.

<sup>143</sup> See “List of Roman Catholic Cleric Scientists.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Roman\\_Catholic\\_cleric%E2%80%93scientists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_Catholic_cleric%E2%80%93scientists)).

Several Jesuit priests were responsible for important discoveries in the natural sciences. Giovanni Battista Riccioli was the first person to discover the rate of acceleration of a freely falling body. Fr. Roger Boscovich, one of the great geniuses of Yugoslavia, is acknowledged to be one of the founders of modern atomic theory. Fr. J.B. Macelwane wrote the first seismology textbook in America in 1936 and was head of the American Geophysical Union.<sup>144</sup>

Jonathan Wright describes the extent of the Jesuit contribution to natural science as follows:

[By the eighteenth century], the Jesuits had contributed to the development of pendulum clocks, pantographs, barometers, reflecting telescopes and microscopes, to scientific fields as various as magnetism, optics and electricity. They observed, in some cases before anyone else, the colored bands on Jupiter's surface, the Andromeda nebula and Saturn's rings. They theorized about the circulation of the blood (independently of Harvey), the theoretical possibility of flight, the way the moon affected the tides, and the wave-like nature of light. Star maps of the southern hemisphere, symbolic logic, flood-control measures on the Po and Adige rivers, introducing plus and minus signs into Italian mathematics — all were typical Jesuit achievements, and scientists as influential as Fermat, Huygens, Leibniz and Newton were not alone in counting Jesuits among their most prized correspondents.<sup>145</sup>

Some historians have suggested that the Catholic Church manifested an “antiscientific attitude” during the controversy with Galileo, but the controversy was not about the veracity of scientific method or its seeming heliocentric conclusion. The Jesuits of the Roman College helped Galileo to confirm mathematically his version of the heliocentric theory, and considered him to be an esteemed colleague and friend. The relationship broke down only when Galileo broke his promise to the Pope and claimed heliocentrism as *fact* (before adequate astronomical observations could be made to confirm the theory through a technique called “stellar parallax”).<sup>146</sup> He exacerbated the strained relationship when he called the Pope and the Jesuits “fools” because of their reservation.

The conclusion that the Catholic Church stood in the way of the development of natural science is clearly false. Natural science grew out of the creative, free, and methodical use of reason within the medieval university, and was aided in its development by priests who saw the natural order (as described by natural scientific method) as an extension of God's intelligence, glory, and love. Discovering the mathematical intricacies, symmetries, and beauty of nature through the rigorous use of empirical-mathematical method was akin to a mystical experience of

<sup>144</sup> See Thomas Woods 2012 *How The Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (New York: Regnery History) pp. 67-114.

<sup>145</sup> Jonathan Wright 2005 *The Jesuits: Missions, Myths and Histories* (New York: Harper Perennial). p. 189.

<sup>146</sup> The stellar parallax technique is essential to confirming the earth's movement around the sun, but astronomical observations of distant stars were not accurate enough to confirm the earth's movement relative to the sun until over 200 years after Galileo – in 1839 by Friedrich Bessel. The Pope and the Jesuits were justified in asking Galileo not to claim his theory as fact until this critical astronomical observation had been made. Unfortunately, he chose not to do so, and the controversy (and breakdown of a long standing collegial relationship) began. See Wallace 1984 and DeMarco 1986 pp 23-51 and 53-59.



the grandeur of God. The Jesuit priest, scientist, and anthropologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin described progress in science and technology as follows:

The greater man becomes, the more humanity becomes united, with consciousness of, and mastery of, its potentialities, the more beautiful creation will be, the more perfect adoration will become, and the more Christ will find, for mystical extensions, a body worthy of resurrection.<sup>147</sup>

We might conclude this short excursus on Christian education by reflecting on the maxim with which we started – no one will bother to educate (or think worthy of education) a person whom one does not respect. If we do not see the unique dignity and goodness of people, we will not attempt to elevate them to a status beyond lowliness. The teaching of Jesus about the uniquely good transcendent dignity of every human being – especially the least of his brothers and sisters – inspired the Christian Church to see this dignity, and to elevate it to its full transcendent status through education in every discipline whose fulfillment resides in the mind and love of God. Education is the “mind’s road to God,” and belief in this vision enabled the Christian Church to educate the lowest rungs of Roman society, re-educate Europe after the barbarian invasions, establish a foundational curriculum for primary and secondary education, initiate the university system, contribute to both the natural and social sciences, and become the largest non-governmental educational organization in the world. Throughout the world today there are 125,016 primary and secondary Catholic schools -- many of them in developing countries, carrying out the same mission of Jesus that inspired the ancient Roman Church. There are also 1,358 Catholic Universities around the world of which 244 are in the U.S. When this is combined with the educational efforts of protestant congregations, the record is impressive, revealing the truth and power of Christ’s vision of the dignity and goodness of every human being.

## V.

### Conclusion

[Back to top](#)

Throughout this Chapter, we have briefly examined the historical impact of three of Jesus’ teachings on human dignity and ethics: (1) The Golden Rule, (2) the intrinsic transcendent dignity of *every* human being, and (3) the subordination of the law to the good of human beings. These teachings promulgated through the Christian Church led to a progressive belief in social equality which significantly diminished slavery in the ancient world. It also led to a rapid increase in public healthcare and welfare as well as public education. Though these initiatives ebbed and flowed during the time of the Barbarian Invasions and various periods thereafter, they formed a steady momentum that led to the creation of the largest networks of healthcare, welfare, and public education in the world. They also had a remarkable influence on the way in which secular institutions developed.

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<sup>147</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin 2004 *The Divine Milieu* trans. by Sion Cowell (Sussex Academic Press) p. 117.

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