

Beyond Shame and Honour: Matthew's Representation of the Dignity Code of Jesus

Bill Domeris

Abstract

The Gospel of Matthew, across the centuries, has provided the bedrock for the instruction of Christians, especially new converts. The Gospel offers a multifaceted portrait of Jesus, perfect for an understanding of the Reign of Heaven (Kingdom of God) and challenging enough to remind the readers that like the home of the scribe, one can constantly find new treasures to discover. In this article, I examine the values which the Matthean Jesus espouses. I argue that Matthew's Gospel highlights Jesus' personal interactions and his ethical teaching in a deliberate manner. Jesus crosses boundaries, engages in economic discussions and promotes a praxis of caring for the vulnerable. In these interactions, we see Jesus challenging the prevailing honour and shame code and offering, through his actions and teaching, a positive alternative in the form of what I have termed his dignity code. Where the honour code promoted the pursuit of self-interest and personal glory, Jesus' code personified humility and the dignity of others, especially those who were rendered vulnerable or were shamed by their society, including women, children and gentiles.

Keywords

Matthew, dignity, honour, shame, vulnerable.

About the Author¹

Bill Domeris

PhD, University of Durham

Bill is a Biblical scholar and a Senior Academic at the South African Theological Seminary. He is also a research associate at the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. An Iconic Gospel

From its opening verses to its epic conclusion, the Gospel of Matthew is an iconic gospel. This, the first of the gospels, has provided, across the centuries, the bedrock for the instruction of Christians, especially new converts. It offers a multifaceted portrait of Jesus, perfect for an understanding of his role within the Kingdom of Heaven,² and challenging enough to remind its readers that, like the home of the scribe, one can constantly find new treasures to discover (Matt 13:52). I suggest that Matthew highlights Jesus' personal interactions and his ethical teaching in a deliberate manner. Jesus crosses boundaries, engages in economic discussions and promotes the praxis of caring for the vulnerable, especially widows and children.

While Jesus-scholarship has followed a variety of paths, there have been some novel developments in recent years (Powell 2009). So, the ministry of Jesus has been connected to a concern for inclusivity and social outreach (Abhilash 2014), social inclusion (Lourdu 2014), an economy of generosity (Nielsen 2013), teaching a form of downward mobility (Talbot 2008), the practice of reciprocity and redistribution (Vearncombe 2010), and confronting the violence of legalism (Tharukattil 2011). In different ways, scholars (Fiensy 2007; Horsley 2016; Oakman 2018) suggest that Jesus, by his very life-style, epitomised a way of living and acting out, which 'pushed back'³ against the Roman Empire's oppressive rule.⁴ Jesus challenged the Roman hegemony, not as a form of resistance but in order to achieve his objective of recalling Israel to her covenant with God (Culpepper 2018).⁵ Reading Matthew in its narrative and historical context, we suggest that echoes of this process may be discerned (Müller 2012), not least in Jesus' reaction to the social values he encountered and in his proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven (God's reign).

2. Shame and Honour as Mediterranean Values

Shame and Honour found place within the ancient Near East forming two of the principle values of the peoples who inhabited that region, like the peoples of Israel and Judah. The Hebrew Bible appeals time and again to the pursuit of honour and the avoidance of shame (e.g. Bechtal 1991; Marè 2014; Hwang 2017), as does the New Testament (e.g. Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998).

The majority of scholarly analyses of shame and honour in the Biblical text, have been largely determined by the existing modes of thinking of the so-called 'Mediterranean cultural anthropology' first proposed by Bruce Malina (1981). While much of Malina's work and that of the Context Group has been valuable, since the early 2000s,

2 Matthean scholarship has taken some interesting turns in recent decades, with a more open approach to many of the earlier questions (Van Aarde and Dreyer 2010), as scholars have puzzled anew about the place of the gentiles (Van Aarde 2007; Seasoltz 2011) and related issues.

3 On the push and pull of empire, see the various articles in Winn (2016).

4 See Anderson (1998) for a social archaeological spelling-out of the impact of Empire on the regions of Judaea and Galilee.

5 An idea which originated with Antonio Gramsci (see Bates 1975) and refers to the control exercised by nation states of empires through overt and more subtle forms of domination.

a few voices, in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament studies, have questioned some of the basic assumptions concerning the relevance of all Mediterranean cultural anthropological findings for the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament literature. At the same time, cultural anthropological reviews of shame and honour as Mediterranean values, have become more cautious (Busatta 2006). With reference to Biblical studies, I refer to works like Johanna Stiebert's shame and honour in the prophetic texts (2002)⁶ and Louise Joy Lawrence's examination of the values espoused by Matthew (2003).

6 Stiebert (2002), in part, builds her critique on my work on honour and shame in Proverbs (Domeris 1995)

7 Horrell (1996) has clarified the proper use of terminology, Giordano (2001) has noted the migration of honour/shame into the sociological domain, and Osiek has pointed out the importance of matrilocality in the New Testament (1997:333-334).

Today, thanks to these and other critical reflections, a more cautious approach is evident across several of the recent studies of the anthropology of shame and honour.⁷ The recognition of the sheer diversity of understandings and applications of values like honour or shame, across class and gender, place and time, even from one ancient author to another, has become essential (Horrell 1996; Lawrence 2003). In particular, the contribution of Zeba Crook (2009) has given proper place to the importance of the public court of reputation (PCR), namely the location of the authority which is appealed to in the granting of a bequest of honour. Reading such studies suggests that social values should only be transposed onto first-century social locations where there is solid epigraphical evidence, dating from that time, that makes clear that such constructed values applied. In applying shame and honour to Matthew's Gospel, I will restrict my comparisons to values already implicit or explicit in the text. Moreover, the focus of this article is not shame and honour *per se*, but the alternative which Jesus lived out in his dealings with ordinary people and is given expression in his memorable parables.

3. Shame and Honour in Matthew's Gospel

Two major studies of shame and honour have focused on the Gospel of Matthew, that of Jerome Neyrey (1998) and Louise Joy Lawrence (2003). The two studies are as different as might be imagined, with Neyrey standing firmly within the Malina tradition and Lawrence opposing it. Neyrey (1998) concentrates on the Matthean representation of Jesus, comparing this to a Greco-Roman encomium or praise story, designed to honour Jesus in his various interactions with the Jewish and Roman authorities.

He, then, refers to the teaching of Jesus under three headings: Honouring the dishonoured (Matt 5:3–12); Calling-off the honour game (Matt 5:21–48); and Vacating the playing-field (Matt 6:1–18). In other words, Jesus summoned his disciples to a life outside of the bounds of the shame and honour culture of the time, an idea which I will carry forward in this article.

Lawrence (2003:22–36) begins by addressing theoretical issues, like the use of models.⁸ Lawrence uses the term ‘ethnography’ to describe written sources like the Gospel of Matthew.⁹ In her thinking, honour and shame worked differently among the different societal levels of Jesus’ time, specifically elite versus the non-elite (2003:75–76). In the latter half of the book (2003:142–279) she addresses the actual Jesus-interactions, pointing out the inequality¹⁰ of some of the persons engaged in what she understands as honour-ripostes, like the Canaanite woman (2003:271), which I discuss below.

Neyrey (1998) and Lawrence (2003) agree on two critical ideas, firstly that honour and shame existed as key values in the areas of the ministry of Jesus, namely Galilee and the surrounding areas and secondly, that Jesus debated these values and the pursuit of honour. Unlike the gentiles who love ‘to lord’ it over their subjects, the disciples are invited to assume the position of servants (Matt 20:25–27). Jesus described his own mission as one who came to serve (*διακονέω*) (Matt 20:28) calling on his disciples to assume the status of a servant (*δοῦλος*) (Matt 20:26). In addition, in a parable about a banquet, Jesus offered a striking alternative to the order of the time (Matt 22:2–10). He criticised the Pharisees for seeking positions of honour among themselves (Matt 23:2–7) and by his teaching and deeds gave substance to quite a different set of values.

Neyrey (1998) and Lawrence (2003), believe that Jesus proposed a life outside of the honour-culture (see also Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998), or at least within a modified form of these values. More strongly, Talbott argues for a form of downward mobility (cf. Talbott 2008), which may be debatable, but he does raise the question of whether Jesus was actually proposing an alternative code of values. If so, and I believe that he was, we need to ask, what then would be the core elements of such a code? What would a logical alternative to shame and honour be? To answer this question we need to look at a contemporary study of shame and honour, which poses this self-same question.

4. Dignity in Place of Honour

Peter Brown (2016), a well-known sociologist, explores the place of honour in the modern United States, and specifically in those states which were impacted by the Scots-Irish. Brown takes note of the various ways in which the honour code manifests in modern society, and produces masses of empirical evidence.

Noting the widespread presence of shame and honour as social values, Brown even suggests that these may be in ‘the deepest

8 Interestingly, using the term ‘model’ for the application of the shame/honour values has been justly criticised by Horrell (1996:10-12), preferring the term ‘research frameworks’ in line with practice within the human sciences. Since I am one of those criticised, I accept the correction as valid.

9 Ethnography is more usually used in conjunction with empirical data resulting from anthropological or archaeological research, and less often of comparisons with other written texts.

10 Lawrence spells out the contrast here between her own reading of honour-challenges and Malina’s understanding, where such ripostes would have taken place between two men, from the same or similar levels of honour (2003:142-148).

recesses of our unconscious minds' (2016:180). Towards the end of his study, Brown responds to the question of what the logical alternative would be to the prevailing code of honour, by referring to societies where human dignity is manifest (2016:184) as a possible alternative.

Brown then adds his own description of what he terms 'the dignity code' (Brown 2016:184). Human dignity is, of course, widely recognised, but it appears that Brown's dignity code is based on his research. Brown writes of his dignity code/culture: 'Social worth is assumed by default. People in a dignity culture are more likely to grant respect to others simply by virtue of their being human' (2016:184). Where shame and honour demanded constant defence and maintenance, a code of dignity simply affirmed the worth of all human beings regardless of their social status. Where the honour code demands constant defence and maintenance on the part of the individual, a dignity code assumes a certain intrinsic value for each individual (Brown 2016:184). More simply, 'Dignity is *assumed*, whereas honor is *earned*' (Brown 2016:184).

So how does this translate into biblical values? In a singular article on Human Dignity in the Bible, Vogt (2010) notes that while the term dignity is not found in the Bible, the sense of human dignity, lost and found, is a constantly recurring idea. He views dignity as God's original intention for humankind, as described in the Garden of Eden, and expressed in the first couple's unique relationship with God (Vogt 2010:422). The path back into that relationship and the full experience of dignity for oneself and in one's community is first spelled out in the decalogue and reinforced by the prophets (Vogt 2010:422). The social vision of the Hebrew Bible, as outlined by Pleins (2001), points to the ultimate restoration of the Reign of God, which in the gospels was heralded by Jesus (Goldingay 2003). I would add 'and to the restoration of human dignity' within the context of God's reign.

One of the Greek synonyms for dignity is the Greek term for worth (*ἀξίος*) used often in the New Testament (see Foerster 1961:379–380). It is found both in the gospels (e.g. Matt 10:10 and Luke 10:7 [worker worthy of wage]) and in the epistles (e.g. Rom 16:2 [worthy of the saints] and Phil 1:27 [worthy of the Gospel]). Jesus' dignity code, I believe, would have been expressed in the Greek form as *ἀξίος* or in English as 'human worth'. Simply put, Jesus affirmed the common worthiness (dignity) of human individuals, beyond, and in spite of, the status conferred upon them by the levels of the honour code of the time.

I assume, that this affirmation would have been evident to the original readers of Matthew's gospel and that these readers would

have functioned as the PCR. Although in the context of the Gospel, the unseen presence of God fulfills that role. The following examples offer some evidence for these assumptions, starting with women in need.

5. The Dignity of Women in Need

As some of the most vulnerable of the population of the ancient world, widows and their children (fatherless rather than orphans) were widely deemed to be worthy of protection, and that not just in ancient Israel as Fensham (1962) has shown. Within the pages of the Hebrew Bible, widows are represented as a special category of people and thus deserving of additional protection, along with orphans and resident-aliens (Baker 2009:189–195; Domeris 2007:163–166). In his diatribe against the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus showcased the plight of widows (Matt 23:14). Generally, for Matthew, the broader category of women in need, rather than of widows¹¹ comes to the fore, although some of these women may well have been widows.

In Matthew 9, we have the familiar account of the healing of a presumed impure woman. Matthew has a different sequence to that that found in both Mark and Luke, in that the woman touched Jesus, which immediately led to his addressing her. The discussion about ‘someone touched me’ and power going out from Jesus (Mark 5:30–32; Luke 8:45–46) is missing. Jesus begins his dialogue with the woman, with the words, ‘Take heart’ (Matt 9:22) and addresses her as ‘My daughter’ (Mark 5:34 and Luke 8:48 have simply ‘daughter’). The addition of the pronoun, works to emphasise the dignity of the woman as does the commendation of her faith (found in all three gospels), which precedes the healing (Matt 9:22) rather than following it (Mark 5:29 and Luke 8:44). The woman, in Matthew, is also spared the sharing of her personal trials (Mark 5:33 and Luke 8:47). In this way, Matthew creates a deep sense of affirmation, which is more diffused in the parallel accounts.

Throughout, the dignity of the woman is preserved and her fear and embarrassment are absent (cf. Mark 5:33 and Luke 8:47).

In Matthew 15, a Canaanite woman called on Jesus to intervene on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. Interestingly enough, the girl is described as ‘badly’ possessed (v.22, Gk. *κακῶς*; the NASV has ‘cruelly demon-possessed’).

We take note that she addressed Jesus as ‘Lord, Son of David’ perhaps in connection with his Messiahship (v.22b), ahead of

¹¹ In Luke’s gospel there are several references to widows (e.g. Luke 4:25; 18:5), explaining, in part, why Luke is often cited as the gospel with a special concern for the marginalised.

Peter's confession in the next chapter (Matt 16:16). Jesus initially was silent (v.23a), while his disciples urged him to drive her away— she was being a nuisance and drawing unwarranted attention to them (v.23b). Only after the disparaging suggestions of the disciples, did Jesus address the woman by arguing that his primary mission was to the house of Israel (v.24). Instead of turning away, she approached Jesus, bowing down before him (v.25) with the supplication, 'Lord, help me'. Again, Jesus responded negatively, 'It is not good to take the children's bread and to throw it to the dogs' (v.26). We note, however, that the apparent rebuttal becomes instead a platform on which the woman builds her counter-argument, 'Yes Lord, but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from the master's table' (v.27, cf. Gullotha 2014). Finally, Jesus was persuaded and commended the faith of the woman, 'O woman, your faith is great' (v.28 cf. Lee 2015)—a rare occurrence in the gospels (cf. Pattarumadathil 2013) and agrees to the woman's request. The pericope ends with the announcement that her daughter was healed from that same hour (v.28c).

The whole event raises some challenging questions. Was Jesus insensitive to the request of the woman, simply because she was a Canaanite and so a foreigner (see Gullotha 2014)? Or was Jesus creating a space for the woman to reveal the depth and tenacity of her faith (see Lee 2015 and Pattarumadathil 2013)? Perhaps, we might envision the dialogue as an honour/shame interaction (riposte) as does Lawrence (2003:271). There is merit in all these suggestions, but I believe that it goes deeper than that. In the context of Matthew's literary structure, and reading the text as narrative, I suggest that the Gospel intentionally created space for this three-part dialogue. In response to the increasing tempo of the three requests of the woman, an opportunity is created for Jesus' climatic declaration about her faith, so affirming her dignity in the eyes of the reader and in the context of God's reign (cf. Lee 2015) and displays what Craig Blomberg (2005) aptly terms the 'positively contagious holiness' of Jesus.

6. The Dignity of Gentiles

The Hebrew Bible implicitly and explicitly recognises the presence of righteous Gentiles, like Job, so we should not be surprised that such is true also of the ministry of Jesus. In two healings in Matthew, Jesus commended the faith of the person asking for the healing (Pattarumadathil, 2013), both from outside of Judaism (Kellenberger 2014). In the second miracle¹² recorded in Matthew (Matt 8:5–13), Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion. First, however, as with the Canaanite woman (see above), he commended the faith of the man (v.10) 'I tell you the truth. With

¹² The first miracle is the healing of a leper in the same chapter (Matt 8:2-4). In Mark, it is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law.

no one in Israel have I found so great a faith'. He then healed the servant from a distance (v.13). The healings found in this chapter, and their order in Matthew, I suggest, point to the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry in the spirit of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew chapter 8 continues the theme of ministry to foreigners, by including the healing of two Gadarene demoniacs (Matt 8:28–34), which largely follows the Markan narrative. Later there is the healing of the daughter of the Phoenician woman, dealt with above. Such interactions with Gentiles would have been frowned upon in his time, as several NT passages indicate.¹³ In each of these interactions, Jesus comes across as granting dignity, but not necessarily honour, to the person. He recognised their human needs and responded to them as human beings deserving of the bequest of human dignity. I suggest that all this was in accord with Jesus' vision of the Reign of God, and his creation of a new extended covenant community (see Van Aarde 2007), where ordinary people, old and young, might find their God-given dignity and wholeness.

13 Examples include Acts 10 and Gal 2:11-13.

7. The Dignity of Children

The Gospel of Matthew emphasises the dignity of children in several different ways. For example, Jesus commends those who offer, in his name, a drink of cold water to 'one of these little ones' (Matt 10:42). Hospitality is a consistent refrain in the New Testament, as various studies have shown (Atterbury 2005; Osiek 1997). What sets Matthew's gospel apart is his representation of Jesus' teaching on the dignity of children, as a focus, in Matthew 18, on protection from abuse.

In his response to the shame and honour culture of his time, Jesus, according to both Matthew and Mark chose to challenge his disciples by placing a child in the middle of the group (Matt 18:2; Mark 9:36–37).¹⁴ In Mark's gospel, the disciples had argued about the question of status along the road, and Jesus asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'

14 We note that Mark includes the detail that Jesus placed his arm around the child, probably as a symbol of his protection (Mark 9:36).

Only reluctantly, did they provide the answer (Mark 9:33–34), namely that they were debating their respective status. In response, Jesus used a child *παιδίον* to teach a lesson in humility (Mark 9:36–37). Here in Matthew 18, the question is more generic, as the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' (v.1). The Greek (v.1) uses the term *μείζων*, because the issue is about status. From Jesus' response (vv.3–4), we see that he interpreted their question as resulting from an honour-competition among the disciples. In other words,

who among the disciples was the most honourable? Like so many of their contemporaries, the disciples were playing the game of shame and honour, and wanted Jesus to join them—but he refused. Instead, Jesus cautioned his disciples that they needed to change radically and to become like children so as to enter God’s kingdom (Matt 18:3). The Greek verb used here is the normal word for repent and turn around (στρέφω). The second part of the instruction is to become like a child (παιδίον) (v.3b). Only, by choosing an alternative set of values, can the disciples achieve status in God’s kingdom. In that kingdom, values like honour and status are turned upside down, and children rather than adults are the measures of status. While hyperbole certainly plays a part here, we do well not to ignore the literal sense (Cruise 2018).

Jesus added ‘The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child’ (v.4). The Greek text uses the form ‘humbles himself’ or ταπεινῶ, which carries both a negative sense of being humiliated and a positive sense of humble submission. If we limit this instruction to modern ideas around humility, we lose much of the biblical meaning. To follow the Jesus-code demanded a complete break with the existing value codes, like shame and honour (v.3a) and a commitment to a different lifestyle—an alternative set of values. The disciples were called upon to recognise that the prevailing code of shame and honour, and similar cultural values, carried a sense of judgement on women, gentiles and children. Instead of becoming part and parcel of such judgement, the disciples were invited to embrace Jesus’ notion of the dignity of all. The true path to honour, in the eyes of God, meant honouring those not considered honourable.

The narrative continues with Jesus saying, ‘Whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me’ (v.5). The word used here is again παιδίον, which connects us to the understanding of children in the context of a home and so is linked to ideas of hospitality and the protection of the vulnerable. Indeed, much of the remainder of the chapter deals with children and their protection against abuse. In verse 6, Jesus describes a threat to children, and the Greek now uses the word for little children (toddlers), namely μικρός.

Such little ones, vulnerable as they are, may have a faith in Jesus and may be caused to lose it. Jesus valued children and their faith at the highest level. The Greek word is σκανδαλίζω, which is variously translated as cause to stumble or to offend (cf. John 6:61; 1 Cor 1:23). In the present context, given the focus on children, the probable reference is to child abuse. How then does abuse cause a child to stumble? We might consider this in several different ways, but for me, one key idea is that of children’s ability to relate to

those who show them love. An abused child may fear to be touched, even by a well-meaning adult. The child has lost his or her ability to be loved.

Following on Matthew's account mentioned above, Jesus stated that, 'If anyone causes one of these little ones (ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων) to lose their faith (σκανδαλίση) it would be better [than meeting the justice of God] if they were tied to a millstone and drowned in the sea' (Matt 18:6), which for Jewish people meant they would be denied eternal life, since they lacked a proper burial. In verse 7, Jesus pronounces a woe on the people (τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ) who become a cause of the 'stumbling' or 'offence' of children. Implicit in this teaching is Jesus' judgement on child-abusers and paedophiles. This is amplified in the references to the causes of children stumbling (v.7) and to 'hand' and 'foot' (vv.8–9). When tempted to abuse a child, rather cut off your hand. When tempted to approach a child, rather cut off your foot. When tempted to look lustfully at a child, pluck out your eye. Radical words for a sin which still plagues the church. Verse 10 reminds us that in the kingdom of God, the angelic representatives of children occupy the front rows—they see the face of 'My Father' —the One who does not abuse his children, but accords them the dignity that they deserve.

The narrative continues its focus on children. Luke presents three parables of the lost objects (coin, sheep and son), but Matthew uses the lost sheep (Matt 18:6–14) to give greater substance to the teaching on children. The 'lost sheep' is a child and God's pastoral concern is focused in that direction. God not only punishes the abuser, but he also actively seeks out the lost child—the one who has been scandalized (σκανδαλίση) (v.6). While the substance of the parable agrees with its Lukan version (Luke 15:4–6), Matthew's version includes the words 'It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that *one of these little ones* should perish' (Matt 18:14, my emphasis). Once again, the word for child is μικρός—the little ones (cf. v.6) and those most vulnerable—the complete opposite of the word used in the disciples' question (Matt 18:1).

In the following chapter, Jesus welcomed and blessed children (παιδιά), castigating the male disciples who had refused the mothers access to him (Matt 19:13–15).

The notion of blessing children may refer to the idea of protecting children from those who intend them evil, not least through the beliefs of 'an evil eye'. Essentially, the people of Jesus' time feared those who might 'look' at their child, especially the newborn, in a certain way and so cause them harm. Asking Jesus to bless the

children implies the idea of creating a blanket of protection about the children, akin to the protection brought about by holy rings and other sacred objects, known from archaeological finds.

Finally, in Matthew's account of Jesus in the temple, he adds a unique insight (Matt 21:15) as Jesus is joined not only by the lame and blind, but also by children. The presence of these children in the holy temple signified the climax to Jesus' recognition of their God-given dignity. Where religious honour found place primarily for educated Jewish males, Jesus brings the presence of children to the foreground—they and not the religious élite find their true place in the holy sanctuary.

8. The Dignity of Workers

David Baker in his careful study of the Pentateuch, spends considerable time discussing the application of the Jewish law to fairness (righteousness or justice) in the marketplace (2009:299–303) and in care of workers (2009:296–299). The latter theme is also to be found in the prophets (Pleins 2001), notably Isaiah 58:1–10. Here in Matthew's gospel, such concern is also part and parcel of Matthew's presentation of the dignity code of Jesus. Unique to Matthew is a wonderful parable about the Lord of the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–15). The story is deceptively simple, and one may easily overlook the great truth found here—namely, the sense of affirmation of the dignity of the individual workers.¹⁵

15 There is no lack of suggested interpretations of the parable, as evident in the important study by Eubank (2013).

16 A title frequently applied to God in the LXX and both God and Jesus in the New Testament, especially in the post-resurrection narratives (John 20:28 and 21:7) and throughout the letters of Paul

The chapter begins by connecting the parable with the kingdom of God (v.1). Jesus described the lord (κύριος)¹⁶ of the vineyard going out to find 'day-labourers' to assist with the work—presumably the harvesting of the grapes. Making his way into the marketplace early in the morning (about 6 a.m.) the landowner found a group of workers and after negotiating terms and wages (one denarius—the usual day's wages), he took the labourers to work in the vineyard (v.2). At 9 a.m., he went back to the marketplace and hired more workers, but without negotiating terms, and again, three hours later.

The pattern was repeated at 3 p.m. (v.3). An hour before sunset (about 5 p.m.) and the usual end of day, the landowner made a final visit to the marketplace and meeting some labourers, who had been standing there the whole day, for lack of work, he employed them also (vv.6–7).

After the working day ended, the lord called his overseer to pay the workers their wages, starting with the last group (v.8). Each group, in turn received one denarius (v.9), but it is only when the 6 a.m. group received their wages that a protest was raised about

the length of time and heat of day which they had worked (vv.10–12). The lord reminded the workers of their initial agreement and of his right to be generous with his own money (vv.13–15). At its simplest level, the parable is about a generous farmer who paid all the workers that day the same wage regardless of the number of hours worked.

Various scholarly opinions have been advanced as to the meaning of this parable (Eubank 2013; Mkole 2014; Nielsen 2013; Vearncombe 2010) and are of merit, like Oakman’s anthropological understanding (2018) of the notion of limited good. Rudolf Schnackenburg (2002:193) neatly sums up what still appears to be the consensus, namely that the parable is more than an emphasis on a living wage. He writes,

Concluding with a question, the story directs one’s gaze to Jesus, who in his message and behaviour, conveys to human beings an appreciation of the unexpected, incomprehensible goodness of God (2002:192).

In taking seriously the generosity of God, I suggest this parable is about Jesus’ understanding about the dignity of ordinary workers. Such workers are to be considered worthy (*ἀξιός*) and the parable is illustrative of the idea that ‘the labourer is worthy of his/her wages’ (Matt 10:10). The parable remains one of the clearest statements in Matthew on the individual worth of all people, and it is noteworthy that it is only found in Matthew.

9. The Dignity of Outcasts

In relation to people who stood outside the pale, Matthew takes note that Jesus affirmed people who were considered to be ritually unclean (Matt 9:20–22). In particular, Matthew records that Jesus even touched lepers (Matt 8:3)—what greater affirmation of dignity could there be. The first miracle found in Matthew’s gospel is that of Jesus healing a leper (Matt 8:2–4), and later Jesus attended a banquet hosted by Simon, the leper (Matt 26:6). Ironically, Simon is unable to find compassion for a woman made unclean by her life-style.

Finally, Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount asserted God’s concern for those who are broken and crushed by the reality of their lives. Reading contextually the first four beatitudes, we find that Jesus gives dignity to those who are poor, and broken in spirit (Matt 5:3);¹⁷ those who mourn, like the relatives of the people massacred in Sepphoris¹⁸ (Matt 5:4); those who have been oppressed/

17 See Luz 2007:185-189, who in contrast to other commentaries on Matthew takes poverty and other tribulations in the beatitudes literally and not just spiritually.

18 A city very close to Nazareth, which was destroyed by the Romans in 6 AD and many of its inhabitants were crucified. This was just one example of Roman violence in the time of Jesus (see further Horsley 1987).

19 Using Ps 37:11 as the basis of Matthew 5:5; see further Domeris 2016:131-149.

20 The Greek term *δικαιοσύνη* corresponds to the Hebrew term *צדקה* (righteousness or justice) in the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, the King James version of Matthew 5:6 (1611) opted for righteousness, whereas the Catholic Douai Rheims (1609) chose justice.

humiliated (the so-called meek) and have lost their land¹⁹ (Matt 5:5; see Evans 2012:106) and those who hunger and thirst for justice²⁰ in a world where that value has been denied. Ulrich Luz (2007:189) offers an appropriate summation, when he writes:

A part of the salvation promised to the poor, the hungry, and those who mourn is already a reality in Jesus' acceptance of the dispossessed, in his common meals with them, and in the joy over God's love experienced in the present. Jesus' beatitudes are not empty promises of something that will happen in the future; they are 'a language act that makes the coming kingdom of God a present event.'

In reading the beatitudes in the context of first-century Palestine, one realises the extent to which Jesus offered dignity to the poor, oppressed, and suffering. In recognising their plight, Jesus offered to ordinary people a sense of God's confirmation both of their dignity in the eyes of God and of the essential justice of their grievances.

10. Beyond Boundaries

The dignity offered by God has no boundaries. Craig Blomberg draws attention to the multiple ways that Jesus as a host or principal guest, was seen to eat with people of all ranks, including tax-collectors, women of dubious reputation, and foreigners (2005). Jesus in Matthew's gospel, revelled in the comments of his opponents, taking upon himself their insulting descriptions (Matt 11:18–19) but not letting this interfere with his granting of dignity to the marginalised of his society. He openly welcomed the idea that he 'was the friend of tax-collectors and sinners' (Matt 11:19). In the account of the temple cleansing, Matthew adds an interesting detail, namely that the blind and the lame come to Jesus in the temple, and he heals them (Matt 21:14).

In Matthew 21:32, Jesus informed the priests and elders, gathered to accuse him in the courts of the Temple, that the tax-collectors and prostitutes chose to believe the message of John the Baptist, but they did not. So indeed, this is a world where the first are last and the last are first (Matt 19:30, 20:16). I have suggested that all this was in accord with Jesus' vision of the Reign of God, and his creation of a new community, where ordinary people might find their God-given dignity and wholeness.

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