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The Moral Teachings of Jesus

Radical Instruction in the Will of God

DAVID P. GUSHEE



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THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS Radical Instruction in the Will of God

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For my dear Jeanie—
partner in ministry and in life for forty years

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Acknowledgments

MY APPROACH TO INTERPRETING the Bible, especially the teachings of Jesus, was shaped by the late Glen Stassen, who taught me a richly biblical version of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and became my dear mentor, co-author, and friend. I acknowledge his great influence here.

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Of course, in the end, the author always bears full responsibility for the final work.

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Introduction

THE CURRENT MOMENT REVEALS many people, especially young adults, leaving the churches in which they were raised. Some are forming or participating in new churches—for example, in the exciting post-evangelical movement of which I am now a part.¹ Others, however, are leaving church altogether.

So many of those who are leaving are doing so because they have concluded that aspects of their faith tradition are no longer healthy. They feel a theological vacuum at best, and toxicity at worst, that in some cases is driving them right out of church. Their churches no longer seem to have much to do with the Jesus whom they are supposed to be about.

Just go onto social media (if you dare) and watch Christians argue over the most basic issues, including the very meaning of Christianity, the gospel, or the Bible. It is astonishing to see especially toxic posts in which articulations of the teachings of Jesus are derided, by “Christians,” as a form of weakness. This is toxic masculinity and Nietzschean will to power masquerading as Christianity.

But it is not only the dissidents and departers who are (or ought to be) looking for a fresh encounter with the teachings of Jesus. Surely any time is the right time, and any church is the right church, to seek the spiritual and moral renewal that comes from close study of the astonishing, bracing, demanding moral teachings of Jesus.

To bring Christians back to first principles, and to offer resources to all sectors of the church today, in this book I will examine all four New Testament (NT) Gospels to attend closely to what Jesus said about how his followers should live.

1. Check out the Post-Evangelical Collective, which I serve as a theological advisor: Post-Evangelical Collective (postevangelicalcollective.org)

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It has been quite a while since a focused treatment of the moral teachings of Jesus has been attempted in Christian ethics.² Overall, Paul's moral teaching rather than that of Jesus has received more attention both by pastors and scholars in recent decades. It appears that the Social Gospel movement, over one hundred years ago, was the last era in which works centered on Jesus' moral teachings were common.³ How desperately we need a return to a focus on the teachings of Jesus.

I am aiming for a brisk, readable survey for preachers/homilists, Bible teachers in homes, schools, and churches, and regular Christians as well as interested seekers. Each chapter offers the needed exegetical work to address textual and linguistic issues that might affect the interpretation of a passage. Relevant related passages are noted, and biblical commentaries are cited and sometimes quoted for expanded coverage of issues. These chapters stay tightly focused on the moral teachings and implications of the text/s in question. The chapters are not sermons, but they ought to be helpful for anyone responsible for preaching and teaching not just what Jesus' instruction *meant* at the time but what it might now be *taken to mean*.

The Gospels of Matthew (Matt) and Luke offer the greatest moral treasures, simply by sheer volume of content, but I also consider the ethical content of Mark and John. Indeed, Mark is central for reasons I will explain just below. This book does not comment on the whole text of each Gospel but on passages that clearly offer moral instruction, at least in my view. Where there are parallel texts, they are treated together, only commenting on notable differences. The reader is encouraged to read the full version of all passages before tackling my exposition.

Two presuppositions at work in this book, widely shared by biblical scholars, are 1) that Jesus' moral teachings were circulated as sayings for decades before being edited and integrated into the narratives offered by the Gospel writers, and 2) that Mark was the first completed written Gospel. This book tries to focus on the core moral teaching of Jesus, letting the chronology start with the version offered by Mark, with consideration of parallels in the other Gospels. Only after Mark's renderings of Jesus' moral

2. Christian ethics is the academic discipline that describes, analyzes, and proposes moral norms for Christian character and behavior. Biblical scholars have produced studies of the teachings of Jesus, but Christian ethics brings a different lens to bear on this subject.

3. A good example: Walter Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, as well as several of his other works. Rauschenbusch is a model for me in his serious engagement with the teachings of Jesus.

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teachings are exhausted do I move to the texts found not in Mark but only in the other Gospels. Thus, the treatment of texts in this book is in this order: Mark, Matthew, Luke, John. The one exception to this approach is that I have saved three narratives tied to Jesus' last week of life as our last passages to consider. Of course, readers are free to jump in anywhere.

My approach assumes that these core teachings were in fact offered by Jesus—more precisely, these sayings *were circulated by the early church as teachings of Jesus*. I want to try to respect these Jesus sayings as they existed before the Gospel writers edited and positioned them. It is true, of course, that this somewhat de-emphasizes the specific Gospels as literary creations and instead emphasizes the teachings of Jesus as they circulated in the early church, but that is not an unreasonable choice. Still, we will watch for the edits made by each Gospel writer, in part to understand what each made of the teaching of Jesus as a part of their own theological work.

In terms of research sources, besides a handful of Bible commentaries,⁴ I have invited along a diverse group of fellow interpreters for the ride. They include as our Bible text the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (JANT), a unique study Bible edited by Jewish NT scholars,⁵ NT scholar Brian Blount's edited volume in African American biblical studies called *True to Our Native Land*, NT scholar Love Lazarus Secrest's womanist text called *Race and Rhyme*, mid-twentieth-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre's *The Politics of Jesús*, Jewish NT scholar Amy Jill-Levine's *Short Stories of Jesus*, mid-twentieth-century theologian Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the *Women's Bible Commentary*, and the *Kingdom Ethics* textbook that Glen Stassen and I wrote together.⁶ This list reflects certain key commitments: to do serious exegetical work (including attention to the Greek text), to engage seriously the first-century Jewish Jesus, to avoid destructive historic patterns of antisemitic readings

4. Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*; Garland, *NIV Application Commentary: Mark*; Davies and Allison, Jr., *Matthew*; Culpepper, *Matthew*; Gadenz, *Gospel of Luke*; Green, *Gospel of Luke*; Ford, *Gospel of John*; Morris, *Gospel According to John*; Thompson, *John*.

5. JANT uses the NRSV. Recently, the NRSV was very lightly updated to become the NRSVue. This is the English translation I will cite unless otherwise indicated.

6. Levine and Brettler, eds., *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (henceforth abbreviated as JANT); Blount, gen. ed., *True to Our Native Land*; Secrest, *Race and Rhyme*; Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*; De La Torre, *Politics of Jesús*; Levine, *Short Stories of Jesus*; Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*; Lapsley, Newsom, and Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*; Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*.

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of the NT, and to learn from the insights offered by writers hailing from a wide variety of social locations other than my own.

The category “moral teachings” denotes teachings intended to instruct Jesus’ listeners, especially his committed disciples, about God’s moral will for their character and behavior. Yet *Jesus taught through his life, not just his words*. When Jesus fed the hungry, cured the sick, cast out demons, and dined with “sinners,” he was teaching. With just a handful of exceptions, I have not treated such events of Jesus’ ministry as teachings, so as not to lose my intended focus on the often-evaded actual teachings of Jesus.

I considered growing this book to offer sections focused on the moral implications of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but I decided that there is value in a tight focus on the verbal teachings of Jesus themselves. It is easy for Christians to ignore these teachings because we become so transfixed by the central events of Holy Week. This book wants to do something different, without in any way obviating the significance of Jesus’ cross and resurrection.

I settled on a grand total of forty “pericopes”—individual and/or parallel moral teachings of Jesus. There were some judgment calls here, in terms of which teachings were included and excluded from the “moral” category. So that the book could be both thorough and of reasonable length, I aimed for a range of 1,500 to 1,600 words per chapter. This forced me to distill what could be said about each passage to the very essence of what this Christian ethicist, at least, believes is most important. I hope you enjoy this journey into the moral teachings of Jesus, whom we will see throughout these pages offered radical instruction in the will of God.

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PART ONE

Mark

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1

The Kingdom of God

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

—MARK 1:14–15

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

—MATT 13:31–32

Texts: Mark 1:14–15/Matt 4:12–17,¹ cf. Luke 4:14–30, Matt 13:24–50

JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY by announcing that “the kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*) has come near” (Mark 1:15). It was clearly an electrifying message.

1. Passages marked like the above, with a slash, indicate that they are formally parallel texts; “cf.” here means, please compare the connected or related passages then listed.

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Jesus' proclamation resembled and built upon the message of his immediate forerunner, the prophet John the Baptist (Mark 1:2–8). Not over-identifying the two, it is still instructive to see what the contemporaneous John the Baptist does with his proclamation.

John offers a warning of imminent divine wrath (Matt 3:7), a baptismal ministry associated with repentance and preparation for judgment day, and a claim that “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me” to bring this judgment to fruition (Matt 3:11–12). Throngs of people recognized this simultaneously forbidding and attractive desert figure as a prophet of God and were baptized by him. His ministry ended with his arrest (Mark 1:14) and later his wanton execution at the hands of King Herod and his family (Mark 6:14–29 and parallels).

After John's arrest (Mark 1:14), Jesus began his own public ministry by proclaiming the kingdom of God. The Gospel writers never show Jesus explicating a precise formula as to what he meant by this phrase, which has made this crucial concept a matter of scholarly debate, and vulnerable to ignorance and misunderstanding.

There is some content visible in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom as recorded in the NT. We see him returning to the phrase time and again, in parables and sayings. Look especially at Matt 13:24–50.² (Due to its unique significance for ethics, we will isolate Matt 13:24–30, 36–43 in a later chapter.)

The passage opens with the kingdom of God depicted as a *mustard seed* (13:31–32)—it starts with a very small beginning, and ends with a great outcome, in a process that God alone has set in motion. Then there is the kingdom as *a bit of yeast* (13:33), mixed in with three measures of flour (that's a lot), leavening the whole dough, which may also symbolize permeation and massive expansion from a small beginning. Next we find the kingdom as *a treasure hidden in a field* and as a *pearl of great price*, the one thing worth more than anything else (13:44–46).³ Finally, Jesus offers

2. Note that Matt uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God.” Scholars believe that this was probably to avoid uttering the holy name of God—a specifically Jewish emphasis. The meaning of the two phrases should not be differentiated.

3. Levine, *Short Stories of Jesus*, chs. 3–5, offers extensive and creative reflections on these three images for the kingdom and what they might be taken to mean. The pearl story helps us in “challenging our acquisitiveness and our sense of what is truly of value” (164); the stories of the mustard seed and yeast in the dough, may be taken to refer to something small growing naturally to produce great effects that benefit many (181), that each illustrates “potential that needs to be actualized” (182), and that this potential is best actualized if after we get it going we leave it alone and get out of the way (182). Levine

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us the kingdom as like a net full of fish, sorted out into categories of good and bad, representing the final sorting out of the evil and the just at the end of the age (13:47–50). These presentations carry an air of mystery, growth, grandeur, and divine power. They invite listeners to want to be a part of the great thing God is doing.

If we take Luke 4:14–30 as Luke’s expanded version of Jesus’ initial kingdom message, we get even more content. Here Jesus chooses and quotes Isa 61 and claims it for himself. Jesus is the anointed one who brings good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus is the one who announces “the year of the Lord’s favor,” sometimes connected by interpreters to the Jubilee promise from OT law (Lev 25), but just as easily connected to the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ kingdom message “announces an event, the coming of God’s new world,”⁴ which is *good news*, more than John the Baptist’s message seemed to be. Like John, Jesus speaks of wrath, but Jesus also speaks of God’s mercy, of God’s *deliverance*, especially for those mistreated in this age before God’s intervention.

The kingdom of God was a concept derived from the Hebrew Bible’s very basic claim that God is King, not just of Israel but all the earth.⁵ For examples drawn from the Psalms, see Pss 5, 47, 74, 93, 95, 97, 99; for examples from the prophets, see Isa 44:6, Jer 10:10, Ezek 20:33, and Dan 4:34 and 6:26.

The basic idea is that not only is there one true God above all the other gods vainly worshipped in this world, but there is also one true King above all the earthly kings vainly parading their permanence, pomp, and power.⁶ Even Israel’s kings were to be disciplined in their behavior and self-understanding by the idea that God alone is true King—and sometimes they were indeed constrained by this crucial idea. A key part of the prophetic calling was to remind Israel’s kings who was truly King of Israel.

The idea of God’s rightful reign over all the earth was sharpened and made plaintive by the experience of the Jewish people’s suffering at the

also emphasizes that the homey/homely setting for these examples emphasizes that the kingdom happens in “our own backyard” (182), not somewhere grand and far away.

4. Garland, *Mark*, 59.

5. I have offered an exposition of the meaning of the kingdom of God both in *Kingdom Ethics*, with Glen Stassen, and in my more recent *Introducing Christian Ethics*. Gushee/Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, ch. 1; Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, ch. 5.

6. Edwards, *Mark*, 46.

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hands of foreign tyrants. Brokenhearted Israel asserted, while in the direst straits—*the God of Israel is king of all the earth!* Such a proclamation by Jews while in foreign lands, or in their own land under foreign domination—as in first-century CE Roman-occupied Judea—was intrinsically subversive and could be perceived as revolutionary.

The story that is being told underneath all kingdom-of-God proclamation is that this world is in rebellion against God, its rightful king. This rebellion merits God's judgment. But the good news, especially emphasized by Jesus, is that God coming as King means God coming to deliver those crushed by this world's cruel kings and kingdoms. A prophet could emphasize either the judgment dimension of the coming kingdom of God (as John the Baptist did), or the mercy dimension, or both dimensions (as Jesus did).

The kingdom of God is a *theological* teaching in the sense that it reaffirms God's Kingship, God's rightful sovereign rule, over not just Israel, but all the world.

The kingdom is an *eschatological* teaching insofar as the kingdom is an event of the end of time, which is beginning right now. NT scholar David Garland writes: "The future created by God is no longer a flickering hope . . . it has become available in the present."⁷

The kingdom is a *teaching about the character and activity of God in the world*, insofar as Jesus proclaims that a redeemed world looks like salvation, deliverance, justice, peace, healing, and a restored and remade covenant community. As *True to Our Native Land*, an African American NT commentary, puts it: "God's imperial reign is more about a holistic, societal, communal transformation than about individual salvation. . . . This vision . . . requires a restructuring of the sociopolitical standing of those on the margins."⁸

The kingdom is a *moral teaching for followers of Jesus* because our response to, and readiness for, the dawning kingdom is part of what Jesus is intending to teach. "The divine rule blazed abroad by Jesus . . . requires immediate human decision and commitment."⁹ Disciples of Jesus are defined by obediently participating in what God is doing by our acts of deliverance, justice, peace, compassion, healing, and restored community. The concept of the kingdom of God thus gives followers of Jesus their behavioral marching orders.

7. Garland, *Mark*, 60.

8. Emerson Powery, "Gospel of Mark," in Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 122.

9. Garland, *Mark*, 60.

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the kingdom-of-God idea we have powerful motivation for moral actions in this world, and many Christians indeed have been motivated by it to strenuous acts of compassion and justice.

But the concept is vulnerable to various distortions. If pushed entirely into the future, it can fail to serve as present motivation. If robbed of human co-participation with God, it can create passivity before divine sovereignty.¹⁰ If expected too imminently, it can forestall efforts that require a longer time horizon. If identified too closely with this world's policies, occurrences, or regimes, it can create an unhealthy confusion of God's redemptive activity with human events and earthly politics.

It also must be noted that the very idea of a "kingdom" is monarchical and male-centered language that may not help us get beyond undemocratic and patriarchal thinking, which we do need to get beyond. "Kin-dom" is an interesting alternative, emphasizing the inclusive-familial nature of Jesus' understanding of what "kingdom community" should look like.

The kingdom of God was "the substance of Jesus' teaching."¹¹ According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke), it is where Jesus himself started as he launched his ministry. That is why it is where we start this treatment of what can be described as the grand story, the theological vision, and the essential core of the moral teachings of Jesus.

10. Here I dissent from Edwards, *Mark*, 46, when he says, "The kingdom of God is not a result of human effort." I believe Jesus teaches discipleship as co-participation with God in kingdom work.

11. Edwards, *Mark*, 46.

2

Sabbath Observance

Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

—MARK 2:27–28

Texts: Mark 2:23—3:6/Matt 12:1–14/Luke 6:1–11

A CORE FEATURE OF narratives about Jesus is the “controversy story.” Jesus goes about his ministry, saying and doing things that evoke controversy and opposition. Just working with Mark for the moment, in the order in which they appear the primary foils who oppose Jesus are scribes (Mark 2:6), Pharisees (Mark 2:16), Herodians (Mark 3:6), chief priests (Mark 11:18), elders (Mark 11:27), and Sadducees (Mark 12:18). By Mark 8 Jesus is already predicting that the chief priests, elders, and scribes will reject him and take actions leading to his execution (Mark 8:31).

Let’s consider this cast of characters. The Pharisees were deeply devout adherents of Jewish Law, notable for their teaching that all Jews ought to live according to the entirety of Torah, including the requirements prescribed for the priests. They were respected for their piety and knowledge of the Law. Their acceptance of traditions and practices that went beyond

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the written Torah proved controversial at the time, but eventually became the mainstream position, and proved essential in the survival of Judaism under varied, difficult post-biblical circumstances.

The Sadducees were members of the Sanhedrin, a governing body set up to handle Jewish affairs. Other members of the Sanhedrin included the high priests and the elders. These latter two groups were particularly concerned with the place of the temple in the life of the people. All three groups were seen by some frustrated Jewish nationalists as colluding with the Roman occupiers. Another group of power players that make up the common cast of Jesus' opponents were the Herodians. These were mostly wealthy aristocrats who had allied with the Herodian dynasty (client kingdom of the Roman Empire) for the sake of stability and their bottom line.

These various figures were all Jews. They performed different roles in first-century Jewish life and represented conflicting parties and beliefs. Some of them did not survive the Jewish-Roman War of 66–70 CE. But as framed in the Gospel narratives, written a generation or more later, the details don't really matter all that much. They are Jewish leaders of various types, and they most often challenge Jesus.

It must be noted here that this framing of Jesus vs. "various Jewish leaders," so pervasive in the Gospels, helped fuel centuries of Christian contempt toward Jews and Judaism, a destructive interpretive tradition that must be rejected. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, has taken a leading role in challenging antisemitism/anti-Judaism in Christian biblical interpretation. The *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (abbreviated here as JANT), for which she served as a co-editor, is one key example of her immense contribution.¹

An early subject of controversy in Mark's Gospel has to do with the observance of the Jewish Sabbath. In Mark 2:23–28, the trigger is when Jesus' hungry disciples begin to pluck heads of grain to eat while wandering through grainfields on the Sabbath. In the next story, Mark 3:1–6, Jesus heals a man in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Even though he does not touch him, his verbal healing triggers such anger that Pharisees and Herodians already begin conspiring "how to destroy him" (Mark 3:6). These stories are repeated in pretty much identical form in Matt 12:1–14 and Luke 6:1–11.

1. The copious notes and essays in JANT are an important part of its contribution and will be cited periodically here. These notes come from several scholars, while the overall work, as noted above, is edited by Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler.

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PART ONE: MARK

There are several Greek words that the author of Mark could have chosen in Mark 3:6.

- *apokteinō*—This word generally means “to kill outright” or “to put to death” and is often used in reference to execution or murder.
- *thanatō*—This word means “to cause to die” and is often used in a broader sense to refer to death in general.
- *sphazō*—This word means “to slaughter” and is often used in reference to the killing of animals for sacrifice or consumption.
- *anairō*—This word means “to take away” or “to destroy” and is often used in a more figurative sense to refer to the ending of something, such as a person’s life or a plan.
- *kteinō*—This word means “to slay” or “to kill” and is often used in reference to violent death or murder.

However, the word the author chooses is *apollumi*, which is more akin to English phrases like “to utterly destroy” or “to ruin.” It appears to be the most powerful available Greek word. Jesus must be *crushed*. We need to try to understand why his actions evoked such a powerfully negative reaction, at least according to Mark.

Both the issue of Jesus’ disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath to have something to eat (Mark 2:23–28), and the healing of a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1–6), are focused fundamentally on the interpretation of Sabbath prohibitions against work. The blessing of the seventh day as a day of rest and worship is introduced in the Genesis narrative (Gen 2:2–3) and is included in both versions of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8–11, Deut 5:12–15). It is one of Judaism’s most holy and distinctive blessings—and obligations.

Various interpretations of precisely what constitutes violating the command to rest by working on the Sabbath, and whether there can be exceptions, inevitably emerged in Judaism.

The Talmud, the central text of rabbinic Judaism and the authoritative treatment of Jewish religious law, consists primarily of commentaries on the Hebrew Bible that were developed before, during, and for a few centuries after the time of Jesus. Writings in the Talmud, often cited in JANT, can shed light on rabbinic debates on issues also addressed by Jesus.

For example, the Tosefta, a compilation of early rabbinic legal traditions generally dated to the late second century CE, includes a provision

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for setting aside Sabbath prohibitions to save a life (*t.Shabb. 16:12*). So that idea was accepted, or at least, it was argued. But in neither of these cases was Jesus saving a life. He was permitting the work required to get a bit of food for hungry mouths, and then healing a man. However wonderful that healing was for the man in question, could it not have waited a day?

The core statements of principle that Jesus offers in Mark 2:27–28 are “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath,” and “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” And then there is also what he says in the synagogue: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4).

The first statement resonates with a key original rationale for the Sabbath—so that animals and humans would have a day of rest from their unrelenting labors, which in the Hebrew Bible is tied to the primal experience of enslavement under the Egyptians (Deut 5:12–15). Sabbath is a gift from God for rest.

The second statement may mean that Jesus is claiming messianic authority to redefine Sabbath obligation, which would have been shocking to his listeners and inevitably would have aroused their opposition. This is the most common Christian interpretation.²

It is possible, though, that Jesus was simply affirming that human beings are “lords” of the Sabbath in terms of needing the freedom to interpret the day’s blessings and demands in terms of deeper well-being concerns. A key issue has to do with how to interpret the phrase “son of humankind” (*hyios ho anthrōpos*), usually translated by Christians as “Son of Man,” and traditionally tied to a messianic reading of the eschatological scene in Dan 7:13–14.³

But see how different the phrase reads if the caps are taken away and it is read as “son of man,” that is, “child of humans,” which means simply, *human being*. This would point toward a democratized, humanistic, maybe even liberative interpretation: that people need to be in charge of their practice of the Sabbath so that it meets its deepest intended purpose.⁴

There is a problem, though. If Sabbath observance is relativized to the point that people are free to do anything that they believe amounts to doing

2. Edwards, *Mark*, 97; Garland, *Mark*, 106.

3. The position taken by Edwards, *Mark*, 97.

4. “It is not only the Son of Man who had authority over the Sabbath but *all humans also* do . . . African Americans . . . have depended on this freedom of action on the Sabbath.” Powery, “The Gospel of Mark,” in Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 126. Italics in the original. This position is explicitly rejected by Edwards, *Mark*, 97.

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some good for human well-being, then Sabbath obligations and indeed, Sabbath blessings, might well be relativized into nonexistence.⁵ The fundamental purposes of Sabbath—worship of God and rest from labor—might be washed away by other priorities.

Overall, the question of the nature and power of religious-moral commands must be taken seriously. This is especially true in Christian circles that tend more toward antinomianism (law/rule-free religion, in which human intuition and divine grace govern the understanding of morality) than toward legalism (hyper-attention to binding and obligatory religious laws/rules, applied with excessive strictness).

If we focus on the divine *command* rather than the *purpose* for which the command was given, we can end up with the worst result of legalism, which is to do harm to people in the name of obeying God's commands. But if we focus so much on the purpose of a command that we attenuate its binding power, its strength as a command can evaporate, and we can end up with the worst result of antinomianism, which is a lack of clear and binding moral obligations.

Looking around at most Christians today, is it fair to say that Sabbath observance for worship and rest is treated as a binding obligation? Might we acknowledge that the protections from overwork that were offered by the binding Sabbath command in Judaism have been weakened out of existence, both in religion and in economic life, in our antinomian versions of Christianity?

Any observer of the lives of the overworked laborer juggling three jobs knows the answer to this question. While recognizing the profound issues about the relationship between Law and human well-being that Jesus raises here, it certainly seems that today the need is for a stronger rather than weaker commitment to the concept of a Sabbath for people to rest and, if they choose, to turn their hearts to the God who made them.

5. That is the problem with the distressingly familiar antinomianism in an interpretive move like this one, by David Garland: "The priority of human need always outweighs the need for humans to conform to ritual formalities" (Garland, *Mark*, 107).