

THE GOSPEL IN THE GOSPELS:
ANSWERING THE QUESTION “WHAT MUST
I DO TO BE SAVED?” FROM THE SYNOPTICS

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The Synoptic Gospels regularly describe how one enters the kingdom of God, or how one inherits eternal life, or how one is saved.¹ We evangelicals hold that people are saved by faith, not by works, but the Synoptics rarely mention faith in these contexts. Rather, in the Synoptics people are saved by what they do. These Gospels do not imply that a person earns or merits eternal life and the kingdom; nevertheless, active obedience provides the gateway to life. This paper argues that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, eternal life comes by an active saving obedience, and that this Synoptic gospel merits its place in NT soteriology.

I. INTRODUCTION

To clarify “What must I do to be saved?” let us first consider a broader question: “How can I be saved?” This wider question includes three subordinate questions.

First, “How can I be saved?” includes, “On what basis does a holy and just God grant me salvation, eternal life, and kingdom entrance?” The NT answers this first question with Jesus the Christ, his merits, and the atonement he accomplished on behalf of his people.

Second, “How can I be saved?” also involves, “How does God act to graciously bring people to himself?” The NT answers this with activities such as electing, convicting, calling, and enabling.

Third, “How can I be saved?” must include, “What must I do? How do I receive what God offers?” Or to frame it in more Calvinist terms, “What response does God graciously strengthen the called ones to make by which

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¹ While the different terms are not identical, they are often used interchangeably in the Synoptic Gospels. The Rich Young Ruler story illustrates this effectively. With no apparent change in referent, Matt 19:16–30 uses “have eternal life,” “inherit eternal life,” “enter the kingdom of heaven,” “enter the kingdom of God,” and “be saved.” Similar variation can be seen in Mark 10:17–30 and Luke 18:18–30. In addition, Mark 9:46–47 uses both “enter life” and “enter the kingdom of God” to contrast “thrown into hell.” Quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

they receive his forgiveness, the kingdom, and eternal life?" This paper assumes the stated answers to the first and second questions. It answers only the third question, and only from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Unfortunately, we can consider this third question burdened with a faulty assumption: if eternal life comes on the basis of active obedience, or "works," the more offensive term, then eternal life necessarily comes as an earned, merited salvation.² This view unnecessarily confuses the third question with the first question. The first asks, on what basis does a holy God offer salvation, the answer being Christ's atonement and merits. The third question asks *only* "what response do the called ones make, by which they receive the kingdom and eternal life?" If God can graciously enable saving faith, he can also graciously enable saving obedience, without threatening the answer to the first or second questions. However, we have understood saving *faith* to emerge from God's call and merit-less human choice, so we should understand saving *obedience* rising from that same dynamic of God's grace and merit-less human response.

Perhaps the crucial distinction is not between faith and works, but between grace and merit.³ By saying "faith not works," we intend "grace not merit," but these are not parallel distinctions. The Synoptics undermine "faith not works," but they support "grace not merit." The short parable of the treasure in the field in Matt 13:44 illustrates salvation in the Synoptic Gospels. Someone put the treasure in the field where the wandering man will see it. He joyfully sells all he has to buy the field, not the treasure. Even by selling all, the man in no sense earns or deserves that treasure; he simply finds it and recognizes its value. He nonetheless must part with all he has in order to take hold of the gift that good fortune placed in his way. In the same way, the fishermen obediently left all to follow Jesus, yet he could say to them, "freely you received, freely give" (Matt 10:8).⁴

The First Gospel has generated the most scholarly discussion, because, of the Synoptics, Matthew most overtly affirms Moses' Law and bases kingdom entrance on obedience. Neither of these fit easily into the traditional Protestant gospel. The response to these elements of the First Gospel normally merges the three questions introduced above. That is, recent writers view the First Gospel's soteriology as a whole, and do not address any one of our three questions specifically. Bacon and Windisch early in the last century, and more recently Marxsen, observe Matthew's high view of the Law and his

² D. A. Carson provides a clear example: "some people have concluded that [the Sermon on the Mount] lays out a series of conditions which must be met if a person is to enter the kingdom of God. In this view, an individual enters the kingdom because his obedience merits entrance" (*Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his Confrontation with the World* [Grand Rapids: Baker: 1987] 123). Note the logical progression from the first sentence of this quote to the second sentence, particularly the word "merits," which I take to mean "deserves" or "earns." Carson's first sentence describes the Synoptic Gospels, but not his second.

³ An observation by Terrance Tiessen in private conversation.

⁴ D. Bonhoeffer captured this well: "This first step must be regarded, to start with, as an external work. . . . Although Peter cannot achieve his own conversion, he can leave his father's nets" (*The Cost of Discipleship* [New York: Macmillan, 1951] 57).

emphasis on obeying Jesus' commands, and conclude that Matthew has a legalistic salvation not in step with the rest of the NT.⁵ They view Matthew's affirmation of the Law and his ethical answer to the third question (how do I receive what God offers?) as his entire soteriology.

To counter this overemphasis on the third question, Ridderbos, Hagner, and Talbert have demonstrated the graciousness of God in Matthew's implicit comments on the first and particularly the second questions.⁶ These more conservative biblical theologians and NT exegetes have worked to bring Matthew's soteriology as a whole into line with salvation by faith, but only by largely ignoring Matthew's answer to the third question, "What must I do to be saved?" They focus instead on more "graceful" elements in his soteriology, his answers to the first and second questions.⁷

⁵ B. W. Bacon, "Jesus and the Law: A Study of the First 'Book' of Matthew (Mt. 3-7)," *JBL* 47 (1928) 203-31; H. Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951 [1937]) 27-29; W. Marxsen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993) 238. A similarly dark view of Matthew's ungracious emphasis on judgment can be found in F. W. Beare, *The Gospel of Matthew* (HNTC; San Francisco: Harper, 1981) 43-44. For the view that Matthew is largely a Christianized Judaism, see A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990); *idem*, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1996); and D. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998). D. Hagner has responded to these in "New Things from the Scribe's Treasure Box (Mt 13:52)," *ExpTim* 109 (1998) 329-34; and *idem*, "Matthew: Apostate, Reformer, Revolutionary?" *NTS* 49 (2003) 193-209. For two who take Matthew's rigorous entrance requirements seriously but achieve less radical conclusions, see R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 28; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and H. Kvalbein, "The Kingdom of God in the Ethics of Jesus," *ST* 51 (1997) 60-84. P. Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study of the Structures of Matthew's View of Salvation* (WUNT 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) examined the First Gospel and found generally the same covenantal nomism that E. P. Sanders found in first century Judaism, that is, getting into covenant relationship with God by grace, staying in covenant relationship by law (E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] and *idem*, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]).

⁶ H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962) 241-59, takes a view similar to this paper, that the demand is entirely real, and that the call of God enables the respondent to obey. But he emphasizes the latter, concerned that Matthew not be considered a legalist, but not concerned that Matthew's call be softened. See also D. Hagner, "Ethics and the Sermon on the Mount," *ST* 51 (1997) 44-59 (esp. pp. 50-53); C. Talbert, "Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology," *Bib* 82 (2001) 515-38; and Carson, *Sermon on the Mount* 122-30.

⁷ Matthew's defenders confuse the offer of salvation with receiving it in one important way. They insist that Matthew follows classic Protestant thought in placing gift before demand, and indicative before imperative. But by their "gift" and their "indicative" they do not mean salvation graciously received, but only salvation graciously offered, which is very different. In the Synoptics, God truly has come graciously to humans through Jesus, in love. But God's relationship with them does not yet exist, and for many never will. The disciples left all to follow, the rich young ruler did not. In Synoptic soteriology, people do not normally obey from a received salvation, they obey to receive an offered salvation. See Hagner, "Ethics" 50-53; Ridderbos, *Coming* 252; and Talbert, "Indicative" 515. I. H. Marshall defends Luke in a similar way (*Luke: Historian and Theologian* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970] 189): "For Luke, salvation is dependent upon the initiative of God who not only sends out the Word but also prepares the hearts of men and women to receive

These writers rescue the First Evangelist from a fate he, in part, would rather endure. They rightly confront modern views of Matthew as pure legalist, but their work undermines the intentional rigor of the First Gospel's call and warning. Matthew's defenders begin by conceding the apparent demand and conditionality of Matthew's soteriology, but then they parade the evidence for God's grace. Matthew himself, however, quietly concedes the grace, and then repeatedly announces Jesus' demand and conditions.⁸

I will examine Matthew, Mark, and Luke, reading each Gospel in turn through the eyes of its own hypothetical reader.⁹ Our three hypothetical readers will each be a late first-century Gentile unbeliever who had only a passing contact with followers of the Christ. These followers indicated that a certain Jesus is Lord of all, and that he offers eternal life. Their presentation persuaded each reader to join with Jesus and to receive eternal life, but the visit was brief. The followers have gone, but have left behind a copy of Matthew's Gospel (or Mark's, or Luke's). So our seekers each read only their Gospel in order to answer one particular question, the same question that the rich young man asked Jesus (Mark 10:17): "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We assume little preconception in our readers as to what eternal life might entail, or how one might get it.

I will consider only and all Synoptic passages that indicate clearly what brings eschatological salvation, or what brings eschatological judgment. This will result in our painting that Gospel's answer in rather bold, primitive strokes, because we will ignore indirect passages. Nevertheless, our rough picture will lead us in the right direction, for implicit teachings will not overthrow the message of many explicit ones.¹⁰

it"; and "it was God Himself who took the initiative in bringing the gospel to them" (p. 190). In these ways Marshall combats those who allege "that Luke comes perilously near, or even actually embraces, a doctrine of salvation by works" (p. 189). This initiating, like the "indicative" of Ridderbos and Talbert and the "gift" of Hagner, is clearly pre-salvation and pre-conversion. None of these weakens my thesis, that God has initiated by offering people the gospel of salvation and preparing hearts to receive it, and has also granted them to receive it by an active saving obedience.

⁸ Talbert agrees at the end of his article: "Granted all of this [divine enablement] is unobtrusive, almost invisible to the eye that is focused on the surface of the plot of the Gospel. . . . This is not the way Paul or the Fourth Evangelist would tell the story but it is Matthew's way" ("Indicative" 538). Mohrlang is correctly more blunt: "One thing is clear, however: [Matthew's] primary focus is on the imperative, not the indicative" (*Matthew and Paul* 81). Likewise, R. Schnackenburg (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] 10–11) believes Matthew deliberately stresses ethical imperative over confession in order to correct the community's shortcomings in this area.

⁹ Hagner offers a precedent for this method. He reads Matthew as a first-century unbelieving Jew in order to discover what in Matthew was new ("New Things" 330). J. D. Kingsbury concludes that Matthew's implied reader was a disciple of Jesus between the resurrection and the parousia ("Reflections on 'The Reader' of Matthew's Gospel," *NTS* 34 [1988] 442–60). See also M. A. Powell, "Expected and Unexpected Readings of Matthew: What the Reader Knows," *Asbury Theological Journal* 48/2 (1993) 31–51. J. B. Tyson believes Luke-Acts should be read as an evangelistic text addressed to Godfearers ("Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts: Reading as a Godfearer," *NTS* 41 [1995] 19–38). This may not have been Luke's design, but Tyson at least demonstrates Luke's writing adequate for such a purpose.

¹⁰ One might object that the Synoptics present the kingdom of God as bringing both temporal salvation (healing, exorcism, etc.) and eschatological salvation together, and thus that I violate

II. SALVATION IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

I will not contend with the common view that the Synoptic Gospels address believers, in Matthew's case Jewish believers.¹¹ But the First Gospel answers its reader's question often, and clearly, speaking to Jew-Gentile matters inclusively. Matthew surely believed his Gospel entirely adequate to show such a reader the way to eternal life, even if he did not design it for that purpose.

1. *Matthew 1-7*. Our reader first notices Matt 1:21: "[Jesus] will save his people from their sins." Jesus' royal line and his birth by the Holy Spirit qualify him for such a task. Our reader learns that sins are the problem, or at least a problem, and "his people" do not rescue themselves but rather need a rescuer. The question will now be, "How do I become one of 'his people'?"¹²

John the Baptist gives the first instruction to our reader: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). The birth of Jesus signals that the kingdom has arrived, and in response one must "repent." For our reader "repent" might be vague, but baptism and confessing sins help fill in the picture. One accesses the saving of Jesus by repentance, baptism, and confession (3:6).

Then John turns angrily on the Pharisees and Sadducees, and our seeker finds three descriptions of judgment: wrath to come (3:7); every tree not bearing good fruit cut down and burned (3:10); and the coming one gathers his wheat but burns the chaff with unquenchable fire (3:12). Our reader will probably not identify with Pharisees or Sadducees, but the Baptist's pictures of future judgment make clear why people need saving. Escaping judgment hinges not on ancestry but on bearing fruit worthy of repentance (3:8). Our

Synoptic intention by inquiring only about eschatological salvation. To be sure, the kingdom brings both, and people find both in Jesus. But the Synoptic tradition itself distinguishes temporal from eschatological. (1) John the Baptist spoke compellingly and only about eschatological salvation. (2) Although people came to Jesus for both, Jesus did not initiate teaching about healing or exorcism, but initiated much teaching on eschatological salvation. (3) The first third of Jesus' ministry in each Synoptic Gospel contains a good deal of both temporal and eschatological salvation, but from that point on the temporal aspect wanes and Jesus ends his public ministry in each Synoptic with considerable teaching on eschatological salvation. I therefore do not violate the intention of these Gospels by bringing to them the specific question of eschatological salvation and judgment, as they themselves point readers in this direction.

¹¹ Regarding Matthew, see D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972) 43; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 16-17; R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 17. R. H. Stein observes that the Gospels were intended to be understood also by those with little or no Christian background, for they were written to be read in congregations which would have a variety of people in the audience ("Is Our Reading the Bible the Same As the Original Audience's Hearing It? A Case Study in the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 46 [2003] 63-78). R. Bauckham asserts that the Gospels were all written for wide circulation, not particular communities (Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]).

¹² The next two verses, Matt 1:22-23, introduce Jesus as Emmanuel, "God with us." "In your midst" and "with you" occur in two other significant contexts: Matt 18:20 and 28:20. Talbert makes good use of these three texts to defend the priority of Matthew's indicative, but it does not answer our reader's question ("Indicative" 522-25).

reader will feel some urgency about this fruit, for the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to be baptized (3:7), and that clearly did not satisfy John. Jesus will save his people from their sins, which must equal him gathering his wheat and keeping them from the coming wrath. Being his people requires baptism and confession, and above all repentance that bears fruit.

In Matt 4:17 Jesus himself repeats John's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," and promptly calls the two sets of brothers to follow him (4:18–22). This helps flesh out what repentance fruit looks like, since right after Jesus called for repentance, he called these men to follow him. This passage also begins to show how one becomes one of "his people." Jesus called the four men to leave possessions, activities, and family in order to follow him. They all left these to follow Jesus, thus clearly becoming "his people." Our reader might wonder how to do what the four men did, because Jesus was no longer physically present. But their leaving these for Jesus still leaves a vivid impression, and appears to resolve their sin problem and rescue them from John the Baptist's "coming wrath."

Four Matthean passages offer lengthy but focused discussion on how one inherits eternal life, and the beatitudes comprise the first. The first eight beatitudes (Matt 5:3–10) attract our reader, because each gives a condition and a reward, and the reward generally sounds like eternal life. The first and eighth both promise the kingdom of heaven, suggesting that all eight rewards are different ways of saying that same thing. Inheriting the earth, being filled with righteousness, receiving mercy, seeing God, and being called children of God, each elaborate the primary "receiving the kingdom of heaven."¹³

The conditions describe something quite different than the fishermen following Jesus, but for our reader they are actually more useful, as one does not need the physical presence of Jesus to receive the promised rewards. The first four conditions acknowledge apparent deficits: being poor in spirit, mourning that poverty, resulting meekness to others, and hungering for righteousness. This attitude of kindly inability opens one to receiving the kingdom. The context implies that Jesus here speaks primarily to his disciples (5:1), so those who have already renounced all in obedience are the poor in spirit and mourning this poverty.¹⁴ Our reader naturally becomes one of the listening

¹³ The ninth and final beatitude in several ways does not follow the consistent format of the first eight, and does not need to be included in this study.

¹⁴ Both the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:1–7:1) have some ambiguity regarding audience. Both begin with crowds mentioned but attention directed to disciples, and at the end both refer to listening crowds. There is ambiguity in the content of the Sermon on the Mount as well, for the whole discourse contains both frequent entrance requirements, as well as assumptions that the audience is already "in." I will show the main entrance requirement texts as we go along. These are mixed with "you are the salt of the earth" (5:13), "you are the light of the world" (5:14), and frequent mention of "your Father in heaven" (5:16, 45, 48, etc.). Nevertheless, opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount have much clearer connection to the disciples than the crowds. The call of the fishermen occurs near the end of Matthew 4, and three verses later the Sermon begins as Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain, and the disciples come to him there (5:1). It is probably best to understand the setting to imply concentric

crowds, wanting to hear Jesus and to emulate the inner circle of disciples. The fourth beatitude promises filling to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and thus holds out to our reader hope of God's enabling in preparation for the next beatitudes.

The fifth to eighth conditions call for a righteousness that our reader takes to be the fruit John the Baptist wanted but never identified. Being merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted for righteousness' sake also develop the meekness of the second beatitude. Each is an aspect of the condition by which the follower of Christ receives salvation from God. The merciful receive mercy, the pure in heart see God, and those whose righteousness endures persecution receive the kingdom. "The expressions [of the eight beatitudes] refer to the concrete, eschatological gift of salvation, not to the reign of God as king."¹⁵ Subsequent teaching in the First Gospel does not stray far from the foundation of these eight conditions.

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).¹⁶ Our reader knows little about the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, but presumably they do not have the kind of righteousness Jesus just described.¹⁷ The beatitudes offer the only indication so far in Matthew as to Jesus' actual standard of righteousness. The five antitheses that complete Matthew 5, and the sections on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting give our reader more information about Jesus' kind of righteousness.¹⁸

circles, disciples on the inside and crowds behind them but also listening. The content would thus also be directed primarily to the newly called disciples who still need kingdom entrance taught clearly, and secondarily to the crowds. On this duality of the audience, see G. Stanton, "The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (ed. G. Hawthorne and O. Betz; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 188; U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 224; R. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 59. More generally on the problem of isolating the Sermon from its context, see W. D. Davies and D. Allison, "Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount," *SJT* 44 (1991) 283-309.

¹⁵ Kvalbein, "Kingdom of God" 67. This is not the most common view, but it seems to me the fairest reading of beatitudes themselves.

¹⁶ B. Przybylski argued that "righteousness" in Matthew was always ethical, never a gift (*Righteousness in Matthew and his world of thought* [SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980]). Hagner believes some of Matthew's seven uses of "righteousness" refer to gift, and others are ethical: "Righteousness in Matthew's Theology," in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (ed. M. Wilkins and T. Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 101-20. Both views are well represented (see the survey in Hagner, "Matthew's Theology" 108-9). I am quite certain that our reader would view all seven as ethical, including 5:6, which implies that ethical righteousness is at least in part a gift of God's enabling.

¹⁷ In Matthew 23, our reader will learn more completely what is wrong with the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes, but the beatitudes already set the basic direction.

¹⁸ In the last antithesis, Jesus teaches people to love their enemies, and thus be complete/perfect as their Father in heaven. "Perfect," *teleios*, can also mean mature or fully developed ("*teleios*," BDAG, 995-96). Its only other use in the Synoptics occurs in Matthew's rich young man account: "If you wish to be perfect [*teleios*], go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." See R. C. Tannehill, "Matt 5:48 'You Shall Be Complete'—If Your Love Includes All," *Journal of Theology* (2004) 29-34; C. Blomberg, "The Most Often Abused Verses in the Sermon on the Mount, And How to Treat Them Right," *SWJT* 46/3 (2004) 1-17, esp. p. 10.

Both Jesus' name (he will save his people from their sins) and John the Baptist's words have drawn our reader's attention to human guilt. Jesus' teaching on prayer expands this: "'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . .' For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:12–15). Our reader has no ability to atone for his or her own sins, but can forgive others. This restates the merciful receiving mercy beatitude, showing how to become one of Jesus' people, saved from one's sins.

Our reader wonders how to leave all to follow Jesus. In the second half of Matthew 6 Jesus clarifies by his teaching on serving God not wealth, treasure in heaven, and not worrying about physical needs but seeking first the kingdom.¹⁹ Although Jesus no longer commands people to follow him on a road, our reader can live out the same attitude to possessions and needs, and thus join the four fishermen in being "his people."

The Sermon on the Mount ends by focusing on the golden rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (7:12), which summarizes the Law and Prophets.²⁰ The previous paragraph will be important for our reader, for it offered God's enabling. There Jesus invited hearers to ask and seek and knock, and promised that they would receive and find and enter (7:7–8). Jesus supported this by highlighting the Father's eagerness to give good gifts (7:9–11), implying God's help in living out the golden rule.

Immediately following the golden rule, Jesus gives four eschatological warnings, which entail the second major Matthean discussion on how one inherits eternal life. The Sermon on the Mount began with conditions of blessing, and ends with warnings of judgment.²¹ Each of the four warnings leaves a blank criterion most naturally filled by the golden rule. (1) The wide gate and easy road lead to destruction, and many are on it, and only the narrow hard road leads to life (7:13–14). Jesus does not describe the narrow

¹⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Matthew 6:33: The Kingdom of God and the Ethics of Jesus," in *Neues Testament und Ethik* (ed. H. Merklein; Freiburg: Herder, 1989) 84–98. Beasley-Murray argues that gift and demand are inseparable in Matthew, as exemplified in 6:33, "seek first the kingdom . . . and all these will be added."

²⁰ The reference to the law and the prophets in 7:12 forms a bracket with 5:17. The intervening sections comprise the main body of the Sermon, and the conclusion commences with 7:12. See Luz, *Matthew* 255; and Guelich, *Sermon* 379. On the remainder of chapter 7 as four warnings, see Hill, *Matthew* 150.

²¹ These read similarly to Paul's three sin lists (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:5–6). In each Paul gives a list of sins that will exclude people from "inheriting the kingdom of God." That repeated line itself suggests that Paul is quoting or rephrasing some saying of the Synoptic Jesus, for Paul rarely uses such language. Each list contains some additional emphasis, for Paul fears that believers will not take him seriously. In 1 Cor 6:9, "Do not be deceived!" In Gal 5:21, "I am warning you as I warned you before." And in Eph 5:5–6, "Be sure of this," and "Let no one deceive you with empty words." Two of the three lists are in Galatians and Ephesians, which clearly teach justification by faith. Paul saw no tension between his teaching on justification and his warnings. He directed these lists to the churches themselves, and in this way distanced himself from the view that works do not affect salvation. Paul declared that any teaching that ignored his warnings was empty and deceptive. The warnings of Matthew 7 are in line with these Pauline warnings.

gate or path, so our reader takes them to refer primarily to the golden rule. (2) Jesus warns against false prophets, and uses John's image of trees bearing fruit and trees without good fruit cut down and thrown into the fire (7:15–19). Jesus does not describe good fruit, so it must be adherence to the golden rule. (3) Some say "Lord, Lord," but do not do the will of the Father. These are told, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers" (7:22). Jesus does not reveal the Father's will in this warning, implying obedience to the Law and the Prophets, as summarized in the golden rule. (4) The final warning describes wise and foolish builders, the latter destroyed by not acting on Jesus' words.²² Which words? Our reader will assume that this warning also to refers to the whole Sermon, but especially to the Law-and-Prophets golden rule.²³

Our reader by now will be aware of five elements in answering, "What must I do to be saved?" First, sin brings consequences, and John the Baptist and Jesus urgently warn of eschatological judgment. But Jesus saves his people from their sins.

Second, one joins Jesus' people, and this element particularly interests our reader, by obedience. Mary's husband Joseph silently and immediately obeyed, as did the four fishermen. Jesus announced an almost entirely interpersonal righteousness, calling people be merciful, be peacemakers, do not hate or condemn, forgive others, love enemies, and do to others as you would have them do to you. Jesus also included moral concerns like adultery, and some pointed teaching about possessions and wealth. By embarking on this "way," one joins with Jesus' people and receives God's forgiveness. In particular the two extended discussions on inheriting eternal life, 5:3–10 and 7:13–27, outline the obedience that will bring eschatological blessing and escape from judgment.

Third, one finds no hint of grading or measuring performance. Rather there are only two gates, two paths, two trees, and two builders. One either embraces Jesus and his teaching, or one does not.

Fourth, there is room for process, for Jesus' people have poverty of spirit, they mourn this poverty, and they need the Father's forgiveness daily.

Fifth, the Father enables obedience, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied, and those who ask and seek and knock will receive and find and enter. The Father eagerly gives these good gifts. Nevertheless, and on this stern note Jesus concludes the Sermon, there will be no eternal life but rather judgment for those who do not practice his righteousness.

²² Although the image is milder than the previous warnings, the destroyed house undoubtedly refers to eschatological judgment. See Guelich, *Sermon* 412; Schweizer, *Matthew* 191; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1993) 191.

²³ R. Schnackenburg (*God's Rule and Kingdom* [Freiburg: Herder, 1963] 92) doubts that John the Baptist and Jesus could both use the same words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2; 4:17). He bases this on the grace God bestows on all who accept Jesus' message, and God's delight in forgiveness in Jesus' words, contrasted with John's judgment message. Though a difference may exist, it does not warrant his doubt, for Jesus' own words in Matthew are often stern. See Beare, *Matthew* 43–44.

2. *Matthew 8:1–25:30.* To be briefer, I will here adopt a topical approach instead of the sequential perspective used thus far, and return to a sequential reading for the final section of Matthew. The conditional theme already firmly established continues to surface frequently. Eternal life depends on obeying Jesus.²⁴

a. *Costly discipleship.* Persecution will occur because of the followers' loyalty to Jesus. On three separate occasions, Jesus taught that only those who endure to the end will be saved; those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will gain them, but those who guard their lives will lose them (10:22, 32–33, 37–39; 16:24–27; 24:9–13).²⁵

Matthew's third extended teaching on inheriting eternal life appears as the story of the rich young man (19:16–30). That account will affect our reader deeply, for the rich man asks the very question our reader asks, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Although Jesus has often taught what brings or excludes salvation, only here in the First Gospel will our reader watch Jesus deal with a person who comes asking for salvation. The young man's decision to walk away from eternal life makes the account striking and sobering. Our reader learns here that one who obeys Moses' commands but will not give possessions to the poor and who will not give Jesus loyalty over possessions cannot enter the kingdom.

b. *Obedience brings life.* When told about his mother and brothers, Jesus pointed to his disciples and said that those who do the will of his Father were his family (12:49–50). Our reader will recall here that Jesus' family will be "his people," whom Jesus saves from their sins. If one's hand or foot or eye causes one to stumble, cut it off, because one is better maimed entering life than whole in hell's fire (18:8–9). Jesus ends the parable of the vineyard and the tenants by telling the chief priests and elders that "the kingdom of heaven will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits

²⁴ This central section overtly offers the kingdom to all, specifically those one might think excluded. After the centurion showed faith, Jesus said many would come from east and west and eat with Abraham and Jacob (8:11–12). It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick, God desires mercy not sacrifice, and Jesus came to call not the righteous but sinners (9:10–13). The twelve are sent to lost sheep (10:6). To the chief priests and elders, Jesus said, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you" (21:31). When invited guests refused, the servants gathered into the celebration all they could find, "both good and bad" (22:10). Whatever obedience brings eternal life, those who appear righteous have no advantage in getting it. They are probably disadvantaged. God particularly desires those who seem far from him.

²⁵ Our reader will probably view Jesus' own suffering and death primarily as an example of this element, for Jesus himself was betrayed, abandoned, and denied, all by loved ones. He was arrested in the dark and tried unfairly, he was humiliated, tormented, and killed. Jesus demonstrates obedience to the will of the Father that endures to the end, obedience he requires of his followers also. In all the Synoptics, Jesus' death as atoning sacrifice receives little attention, functioning more as example. See D. Allison, "Structure, Biographical Impulse, and the *Imitatio Christi*," in *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 135–55, esp. p. 151.

of the kingdom" (Matt 21:23, 43). The five unprepared virgins (25:1–13) say, "Lord, Lord, open to us," but the bridegroom says, "I do not know you," recalling those in 7:22–23 who said "Lord, Lord," but did not do the Father's will. The five virgins are foolish, like the builder who heard but did not obey (7:24–27).

There is, however, one story where a person received mercy before showing it. In a parable, a king forgave a slave with an impossible debt, simply because the slave begged for patience (18:21–35). But when that slave would not forgive a fellow slave a small debt, the king was enraged and handed over the unforgiving slave to the tormenters. Our reader will probably view the unforgiving slave as a person who did not produce repentance fruit, who was not merciful and did not do to others as he would have them do, and thus comes under the four warnings that end Matthew 7.

Matthew 8:1–25:30 has expanded considerably on what the treasure in the field entails, but has not altered the offer of life to those who hear the golden rule and obey it, to those who leave all to follow Jesus.²⁶ Active obedience to Jesus and his teaching continues to be the narrow gate to life.

3. *Matthew 25:31–28:20.* In this final section we will revert to a closer sequential way of interpreting Matthew's salvation passages, since a writer's overriding views most likely emerge at the beginning and end of their writing. The separating of sheep and goats (25:31–46) portrays in detail the final judgment scene already summarized many times in Matthew, and is Matthew's fourth-long section on how one receives eternal life. Because it concludes Jesus' teaching, it intentionally fastens to the reader's mind. And these words concern the very topic our reader pursued from the start, how one might "inherit the kingdom" and not "depart from me into the eternal fire." Our reader has every reason to pay careful attention. The king's verdict depends only on whether or not the nations have acted compassionately toward the least, the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. This summarizes the standard of righteousness that Jesus taught throughout Matthew, and our reader will find here

²⁶ Our reader also finds God working graciously in these chapters, but generally not in a way that overturns the emphasis on active obedience being rewarded with salvation. So, Jesus forgave the sins of a paralytic because of his friends' faith (9:1–8). All our reader learns with certainty is that Jesus has authority to forgive sins. To disciples who had left all to follow, Jesus said, "you received without payment; give without payment" (10:8). After reproaching the cities that had not repented, Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (11:27). "When the disciples asked the meaning of the parables, Jesus said, 'to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given'" (13:11). "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (15:13). Near the end of the rich young man story, when the disciples wonder if anyone can be saved, Jesus replies: "for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." In the parable of the talents, the story begins with the master entrusting large sums of his money to his servants (25:14–15). God's kindness pervades everything, but does not mitigate the need to sell all in order to buy the field.

only a final confirmation of the consistent call and warning of Jesus.²⁷ To some Anabaptist and social gospel Christian traditions, Matt 25:31–46 functions as their equivalent of the popular John 3:16. There is no reason why it should not. Both Matt 25:31–46 and John 3:16 come from the mouth of Jesus; both deal with perishing versus eternal life; and in both Jesus explains how one acts to receive salvation. The Matthean passage may have better claim to prominence, since it deliberately concludes Jesus' earthly teaching ministry.

Matthew has not yet offered any clear explanation for Jesus' coming death except to "give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). But "this is my blood of the covenant" (26:26) may be significant even without our reader knowing Exodus 24. The Exodus 24 covenant blood has no forgiveness function, but rather binds Israel to God in relationship. But Jesus will save "his people" from their sins, so our reader will now understand in some way that Jesus' blood and the cup establish people in covenant relationship with Jesus, making them his people.²⁸ "Poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" explains that he will "save his people from their sins" by dying sacrificially.²⁹

²⁷ For a survey of approaches to Matt 25:31–46, see S. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation* (SBLDS 114; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989). For the view that this refers to a judgment specifically of Gentiles, and that "the least" are believers, probably missionaries, see D. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (SacPag; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 356–58; D. Senior, *Matthew* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 284–85. For the view that all are judged, and that "the least" are all the needy, see Beare, *Matthew* 492–95; D. Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 347–49; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 255–59; J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 1021–37. Beare finds this judgment scene unchristian (pp. 496–97). Hagner agrees that the judgment is universal, but defines "the least" as believers, possibly missionaries. This should be taken seriously. Based on what Jesus has previously said about the least of these and about family (i.e. brothers) in Matthew, it is probably what our reader would conclude (*Matthew 14–28* [WBC; Dallas: Word, 1995] 746). In the previous chapter, Jesus said that the end would not come until the gospel of the kingdom had been proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations (24:14). This judgment scene thus describes responses to the gospel, and the consequences of those responses. Our reader would assume two points. First, John the Baptist promised judgment and that the coming one would separate wheat from chaff, and all the way through Matthew this separation occurs: two gates, two roads, two trees, two builders, wheat and weeds, good and bad fish, wise and foolish virgins, and so on, always with profound eschatological implications. Separating sheep and goats reiterates that same common theme. Second, this passage will not be teaching any different morality or salvation other than what the First Gospel has communicated all along. It is most improbable that a new teaching emerges at this final stage.

²⁸ "Poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" provides the only clear Matthean answer to our first introductory question, "How does a holy God offer sinners forgiveness and eternal life?"

²⁹ The First Gospel has both the "ransom" saying, and "for the forgiveness of sins" in the last supper (Matt 20:28; 26:28). The Second Gospel has only the "ransom" saying (Mark 10:45), and the Third Gospel has neither. For these reasons most assume that the First Gospel affirms Jesus' death as atoning, but debate the atoning significance of Jesus' death in Mark and especially Luke. None of this directly influences our discussion, since no Synoptic Gospel ties atonement to "what must I do to be saved?" For a different suggestion concerning atonement in Matthew, see B. Gerhardsson, "Sacrificial Service and Atonement in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Reconciliation and Hope* (ed. R. Banks; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 25–35.

The concluding words of the First Gospel summarize what our reader already learned.³⁰ "Make disciples of all the nations" affirms that the obedience of the first four, leaving all to go with Jesus and be disciples, was indeed a model for all to follow (28:19). "Baptizing them" will take our reader back to John the Baptist, since Matthew has not mentioned baptism without reference to John, and therefore will recall confession and bearing repentance fruit as part of baptism to escape judgment. "Obey everything I have commanded you" recalls the wise builder and the disciples and many others who acted on Jesus' words, and the foolish builder and virgins and the rich young man who did not act. The great commission repeats what our reader has learned. The resurrected Jesus does not update his pre-Easter gospel; he confirms it.

4. *Summary.* The gospel of the First Gospel is that God's kingdom of salvation has arrived, brought and offered to all by the Christ who saves his people from their sins. People enter by giving Jesus complete loyalty, by choosing him over family and possessions and life itself. They show their allegiance by obeying what he taught, which is at root a deep generosity to all others that extends to loving enemies by not retaliating or judging them but forgiving and showing mercy. Proscriptively, Jesus taught them to avoid all posturing before people, and to avoid breaking the moral teaching of Moses as Jesus interpreted it. Ignoring this gospel, not acting according to his teaching, brings terrifying eternal consequences.

³⁰ I pay particular attention to the conclusion of Matthew and Luke, to establish that the resurrected Jesus does not alter the pre-crucifixion gospel. Progressive revelation explains some biblical phenomena, but does not adequately explain why the gospel of the Synoptics looks different to us than the gospel of the epistles. There are four reasons why progressive revelation does not account for this difference. (1) It requires us to believe that Jesus, who surely knew that the gospel that he preached right to his death would change significantly, never hinted that his message was limited or that a better gospel would soon emerge. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus' post-resurrection teaching only affirms his earlier content. (2) It requires us to believe also that Matthew and Mark and Luke wrote Gospels and sent them out several decades after Jesus died, knowing that the good news in these writings was dated and misleading, but never in any editorial comment indicating this. These strain credulity. (3) John's Gospel records Jesus' teaching during the same pre-crucifixion time, yet none wish to relegate its soteriology to an earlier phase of revelation. (4) The epistles affirm the conditionality of the Synoptic gospel. Hebrews: "whoever would approach [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (11:6). 1 Peter: "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile" (1:17). John: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (14:21). Revelation: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (22:14-15). Galatians: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you will reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (6:7-8; Paul comfortably adds this to justification by faith alone). Above all, James 2:14-26 affirms the Synoptic gospel and corrects misinterpretation of Paul. The rest of the NT includes the Synoptic gospel, so it cannot simply reflect an earlier stage of revelation.

The first of Matthew's four longer discussions on entering the kingdom, the beatitudes, are kindly and inviting, although we remember that their primary audience had already left all for Jesus. The remaining three extended passages on eternal life are severe: the warnings in 7:13–27, the rich young man, and the sheep and the goats.³¹

III. SALVATION IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

We will read Mark through the eyes of a second reader, positioned as Matthew's reader, desiring to join Jesus' followers and receive the eternal life offered through Jesus, and wanting to know how. Our second reader differs from the first only in having Mark to read instead of Matthew.³² Unlike the readers of Matthew and Luke, who will find important soteriological teachings at the beginning of their Gospels, Mark's reader will find no direct answers until after Jesus' first death prediction.

1. *Mark 1–7.* Mark reports that John the Baptist proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Our reader learns from 1:4–5 that sins need to be repented of, confessed, and forgiven. Mark's John says nothing about judgment, and Mark actually quotes John only when John predicts the coming one; thus the Baptist says nothing directly to our reader except to introduce Jesus.

Mark's reader continues to learn about sins. Jesus himself calls everyone to repent and believe the gospel (1:15), and then calls two sets of brothers to follow him (1:16–20). They leave all and follow Jesus, and our reader understands that this enacts the repenting and believing Jesus just invited. Their immediate obedience makes a strong impression, and their obeying and following seems to swallow up their need to repent and confess. Soon after, Jesus forgave the sins of a paralyzed man who had loyal friends (2:1–12), establishing what our reader might already suspect, that Jesus has authority to forgive sins.

Jesus calls Levi, who gets up and follows Jesus (2:13–14). This parallels the call of the first four, and leaving something to follow Jesus emerges as a pattern for our reader. Criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners at Levi's house, Jesus said he came not to call the righteous, but sinners

³¹ Matthew does not mention saving faith. Four times in Matthew, “saved” refers to eschatological salvation (1:21; 10:22; 19:25; 24:13), but none of these occurs with “believe” or “faith.” “Believe” and “faith” occur many times, but never connected to inheriting eternal life, or salvation from judgment, or entering the kingdom. The closest Matthew gets to “saved by faith” is Jesus forgiving the paralytic due to the faith of his friends in Matthew 9. That is not an easy passage to build on. From evidence such as this, D. Sim revives an older view that Matthew intentionally attacks Pauline teaching. I am not convinced regarding intention, but like James 2, Matthew corrects excesses of Paul's adherents (“Matthew's anti-Paulinism: A neglected feature of Matthean Studies,” *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 58 [2002] 767–83). Matthew must have known about the Pauline mission, and the ensuing Jerusalem controversy that Acts 15–23 reflects. Especially if Matthew wrote from Judea or Syria, as many suggest, can Matthew's message be entirely separate from Pauline matters?

³² See on Stein, “Our Reading the Bible,” in n. 11 above.

(2:15–17). Whereas John baptized people, Jesus the forgiver simply calls people to follow him. Once they leave all to follow, their sins are apparently forgiven. In contemporary terms, once Jesus is Lord, he is thereby also Savior. But our reader still gropes for the way to eternal life, because neither sins nor forgiveness have been connected in any way to that life, nor has the Second Gospel indicated any way of joining a Jesus not physically present.

"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," says Jesus in 3:35, but our reader still knows little about the content of that will. Jesus' teaching later in chapter 7, on the tradition of the elders and on what defiles, helps our reader. Following Jesus means having little use for external rituals of cleansing. Evil intentions, which Jesus lists in detail, originate within the heart of a person, and so defile. However, none of this has addressed how one might gain eternal life.

2. *Mark 8:32b–38*. Here our second reader receives a clear and overwhelming answer. The Second Gospel has made no mention of eschatological judgment or salvation, of entering the kingdom or inheriting eternal life, prior to Jesus the Christ predicting his own death (8:27–32a). Our reader already knew that Jesus was the Christ (1:1). But only now, after learning that Jesus will die and rise, can Mark's reader understand that one receives eternal life by imitating Jesus' death.³³ The way of Satan and humans avoids death, but God's way requires submission to death (8:33). Peter was no happier about this than our reader will be. Being a follower means self-denial and walking to horrible execution (8:34).³⁴

To the naturally hesitant, Jesus gave investment advice about life, and explained the practical wisdom of not guarding the present life, for only by losing it does one gain [eternal] life (vv. 35–37). That life, which those losing their lives will gain, refers back to the resurrection life Jesus just predicted for himself (v. 31). The glorious coming of the Son of Man provides the future time of reckoning, when present investments pay their dividends. Our reader learns that following Jesus includes faithful witness to Jesus and the gospel (v. 35), to Jesus and his words (v. 38), and to both in the face of death. This dangerous following is not a radical higher stage of discipleship or Christian living, but the only way to eternal life. Saving one's life now brings a death without resurrection life.

3. *Mark 9:43–48*. Here Jesus offers three contrasts, the first two between life and hell, and the third between the kingdom of God and hell. Entering

³³ M. D. Hooker describes "Mark's persistent message" as "the path of discipleship involves suffering, and that it is those who follow this way faithfully who will be vindicated" (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark* [BNTC; London: Black, 1991] 301).

³⁴ "Come after' and 'follow' make this passage a general invitation to discipleship for everyone—not just Jesus' audience in the narrative but Mark's audiences then and now as well. The invitation, however, stresses not the blessings of God's realm, but the cost—'pick up your electric chair.'" J. Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Searching the Scriptures* (ed. E. S. Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994) 2.487.

life requires getting rid of the hand or foot or eye that causes one to stumble. Jesus does not say “cause to sin” here, he says “cause to stumble,” *skandalizō*, as in “you will all stumble [i.e. ‘desert me’],” *skandalizō* (14:27). Because of 8:31–38 just noted, lose your life to gain it, our reader will take the cause of stumbling to be whatever causes one to desert Jesus.³⁵ That is, these warnings against stumbling reiterate the folly of gaining the world but forfeiting life, and the wisdom of facing death to gain eternal life. The rich man story in Mark 10 confirms this, as his wealth caused his stumbling. His having wealth was not itself sinful, but nonetheless kept him from eternal life and the kingdom.

4. *Mark 10:13–31*. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:15). Our reader may not know how little children exemplify kingdom entry, but the following story of the rich man at least helps. It shows that in the matter of entering the kingdom, the upright and wealthy are at a considerable disadvantage compared to children who have no status.

The story of the rich man’s rejection will affect our second reader for the same reasons as Matthew’s account affected our first reader. The rich man asked the reader’s question, he was a real example, and he left without eternal life. With the children’s blessing before and comments after on how hard it is for the rich to enter and “we have left all,” this is Mark’s longest teaching on receiving eternal life.³⁶

Because of this context, the story of the blind beggar Bartimaeus immediately following may also become a discipleship and salvation story for our reader (10:46–52). Unlike the rich man but like the disciples, the beggar left his cloak, acknowledged Jesus as son of David, came to Jesus for sight, and followed him into that place where our reader just learned that Jesus will die (10:33).

5. *Mark 13:9–13*. In Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse he depicts coming persecution for his followers in words prophetic of his own approaching ordeal, in which he himself will be handed over to councils, stand before governors and kings, give testimony to them, be brought to trial and handed over, and

³⁵ Anderson rightly says that Mark 9:43–48 refers not to moral theology but the cost of discipleship (H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* [NCB; Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1976] 238). Similarly, Lane ties these verses directly to 8:34–38 (W. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 347); and Taylor and Cranfield note the value of these verses for the persecuted Roman church (V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* [London: Macmillan, 1959] 411; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 314). Gundry and Mann believe these verses refer to moral matters, although they do not interact with the former view (C. S. Mann, *Mark* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1986] 382; R. H. Gundry, *Mark* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 524–25).

³⁶ J. Crossley stresses the soteriological implications of this story (“The Damned Rich [Mark 10:17–31],” *ExpTim* 116 [2005] 397–401. For its social implications, see J. Hellerman, “Wealth and Sacrifice in Early Christianity: Revisiting Mark’s Presentation of Jesus’ Encounter with the Rich Young Ruler,” *TrinJ* NS 21 (2000) 143–64.

be betrayed by family members. "You will be hated by all because of my name," Jesus concludes, "but the one who endures to the end will be saved" (13:13).

Enduring to the end likely means death, so this last Markan salvation saying echoes the first, "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:35). As 8:34–38, 13:9–13 indirectly calls followers to speak of Jesus and his gospel, for "the gospel must first be preached to all nations" occurs in the middle of this (13:10). In 13:26–27, Jesus describes the Son of Man coming in glory with angels, gathering the elect. At the Son of Man's glorious return he will either gather the elect (13:27) or be ashamed of others (8:38), depending on whether or not people lost their lives for his sake and endured to the end.

Mark directly answers our reader's question only in the third quarter of the Second Gospel, and Mark 14–16 adds little. The death of Jesus will probably not convey to our reader atonement for sin, and even if it did, Mark does not connect eternal life to any response to toward Jesus' death.³⁷ In Jesus' passion he leads the way in the martyrdom he calls his followers to imitate, and his resurrection typifies the life his followers will gain.³⁸ In Mark, selling all to buy the field means readiness to walk away from bodily life itself, and only this saving obedience brings eternal life.

6. *Grace through failing disciples.* The strongest consolation for our reader, struggling to grasp and enact the high level of commitment Jesus required, will arise from Jesus' response to the failure of the disciples. They failed to understand (4:13, 40–41; 5:31; 7:18; 8:32; 9:6, 32, 38–39; 10:13–14). They received Jesus' strong rebuke in 8:14–21, where he openly suspects them of hard hearts, unperceiving eyes, and stopped ears. They lacked faith (4:40; 9:19). They responded to Jesus' second and third death predictions with remarkable insensitivity: by competing with each other for glory and spiritual honours. Jesus' steady loyalty to his disciples in return will encourage our reader. In Mark 14, the disciples failed completely in the very self-denying obedience that Jesus made essential for eternal life in 8:34–38 and 13:9–13, for in Mark 14 Peter denied Jesus, and the rest abandoned

³⁷ For the view that Jesus' death in Mark is atoning, see E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) xlv–lxxiv; D. J. Harrington, "What and Why Did Jesus Suffer According to Mark?" *Chicago Studies* 34 (1995) 32–41; A. Y. Collins, "The Significance of Mark 10:45 among Gentile Christians," *HTR* 90 (1997) 371–82; *idem*, "Finding Meaning in the Death of Jesus," *JR* 78 (1998) 175–96. For the view that it was not atoning, see S. Dowd and E. S. Malbon, "The Significance of Jesus' Death in Mark: Narrative Context and Authorial Audience," *JBL* 125 (2006) 271–97; Hooker, *Mark* 248–51. D. E. Nineham does not believe "ransom" in 10:45 should be pressed to affirm atonement. He rightly observes that "blood of the covenant" in 14:24 alludes to Jer 31:34 as well as Exod 24:8, and that the Jeremiah passage includes forgiveness, but we do not necessarily have atonement (*Saint Mark* [London: SCM, 1977] 285, 385–86).

³⁸ J. R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ?* (SBLDS 10; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1973) 210–24; Dowd and Malbon, "Significance." Holding the opposite view, Best says, "most of the instruction Jesus gives on discipleship is largely unrelated to martyrdom" (*Temptation* xlvi).

Jesus, all in order to save their own lives. Yet throughout this increasing failure by the disciples, Jesus remained faithful to them. He was often kind, and sometimes stern and frustrated, but always committed to them without hesitation (14:28; 16:7).³⁹

7. *Summary.* The early chapters of Mark introduce sin as a barrier, but Jesus can forgive sins, and the text assumes those who follow Jesus are forgiven. Our reader found four passages describing how one receives eternal life. The first and fourth teachings hung eternal life on faithfulness in persecution, even in the face of death. The second teaching did not specify what would cause stumbling and judgment, but declared that choosing loss of limbs to enter life was better than the unquenchable fire. The third text concerned children who enter the kingdom, the rich man who did not, the disciples who did, and a man with new sight who followed Jesus to the death place. These passages require a saving obedience so radical that people would not consider it for anything less than eternal life itself.⁴⁰ Jesus loyally guided and taught followers who could not yet manage the ultimate commitment he required. On the other hand, although he patiently led those slow to follow, he did not soften his teaching.

IV. SALVATION IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

1. *Luke 1-5.*⁴¹ Our third reader seeks in the Third Gospel the way to the eternal life Jesus offered, having as our other readers no further information. Luke 1-2 thoroughly intertwines the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, so this reader quickly expects the Baptist to play a significant role in the coming story. Gabriel said that John would lead disobedient people back to the Lord (1:17), and Zechariah prophesied over newly born John that he

³⁹ For effective development of human failure in the Second Gospel, see R. C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977) 386-405; F. J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2004) 191-97; and P. Danove, "The Narrative Rhetoric of Mark's Ambiguous Characterization of the Disciples," *JSNT* 70 (1998) 21-38.

⁴⁰ For depictions of salvation and discipleship that coincide with this conclusion, see D. Rhoads, "Losing Life for Others In the Face of Death: Mark's Standards of Judgment," *Int* 47 (1993) 358-69; R. D. Witherup, "Conversion in Mark's Gospel," *Bible Today* 31 (1993) 166-70; B. J. Colijn, "Salvation as Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark," *Ashland Theological Journal* 30 (1998) 11-22.

⁴¹ This paper takes the view that Acts is not a continuation of the Third Gospel, which would then be incomplete if read alone. Acts is rather a sequel to the Third Gospel, which is therefore complete and freestanding. J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC; Word: Dallas, 1989) xxxiii-xxxiv; and M. Parsons and R. I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 126. For the former view, see R. H. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 1.15-44; and J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 6-10. The end of this opening section regarding salvation is somewhat arbitrarily placed. By the end of Luke 5 the narrative has put forward enough soteriological statements to create a particular impression. A. M. Okorie ("The implied reader of Luke's gospel [sic]," *Religion & Theology* 4 [1997] 220-28) also examines clues in the narrative to depict the intended audience, and concludes with a reader who primarily needs to be taught more about Jesus (p. 228).

will "give knowledge of salvation to his people, by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77). Luke 1:50–87 mentions "mercy" five times, so our reader knows by the end of Luke 1 that the way of salvation involves John the Baptist and the forgiveness of sins flowing from God's merciful acts.⁴² Two oracles concerning Jesus in Luke 2 make clear that salvation comes not through John, but Jesus. The angels tell the shepherds, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior" (2:11), and Simeon says of the infant Jesus, "my eyes have seen your salvation" (2:30). Still, what is one saved from, and how does one receive this merciful salvation?

One could hardly overstate the jolt our reader experiences in Luke 3 after the flood of joyful praise at God's salvation throughout Luke 1–2. In Matthew, John the Baptist's first direct speech is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2), and in Mark, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming" (Mark 1:7). But Luke's John opens with "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7; and this to all who come for baptism, not just leaders, as in Matthew). John the Baptist continues: "bear fruits worthy of repentance," because the axe is already at the root of the tree, and trees without good fruit will be thrown into the fire (3:8–9). In dismay, the people ask how to be saved from this coming judgment, and John teaches the fruit of repentance to crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers. In each case, the Baptist required generosity and honesty regarding money and possessions.⁴³ Our reader begins to have an answer. God's wrath is coming, and to repent and be baptized will bring a merciful salvation, as long as it includes repentance fruit, particularly economic kindness and integrity. No fruit, no escape. John ends by offering a further judgment picture, in which the powerful Coming One will gather his wheat, and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (3:17).⁴⁴

The section concludes, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." John's preaching frightened people, so this "good news" in 3:18 surprises us (and our reader), causing us to step back and ask what about it might be good. The good news is that God has mercifully provided a Savior and a way to escape the fiery judgment, and this way is open to all people, especially to undesirables like tax collectors and soldiers.

⁴² "Save" (*sōzō*) in the Third Gospel refers twelve times to healing or some other temporal restoration (6:9; 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 9:24a; 17:19; 18:42; and the four insults aimed at Jesus on the cross in 23:35–39), and five times to forgiveness or some other eschatological restoration (7:50; 8:12; 9:24b; 13:23; 18:26). "Saved by faith" brings temporal restoration four times in Luke (8:48, 50; 17:19; 18:42), and eschatological restoration twice (7:50; 8:12). For the meaning of "save" and "Savior" in Luke, see B. Witherington ("Salvation and Health in Christian Antiquity: The Soteriology of Luke-Acts in its First Century Setting," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* [ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 145–66).

⁴³ "According to Luke, the evidence of true repentance is chiefly seen in the ethics of contentment and generosity," says C. A. Evans, generalizing from Luke 3:10–14 (*Luke* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990] 49). See also J. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* 149–50.

⁴⁴ Luke uses the foundation laid in John the Baptist's ministry: "repent" and "repentance" occur 14 times in the Third Gospel, compared to Matthew's seven and Mark's three. "Repent" and "repentance" are Luke's standard ways of describing conversion, and our reader will assume that these terms refer at least generally to what John the Baptist preached.

Luke 4 presents Jesus the Savior, but does not explain how to find his release and recovery. In Luke 5, however, our reader learns about Jesus and sinners. Simon the fisherman kneels before Jesus and confesses that he is a sinner (5:8), and then Simon and Zebedee's sons bring their boats to shore, leave everything, and follow Jesus. After John the Baptist's emphasis on dispersing possessions, our reader will take note of what they leave behind.

Luke 5:17–26 records Jesus healing the paralytic with creative friends. As in the other Gospels, the story shows Jesus' authority to forgive sins.⁴⁵ Immediately after this Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow, and Levi "got up, left everything, and followed him" (5:28). At the celebration banquet that follows, the Pharisees and scribes complain that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus ends his kind response with "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:32).⁴⁶ Our reader now knows that Jesus calls sinners and has authority to forgive sins. The examples thus far are first Simon, James, and John, and then Levi. Each of these left all to follow Jesus, and this will resonate with our reader, who, with the Baptist's words still freshly in mind, quickly connects repentance with radically adjusting one's relationship to possessions, which people abandon when they come to Jesus. Once sinners leave all for Jesus, the text assumes they have repented and been forgiven by Jesus the forgiver.

2. Luke 6–17.

a. *Obedience and eternal life.* Several themes emerge in these central chapters, none conflicting with what our reader has already seen. Jesus often holds up obedience as the condition of receiving life. In the Sermon on the Plain (6:20–49), Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High. . . . Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you" (6:35–38; cf. 11:4). Later in that sermon, Jesus says, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" Jesus illustrates this with the two foundations (6:46–49; Matthew's wise and foolish builders), which ends the Sermon on the Plain as Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (11:28). Someone asked Jesus if only a few would be saved (13:23), and Jesus responded by warning people to strive to enter through the narrow door, because many would claim to know him, but he would say, "go away from me, all you evildoers."

The parable of the Good Samaritan answers a lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life (10:25). In response, Jesus asked the lawyer to in-

⁴⁵ For a discussion of "forgiven" in this story see D. Bock, "The Son of Man in Luke 5:24," *BBR* 1 (1991) 121 n. 37.

⁴⁶ Matthew 9:13 and Mark 2:17 have the same line, but only Luke has the last two words, "to repentance," reminding readers of John the Baptist's unforgettable warning in Luke 3.

terpret the Law on this matter, and the lawyer answered with the two great love commands. Jesus approved: "Do this, and you will live." If the lawyer had not pressed for a definition of "neighbor," the conversation would have been over. In the parable that followed a Samaritan, a heretic, provides Jesus' illustration of neighborly love that obeys the Law and brings eternal life.

b. *Forgiveness and salvation from faith.* Two passages early in Luke 6–17 present faith as the requirement for eschatological salvation. In 7:36–50, Jesus forgives a sinful woman while dining in the home of Simon a Pharisee. He tells Simon the story of a creditor who forgives two different debtors, and at the end of the account Jesus says to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven"; and "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." There are some ambiguities in this account that make it less than certain at what point exactly she is forgiven, but "your faith has saved you" remains as Jesus' summary.⁴⁷

In the next chapter, when Jesus explained the parable of the sower, the result of improperly hearing the word was that "they may not believe and be saved" (8:12). But properly hearing the word results in those who "hold it fast" and "bear fruit with patient endurance" (8:15). So, to describe the results of right hearing, Jesus interchangeably used faith and salvation on the one hand, and persistent endurance and fruit, on the other. Thus the Third Gospel introduces salvation by faith, but not in a way that would lead our reader away from a saving obedience.

c. *Costly discipleship.* Immediately following Jesus' first death prediction (9:21–22) he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." He follows this with his contrast between trying to save life and thus losing it, or losing life for his sake and thus saving it (9:23–26). In 12:4–9, Jesus warned the disciples not to fear those who could only kill the body, but to fear him who can kill the body and then cast them into hell. In 14:25–27, Jesus explains the basis on which people will be excluded from discipleship: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate [all family members] and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." He adds "carry the cross and follow me" as a further excluding condition. Jesus does not speak of eternal life in these verses, but he is the Savior (2:11), bringing salvation (3:31), gathering the wheat and burning the chaff (3:17), so failing to be a follower would also result in forfeiting salvation.⁴⁸ Luke 17:33 repeats the notion of saving life to lose it versus losing

⁴⁷ The account of the forgiving creditor does not answer what the debtors did to be forgiven. Further, it is not entirely clear at what stage the woman was forgiven, and how to take *hoti* (because, for) in 7:47. Nevertheless, the story does affirm that Jesus forgives sinners. For a discussion of ambiguities, see C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 364. For helpful resolutions that do not ignore the difficulties see F. Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2002) 297; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) 140; L. Ramarosan, "Le premier, c'est l'amour" (Lc 7, 47a)," *Science et Esprit* 39 (1987) 319–29.

⁴⁸ The rich ruler account in Luke 18 will confirm this.

life to save it.⁴⁹ Our reader learns that leaving all to follow Jesus, as the first three disciples and Levi did, can mean considerably more than just leaving possessions. Following Jesus requires surpassing loyalty than that to family and to life itself, and Jesus' words make these conditions essential for receiving eternal life.

d. *Possessions and eternal life.* Luke 6–17 continues to link correct use of wealth with salvation.⁵⁰ In Luke 12:16–21, Jesus describes a rich man whose biggest concern was enough barns to store his wealth, but who died without being rich in God's sight. For this God called him a fool. In 14:33, the last of Jesus' discipleship conditions requires one to "give up all your possessions." In 16:1–9, Jesus tells the parable of the unjust steward, a worried man who used wealth not his own to make friends who would take care of him in the future. Jesus tells this parable to encourage using money to make friends who "may welcome you into the eternal homes," the "friends" probably a circumlocution for God himself (16:9).⁵¹ In 16:19–31, the rich man and Lazarus end up in opposite eternal states, and so invite our asking how each brought this about. Lazarus was very poor and suffered, and in this story that alone brought him to Abraham's bosom (16:20–22). The rich man, on the other hand, ate sumptuously every day and did not even grant the crumbs to Lazarus at his gate. Luke has reported enough about economic unselfishness thus far for our third reader to understand why the rich man ended in torment.⁵²

To modern readers, "saved through faith" may contradict "saved through obedience." That would not occur to our seeker from reading Luke, though, for Luke 6–17 puts considerable emphasis on saving obedience, particularly costly discipleship and openness with possessions, yet two passages proclaim being saved by faith. The Third Gospel sees no need to reconcile these teachings. This may be because relinquishing possessions and life itself requires a great deal of faith.

⁴⁹ Luke 21:19 continues this theme, for there Jesus ends a section on persecutions with, "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

⁵⁰ Worth mentioning here is 11:41: "So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you." Commentators generally take "within" to mean "within the cup and the dish." So if the Pharisees will be generous with what is in their cups and bowls, their inside and their outside both will be clean with that one stroke. See A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1922) 311; I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 495; J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 945. Jesus does not spell out the relationship between alms and cleansing, but he does imply a close connection. See also J. R. Michaels, "Almsgiving and the Kingdom Within: Tertullian on Luke 17:21," *CBQ* 60 (1998) 475–78. I do not think Michaels reads Plummer correctly.

⁵¹ "Friends with eternal homes" may baffle our ancient reader, as it confuses modern readers. But in view of John the Baptist's preaching, and the rich fool who was not rich toward God, and Jesus' words on treasure in heaven (12:33–34), our reader would conclude this at least to be a call to material generosity.

⁵² D. Bock argues this effectively in "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Ethics of Jesus," *SWJT* 40 (1997) 663–72.

3. *Luke 18–24.* The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple (18:9–14) indicates that one's self-humbling before people and before God count equally. Jesus directed the story to those who believed themselves righteous and despised others. In the parable, two men went to pray, but the Pharisee stood apart (from the tax collector?) while praying. He opened with "God, I thank you that I am not like other people."⁵³ In concluding, Jesus contrasts those who exalt themselves with those who humble themselves, and in context this refers equally to one's attitude to God and to people. Our third reader would find in the Pharisee a clear warning about a posture toward others that ruled out justification.⁵⁴

Immediately following is a sequence of stories familiar from the other Gospels. Jesus blesses the infants with, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (18:17), and then Luke recounts the story of the very rich ruler who demonstrates how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God (18:24–25).⁵⁵ This story may have even more weight in Luke than in Matthew or Mark, since John the Baptist and subsequent teaching and incidents have drawn attention specifically to use of possessions as a crucial response to the gospel.

Jesus encounters Zacchaeus shortly after this (19:1). When some grumbled about Jesus eating with a "sinner," Zacchaeus "said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'" (19:8–10). Zacchaeus's repentance fruit drew Jesus' announcement of his salvation as certainly as the sinning woman's faith brought Jesus' announcement of hers (Luke 7).

The stories of the rich ruler and Zacchaeus intentionally contrast with each other. They occur close to each other in the narrative, and at the end of the Lukan Jesus' public ministry, for Jesus does not deal with another non-disciple after Zacchaeus.⁵⁶ They are both real people; both are rulers, and as a pair they illustrate negative and positive salvation choices, and both recall the economic openness of John the Baptist's fruitful repentance. The respected upright ruler did not inherit eternal life, but the despised ruler of tax collectors did. The narrative softens this concluding emphasis on possessions by including between these two stories Jesus' prediction that they are going to Jerusalem and he will be killed there and rise (18:31–34), and the

⁵³ The words convey more force than the NRSV indicates: he does not regard "others" with contempt (NRSV), he regards "the rest," *tous loipous*, with contempt; he does not thank God that he is better than "other men" (NRSV), but rather than "the rest of men," *hoi loipoi tōn anthrōpōn*.

⁵⁴ J. J. Kilgallen, "The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9–14): The Point?," *ExpTim* 114 (2003) 157–59.

⁵⁵ See S. Fowl's study on 18:15–19:10: "Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Child: Children and Riches in Luke 18:15ff.," *NTS* 39 (1993) 153–58.

⁵⁶ That is, except for the thief on the cross.

once-blind man following Jesus into that lethal Jerusalem (18:35–43). Nevertheless, our reader will view Zacchaeus as the rich ruler's foil, will connect these two stories with what John's repentance preaching began, and will observe again the strong correlation between receiving salvation and serving God rather than wealth.

Two final passages bear directly on our reader's question.⁵⁷ First, the thief on the cross cannot offer fruitful repentance in the normal Lukan sense (23:42–43). He is obliged to ask for mercy with only confession, without offering a changed life, and he received paradise. The thief receives salvation simply by asking.

Second, Jesus' last words in the Third Gospel instruct that, beginning in Jerusalem, "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" should be proclaimed to all nations (24:47). Here, after his resurrection, Jesus describes what the disciples will preach to all the nations once the Spirit comes on them, and he deliberately echoes John the Baptist's proclamation. "Repentance for the forgiveness of sins" summarized John's message in 3:3, and has not been used since. By putting the future gospel in these words, Jesus affirms the blistering repentance message on which the Baptist's ministry centered and declares it to be the gospel for the world.⁵⁸

4. *Summary.* The Third Gospel usually speaks of receiving eternal life in terms of some active obedience. This includes being merciful, being more loyal to Jesus than any other in the face of opposition, even to losing one's life, and living obediently to Jesus. Loyalty to Jesus over possessions receives special association with salvation by John's focus on this at the start, and by the accounts of the rich ruler and Zaachaeus at the end of Jesus' public ministry. Mingled with all these are a few stories, exemplified most clearly by the thief on the cross, in which people receive eternal life simply by asking contritely. Our reader would probably not assume tension between these stories and the others, for Luke the narrator does not show awkwardness about this variety, or attempt to reconcile them to each other. Our reader would assume that those who ask for mercy would also change their lives. The sinning woman, who loved and was forgiven, also ceased her sinning; and the tax collector in the parable accompanied his prayer for mercy with

⁵⁷ For three studies on Luke's apparent silence regarding atonement, see D. Raven, "St Luke and Atonement," *ExpTim* 97 (1986) 291–94; I. J. Du Plessis, "The Saving Significance of Jesus and His Death on the Cross in Luke's Gospel—Focussing on Luke 22:19b–20," *Neot* 28 (1994) 523–40; and R. H. Anderson, "The Cross and Atonement from Luke to Hebrews," *EvQ* 71 (1999) 127–49.

⁵⁸ In Luke 3:7–14, the only thing John the Baptist offers that will save people from the wrath to come is to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." See also Acts 26:20, where Paul calls for deeds "worthy of repentance." L. T. Johnson takes that final participial clause in Acts 26:20 instrumentally, i.e. "repent and turn to God by doing deeds worthy of repentance" (translation mine). There are other ways to take the clause, but Johnson's view follows the sense of Luke 3:8, which is the only other "worthy of repentance" in Lukan writing. This, in turn, strengthens the conclusion that Jesus' instruction in Luke 24:47 did refer to John the Baptist in Luke 3, and that it was obeyed after Pentecost (Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* [SacPag; Colleagueville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992] 431).

corrected ways, as Luke’s other tax collectors. Conversely, the reformed lives of John’s audience, Zaachaeus, and other wise builders throughout are only their way of requesting mercy and forgiveness.⁵⁹

V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

1. *Summary: saving obedience.* The Synoptics normally teach that one receives eternal life, or eschatological salvation, or that one enters the kingdom of God, by some kind of active obedience. Were our three readers to meet each other and discuss their findings, they would have slightly varying views of how one received the life God offered through Jesus. But they would all agree that salvation came by profound loyalty to Jesus as expressed in concrete saving obedience. Matthew’s story of the treasure in the field thus effectively summarizes the general tone of all three Synoptics. God’s generosity puts the treasure in the field where the wanderer will find it, and God grants him to recognize its value. So the man joyfully sells all he has to buy the field, not the treasure, and in this way acquires the treasure. The gospel of the Synoptics is that the kingdom has come, and that salvation and eternal life are available through Jesus. One normally leaves behind a great deal, not in response to receiving the treasure but in order to receive the treasure. But what one leaves does not compare to what one receives. It is the bargain of eternity. Saving obedience is the normal Synoptic way to receive eternal life. Let us begin to apply this Synoptic gospel to how we describe receiving salvation and eternal life.

2. *Saved by grace not by works.* These words unnecessarily mix the first question with the third. “Saved by grace” answers the first question, which asks on which basis a holy and just God offers sinners salvation. The answer is his own kindness through Christ. “By works,” on the other hand, addresses the third question, which asks how we take hold of God’s gracious offer. These are separate matters. In the Synoptics, people are consistently saved both by grace and by works. God graciously offers the kingdom and eternal life, and people take hold by their works, by active obedience, by selling all to buy the field.

3. *Saved by faith not by works.* These words more clearly address our third question, the means by which we take God’s gift. The Synoptics support salvation by active obedience, understanding that this active obedience

⁵⁹ For similar summaries of salvation in Luke, see J. T. Carrol, “The God of Israel and the Salvation of the Nations: The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Forgotten God* (ed. A. A. Das and F. J. Matera; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 103–4; *idem*, “Welcoming Grace, Costly Commitment: An Approach to the Gospel of Luke,” *Int* 57 (2003) 16–23; F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian* (2d ed.; Waco, TX: Baylor, 2006) 302–28. R. Martin discusses salvation and discipleship and apparently views the latter as merely a consequence of the former, although he does not spell that out (“Salvation and Discipleship in Luke’s Gospel,” *Int* 30 [1976] 366–80). Cf. Marshall, *Historian*, in n. 7 above.

neither earns nor merits the gracious gift, but is the God-enabled way by which one receives the gift. In the Synoptics, Jesus actively combated a system of righteousness that he opposed. But contrasting faith and works was not his way to correct Pharisaic righteousness. He corrected their righteousness by calling for a different active obedience, centered on utter loyalty to himself.

It certainly took a great deal of faith for the first four fishermen to leave everything and follow Jesus. The Synoptics do not support separating faith from works. But if one separates them, the Synoptics, as James, will come down on the side of works, of active saving obedience. "Saved by faith not by works" does not represent the Synoptic Gospels, and so does not summarize the NT soteriology.⁶⁰ As noted earlier, rather than separating faith and works one should separate grace and merit, for the Synoptics affirm grace not merit, and gift not payment.

I have been speaking of "works" as if it were a uniform NT category, with a correspondingly uniform relationship to faith, but that is not accurate. If we take "works" to mean "acts of obedience" or "a life of obedience," we find that the NT distinguishes between different works, depending on whom one obeys, Christ or Moses' Law. These two different obediences, to Christ or to the Law, have contrasting relationships to faith. Works of obedience to the Law of Moses cannot justify, and where the NT compares Christ to the Law, we read that one is saved by faith in Christ not by the works of the Law (Acts 15; Romans 3; Galatians 3; Philippians 3; and Ephesians 2). But the NT urges works of obedience to the call of Christ (which is his messianic reinterpretation of the Law and the will of the Father). The NT never

⁶⁰ Some evangelical writers correctly expand our definition of faith. B. Demarest says, "Obedience to God, therefore, is virtually a synonym for saving faith" (*The Cross and Salvation* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1997] 268). He cites with approval P. Cedar, who "contended [from the book of James] that an appropriate Biblical definition for faith is 'active obedience'" (*James; 1, 2 Peter; and Jude; The Communicator's Commentary* [Waco, TX: Word, 1984] 148). J. MacArthur speaks similarly in *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), where he argues that a person must receive Jesus as both Savior and Lord in order to be saved (p. 221). But although these enlarge faith, they will not speak of salvation without speaking of faith, of salvation simply by a saving active obedience. This, however, was our Lord's normal expression. A few comments on the apostle Paul: I assume that Paul and the Synoptic Gospels fundamentally agree how one receives eternal life. I tentatively suggest the following. Paul speaks of righteousness by faith only in active conversation with Jews and Judaism: in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians 3. Because of this, Paul's "faith not works" may not mean "faith not obedience," but rather abbreviates "faith in Christ not works of the Law" (Gal 3:1-5). I suspect that although the Law of Moses was never intended to answer more than our third question (the means by which one receives the gracious gift), for some of the Jews that Paul dealt with, the Law had become part of their answer to the first question. That is, they believed the Law itself dispensed righteousness and salvation to its adherents. In such conversations Paul affirms that Christ is the Savior, not the Law: faith in Christ (which includes selling all), not works of the Law. John's Gospel also makes much of faith, but John consistently holds up faith against rejection, not faith against works. There is no reason to think John's belief signifies a much different response than the Synoptics invite, and John 14-16 make some strong statements about the need for obedience. John 3 speaks of rebirth, and I would assume that Peter and Andrew were reborn when they first dropped their nets and stepped out of their boats, and Levi when he got up from his table to follow Jesus.

separates trusting Christ from obeying Christ, never opposes faith to these obedient works; it never says or suggests that one is saved by believing in Christ rather than by obeying him. Instead, as we have seen, the Synoptics normally attach eternal life to obeying Jesus, and occasionally to trusting him. Accordingly, we may not speak of the relationship between faith and “works” of obedience until we specify whom one obeys.⁶¹

Once this gospel of the Synoptics, a gracious salvation by active obedience, has found a place within evangelical soteriology, we will find ourselves able to reevaluate some other important faith perspectives.

4. *Evaluating other faith traditions.* Let us view two ancient and two modern believing traditions through the eyes of the Synoptic gospel.

a. *The Old Testament.* Through Moses God offered life by obedience. “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live” (Lev 18:5; cf. Deut 30:15–16, 19). Jesus taught a similar way to life, as we have seen throughout this study. Some view these lines from Leviticus and Deuteronomy as making an offer of life that no one could achieve. But a great deal of Moses’ Law showed how to get forgiveness, making clear that Moses’ Law required a wide faithfulness, but nothing near perfection. Within the former Prophets, Joshua intentionally illustrates Israel’s life during a time of general faithfulness. Many of those listening to Moses and Joshua in those days and afterward did remain in the covenant. They faithfully pursued God’s requirements for life, and on that basis they will share eternity with followers of Jesus. In Moses, as in the Synoptics, saving obedience never answered more than the third question, which asks how one takes hold of the gracious gift.

b. *The Apostolic Fathers.* The Synoptic Gospels provide a more useful measuring stick for the Apostolic Fathers than some have used. In 1947, Torrance evaluated the Apostolic Fathers and carefully demonstrated their inability to grasp the true gospel of grace. Instead of grace, he concludes, “What took absolute precedence was God’s call to a new life in obedience to revealed truth.”⁶² This condemnation also summarizes the Synoptics. In

⁶¹ The NT observes a third order of works, those required neither by Moses’ Law nor by Christ, but by human tradition and invention. It critiques these works in the defilement teaching of Mark 7// Matthew 15, “why do you submit” in Colossians 2, deceiving spirits and teachings of demons in 1 Timothy 4, and “all things are pure to the pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving” in Titus 1. Paul denounces this third kind of works, but not with “saved by faith not by works.”

⁶² T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) 133. View the following comments of Torrance through the teaching of the Synoptic gospel: “That Ignatius, in many ways the most ‘Pauline’ of all the Apostolic Fathers, should have . . . failed to see that the death of Christ as an act of salvation can be appropriated by faith alone, is very significant indeed” (p. 138); and in clarifying what went wrong with the Apostolic Fathers as a whole he says: “It was the teaching of Christ, the new Way of life, that was their chief concern. What occupied the foreground of their thought was how they were going to walk in the way of this life, and confirm to its high standards” (p. 139).

1999, another scholar wrote, “Certainly compared to the gospel of grace, [the Apostolic Fathers’] messages seem severely moralistic, focusing on conduct rather than mercy and on salvation as a struggle rather than a gift.”⁶³ Again, this accusation summarizes much Synoptic teaching. The Apostolic Fathers admittedly wrote things not supported by any Scripture. But if the Apostolic Fathers were measured by the gospel of the Synoptics, the criticisms of Torrance and others would fall away. Furthermore, if the same “true gospel” criterion of these writers was applied to the Synoptics, these Gospels themselves would fare little better.

c. *Social gospel churches.* There are liberal social gospel churches that embrace the gospel of the Synoptics. They take Matt 25:31–46 (judgment of sheep and goats) and similar passages as their path to salvation and eternal life. From a biblical theology perspective, there is no reason they should not. These churches no doubt have excesses and errors, as do all, but inasmuch they reflect the Synoptic Gospels, they truly follow Christ and inherit eternal life.

d. *Legalistic churches.* Still other contemporary churches present a pressure to external conformity that rivals the Synoptic scribes and Pharisees. The Synoptic Gospels thoroughly disapprove of such religion, but not because it is for all intents and purposes a salvation by works. The righteousness of such groups has normally deteriorated into defilements that do not defile, and their defining call differs greatly from “do to others as you would have them do to you.” The Synoptic Jesus faced a similar setting and authoritatively corrected it, but not with grace alone or faith alone. He corrected such religion by calling people away from boundary markers and away from posturing before people and spiritual respectability. He called for a greater righteousness, a generosity of mind, heart, and action. Not all that Christians do as Christians comes from Jesus, and these will say, “Lord, Lord, did we not . . . ?” Our Lord sharply critiqued such misguided religion and at the same time offered salvation, and did both by calling for his particular saving obedience.

6. *A pastoral concern.* There are loyal followers of Jesus who suffer much anxiety due to their own sinfulness, perceived or real.⁶⁴ These people

⁶³ This writer concludes, “to one degree or another, [the Apostolic Fathers] fell far short of handing on in their traditions the pure gospel of salvation as a gift that is not of works but of grace alone” (R. E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999] 52–53). Henry Chadwick legitimately complains: “[Lightfoot] was content to adopt the sad comment of many protestant commentators upon the Apostolic Fathers, that this language about justification by faith and hospitality illustrates a moralistic failure to comprehend the authentic gospel of *sola fide*. This conventional view has, of course, its equally conventional catholic counterpart” (“Justification by Faith and Hospitality,” *Texte und Untersuchungen* 79 [1961] 281–82). See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Part One: Clement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1989 [1889]) 1.397.

⁶⁴ E. Charry contends that western theology became focused on guilt and shame in the medieval period, and on faith as the means of overcoming fear of God’s wrath and rejection during the

cling to salvation by grace alone and by faith alone as their hope and will be distressed by this paper. In response, first, we must admit that even the gospel of grace alone and faith alone has not solved the problem. People who know this gospel continue to be troubled. Second, Scripture does give assurance of salvation but never apart from conduct.⁶⁵ Third, the Synoptics consistently present life as only two ways, two paths, two trees, or two builders (Matt 7:13–27).⁶⁶ One has made a deep commitment to follow Jesus or one has not. There is no measuring or counting, no gray area, and no third way. Fourth, the failure of the disciples in all four Gospels, even though committed to Jesus, provides a more useful and more biblical comfort to strugglers.

7. *The way out: no more dualism.* I have so far assumed a distinction between faith and active obedience. When the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul said to believe in Christ (Acts 16), but when Judean crowds asked basically the same question, John the Baptist said to share and be content (Luke 3). This difference did not trouble Luke. Contemporary thinking wrongly distinguishes right faith from right actions, our inner selves from our outer selves, "being" from "doing." We must recognize how completely this ancient dualism contradicts Scripture. Jesus declared carefully and emphatically that a good tree, by definition, is one that produces good fruit. James says that faith is no better than its obedience, and a faith without obedience will not save. First John says that when people claim to know God but do not obey God, they are lying. Paul says repeatedly that those who live in sin will not inherit the kingdom of God, and warns in these contexts not to be deceived (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:6). Scripture everywhere assumes, and often teaches, that a person's true self inevitably displays itself in actions. If we live unfaithfully, it is because we have not entrusted ourselves to God's view of things. But if our essential beliefs and loyalties change, our behavior and practices in the world invariably change. If there is no saving obedience, there is no saving faith. Jesus calls for faith by calling for actions that require faith. Biblically speaking, there is very little difference between John the Baptist's answer and Paul's.⁶⁷ Faith versus works comes from an imported dualism. The Synoptic Jesus was content to attach eternal life to an obedience that by its nature required great faith. "Faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes

Protestant Reformation (*By The Renewing of Your Minds* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997] 57, 234–35). She states that Christians slowly became worried about the wrath of God during the Middle Ages, and so the question "does God love me?" became compelling. In the NT, guilt and shame and God's wrath are problems solved at salvation, but in the western church they come alive after salvation. Much contemporary Christian thought and practice aims to relieve believers still writhing under this unbiblical weight.

⁶⁵ 1 John 5:13 promises assurance, but only after a whole letter of testing doctrine and conduct. See also 2 Pet 1:3–11 and "you will know a tree by its fruit" (Matt 12:34–35; 7:16–18/Luke 6:43–45).

⁶⁶ Carson's pages on the end of the Sermon on the Mount are very helpful in this light (*Jesus' Sermon* 129–45, esp. 129–30).

⁶⁷ Helpfully presented in J. B. Green, *Salvation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003) 115–16. This paragraph of my paper, and many others, also represent the insights of my life-long friend, Pastor Ron Shiels.

faith in the act of obedience.”⁶⁸ This inseparability of faith and obedience needs to inform both evangelism and pastoral teaching.⁶⁹

The gospel of the Synoptic Gospels is that God has graciously, out of his own wealth, placed a priceless treasure in a field where we will find it. He has also granted us recognition of its value and the means to buy the field, not the treasure. We nonetheless must leave all behind in order to acquire the treasure.

⁶⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* 56. Bonhoeffer offers a remarkable discussion of faith and obedience (*Cost* 56–60).

⁶⁹ We should hear the end of B. Metzger’s discussion of a canon within the canon: “The canon stands as a perpetual reminder to the several churches of the need to examine critically their own interpretation and proclamation of the apostolic witness, and to listen attentively to the interpretations offered by other believers. In this way the dynamic leaven within the entire New Testament canon will work creatively in and among the Churches. Unity will be achieved, not by an initial agreement on doctrine and practice, but by the willingness to grow together in the common search for a renewed understanding of the several traditions embodied within the entire range of the New Testament canon” (*The Canon of the New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987] 282).