

JESUS' PATH TO A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

Reflections of the Sermon on the Mount

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Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount does not call his followers to an impossible-to-achieve morality but to a deeper conversion issuing in grace-filled praxis.¹ Building on the structural insights of New Testament ethicist Glen Stassen and the mimetic theory of René Girard, this essay draws attention to the relational problems the sermon seeks to address, highlighting the non-rivalistic role Jesus' followers are to model in a world trapped in a meritorious system of exchange. This vocation, I will argue, calls them to growing self-knowledge of their own complicity with this economy, rooted according to mimetic theory, in death-dealing victimage from which Jesus came to deliver us, offering a path to a new social order, the economy of infinite divine grace.

Stassen's discovery

Until recently, New Testament scholarship read the main part of the Sermon—the section that follows the Beatitudes (Matt. 5.21–7.12)—in terms of antitheses.² Each unit of teaching was understood as comprising some traditional instructions or prohibitions, which Jesus introduces with words such as “You have heard that it was said to the men of old ...” followed by his antithesis, “But I say to you ...”, occasionally amplified by an illustration. However, this interpretive approach is fraught with difficulties, implying an emphasis on prohibitions of such “undesirables” as anger, lust, wealth and so on, giving the Sermon a negative moralising slant and the reputation of impossible to meet standards.

¹ Glen Stassen, ‘The fourteen triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.21–7:12)’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 12, no. 2 (2003): 267–308.

² *Ibid.*, 268.

New Testament scholar and ethicist Glen Stassen has broken with this dyadic tradition. By showing that the internal structure of the Sermon is composed of threefold teachings or “triads,” he has opened a fresh window in the history of the sermon’s interpretation. According to Stassen, this structure is not only typical for Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, but featured in each pericope of the sermon.³ A well-known passage (Matt. 5.21–26) shall serve as an example of the triadic pattern:

Part 1: You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” (v. 21)

Part 2: But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, “Raca,” is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell. (v. 22)

Part 3: Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (vv. 23–26)

Stassen calls the first part “the traditional teaching,”⁴ while he reads the second part not interpreted as Jesus’s teaching on anger (the antithesis) but as his diagnosis of the underlying relational pathology or alienation from God and neighbour. There is no command never to be angry; rather the verb is in the form of the continuous-action participle (being angry), leading Stassen to call it the “vicious cycle”, or in Girard’s language, the destructive escalation of symptoms. When anger and resentment spin out of control, they will lead to violence, even to murder, unless it is intercepted by a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 272.

“transforming initiative.” Jesus does not teach this third part as an illustration, as the dyadic model falsely assumed, but as a transformative step toward healing the alienation from God, self and neighbour.

Fourteen triads: a Girardian reading

From the perspective of Girard’s theory, Stassen’s structural insight looks highly suggestive; part 1 of the triads is called “the traditional teaching.” In ancient societies, traditional teachings, like prohibitions, fulfilled a life-preserving function. Such institutional derivatives of Girard’s scapegoat mechanism kept mimetic violence in check, working like instinctive drives among animals that stop them from fighting to their death.⁵ In that capacity, cultural institutions keep mimetic violence in check. While revealing the depth of human entanglement with negative (rivalistic) mimesis, the reading of the sermon also discloses a path on a new social order based on Jesus himself, the totally non-rivalistic model.

As conflicting mimetic desires clashed among Jesus’s followers, rivalry broke out (Matt. 18.1ff; Mk 9.33; Lk 9.46, 22.24). In each instance, Jesus breaks this vicious cycle by counterintuitive instructions, intending to instil in his disciples his own habit of response to negative mimesis, a pattern that will occupy our attention as we examine the fourteen triads in detail.

If we align the triads with elements of Girard’s theory, it may be suggested that the first part (“traditional teaching”) touches on vestiges of ancient sacrificial religion and its close relative, an economy of prohibitions, while the second part demonstrates Jesus’ own deep knowledge of the snowballing consequences in each of these relational crises he refers to; and the third part shows Jesus instructing his disciples in inspired countermeasures that they are to practice as they imitate him. This new mimesis would subvert the vortex of imitative rivalry and its escalation. But there is more: if, according to Girard, meaning in human culture is derived from a foundational murder, and if Christ entered the “black

⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the sacred*, (1972), trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 221.

hole” of *that* culture willingly and forgivingly only to rise again from its depths, then he is the undoing of the entire structure of that death-encased meaning, endowing the sermon’s instructions with unimpeachable veracity.

Triad 1: Matthew 5.21–26

Part 1: You shall not murder.⁶

Part 2: Being angry or saying “you fool” has grave consequences.

Part 3: Go, be reconciled; be urgent about it.

In contrast to the Beatitudes, where Jesus stresses meekness and peacemaking, he begins by speaking of murder, plunging us instantly into the depth of the human crisis, bringing to mind Cain and Abel, where exasperation of desire led to the paroxysm of murderous violence against the brother who had become both model and rival. In the diagnostic part of this triad, Jesus takes the issue beyond a mere acknowledgement of this condition: murder is preceded by resentment and anger or, in Girard’s language, by an outbreak of rivalry. Hence, refraining from homicide is one thing: dealing with the underlying mimetic impulse is quite another. Unless such an outbreak is intercepted or deflected, it will inevitably lead to a symmetrical redoubling of the energy unleashed in the conflict as each party becomes increasingly the model/obstacle for the other. Name-calling and insults are only advanced symptoms of an escalating relational crisis of which murder is the final stage.

On one level, we may regard Jesus’s teaching as an extension of the numerous maxims against anger already found in the Old Testament. At another, at an expression of a “higher righteousness” (Mat 5.20), Jesus does not simply present ethical demands while leaving the human bias towards mimetic violence intact. Given Girard’s insight, Jesus offers instead a new mimesis with himself as the new model, the totally pacific One, who is free of acquisitive desire. “Imitation” of such a One would mean nothing less than actual freedom from resentment toward the other, and we shall read the third part of the first triad in this

⁶ While retaining Stassen’s descriptors, I have given the biblical references for each triad but omitted Matthew’s text.

light. Here, Jesus urges haste⁷ not because anger is such a grievous sin (which it is) but because the mimetic impulse can rapidly turn any budding rivalry into its extreme. Jesus commands his followers to be the first to make a move towards reconciliation. They are to go to the one who has *taken* offence. The hostile opponent is the one to be appeased, for to return his hostility would only aggravate the crisis. Hence, the task of peace-making involves foremost a calm and peaceful (resentment-free) disposition towards the hostile party, an attitude that recognises the legitimacy of the opponent's ontological needs. Followers of Jesus are called to model the kind of peace that rises even above the life-threatening hostility of others, seeing in them not dangerous rivals but vulnerable human beings trapped in the vortex of mimetic escalation. Jesus modelled this kind of peace when he prayed for his persecutors, even as they nailed him to the cross.

Triad 2: Matthew 5.27–32

Part 1: Do not commit adultery.

Part 2: Looking with lust is adultery in the heart.

Part 3: Remove [in yourself] the cause of temptation.

The second triad also begins with a prohibition. According to the Torah (Exod. 20.15; Lev. 20.10), adultery attracted the death penalty for both the adulterer and the adulteress. In his diagnosis, Jesus goes a step further. Adultery springs from “desire according to the other”: the married woman becomes the object of desire because she belongs to another (her husband). Since desire tends to exert itself in the presence of resistance, her very “inaccessibility” heightens her desirability. This desire is neither triggered by a comparison with the craver's own spouse nor by sexual needs, but by the desire to possess what another possesses. Looking upon her with eyes that covet her, especially because it is forbidden (*epithymeō*), is already an act of adultery. This kind of looking turns the woman into an object for consumption feeding the imagination where the fantasy continues, yet outside a real relationship based on mutual respect, devotion, dignity and love. To cure this cycle of bondage, Jesus proposes radical surgery: “tear out the eye.” With this figurative

⁷ “Go, be reconciled, settle matters quickly before the offense gets out of hand.”

language, Jesus's followers are instructed not to play fantasy games that turn others into objects for personal gratification, which, on closer inspection, is a variant manifestation of the victimising mechanism that Jesus has come to reveal and to undo.

We may infer from Jesus's corrective that the mythical hold mimetic desire has on the human psyche is undone by what psychology calls "identification." When we share with others a common identity in Christ, the need to covet and grasp what they possess vanishes. However, this inner shift from rivalry to identification presupposes a conversionary experience grounded in our own identification with Jesus in death and resurrection, setting us progressively free from the vicious cycle of acquisitive mimesis and its consequences, the crises of metaphysical desire.

Triad 3: Matt. 5.30–32

Part 1: Whoever divorces let him give a certificate.

Part 2: Divorce involves adultery.

Part 3: Be reconciled (1 Cor. 7.11)

Commentators see in this text an elaboration on the previous triad. In Jewish culture, divorce was a totally one-sided affair. Only men had the right to issue a writ of dismissal, which was designed to allow a divorced woman to remarry. Also, under Jewish law, an extramarital affair between a married man and an unmarried woman was not classified as adultery. According to Jesus, however, issuing a writ of dismissal would cast divorced women into an impossible situation: remarry and become involved in adultery or forgo the only means of support. In other words, male dominance is the issue. In his critique, Jesus by identifying the vulnerability of women takes the side of the victims, implying that both men and women are equal partners and have equal responsibility for the demise of a marriage, calling for a real-life partnership as his answer to this cycle of bondage. With this answer, he signals the downfall of the domination system already foreshadowed in the Beatitudes, replacing it with a vision of a new social order, although presently he leaves open the details of the transition from the old to the new.

Since the former state is not likely to yield its hold on humanity without resistance, we begin to see why Jesus is unequivocal about his bringing “not peace but a sword” (Matt. 10.34), anticipating “combat” rather than a peaceful changeover. After all, to accomplish this vision, an entirely new, non-acquisitive mimesis must come into play, presupposing a profound turning of humanity’s consciousness with its insatiable desire for transcendence toward the only source that can satisfy this longing, namely the abiding intimacy with the infinite horizon of ‘Being’ that Jesus calls “Abba” (Father).

Triad 4: Mt 5.33–37

Part 1: You shall not swear falsely.

Part 2: Swearing involves false claims.

Part 3: Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no.”

With the fourth triad, Jesus introduces a new theme: the issue of oaths and truthfulness. The ancient world was a world of patronage. Its sociality depended for cohesion on oaths of loyalty. One person’s allegiance pledged by an oath to another of higher rank established domination through unchallengeable hierarchies.⁸ This pattern of fealty and homage, of patron and vassal, prevailed in Europe to the end of the Middle Ages. In the Jewish tradition, witnesses used oaths before a court to substantiate (or refute) testimony; by means of oaths, debtors disclaimed a demand directed against them; and people of piety bound themselves before God to special obligations.⁹ The Torah prohibited perjury and demanded truthfulness. Jesus takes the issue a step further by directing his criticism at the sophisticated casuistry that had developed in practice. Distinctions had multiplied—for instance, swearing *by* Jerusalem was not binding, while swearing *towards* Jerusalem was.¹⁰ This approach did not lead to truthfulness but to deceit through hair-

⁸ This is still visible in the structure of biblical covenantal formulas (cf. Meredith Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 1963).

⁹ Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount: Utopia or Program of Action?* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 70. 13 .

¹⁰ For other examples, see Jesus’s polemic in Matt. 23.16–22.

splitting arguments.¹¹ Jesus' point is twofold. If one is consistently truthful, one does not need to swear at all, avoiding the danger of committing perjury. At the same time, since everything, including ordinary speech, is related to God in some way, watching over one's words becomes an inescapable reality.

In the Girardian view, one may forge a link to the realm of ancient religion and thus to the mechanism of mimetic rivalry. In ancient Greece, religion, morality and political organisation were linked by an oath, and its prerequisite was the altar.¹² Further, oaths presumed power to perform an extraordinary promise. In Germanic paganism, for instance, chieftains held formal gatherings of their retainers in mead halls, in which ceremonial drinking was accompanied by boasts and oaths involving self-cursing in case of non-performance. Vestiges of this practice are still visible in ordinary speech. Psychologically, these habits of speech are derived from the felt need to fill an ontological void at the expense of another. To compensate for the perceived deficit, the speaker embellishes his claims and adds self-imprecation to lend force to his words. Caught in such an existential crisis at the trial of Jesus, Peter denies him with a curse (Mk 14.71; Matt. 26.74). The relational energy is directed towards the other, which has become model/obstacle. Such maneuvers are symptoms of alienation based on the mythical lie of redemptive violence even against oneself. Jesus rejects them, insisting instead on the integrity of truth and life, that is, on inner simplicity where "yes" means "yes" and "no" means "no." In the new social order of God's reign, impressing or outdoing others is unthinkable.

Triad 5: Matt. 5.38–42

Part 1: An eye for an eye.

Part 2: Retaliating violently or vengefully by evil means.

¹¹ Entire mishnaic tracts (e.g. M. *Shebuoth*; M. *Sanhedrin* 3.2) were devoted to the subject. See D.A. Carson, "Matthew" in Frank E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew; Mark; Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 153.

¹² Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. Raffan (Harvard University Press, 1985), 250ff.

Part 3: Do not resist, turn the other cheek, give your coat, go the second mile, give to both beggar and borrower.

The Old Testament formula “an eye for an eye ...” (Exod. 21.23ff.) made the injury a measure of restitution, thus limiting vengeance, not legitimizing it. Jesus’ solution to potential conflicts from personal injury is simple: he removes the response from the realm of tit-for-tat altogether.¹³ Without downplaying the indignity and humiliations his fellow-Jews endured in first-century Palestine, Jesus offers to all who are oppressed the power of personal initiative, thus restoring faith in their inalienable dignity. This power belongs to all whose identity does not depend on how they are treated. They are able to respond to a provocative demand or injury not by taking offence (resentment) but with compassion, seeing in the other a fellow human being in need. In this way, it is possible to rise above the zero-sum game of retaliation with its potential for mimetic snowballing, breaking out of its vicious cycle.

Therefore turning the other cheek is far from being a “doormat”; rather, under conditions of abuse, it empowers the powerless toward non-violent resistance. If his followers act on Jesus’s instruction, they can change the rules of the game of blame and punishment and so defuse all kinds of potentially explosive conflicts. Their own practice of peace thus becomes the key to personal transformation and a prerequisite for shifting the attitudes of an entire culture toward nonviolence.

Triad 6: Matt 5.43–47

Part 1: Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Part 2: Hating enemies is the vicious cycle you see in the world.

Part 3: Love your enemies and pray for persecutors; be all-inclusive as your heavenly Father is.

¹³ Jesus’s concern here is the non-violent response of his followers to personal injury and must not be taken as a prohibition of the defence of others or of resistance to unjust and oppressive structures in society.

This triad is the most challenging of all, for until there is evidence of loving an enemy, the inner transformation Jesus has been referring to all along has not yet occurred. The Torah certainly commanded Jews to love their neighbor (Lev. 19.18) and to show kindness to enemies (Exod. 23.4–5). Only sectarian groups like the Qumran sect commanded hatred of enemies. Yet it is easy to see how Jesus’s opening line recognizes a well-known cultural phenomenon: “love” is reserved for members of the “in” group—my cultural tribe, my club and so on. Remaining in this comfort zone, with its prejudices and claims of exclusivity, this love avoids exposure to others who may not share the same values, while its surrogate peace actually perpetuates victimisation.

In contrast, the transformation Jesus implies in his teaching begins when we forgive the enemy “within” and then compassionately extend it to the enemy “without.” Here we see the hidden meaning of God’s command to love others as we love ourselves. Without having first experienced God’s forgiveness in ourselves and then begun to love ourselves, we are unlikely candidates for extending love to our enemies without wanting anything in return. If persecutors are the hardest people to love, then prayer is the essential and surest way of changing one’s attitude. Jesus’s instruction to aim at the perfection of God, whose grace is indiscriminate, reminds us of our need to work at it repeatedly in relationship with God. Jesus points us to the great model who imparts some of his character to those who come into imitative contact with him; when we do, we simply stop keeping score. Lastly, what is so significant about Jesus’s radical love command is that with one stroke, he repudiates those aspects of his own religious tradition mired in violence.

Triads 7, 8, 9, and 10: Matt 6.1–4, 5–6, 7–9, 16–18

The common focus of these triads is “ostentatious acts of piety.” Since the same pattern of instruction continues in all four, I have grouped them here into one.

Part 1: When you give alms (triad no. 7), when you pray (no. 8), when you pray (no. 9), when you fast (no. 10)

Part 2: Practicing righteousness for show (nos. 7–10).

Part 3: Give in secret (no. 7), pray in secret (no. 8), follow the model prayer (no. 9), dress with joy (no. 10)

Religious obligations must be performed from the right motives. When these acts are externalised so becoming “observable” by others, practitioners are trapped in their own mimeticism: they see themselves as in a mirror and compare themselves with others. Unless acts of charity, intimacy with God in prayer, and other acts of piety like fasting remain hidden—even from our own eyes—they lose their core meaning, although they may bring temporary human applause. The motivational energy behind such acts has been corrupted by the desire for “gain,” that is, for recognition from the all-pervasive meritorious system based on competition and rivalry. If performed out of such motives, these acts are no longer done in love. When the desire to outdo others cloaks itself in religious observance and charitable acts, it rightly deserves Jesus’s condemnation as hypocrisy, for in the new order of grace ostentation has no place.

The corruptive tendency of the meritorious system deserves another look. Its honour/shame culture has its origin in the foundational murder and its cover-up. When Jesus instructs his disciples to go into the inner room and seek God’s presence for its own sake, he is not preaching a mystical approach of silent contemplation (although that is not excluded) but probing the motives in order to subvert the scapegoat system at the personal level, instructing them to present their requests in well-chosen words that go to the core of the issue, emphasizing further where they are to put their trust. Those who pray in this way know God. But as long as those who pray are trapped in the meritorious system, they are in danger of believing they must convince God of their need with “many words.” Praying as if God was unwilling to act on their behalf only betrays their alienation. In order to deliver his hearers from such bondage, Jesus instructs his followers to use simple requests.¹⁴ His emphatic “Pray like this” only shows how significant this is in his estimation. The specific instructions known as the “Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father,” serve as a model for spoken prayer, at the heart of which we find a father-child relationship of trusting collaboration in the Father’s business worthy of faithful imitation.

¹⁴ Belief in a reluctant god is the pagan model of archaic religion.

That Jesus repeats the instructions about corrupt piety three times signals the danger that his followers face. To make sure they are safe, he intercepts the possibility of mimetic contagion, even of traditional custom, thus grounding all spiritual disciplines in a new identity and imitation. Prayer, alms-giving, and fasting are to be done secretly, within the “closet” of the heart, and not for show. Only then will these disciplines accomplish their purpose, freeing his followers from the imitation of a false image of God, of their neighbors and of themselves.

Triad 11: Matthew 6.19–23

Part 1: Do not pile up treasures on earth.

Part 2: Moths and rust destroy, thieves break in and steal.

Part 3: Pile up treasures in heaven.

This triad begins with a present-tense prohibition. It could be rendered “Stop storing up treasures” rather than the weaker imperative “Do not store up treasures.” Jesus’ warning is against the practice of treasuring what is perishable. While we must resist making this teaching absolute and refrain from making provision for the future, we must nonetheless hear Jesus’s concern with covetousness that always wants more of tangible and observable goods that corrode, are stolen, are eaten by vermin, or otherwise deteriorate. It is the downward spiral of deterioration that can trap even his followers in a cycle of bondage from which Jesus seeks to set them free. Anyone who wishes to render life secure by overcoming increasing entropy will discover that this is an exercise in futility, like trying to walk up the down escalator.

Because material goods feed the self-intensifying nature of mimesis, falsely promising to answer the longing for ontological fullness, such objects of desire tend toward the idolatrous. The cure is to sever all attachments to the system of mimetic accumulation and consumption that always gives rise to comparison and subtle competition with others. In other words, the old cycle of mimetic desire cannot be overcome except by a radical

turning away from envy, redirecting the irrepressible longing for fullness into an ever-deepening desire for God (cf. Isa, 55.1ff).

Triad 12: Matthew 6.24–33

Part 1: No one can serve two masters.

Part 2: Serving God and money, worrying about food and clothing.

Part 3: Seek first God's reign and righteousness.

On the surface, the part 1 injunction above looks like a call to exclusive allegiance to God, which is certainly implied, as it is throughout the Sermon. On closer inspection, however, Jesus highlights another concern, the utter incompatibility of two realms: the reign of God on the one hand and the victimising system of mimetic exchange that produces winners and losers (code named 'mammon') on the other.

Market transactions at their simplest are generated by momentary exchanges between participants in which one pays and the other receives payment. Thus, the "market" or "money" seems to be capable of creating superficial personal contact without leading to social relationships. In today's more complex economic system, people are linked together by innumerable bonds of mutual indebtedness on a global scale. No other cultural artefact seems to make more use of acquisitive imitation than the market. What is more, nothing can compare with the scale at which victims are created as obscurely and anonymously as they are through the system of exchange.

Yet while it is an inescapable phenomenon, mimesis is not deterministic. People are still able to choose the model they will follow, although the extraordinary difficulty of this choice needs to be acknowledged. A culture of desire-inducing messages and gestures incessantly stimulates our mirror neurons directing us to emulate appropriative models. Besides, the meritorious system of mimetic exchange is driven by fear: fear of loss, fear of the rival, fear of losing control, fear of the future, all signs of a surrogate peace. No wonder that Jesus should identify anxiety as a symptom of the underlying relational pathology.

Entangled in this web, even those who profess to be Jesus' followers will experience anxiety and worry about necessities.

If states of anxiety over money or future provision are but symptoms of an entanglement with the victimising and accusatory system of reciprocal exchange, the antidote is getting out from under it by setting heart and mind on God's reign. Such single-mindedness will deal a death blow to anxieties over not having enough. It will eliminate worries over not measuring up, another sign of alienation from God, self and neighbor. Instead, setting one's mind on God will transform fears of tomorrow's misfortunes into hope and confidence, as the all-sufficiency of the Father's care becomes an existential reality for Jesus' followers. Those who enter this state will experience what the Bible calls "the glorious freedom of God's children" (Rom 8.23).

Triad 13: Matthew 7.1–5

Part 1: Do not judge, lest you be judged.

Part 2: Judging others means you will be judged with the same measure.

Part 3: Take first the log out of your own eye.

Because of its wide semantic range, the word 'judge' (*krinō*) requires some qualification. Jesus does not forbid the exercise of evaluative capacities, as previous instructions in the Sermon show. What Jesus prohibits here is censorious judgment. A judgmental attitude is none other than the reappearance of the old scapegoat system that produces victims by a comparative assertion of presumed superiority. Here again, Jesus meets the meritorious system head-on. Any judgment, put-down, name-calling, fault-finding has alienation as its source: the underlying attitudes are tragic projections of unmet ontological needs and are thus untrue with respect to the other.

Whatever the conflict, censorious judgment seeks to resolve it violently and the words employed are verbal offshoots of the founding murder. This kind of judgment is not grounded in love and compassion but in the desire to outdo a rival against whom the judgment is pronounced. At another level, it also signals the inability to think of ourselves

and others in terms of vulnerability and our identity with each other. As the underlying rivalry will provoke resistance and reciprocity, judgment intensifies. Whether the resistance is real or imagined, with rising intensity it will inevitably fall back on the one who asserted himself/herself above the other and mimetic reciprocity will ensure that the judgment returns with increased fierceness and passion, promoting the possibility of violence. Hence Jesus's stern reminder to his followers to look first at their own lack of ontological wholeness that caused rivalrous judgment in the first place, lest they be exposed as hypocrites.

Triad 14: Matthew 7.6–12

Part 1: Do not give holy things to dogs or pearls to pigs.

Part 2: They will tear you to pieces or trample them.

Part 3: Trust yourselves in prayer to your Father who is in heaven.

In this last triad, the intense resentment which the message of God's grace over what it reveals about us comes into view: we must accept God's Kingdom as a gift or go without. This message cuts across our fondest beliefs about human autonomy and independence, and is fiercely contested. True, Jesus exhorts his disciples to love their enemies (Matt. 5.43–48), he nonetheless calls them to be circumspect. They are not to give away naively and without discernment what has been entrusted to them. Jesus's reference to dogs and pigs needs to be understood within his context. These animals are no pets. Both kinds are wild, vicious, unclean, and attack in a mob-like fashion. In addition, what is "holy" in Matthew's Gospel is the notion of God's Kingdom, so that from the perspective of the system steeped in the "false sacred," the reign of another provokes violent jealousy. In other words, people designated as "dogs" and "pigs" are those who are so deeply possessed by the paternity of violence that their only reaction even at the hint of another realm is vicious attack.¹⁵ Since Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (cf. Jn 18:36–37), his disciples must not naively assume that their message will be

¹⁵ The designations are possibly code words for the Roman Empire.

welcomed by a system that is retaliatory by nature. Indeed, while they must expect persecution on his account, they must not naively provoke it.

The Sermon on the Mount and a new social order

In the Sermon and in anticipation of his departure, Jesus is training his disciples as successors in the task of proclaiming the nearness of God's reign. Jesus's followers were to make his teaching their own and then creatively implement it in actual life situations (cf. Stassen's triads), pointing to a new social order away from the system of negative mimetic exchange.¹⁶ As heirs and beneficiaries of Jesus' messianic work, this new community is to be identified by certain characteristics described in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5.3–10) by: "poverty of spirit," "hunger for righteousness," "mourning over sin," "meekness," "purity of heart," "mercy," "peacemaking", and so on. In our analysis of the triadic formulas, we have identified on the one hand the destructive consequences of negative mimetic escalation as the core of the relational pathology that Jesus seeks to address, and on the other hand, Jesus' the destructive consequences of negative mimetic escalation as the core of the relational pathology Jesus seeks to address, and on the other, Jesus' remedies. In each case, his followers are to take initiatives toward another kind of mimesis that would avoid the negative, rivalistic form. This *positive* mimesis is an imitation based on "identification," whereby the identity of the subject is gradually reconstructed through growing identification with the model. By commanding his disciples to put his words (and example) successively into practice, Jesus heals the problem of negative mimesis. According to a well-known psychological strategy, when the imitating subject *shares a common identity* with the model, the impulse to engage in negative, rivalistic mimesis, that is, the desire for the being of the other, vanishes,¹⁷ breaching at the emergence of true intersubjectivity, the cycle of escalation toward violence opening the way to a new sociality. Now the imitating subject can consciously choose the model and follow it, rather

¹⁶ Hans Dieter Betz, "The Sermon of the Mount: Its Literary Genre and Function", *Journal of Religion*, vol. 59, no. 3 (July 1979): 285–297.

¹⁷ Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 31.

than imitate it passively and undiscerningly. Yet, as Oughourlian notes, any unwillingness or inability to recognise this interdividual relation and its mimetic character will keep on producing rivals and, as a consequence, “disassociations” within the subject’s personality (and relations) in proportion to this misrecognition.¹⁸ Here the psychotherapeutic dynamism of Jesus’s instructions in the sermon, quite apart from their ethical significance, becomes clear. Consequently, those who put Jesus’ teaching into practice will stand in a peculiar relation to the surrounding society.

On several occasions in the Gospels, Jesus hints at a close identity between himself and his disciples (cf. Matt. 20.23 and parallels; Lk. 22.29; Jn 15.20; 20.21). In the sermon, Jesus invites his followers into close communion through imitative identification with him, made particularly obvious in Matthew 5.11, right after the Beatitudes. Interestingly, the text suddenly breaks with the previous pattern of narration and confronts the reader with a startling projection: Jesus’ followers are identified with Israel’s prophets and can thus expect to experience the same opposition and hatred that their predecessors had suffered. It is into this world that Jesus sends his followers “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10.16). In the world of the domination system, in which everybody wants to be a “wolf,” they are to conduct themselves in a manner as “wise as serpents and [as] innocent as doves,” because it is by their insight into this system and by their “innocent” non-resonance with mimetic contagion that they are able to exert a healing and non-violent influence on the world and so, preserve it.

Jesus thus reveals the intensely personal and historical nature of the relation between the prophetic community and the surrounding society. Since he himself is the embodiment of a coming social order (the reign of God), those who live in communion with him will be an “eschatological” people. This exalted status implies that they overcome, through a deepening relationship with Jesus and single-minded devotion to his teaching, the mimetic contagion of the world. Knowing that their community is not the consummation of the reign of God, yet destined for this future, state the followers must live as its members in history, bearing whatever experience this destiny implies, be it hidden rejection or open

¹⁸ Oughourlian, ‘From Universal Mimesis to the Self Formed by Desire’, in Scott R. Garrels, *Mimesis and Science* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 2011), 52.

hostility. At the same time, this community, the Church, carries the greatest human responsibility; it also is likely to exhibit the greatest human failures, because it is still sinful and fallible, as Karl Barth has pointed out.¹⁹ Claiming to be the new, authentic community that adheres to and shares the same truth, they must face their own fallibility, made so obvious by their divisions. Yet when the Church accepts this self-judgment under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, it undergoes its own “crucifixion,” thus opening within itself the path of “new life,” and enters, with its prayer for God’s kingdom to come, the space that belongs to the eschatological promise ‘Behold, I am making all things new’ (Rev. 21.5).

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 362–90.