Chapter Four: The Kingdom Teaching of Matthew and Ethical Implications for Similar Contexts Today

In the previous chapter, I analysed three specific texts: Jesus’ major discourse on the kingdom (Matt 5-7), Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom through parables (13:1-52), and the eschatological warnings (25:1-13, 31-46), flowing consistently and logically in the Gospel of Matthew. As a sequel to the analysis of these distinctive texts, which outline the Two Ways Theme, I will reflect on the ethics of the Evangelist and the way he addresses the crises arising in his community, as detailed in chapter two.¹

To achieve this aim, this chapter will deal with how the Evangelist retells the story of Jesus and focuses the ethics of the kingdom teaching of Jesus — mainly in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), in the parabolic chapter (chapter 13), and in the eschatological chapter (chapter 25:1-13, 31-46) — to meet the challenges of his community. As the Christian community in Myanmar is encountering similar kinds of crises (as outlined in chapter one), I will also explore the implications of the kingdom ethics of Matthew which seem to be particularly relevant to the Christian community in Myanmar and to those that face similar situations.

Before exploring these issues, I will briefly outline the major scholarly interpretations of the last century on the kingdom ethics of Jesus, with particular reference to the Gospel of Matthew. I will show how the insights in these interpretations were shaped by the context in which they arose, and briefly indicate any ongoing relevance they may have for the interpretation of Matthew in my own context.

¹ These specific texts of kingdom teaching are distinctively set in three main parts of the Gospel: at the beginning, the middle and the conclusion (5-7; 13:1-52; 25:1-13, 31-46), sandwiching the issues arising from mission (Matt 10), community problems (Matt 18-19) and doctrinal problems (Matt 23).
A. The Kingdom Teaching of Jesus and some Influential Interpretive Paradigms

The kingdom teaching, and particularly the Sermon on the Mount, has provided the basis for many scholarly interpretations of the ethics and eschatology of Jesus, if not of Matthew. Here I will briefly outline and critique some of the most influential interpretative paradigms.

Early twentieth century scholarship offered different views regarding the kingdom ethics of Jesus. Viewing the kingdom as ‘thoroughgoing or future eschatology’, Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer offered the view that the kingdom ethics of Jesus constituted a special ethic, an obligation to fulfil the Law in the immediate present. They argued that the ethics of Jesus were a final urgent call to repentance before the coming of the kingdom (an ‘interim-ethic’), which Jesus explained especially in the Sermon on the Mount. This way of life was intended only for a short-term period and not expected to be followed by later generations in the same way after the eschatological crisis had passed. In this view, the historical Jesus was hoping to encourage his disciples to repent and do the very best they could in the short time available to them.

The idea of ‘interim ethics’ has been attacked and modified by many scholars. Jeremias argues that the ethic of Jesus is not “an expression of anxiety in face of


4 Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation*, 53, 105-106.

5 Dodd and Joachim Jeremias offer two convincing arguments against the idea of an ‘interim ethic’. Dodd argues that the word ‘repent’ needs to be considered as applying at all times to those who go wrong and who are willing to readjust radically, and not just in an interim setting. C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963).
catastrophe”, but “the knowledge of the presence of salvation”.\textsuperscript{6} It is clear that in the Gospel of Matthew, the kingdom teaching of Jesus is not relevant only for a short interim period, but has validity not only for the end, but also for what comes after the end (5:18; cf. 24:34-35//Mark 13:30-31//Luke 21:32-33).\textsuperscript{7} Though the idea of ‘interim ethics’ is inconsistent with the context and emphases of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, there are glimpses of eschatological crises in the immediate past of the Matthean community where a heightened form of ‘interim ethics’ may well have been necessary.\textsuperscript{8} Schweitzer’s views, therefore, give us a partial insight into the ethical problems of the pre-Matthean communities, but they also reveal more about Schweitzer’s own context, and his own drive to enact the radical ethics of Jesus in the Congo. As Haddon Willmer concludes: “Like many Germans of his generation, in the shadow of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, (Schweitzer) was dismally assured of the decay of civilization”\textsuperscript{9} and so flung himself on ‘the wheel of fate’, left Europe, and set up a hospital in equatorial Africa. The insights of Schweitzer have some value, and especially so for believers in my context who experience extreme persecutions and hardships and face the eschaton daily. Some aspects of Schweitzer’s life and mission are also admirable, but his view of ‘interim ethics’ lacks explanatory power beyond the immediate crises of this generation.

Rudolf Bultmann also argued the view that the ethic of Jesus is an ethic of radical obedience.\textsuperscript{10} Like Schweitzer, Bultmann views the kingdom as impinging on the

\textsuperscript{6} Jeremias, The Sermon, 11.
\textsuperscript{7} See the mission discourse of Matthew 10:5-42, for example, which can be read as a retrospective on a failed mission to the Judea and Galilee before the Jewish War. Whether these traditions as they started in Matthew 10 reflect the historical Jesus and/or the particularist Jewish traditions in the Matthean community (see pages 133-143 above) is not so important here. Either way, the interim urgency of that time is relativised by the wider context of Matthew’s narrative.
\textsuperscript{8} Jeremias, The Sermon, 11-12; Hagner, “Ethics”, 57; and Stanton, A Gospel for a New People, 293.
\textsuperscript{10} Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus and the Word (trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 72-86. In Oden’s account, this radical obedience means, “to
now and the immediate future, but his interpretation is different from that of Schweitzer in that it is re-mythologised in terms of his own context: that of German existentialism.\(^{11}\) Bultmann argues that Jesus’ ethic of radical obedience involves a person’s whole being in the decision about what is good and what is evil, where one is confronted by a ‘crisis of decision’ between God (and God’s will), and the world (and one’s own will).\(^{12}\) As the kingdom is present in the recurrent now of decision, a person can experience it in the demand for radical obedience as a person continues to encounter his or her neighbours.\(^{13}\)

For Bultmann,

> Obedience is bound up with the crisis of decision in which [one] stands; obedience is actual only in the moment of action, and if one wishes to call obedience an intention, [one] must at the same time hold fast the fact that this obedience presupposes the authority of God.\(^{14}\)

Thus every concrete situation is a ‘crisis of decision’, for God speaks to a person in that concrete situation.\(^{15}\) This recurrent ‘now’ or ‘crisis of decision’ is essential to the eschatological message which directs a person before God.\(^{16}\) In fulfilling the will of God, one is in the entrance of the kingdom and participating in it.\(^{17}\)

Bultmann’s view of radical personal obedience focuses on a legitimate implication of the kingdom teaching of Jesus. However, Matthew’s focus on Jesus’ kingdom teaching is based not so much on repentance, but on the preparation and practical doing of the will of God (25:1-13, 31-46; 28:18-20; cf. Luke 5:32; 15:7, 10; listen for and respond to the Word of God speaking through the situation in which one exists”. Cf. Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience: The Ethics of Rudolf Bultmann, with a Response by Rudolf Bultmann* (London: The Epworth, 1965), 25.

\(^{11}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 93.

\(^{12}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 77-78, 83-84.


\(^{14}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 86.

\(^{15}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 102.

\(^{16}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 88, 131-132.

\(^{17}\) Bultmann, *Jesus*, 121, 131-132.
Jesus’ ethics of radical obedience involve not just individuals — a person’s whole being in the crisis of decision — but also communities in the crises that they face. Bultmann may have legitimately contextualised the kerygma for his own existential context, but at the cost of not paying due attention to corporate ethics. Again, Bultmann’s writings are challenging and insightful to a degree but they are of limited value in my context where the absence of corporate and national ethics is as extreme as under Nazism itself.

C. H. Dodd famously argued that the kingdom of God should be interpreted in terms of ‘realised eschatology’. Focusing on Matthew 12:28 (cf. 4:17; 10:7; 16:28 and 26:29), Dodd suggests that the Greek word ἠγγίξεν should be translated as “has come”, rather than “is at hand”. The kingdom which Jesus declared is thus a matter of present experience, not something to come in the near future. In Dodd’s view, the kingdom was present in Jesus’ time; therefore Jesus was not mistaken as to when it would come. Dodd thus argues that the teaching of Jesus is “not an ethic for those who expect the speedy end of the world, but for those who have experienced the end of this world and the coming of the Kingdom of God”. As the kingdom of God continues to be present, Jesus’ ethic is “not only a guide to the good life”, but also “a means of bringing home to the conscience the judgment of God”. Jesus’ ethical teaching is the way to live for people who have already entered the kingdom of God. Thus Jesus’ ethical precepts are for those who have received the kingdom and experienced its presence.

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Matthew is the only Gospel to use ἐκκλησία (16:18; 18:17).


Dodd, The Parables, Revised edition, 82.

Dodd, History, 125.

Dodd, History, 127-128.

Dodd, History, 127-128; and Gospel and Law, 62-64.

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Dodd’s view of ‘realised eschatology’ and appropriate ethics is more easily imaginable in a context where the kingdom of God has already come or been inaugurated (12:28). The false ‘peace in our time’ in the twilight of the British Empire just before World War II was the situation in which Dodd wrote. This is very different to the post-war context described in chapter one above, where the colonial powers were divesting themselves of their troubled colonial legacy as quickly as they could. It would be unfair to dismiss Dodd’s interpretative framework just because of these conflicting contexts, because realised eschatology and ethics are evident wherever the Good News is lived out — and especially so in the Karen Refugee Camps on the Thai-Burma border, as many visitors attest. Were this not so, and Dodd’s emphasis on realised eschatology not true at all, then there would be little ground for hope at all. But Matthew’s ethical exhortations reach beyond present realities, beyond refugee camps, and have continuing transformative power. Certain passages of the Gospel suggest that the full essence of the kingdom will be experienced in the time of consummation, as emphasised in the second part of each beatitude (5:3-10), in the parables (13:40-43, 49-50), and in the eschatological warnings (25:1-13, 31-46).25

The practice of discipleship in Matthew cannot, therefore, be reduced merely to a special effort in the last days (interim ethics), nor just to the ongoing challenge to respond to the kerygma (existential ethics) nor just to an ethical sign that the new kingdom has already come (realised eschatology). Rather, for Matthew it is the pure “expression of the will of God as it agrees with the law and prophets” as embodied by Jesus, and which “defines the conditions for entering into the kingdom of God” (5:17-20).26 Since Weiss, Schweitzer, Bultmann and Dodd focus on the kingdom teaching of Jesus rather than on the Gospel of Matthew as such, their views on Jesus’ ethics do not

25 Similarly Bultmann stated that realised eschatology “cannot be substantiated by a single saying of Jesus”. Bultmann, Theology, 1:22.
26 As rightly argued by Luz. Matthew 1-7, 217.
fit so well with the specific Matthean context. Their work, however, provides some basic frameworks for understanding kingdom ethics in light of the Gospel of Matthew. The exaggerated emphases that they each make are understandable in the context within which they write, yet some aspect of the truths they highlight remains for all contexts: the urgency of contingency (interim ethics), the crisis of decision (existentialist eschatology) and the signs of the kingdom’s presence (realised eschatology).

Focusing more specifically on the Sermon on the Mount, W. D. Davies and Hans D. Betz offer two notable interpretations of kingdom ethics in Matthew (or before Matthew). Davies argues that the Sermon on the Mount is the Christian response to Jamnia.27 Davies observes that the difference between Jesus and the sectarians lies “in their interpretation of the Will of God which demands this total obedience”.28 In Davies’ view, “there is no complete break in Jesus with the ethical teaching of Judaism”.29 Thus the expression of the absolute demand of God in the Sermon goes back to Jesus himself; “his own intuitive awareness of the will of God is the source of the radical ethic”.30

Davies is right in observing that the Matthean community was at odds with contemporary Judaism. The evidence from the Sermon itself, however, is not compelling since “none of the direct links proposed between the Sermon and the reconstruction taking place within Judaism during the Jamnian period is entirely satisfactory”.31 To locate the ethics of the Sermon entirely within the post-Jamnian debates leads to an ethic sharpened by dialogue and dissension, but blunted in its ability to inform the complexities of other encounters and contexts.

Betz offers another view, arguing that the Sermon on the Mount is pre-Matthean traditional material which has been incorporated without modification by the Evangelist

27 Davies, The Setting, 315.
28 Davies, The Setting, 427.
29 Davies, The Setting, 428.
30 Davies, The Setting, 432.
and reinterpreted only minimally. Betz argues that therefore the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of Matthew consist of different theologies, and seem not to be from the same *Sitz im Leben*. In Betz’s view, the community of the Sermon was a Jewish Christian minority in the mid-50s, which opposed Pauline law-free Gentile Christians. The Sermon thus is testimony to a community which is undergoing “a profound internal crisis” not only for maintaining and defending the teachings of Jesus, but also for establishing “what Jesus taught and desired of others, and what he did not teach and did not desire”. The Sermon is thus a pre-synoptic source which the Evangelist transmitted intact and then integrated into his Gospel. In Betz’s view, this source derives not from the historical Jesus, but from the Jewish-Christian groups who resided in Jerusalem around 50 CE. The Sermon thus serves as an instruction to that Jewish Christian community, and the ethics of the Sermon are “at home in the context of Jewish piety and theology”. These are ethics of obedience to the Torah in “learning the way and manner in which God loves and preserves his creation”, and therein learning to seek God’s righteousness.

Betz’s view suggests the Sermon contains a theology which is independent and different from the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, but this is also unconvincing since there are plenty of parallels in content and vocabulary between the Sermon and the rest of the Gospel. Betz is aware that the community of the Sermon is in the midst of a profound internal crisis and needs not only to maintain and defend the teachings of Jesus, but also to establish what Jesus taught and desired of others. This argument fits

36 Betz, *Essays*, 123.
37 Betz, *Essays*, 123.
well, however, with what was happening in the Matthean community rather than positing a separate community of the Sermon. Thus as argued in chapters two and three, the evidence of the whole narrative of the Gospel reflects the Evangelist reshaping and re-interpreting the kingdom teaching of Jesus considerably in the light of his own context.\(^{39}\) Separating the ethics of the Sermon historically from those of the Gospel as a whole, as Betz does, not only misses the lines of continuity in the narrative but leads to a polemical and biased ethic of limited value.

As discussed in chapter two, after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, many Jews who fled from the south resettled in the city of Antioch. The ongoing effects of the Jewish War, the pressures of Roman imperialism and the hostility to the Jews by the Antiochene residents from outside impacted on the Matthean community as it apparently was seen to be one of the Jewish groups. Members of the Matthean community were thus under the pressure of Roman imperialism and lived with constant fear. On the other hand, different interpretations of the Law within the community, and religious pressure from within and from outside (from formative Judaism and the false prophets) also produced tensions within the community. As the community was emerging to embrace a wider context and to make disciples of all nations (28:19-20), the final compilers of Matthew’s Gospel used the kingdom teaching of Jesus as a particularly important guide to the ethical teaching which would meet the needs for the community in the midst of their crises. Leander E. Keck thus rightly states that the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew are not “general ethics” but “specifically Christian ethics”.\(^{40}\) Even more precisely, the ethics of Matthew’s Gospel are not “ethics as advocated by one who happens to be a Christian”.\(^{41}\) Rather, Keck argues, Matthew’s

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\(^{39}\) See chapter two and chapter three, esp., page 163 above. In a similar way, this is also argued by Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 324.


\(^{41}\) Keck, “Ethics”, 41.
ethics are “the ethics of a Christian who stands within the Christian community and who addresses the Christian community. Matthew did not write a story about Jesus for anyone whom it may concern nor did he write for the so-called religious leadership in Antioch. He wrote within and for a particular Christian community”.

As the majority of contemporary scholars accept, in composing the Gospel, Matthew primarily uses the Gospel of Mark and the teaching of Jesus from different sources in retelling the story of Jesus. Matthew redacts these sources together with his own narratives, in a way that reflects the situation of his community. This created a new and contextualised Gospel, which spoke more forcefully “to the particular circumstances of his community”.

The specific texts of the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew begin with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). The sequels of exhortation in kingdom parables (13:1-50) and the warning of eschatological judgment (25:1-13, 31-46), as I argued in chapter three, are not accidental additions of the Evangelist. Rather, they are carefully arranged in order to meet the challenges facing his community, urging them to re-examine themselves in order to maintain their faith identity and to be prepared for the parousia in the midst of socio-political and religious crises. Thus the kingdom ethics of Jesus in Matthew are a response of radical obedience to “the

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42 Keck, “Ethics”, 41. I suggest that Matthew’s ethics will provide the basis for understanding the kingdom teaching of Jesus also to communities that face similar crises. See further below.


44 Such texts as the temptation narrative (4:1-11) should be noted. Here, Matthew’s narrative seems very close to that of Luke. In the answer of Jesus in the first temptation, “Human beings cannot live on bread alone”; Matthew adds “but need every word that God speaks” (4:4), which reflects the situation of the Matthean community in the midst of persecution, trials, tensions and darkness (cf. Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13). So also argued, in similar way, by Senior, “The Mission Theology of Matthew”, 235; Crosby, House of Disciples, 134.

gracious, redemptive activity of God” in both present and the future reality.46 A closer investigation of the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew as seen through the ethical exhortations of the Evangelist to his community thus follows.

B. Matthew’s Kingdom Teaching and the Ethical Implications for His Community

The Gospel of Matthew in its climactic conclusion ends with the Great Commission of the risen Lord to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded” (28:19-20). This Great Commission is sandwiched between the proclamation of Jesus’ divine authority — “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18) — and his promise of immanence — “… and surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20). This conclusion evokes again Matthew’s implicit parallelism between the story of Moses and that of Jesus, except that here, Jesus echoes the Divine Voice rather than the voice of the new Moses. Just as God had said to Moses, “I will be with you” (Exod 3:12), so Jesus promises, “I will be with you” (28:20; cf. 1:23). This confronts the readers with “the power of the exalted one and by his word which is identical with the word of the earthly one” by which Matthew brings the continuing presence of Jesus to his community.47 For Matthew, Jesus is not merely the one who comes and fulfils the Law and the Prophets (5:17), but he is the Son of God. Matthew develops this Christological theme from the

infancy narrative throughout the Gospel (1:18-25; 2:1-6; 3:17; 14:33; 16:16; 17:5; 27:55; cf. 4:1-11, the temptation narrative). Thus the high Christological statement in the climactic part of the Gospel — about the possession of all authority, the Great Commission, the charge to baptise using the Trinitarian formula, the call to teach the keeping of all Jesus commanded and the promise of his presence until the end of the age — now comes from “the risen, vindicated Jesus, who manifests his identity on the other side of death”.48

The Matthean community, as a community trained in the Scriptures (13:52), would have understood how this theme was developed from the very start of the Gospel. Thus Jesus, “with the divine voice of the Son of God, hands over his instructions and commandments to his disciples” as a direct message which God is speaking to the Matthean community for them to bring to the world.49

In the Great Commission, there are three distinctive instructions to the disciples: to make disciples of all nations (not just for the lost sheep of Israel as in the earthly Jesus’ commission, cf. 10:5-6), to administer baptism in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit (no mention of circumcision; baptism alone is required for fulfilling all righteousness, as for Jesus, 3:15),50 and to teach them to observe everything Jesus has commanded them (28:29). There is no doubt that this instruction is echoing the five major discourses (5:3-7:27; 10:5-42; 13:3-52; 18:1-35; 23:2-25:46), which are mainly addressed to the disciples (and in several cases, also to the crowds),51 though in this research I have focused on the kingdom teaching of Jesus in the three main texts

50 So Byrne, Lifting the Burden, 228.
51 Senior, The Gospel of Matthew, 64; Paul S. Minear, “The Salt of the Earth”, Int 51 (1997): 32. According to Minear, “Throughout the Sermon Jesus addressed the disciples directly because he was training them as future leaders of these crowds. The disciples were the primary audience”.

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As discussed in chapter three, the Sermon on the Mount is the first of Matthew’s five discourses and the heart of the teaching to which the Great Commission refers.\(^{52}\) By placing the Sermon at the beginning, Matthew provides a comprehensive and paradigmatic understanding of Jesus’ teaching on righteousness in order to admonish his community to seek first the kingdom of heaven.\(^{53}\) The Sermon thus not only outlines the foundational ethics for those seeking the kingdom, but also “specifically anticipates some difficulties which the followers will encounter”.\(^{54}\)

Matthew begins the Sermon with the beatitudes (5:3-11), which exhort members of his suffering community to be steadfast and faithful in enduring and overcoming their problems.\(^{55}\) Beyond these crises, they will be — and partly already are — rewarded as indicated in second half of each beatitude. The parables of the salt and the light support the view that the Matthean community was encouraged to be salt and light — to be both purifying/preserving and purified/preserved — to their surrounding world (5:13-16; cf. 28:19-20).\(^{56}\)

In the teaching of the six case studies (5:21-48), the traditional interpretation of the Law is transformed by the way of Jesus. Jesus’ teaching about reconciliation, honest speech, responsible sexual expression, non-retaliation, love even for the enemy, and about non-pretentious piety “are intended as ethical guides for the community”.\(^{57}\) Then follow the instruction about deeper religious ethics (6:1-18) and an exhortation for

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\(^{52}\) See page 158 above.


\(^{55}\) See Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 70. Stanton contends that the addition of Matthew’s “five beatitudes and the changes he makes to the Q sayings” are “particularly concerned with ethical conduct”.

\(^{56}\) This section will be developed further below.

\(^{57}\) Senior, “Matthew’s Gospel as Ethical Guide”, 278.
seeking the kingdom and its righteousness (6:19-7:11). All these instructions are sandwiched between the declaration of Matthew’s Jesus: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (5:17-20), and his concluding remark “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you; for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (7:12). This suggests that Matthew not only corrects his Jewish Christian community but also offers a more comprehensive and transforming way through Jesus’ interpretation of kingdom ethics.

Glen H. Stassen’s argument for fourteen triads in the Sermon is convincing. Stassen argues that each three-fold teaching “transforms the interpretation, making the Sermon more significantly helpful in a time of confrontation” between powers and recovering the original intention of the Law and Prophets more accurately. The Sermon thus encourages the Matthean community to practise the transforming initiatives of Jesus in order to “confront power and injustice non-violently but forcefully”.

In the seven parables of chapter 13, the kingdom of heaven is antithetically constructed using opposing metaphors. These antithetical parables conform to the warning at the conclusion of the Sermon (7:13-14), where the hearers are challenged by the two polarised ways. These kingdom parables again challenge the Matthean community to evaluate themselves according to which group they belong. Were they seeds of wheat, sowed by Jesus or seeds of tares, sowed by the enemy (13:3-30, 36-43)?

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58 Stassen argues that the patterns in the Sermon on the Mount comprise not “twofold antitheses” but “threefold transforming initiatives”, which emphasise an interpretation based not on an idealised prohibition but on a realistic hope of change and deliverance by means of the transforming initiatives. Stassen proposes that from Matthew 5:21 through 7:12, the Sermon consists of fourteen triadic teachings, each of which climaxes not in a renunciation, but in a transforming initiative. Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 133, 135-145, 472; and Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads”, 307-308.


61 David Rhoads observes, “In the first century, it was common to present ethical teaching as a contrast between two ways, the way of good and the way of evil. The two conceptions were presented as opposites, so that the particular directions for good were an exact contrast to directions about what evils to avoid”. See Rhoads, “The Gospel of Matthew”, 453.
Were they seeds of the mustard plant, providing positive growth or of leaven which leads to corruption (13:31-33)? Were they like a man who joyfully finds hidden treasure and possesses it or like a merchant who is looking for fine pearls, selling everything but possessing nothing (13:44-46; cf. 6:19-21 and 19:21)? Were they edible fish, which will be collected into buckets, or inedible fish, which will be thrown away (13:47-50)?

In these seven parables, we encounter the distinctive sayings of Jesus recorded by Matthew: “Let anyone with ears listen!” (13:9, 43); “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); and “Blessed are your eyes and ears for they see and hear” (13:16). These indicate that the readers of the Matthean community have already been given the secrets of the kingdom (13:11), and have truly received it. The dialogical question of Jesus in conclusion “Have you understood all these things?” and the reply of the disciples, ‘Yes’ (13:51), supports the view that the hearers in the Matthean community should be alert and realise the significance of Matthew’s ethical teaching, conveyed through Jesus teaching the secret of the kingdom in parables.

Moreover, the seven parables end with Jesus’ concluding remark: “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (13:52; cf. 5:19). This allows the readers to understand that, as has been instructed in the Sermon on the Mount and admonished again in the kingdom parables, Matthew wants his community to realise that Jesus has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets (5:17), and that they should reinterpret the Law through the teaching of Jesus.

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63 At this point, I agree with Hagner in arguing that, for Matthew, a Christian scribe is one who is trained up “in the mysteries of the kingdom and, so is able to maintain a balance between the continuity and discontinuity that exists between the era inaugurated by Jesus and that of the past”. So Hagner, “Matthew’s Parables”, 121. So also Donald A. Hagner, “Balancing the Old and the New: The Law of Moses in Matthew and Paul”, Int 51 (1997): 21, 24.
In two narratives unique to Matthew in the eschatological discourse (25:1-13 and 25:31-46), Matthew reminds his community to be prepared for the parousia. Again the wise and foolish are described as those who were prepared or unprepared for the delay of parousia (25:1-13; cf. 7:24-27). Matthew warns his community that they must be alert despite the delay of parousia and continue to do the will of God in practice (25:31-46).

Thus Matthew’s ethics are presented through the kingdom teaching of Jesus in the transforming triads of the Sermon on the Mount and the antithetical metaphors of the seven parables, and reinforced by the parables of the eschatological discourse. I will now focus further on two major implications of these ethics: the better righteousness and the call to radical discipleship, which I will argue are particularly important for communities suffering socio-political and religious crises like the Matthean community.

i) The Better Righteousness

Scholars note that though Matthew has no one word directly equivalent to ‘ethics’, the closest technical category is δικαιοσύνη, ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness’. The word ‘righteousness’ occurs seven times in the Gospel of Matthew; five occurrences are in the Sermon (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33) and two occurrences are related to the way of John the Baptist (3:15; and 21:32). Three of them (5:6; 6:33; and probably 3:15) seem to mean God’s saving activity or his gift of salvation, and the other four (5:10, 20; 6:1; and probably 21:32) are used in the ethical sense of the demand for good behaviour and right conduct. Righteousness is thus a fundamentally important concept for Matthew.
Righteousness may be defined as human conduct in accord with God’s will expressed in rightness of life before God. In the ethical sense, Matthew’s particular understanding of ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness’ is to do the will of God according to the teaching of Jesus. Though righteousness in Matthew primarily entails ethical performance, it sometimes also clearly connotes grace rather than just demand. In the main context of the Sermon, grace and demand are intertwined. Grace does not precede the Sermon’s demands, but “grace happens in the proclamation of the demands”. Righteousness for Matthew thus seems to be in agreement with the letter of James (Jas 2:14-26), but is in some tension with Paul’s emphases (cf. Rom 4:10; Gal 2:21). It has the sense of grace at times, but Matthew does not usually emphasise faith as such. Arguably Matthew’s theology is different from, but not contrary to, that of Paul. This grace enables obedience and participation in the salvation of God (5:20; 7:13-14, 21, 24-
25; cf. 28:20a). Righteousness in Matthew is thus to be understood as a response to God’s grace.\textsuperscript{73}

In the Gospel of Matthew, ‘righteousness’ is the ‘gateway’ to entering the kingdom of heaven. In the Sermon, after the proclamation of Jesus that he has come not “to abolish the Law or the Prophets”, but “to fulfil them” (5:17), Matthew distinctively records the saying of Jesus, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

The question is why Matthew’s parameters for entering the kingdom of heaven refer to the righteousness which the scribes and the Pharisees possessed. And how will the new community surpass the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees according to Matthew’s ethics?\textsuperscript{74} As discussed previously, in many respects, the Gospel of Matthew is very Jewish.\textsuperscript{75} Among the Jews, the scribes and the Pharisees were religious leaders who were profoundly interested in and motivated by the sole concern of achieving righteousness. The scribes were regarded as professional students of religion who studied the Scriptures full-time, focusing on the definition of righteousness.\textsuperscript{76} The

\textsuperscript{73} So Hagner, “Righteousness”, 101-120. In Luz’s view, “Christ opens the way into life for those who do righteousness…. Christ gives his grace to the doers of the word”. The experience of grace is found only in the practice of Jesus’ commands, not in the hearing nor in the intention. Luz, \textit{Matthew 1-7}, 454. Guelich argues however that “the basic content of the Sermon’s Christological statement consists in Jesus Messiah as the one whose coming fulfils the Old Testament promise for the coming of the age of salvation, the coming into history of the Kingdom of Heaven”. Jesus proclaims the presence of God’s reign, the opportunity to encounter a new relationship with God through the presence of God’s sovereign rule in one’s life. This gift of salvation, this display of God’s grace and reign in Jesus, this ‘Christological indicative’, precedes and provides the basis for the Sermon’s demands. Guelich, \textit{The Sermon}, 27, 28-33. In Bornkamm’s view, it is “both demand and eschatological salvation”. Bornkamm, “End-expectation”, 31. According to Richard J. Dillon, Matthew respects this “precise correlation of grace and obligation in making his editorial insertion of righteousness after kingdom rather than before it”. Dillon, “Ravens, Lilies, and the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:25-33/Luke 12:22-31)”, \textit{CBQ} 53 (1991): 625.

\textsuperscript{74} As Matthew’s emphasis on righteousness is referring to that of the scribes and the Pharisees, in this section I will mainly discuss the case of the scribes and Pharisees.

\textsuperscript{75} See chapter 2, pages 123-124 above.

\textsuperscript{76} So George Eldon Ladd, \textit{The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 79. See also Gale, \textit{Redefining Ancient Borders}, 89.
Pharisees were those who implemented the teachings of the scribes and taught them, “thereby aiming to achieve a life of righteousness”.  

In the Gospel of Matthew the pairing of the scribes and the Pharisees appears in a large number of places (5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2, 13-13, 23, 25, 27 and 29), whereas it is not precisely found in Mark. Both the scribes and the Pharisees were the learned religious groups par excellence in Judaism. In the Gospel of Matthew, they are typified as the zealous and pious official representatives of Jewish religious leaders whose interpretation and practice of the Law are contrasted to that of Jesus’ interpretation.

It is likely that in the time of Matthew, the scribes and Pharisees were those who “sat in the seat of Moses” (cf. 23:1-2). Mark Alan Powell convincingly argues that Jesus in Matthew refers to their roles not so much as teachers but as those who socially and religiously controlled accessibility to Torah. They are those who had access to copies of the Torah and were able to read them, know them and instruct others in what Moses said. They told people what is lawful and unlawful according to Mosaic Law (cf. 9:10-11; 12:1-2, 9-10; 15:1-2).

Jesus’ denunciation of them in Matthew’s account concerned

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77 So Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom, 79. See further below.
79 In the Gospel of Matthew, the scribes appear alone in five passages (7:29; 8:19; 9:3; 13:52; 17:10). Three of them (7:29; 9:3; and 17:10) come from Mark, and the other two (8:19; 13:52) are associated with Q (cf. Luke 9:57-58). In all cases, the scribes are recognised as the teaching authorities in Jewish society. The Pharisees are, however, those who oppose and challenge Jesus’ authority as a religious and social leader by assaulting its source (9:32-34; 12:22-30), arguing with him (19:3-9), and plotting against him (22:15). According to Repschinski, the Pharisees are the chief opponents of Jesus. Repschinski, The Controversy Stories, 323-326. Meier thus argues that the pairing of scribes and Pharisees is definitely a fixed theological formula of Matthew which describes them as representatives of Jewish religious leaders who attack Jesus. Meier, Law and History, 111-113. Similarly, Saldarini also argues that the formulaic designation of scribes and Pharisees is not used elsewhere in Mark except Mark 2:16 and 7:1. In several passages “Matthew eliminates Mark’s scribes when they are opponents of Jesus and replaces them with Pharisees (9:11, 34; 12:24; 21:45) whom he considers to be Jesus’ opponents par excellence”. Saldarini argues that Matthew follows Mark fairly closely and “changes him in ways which can be clearly explained by his view of Judaism and Jesus. Matthew’s picture of the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees is less distinct than Mark’s and it is likely that Matthew has revised Mark to fit his literary and theological purposes without providing any new first hand information”. So Anthony J. Saldarini, “Pharisees”, ABD 5:296; Saldarini, Pharisees, 157-164, esp. pages 145 and 164.
their interpretation of Moses “both through verbal teaching and practised life-style” which revealed “a perverted understanding of Torah” (23:3-7).

More than Mark and Luke, Matthew records the polemics between Jesus and these Jewish religious leaders. Matthew portrays them largely in negative terms. In the baptism narrative, John the Baptist called these Jewish religious leaders (the Pharisees and Sadducees) a ‘brood of vipers’ (3:7). In the Sermon, the way of the scribes and the Pharisees is portrayed as the way of self-righteousness, that is, the way of hypocrites. These Jewish religious leaders apply the Law only to “outward actions and to limited situations” (6:1, 5; cf. 23:5-7). For Matthew, true righteousness is not to bring glory to oneself but to be self-effacing (6:1-18).

In the major diatribe against the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 23), Jesus points to the scribes and the Pharisees as those who bind heavy loads on others but who do not move them with their fingers (23:4). They do all their deeds to be seen by others (23:5; cf. 6:2, 5, 16). They love the place of honour (23:6-7). They shut the kingdom of heaven against people (23:13). They proselytise people to make them twice children of hell (23:15). They are blind guides (23:16-24; cf. 15:14), who clean up the outside of a cup but not the inside (23:25-26), and who are like whitewashed tombs (23:27-29). They are sons of those who murdered the prophets (23:29-31; cf. 27:20-25). They are ‘serpents’, and a ‘brood of vipers’ who try to escape being sentenced to hell (23:33; cf. 3:7-10). In the Gospel of Matthew, both John the Baptist and Jesus predict that the scribes and the Pharisees cannot escape from the punishment of God (cf. 3:7-10; 12:33-36; 15:13). Because they do not produce true righteousness (5:20), they will be excluded from the

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82 Rhoads, “The Gospel of Matthew”, 456, 457. Rhoads observes that there are four categories of hypocrisy in Matthew: the people (i) “whose inner motives contradict outward actions” (e.g., 6:1-18), (ii) whose inner attitudes oppose outward appearances (e.g., 5:21-22, 27-30), (iii) who act “in some situations but not in others” (e.g., 5:33-37), and (iv) who relate to God in one way but treat others another way (e.g., 5:23-24).
83 Hagner, “Ethics”, 50.
kingdom (3:10; 15:13). The kingdom of God will be taken away from them and then will be given to those who produce its fruits (9:13; the Parable of the Two Sons in Matthew 21:28-32, 43). Jesus thus warns his readers to observe what the scribes and the Pharisees taught but not to follow their practices because their way of life deviates from what they are teaching. They are righteous in words but not in practice (23:2; cf. 15:1-9). Their teaching laid “the emphasis upon the outward act”. The way of the scribes and the Pharisees thus leads to hell (23:33; cf. 9:13).

What kind of righteousness, then, surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees for entering the kingdom of heaven (5:19-20)? In the Sermon, Jesus teaches that righteousness is not just to be done in public (6:1). It is clear that the righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, or ‘a better righteousness’, is not purely legal righteousness or outward expression but an inward and sincere practice (6:3-4, 6, 17-18). The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon tells us that righteousness involves the human heart in a sincere and practical way in seeking to do the will of God unheralded.

At this point, Stassen is right in stating that when Jesus teaches about ‘righteousness’, the frame of reference is the Hebrew Bible usage, not the Greek or English term. In Hebrew, the term ‘righteousness’ means delivering justice for those in bondage, especially the poor, the widows and orphans and foreigners — all those who lacked power. It means community-restoring justice that delivers the powerless from bondage and into the covenant community. Even enemies are included; they too, are neighbours.

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84 Repschinski states that the controversy stories in Matthew are “part of the Matthean agenda to delegitimise the Jewish leaders”. Repschinski, The Controversy Stories, 345. Powell also concludes that “in spite of the power of controlling accessibility to Torah that the scribes and the Pharisees now exercise”, they do not “in fact have authority to teach (7:29). Their understanding of the Law and their actions that derive from and demonstrate this understanding are wrong, and must be wrong, for the authority they presume to possess has been given to another” (7:28-29; 9:6-8; 12:8; 21:23-27; 28:18). Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says”, 435.
87 Tagawa, “People and Community”, 150.
88 Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom, 82.
89 See Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom, 82-87.
90 Stassen, “Healing the Rift”, 103.
Thus Stassen persuasively argues that the term ‘righteousness’ should be better translated as “compassionate, delivering, community-restoring justice”.\(^{91}\) For, Stassen, ‘righteousness’ should mean restoration of just relations, personally and societally, and with God. It can be described as “God’s gracious initiative in delivering us from sin, guilt, and oppression into a new community of justice, peace, and freedom, into our obedient participation in God’s way of deliverance”.\(^{92}\)

This agrees with the deeper essence of a better righteousness as found in the parable of the sheep and goats (25:31-46). In the parable of the sheep and goats, the righteous are the particular group who are fulfilling practically the humanitarian law (25:35-40). Righteousness here involves doing the will of God in fulfilling the practical actions of mercy and love (cf. 5:23-24).

In two contexts containing Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisaic way of thinking, Matthew quotes Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (9:13; and 12:7). This quotation is unique to Matthew’s redaction, and in each episode, “Jesus is represented as in dispute with the Pharisees and passing judgment on their conduct”.\(^{93}\) It is clear that the Pharisees are ‘righteous’, but nevertheless unfit for entering the kingdom of heaven. Their imperfection is their lack of mercy and love. Thus Jesus told them to learn the meaning of Hosea 6:6. For Matthew, righteousness is bound up with love and mercy, which are the focal points in doing the will of God.\(^{94}\)

In the kingdom beatitudes, Matthew emphasises that the merciful are blessed (5:7). Matthew desires that his community should possess ‘a better righteousness’, if

\(^{91}\) Stassen, “Healing the Rift”, 103.
they are to enter the kingdom of God. For him, righteousness before God is not just an outward expression of performing religious duties and pleasing people, but an inner heart of obedience and mercifulness expressed in compassionate action and practically doing the will of God (6:1). This is “the essence of the righteousness that Jesus proposes (6:10; 7:21)” . This is a key concept of Matthew’s understanding of kingdom ethics.

In two particular episodes, Matthew distinctively records the qualifications of righteousness. In the first episode, Joseph is a righteous person in the infancy narrative (1:19). Matthew indicates that Joseph has been qualified as a righteous person by his actions and his decision to render a difficult obedience. The other episode highlights Jesus as a righteous man in the passion narrative (27:19, 24). Matthew develops this theme from the beginning of the infancy narrative throughout the story to the crucifixion, since Jesus is portrayed not merely as the Messianic interpreter of the Law for ‘a better righteousness’ (5:20), but as the one who himself fulfils the Law and the Prophets in his words and deeds (cf. 3:15; 20:28). Jesus is thus “the model of righteousness”. He is the one who fulfils the Law by interpreting it “according to its true intent”, in which “every detail of Mosaic Law remains valid” (5:18). The

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95 Hill, “Hosea VI. 6”, 117.
97 Matera, New Testament Ethics, 49.
98 Matera, New Testament Ethics, 42.
99 As this point, I agree that Dan O. Via is right in arguing that the four particular women in the genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, indicate the dubious pedigree to which Mary belongs at least potentially in the public eye, and so Joseph first considers her to be adulterous. Thus the explicit mention of the five women “suggest the natural basis for Joseph’s suspicions and encourage the reader to identify with those suspicions. Then the suspicions are overturned by the story”. See Via, “Narrative World and Ethical Response: The Marvelous and Righteousness in Matthew 1-2”, Semeia 12 (1978): 124-132, esp. page 132.
100 Matera, Passion, 142; and New Testament Ethics, 50-53.
disciples of Jesus are thus commanded to make disciples of all nations and to instruct them in what they have been commanded (28:19).  

In sum, for Matthew, the interpretation of the Law in the tradition of the Pharisees is the way of hypocrites, which will result in destruction (cf. 23:1-39). The interpretation of the Law by Jesus, however, is the way of righteous integrity, which will result in salvation. Jesus’ ethics are the way to be perfect just as his Father in heaven is perfect (5:48). His way of perfection is “to live in complete accord with God’s will, to be a person whose actions (5:23, 38-42), words (5:22, 33-37), thoughts (5:28), attitudes (5:43-44), and motives (6:1-6, 16-18) are pleasing to God”. In comparison with Jewish religious leaders, Jesus’ ethics are “idealistic and even perfectionist”.  

As his community encountered socio-political and religious crises, Matthew called the attention of his community to hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6, cf. 5:10). This is a radical exhortation of the Christian goal in this life though it will only be attained fully in the consummation. Through Jesus, Matthew challenges his community to seek first the kingdom and its righteousness (6:33). In discerning a better righteousness, they will inherit eternal life and shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father (13:43; 25:46). Thus Matthew calls for “dedication to the service of the kingdom of God, and living one’s life in total submission to and in light of God’s redemptive rule in history”.  

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Matthew also warns that these Jewish religious leaders “provide a negative example which highlights characteristics of being a disciple and doing God’s will”. Matthew affirms to his Jewish Christian community that Jesus has come not “to destroy the Law and the Prophets” but to bring them to fulfilment (5:17) and has shown the way of greater righteousness (5:20). Thus they should keep their eyes fixed on the example of Jesus for he is “both teacher and exemplar for the community”. As Senior rightly states, “For Matthew, Jesus’ teaching lovingly reinterprets, clarifies, and fully expresses the meaning of the Jewish Law — providing light and life for those who put his words into action”. Thus Matthew exhorts his community to follow Jesus’ model of righteousness and put his teachings into practice in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20; 7:24). This is the righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees which his community must also instruct others to do, just as Jesus has commanded them (5:19; cf. 28:19).

In discerning this way of better righteousness, Matthew warns his community not to judge the hypocrisy of others but to focus on examining their own hypocrisy. For pointing fingers is the way of the scribes and the Pharisees (7:3-5; cf. 9:10-11; 12:1-2, 9-10; 15:1-2). Thus the unusual character of the call to righteousness that we encounter in the Sermon on the Mount is as Hagner rightly states:

These are not ordinary ethics, nor are they a merely an extension or intensification of Jewish ethics, despite the overlap that is often apparent. They are the ethics of the kingdom, i.e., the ethical standard for those who, receiving the gift of the kingdom, participate in it by faith. These ethics, in short, reflect the reality of the rule or reign of God in one’s life. And it is for this reason that they constitute a call to perfection (5:48;

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114 See also Hannan, *The Nature and Demands*, 56; Matera, *Passion*, 146-147; and Schrage, *The Ethics*, 144.
“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” is the counterpart of the call of Lev 19:2 [“You shall be holy, for I am holy”]; cf. 1 Pet 1:15).\(^\text{116}\)

\[\text{i) Radical Discipleship}\]

The kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount confronts the readers of the Matthean community with the challenge of the decision for radical discipleship. It is “Jesus’ programmatic statement of discipleship”\(^\text{117}\). By beginning the kingdom teaching with beatitudes, the Sermon embraces the readers and exhorts them to embody the kingdom blessings in their daily life in order to preserve their earth and to turn their world of darkness into light (5:13-16).

In each of the case studies of social ethics, the disciples are instructed in the way of radical discipleship. These six case studies anticipate the instruction for community formation in chapters 18-19. Jesus teaches that disciples are to seek for reconciliation to end the anger that leads to murder (5:24; cf. 18:15-35). They must respect their marriage by abstaining from divorce and adultery, for both divorce and adultery are destructive of a God-given life partnership (5:29-30, 32; cf. 19:1-12). Disciples must speak the truth rather than taking oaths (5:37). They must not repay evil with evil (5:39). Instead, they must seek non-violent ways of transforming both persecutors and the needy (5:39b, 40b, 41b, and 42; cf. Rom 12:21). They must even love their enemies in order to achieve perfection as their father in heaven (5:48).\(^\text{118}\) They also need to fulfil the religious practices as discussed above. The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon is thus not just a way

\(^{116}\) Hagner, “Ethics”, 48-49.

\(^{117}\) Matera, *Passion*, 147.

\(^{118}\) See chapter three, pages 182-188 above.
of grace or a way of vague passivity, but of “transforming initiatives, and we are asked to participate in what God is doing, imitating God’s initiatives”.\footnote{So Stassen, “Transforming Initiative”, 24.}

In the conclusion of the Sermon, disciples are confronted by the challenges of two polarised ways (7:13-14). According to the Sermon, true disciples are designated as those who enter the narrow gate (7:13; 6:33), who bear good fruits, sowed by Jesus (13:3b, 24b, 37), and those who are wise in building their house on the rock (7:24-25). In contrast, false disciples are those who seek to enter by the wide gate (7:14), who bear bad fruits, sown by the enemy (13:25, 38b), and who build their houses on the sand (7:26-27).\footnote{Cf. Terence L. Donaldson, “Guiding Readers — Making Discipleship: Discipleship in Matthew’s Narrative Strategy”, in \textit{Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament} (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 44-45. They are those “who love family more (cf. 10:37), who try to save their lives (cf. 10:39; 16:25-26), and who cling to riches and so turn away (cf. 19:22-24)”.}

The seven parables offer a more comprehensive understanding of the ‘Two Ways Theme’. In the parables of the sower and the tares, Matthew describes Jesus as the Son of Man who sows the good seed that produces the children of the kingdom. He is also working through those who continue his work as the community of his followers and disciples. As the reign of God is universal, wherever the church’s proclamation takes place throughout the world, the children of the kingdom will be found scattered and growing throughout it. On the other hand, the devil who sows the crop that produces the children of the evil one also works throughout the world.\footnote{Robert K. McIver, “The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43) and the Relationship between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew”, \textit{JBL} 114 (1995): 644-653. Though McIver agrees with the ecclesiastical interpretation and raises many questions for the weakness of the Universalist interpretation, in my opinion, both interpretations are implicit in Matthew’s understanding of the kingdom.} The parables that follow — the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, the hidden treasure and the pearl, and the dragnet — also underline the faith community as a mixed body that contains good and bad. Thus not all disciples in the Matthean community are true disciples. Even among Jesus’ own disciples, Judas Iscariot is portrayed as a false disciple, “just as the...
tares are sown among the wheat, and bad fish are found with the good in the same net, and so on”.

Matthew contends that true disciples are those who hear and understand the teaching of Jesus (13:51-52; cf. 16:12; 17:13) and practically do the will of God (12:50).

In the eschatological discourse, true disciples are again vindicated as those who prepare for the delay of the parousia (25:2b, 4), and practically do the will of God by fulfilling humanitarian law (25:35-40). In contrast, false disciples are those who do not prepare anything for the delay of the parousia (25:2a, 8, 10), and who fail to practise the will of God (25:42-45).

As the Matthean community is a mixed community, the antithetical contrast of good and evil serves as the boundary between the insider and the outsider. Those who remain true to God in the community are defined as good and righteous, but those who oppose the community are the wicked.

In the dualistic worldview of the Evangelist, those who follow the will of God belong to the righteous, but those who do not follow belong to the devil (13:19, 38-39). These righteous and wicked disciples will continue to coexist until the end of the age (cf. 13:49). In the time of judgment, those who are righteous will be rewarded. They will shine like the sun and will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

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124 Przybylski rightly states that the essence of Matthew’s discipleship is “doing the will of God”. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew*, 112.


126 Kingsbury, “The Developing Conflict”, 58. According to Kingsbury, the ‘dualism’ is modified slightly by the existence of the least two groups of opponents to the Matthean community: the rival Jewish leaders and the Gentile opponents.

(13:30, 42; 25:10b, 34, 46). Alternatively, those who belong to the devil will be sent off with the devil to eternal punishment (7:23; 13:30b, 41-42, 49-50; 25:11, 46a). The reward is dependent on how they have done the will of God (16:27).\(^{128}\)

In these antithetical contrasts, we see that Matthew desires to admonish his community to maintain their identity as ‘radical disciples’ and to be faithful especially in the times of crises. For Matthew, his community should examine themselves as to whether they are authentic disciples or not. As Stassen states, “where Discipleship failed to draw out the implications for the Christian’s public life and secular persons, now in Ethics they are drawn out”\(^{129}\).

In such times of instability, a clear exhortation of Matthew’s ethics is not only to be faithful and steadfast but also to be righteous and doing the will of God, for this is important for entering into the kingdom of heaven (5:10-12). Thus within the community, as France rightly concludes, discipleship involves being:

People who first and foremost belong to Jesus. They are personally committed to him, with a loyalty which transcends even natural family ties. It is their relationship with him which forms the basis of their community with one another, and in this community they are therefore able to recognise one another as brothers, and to care for one another with all the concern of members of the same family. Indeed they are themselves ‘little brothers’ of Jesus.\(^{130}\)

On the other hand, in confronting socio-political and religious crises from both within and outside, steadfastness and faithfulness are particularly essential to the nature of Jesus and of those who follow him in radical discipleship.\(^{131}\) The way of the disciple

\(^{128}\) This ‘dual’ basis for judgment (works and grace, deeds and faith) is consistent with other Jewish Christian traditions — the letter of James and the two books of Revelation 20. Compared to the other Evangelists, we see that Matthew makes much more use of the ‘reward and punishment’ motif in his material. For Matthew, these themes play a major role in Jesus’ teaching and provide a powerful motivation for the disciples to do the will of God by practising deeds of righteousness. So Mohrlang, Matthew and Paul, 48; and Matera, New Testament Ethics, 56-59, 61.

\(^{129}\) Stassen, “Healing the Rift”, 95.

\(^{130}\) France, Matthew, 265.

\(^{131}\) Kingsbury, Matthew, 89.
and discipleship consists “in walking the way with Jesus”. Matthew emphasises that Jesus’ actions serve as ethical guides for authentic discipleship. As Senior states,

> [Jesus’] commitment to compassionate healing and reconciliation (is) demonstrated in the miracle stories; his vigorous defense of those on the margins of society; his openness to those Gentiles seeking life; his courage and fidelity even in the face of threat and death; his authentic prayer in the last moments of his life. In contemplating the life and example of Jesus, the reader would understand the qualities of authentic discipleship — even as the attitudes and actions of those who opposed and failed Jesus exemplified what a disciple should not be and do (e.g. chapter 23).

Matthew’s ethical teaching on radical discipleship is thus underlined by the necessity that disciples of Jesus are to be like Jesus (10:24-25). They should learn from him (11:29-30). They should deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him, even to lose their lives for his sake (10:38-39; 16:24-26). They should leave their family, their properties, for the ministry of Jesus (8:21-22; 10:37; cf. 6:19-21 and 19:16-22 with 19:27-30). They should prepare for unexpected hardship (8:20). As they are sent out like sheep among wolves, they are to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16). They should also be not like the ‘foolish’ salt and the lamp under a bowl, but act as salt of the earth and light of the world (5:13-16).

The way of discipleship is a hard road. Matthew, however, wants the readers to learn some characteristics of radical discipleship from Jesus’ own disciples. Matthew describes that sometimes when they face crises, they have no confidence (cf. 8:23-27; 14:25-30). Matthew’s Jesus often rebuked them as those of ‘little faith’ (6:30; 8:26; 9:18-20). And at this point, I do not agree with Weaver who states that the disciples are sent out “to suffer” as such. Weaver, “As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves”, 138. In my opinion, they are sent out not to be victims and scapegoats, but to confront crises peacefully and non-violently (cf. 10:17-23). Arguing that the metaphor of salt and light acts as Matthew’s endorsement of the radical demand for discipleship in mission, Guelich states, “to fail in mission is to fail in discipleship”. So Guelich, The Sermon, 125-133, esp. page 127.

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132 Avery Dulles, Models of the Church (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 210-211.
133 See also Weaver, “As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves”, 138-139.
134 Senior, “Matthew’s Gospel as Ethical Guide”, 278.
135 Hagner, Matthew 1-13, lxii; Hagner, “New Things”, 333; and Jack Dean Kingsbury, “On Following Jesus: The ‘Eager’ Scribe and the ‘Reluctant’ Disciple (Matthew 8.18-22)”, NTS 34 (1988): 48. Kingsbury points out that according to Matthew’s understanding of discipleship, “the point at which a candidate first evinces his willingness (or unwillingness) to commit himself to Jesus and to ‘follow’ him is at the moment of his initial summons (4.18-20, 21-22; 9.9; 19:21-22)”. At this point, I do not agree with Weaver who states that the disciples are sent out “to suffer” as such. Weaver, “As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves”, 138. In my opinion, they are sent out not to be victims and scapegoats, but to confront crises peacefully and non-violently (cf. 10:17-23).
136 Arguing that the metaphor of salt and light acts as Matthew’s endorsement of the radical demand for discipleship in mission, Guelich states, “to fail in mission is to fail in discipleship”. So Guelich, The Sermon, 125-133, esp. page 127.
When they were charged to go on mission, some of them were afraid for their lives in declaring that they belonged to Jesus (10:26-33). For some of them, leaving their beloved family was difficult (10:37). Jesus in Matthew warns them that whoever does not take up the cross and follow him is not worthy of him (10:37-38).

Matthew also tells us that some disciples put their family first before the ministry of Jesus (8:21-22). Some of them requested from Jesus the places of honour in his kingdom (20:20-28; cf. 23:8-10), and Judas Iscariot even betrayed him with thirty silver coins (26:14-16, 47-50). In the time of trial, though all disciples promised Jesus they would be with him even in death (26:33-35), they failed to keep watch and pray with him (26:41), and when Jesus was arrested, all of them left him and ran away (26:56). Even Peter who plays a prominent role in Matthew, denied Jesus three times as Jesus had predicted (26:33-35; cf. 26:69-74). Though the revelation of Jesus’ death and resurrection was predicted for them in Matthew’s account, they finally heard the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection via the women (28:5-8; cf. 16:21, 27; 20:17-19; 26:1-2). Even when they met Jesus at the appointed place, Galilee, some of them were in doubt (28:10, 16-17).

We should consider, however, how Matthew presents the role of disciples in the climactic part of the Gospel. Matthew turns the attention back to the eleven disciples as those who received all authority in heaven and on earth to go and make disciples of all nations (28:16, 18). They were commanded to give baptism in the name of the Father,

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138 Cf. Mark 4:40; 8:17-18. In Mark, the disciples are portrayed as having no faith.
139 Emmanuel M. Jacob, “Discipleship and Mission: A Perspective on the Gospel of Matthew”, JRM 91 (2002): 110, footnote no. 32. Jacob argues that “the disciples are sent out in Matthew, but there is no mention of their return. The mission discourse ends at 11:1 with the words “And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples…” Here, Jacob is right in suggesting that “the disciples are not sent out during the lifetime of Jesus: they have only got their instructions. Matthew is concerned only with Jesus’ instruction”.
140 For the arguments on Matthew 8:18-22, see Kingsbury, “On Following Jesus”, 45-59; Gundry, “On True and False Disciples”, 433-441. Here, Gundry’s argument about Matthew’s standard of discipleship is more convincing.
the Son and the Holy Spirit (28:19) and to teach obedience to everything they had been commanded (28:20).

This positive conclusion reminds us that in Jesus’ public ministry, when Jesus called the disciples (4:18-22; cf. 9:9-10), they left everything and immediately followed him (4:20, 22; 9:9; cf. 19:27). Matthew portrays them as close learners of Jesus (5:2). They travelled together and had meals together with him (8:23-27; 9:1, 10). Throughout Jesus’ ministry, they were in the service of that ministry full-time (19:27; cf. 8:21-22).

When Jesus preached the kingdom of heaven, healed the sick, drove out demons, and performed miracles openly in public as well as in synagogues, these disciples were with Jesus. They learnt from him (11:29). Sometimes when they did not understand what Jesus meant about the mystery of the kingdom in his teaching (13:10, 36), the traditional teaching about the Law (17:10-13), the warning against Jewish religious leaders (16:5-12), and about exorcism (17:19-21), they came to Jesus privately and asked him till they understood (13:51-52; cf. 16:12; 17:13). Matthew describes how they have been given the knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, which has not been given to others (13:11-17). They discerned Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God (14:33; 16:16-20; 17:5-9). Jesus in Matthew thus declares that he will build his church on them and give them the keys of the kingdom of heaven (16:18-19). Jesus gave them authority to bind and loose in heaven (16:19; 18:18; cf. 18:21-35). Jesus privately revealed only to them about his crucifixion and resurrection (16:21, 27; 20:17-19; 26:1-2), and the signs of his parousia (Matt 24). Jesus reminded them to be prepared (24:44; 25:1-13), and to practically do the will of God till the last day (25:31-46). Thus

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141 In Mark, the disciples also do not understand Jesus. Cf. 14:33 and Mark 6:52; 16:5-12; 8:14-21. See also Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 64.
142 Schnackenburg states, “This acute division of listeners is certainly connected with the polemic of this evangelist against the unbelieving and stubborn group of Jews from his own time”. Schnackenburg, “Matthew’s Gospel as a Test Case”, 257. In my opinion, they are the Torah extremists as discussed in chapter two above.
there is no doubt that these disciples had learnt everything from Jesus so that in the Great Commission, when Jesus instructed them to go and make disciples of all nations and to teach everything they had been commanded, these disciples might be expected to understand what they had to do (28:19-20).\(^{143}\)

These negative and positive characteristics of Jesus’ disciples highlight the way of radical discipleship. At this point, I agree with Jeannine K. Brown, who proposes that these negative and positive characteristics are “a model for understanding Matthew’s method of communicating discipleship to his reader”.\(^{144}\) Matthew does not show that the growth of Jesus’ own disciples progresses substantially in either their understanding or their faith.\(^{145}\) To follow Jesus is not an easy way. But it is to learn, discern and practise.\(^{146}\) Through following the steps of Jesus, disciples become perfect, as God the Father is.\(^{147}\) In doing these things, they are doing the will of God and becoming Jesus’ true family (12:46-50).\(^{148}\)

The commandment to observe everything in the climax of the Gospel also highlights the significance of discipleship.\(^{149}\) Matthew speaks of observing Jesus’ commands and sees in it the essence of discipleship.\(^{150}\) Matthew describes how disciples are called to be like salt of the earth, light of the world, and a mountaintop city — that is, “a community living a righteous life of such visibility that others will be led to give

\(^{143}\) Donaldson, “Guiding Readers”, 46-47.
\(^{147}\) Crosby, *House of Disciples*, 132; Cahill, “The Ethical Implications”, 149.
\(^{149}\) John Nolland states, “in light of the mission charge with which it ends, and which includes ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’, the Gospel is clearly intended to function as a manual for discipleship”. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 20.
\(^{150}\) Luz, “The Disciples”, 131.
glory to God (5:13-16)." In circumstances of persecution and conflict and in struggling with the Hellenistic culture, disciples are not to lose their identity by dilution. This would be to lose the identity that distinguishes them from the world around them — leading to corruption by the world because they do not practise what Jesus teaches. In losing their distinctive usefulness and their illumination they are no longer useful for anything and instead of being able to judge others they will be judged themselves and condemned.

In sum, as Jacob concludes, the central focus of Matthew’s story is concerned with the threefold theme “Jesus, kingdom and discipleship”. In telling his community the story of Jesus, Matthew uses a variety of means to guide his readers to a correct understanding of discipleship. Matthew wants his community to be “disciples and recipients of Jesus’ teaching as well”, since “readers — at least on repeat readings — become aware of an invitation to join the original disciples as they are taught by their teacher and lord”.

C. Matthew’s Kingdom Teaching and the Socio-Political Context of Myanmar Today

Without readers, the story of Jesus and the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew “remains inert and its narrator ineffectual”. Its meaning emerges more clearly only when there are readers/hearers who read/hear it and enter into the world of

152 Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 470.
154 Jacob, “Discipleship”, 104.
155 Donaldson, “Guiding Readers”, 42.
156 Donaldson, “Guiding Readers”, 47.
its narrative and follow the guidance of the implied author. The readers then will “encounter the characters, experience the plot as it unfolds, form opinions, anticipate events, revise opinions and expectations in the light of subsequent events and thereby eventually grasp the story as a whole”. 157

As a flesh and blood reader, who has experienced what seem to me to be similar forms of crises to the Matthean community, I am convinced that the kingdom teaching of Matthew I have described in this research is particularly relevant to my own community, just as also to the Matthean community. In a mixed body, containing good and bad members (wheat and tares), the kingdom teaching enlightens members of both communities, which are affected by the threat of false teaching from within and from outside, and where what is true and false are essential matters to resolve for the survival of the community way of life. This teaching offers a clear way for the immature as well as mature believers to articulate their faith identity according to the teaching they follow. It encourages members under the threat of political oppression from outside, especially from non-believers, to be faithful and steadfast. It challenges members of both communities under pressure to turn inwards to emerge towards a wider mission to all nations. It provokes them to embody the way of Jesus taught in the kingdom teaching and endorses their saltiness and light in the midst of their crises. The kingdom teaching of Jesus thus effectively engages the need of the two communities to confront their crises with new power and encouragement.

As the city of Antioch was filled with chronic social problems, Stark rightly observes that the Gospel brought new hope.

And herein lies the very utilitarian link between Christianity and its social situation. Christianity revitalised life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent, urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis

157 So Donaldson, “Guiding Readers”, 47.
for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.158

Under these critical conditions in the city of Antioch, Matthew desires his readers to discern the kingdom teaching of Jesus taught in the Sermon and to embody it in their daily life in order to maintain their identity as well as to transform the world surrounding them by the light of God. As Stark observes, Antioch suffered acutely from all of these urban problems, yet the Christian gospel was able to meet these chronic problems and play a major role in its ultimate transformation.159

The country of Myanmar faces similar crises to those faced by the city of Antioch. The country is enmeshed in socio-political and socio-economic disasters because of an elite dominating the political system and the ongoing effect of civil conflicts, as discussed in chapter one. These crises result in the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer. They also lead to corruption and injustice everywhere in the urban areas. The consequences of all this affect all minority groups, and especially the Christian believers. Further, because of this civil conflict, human rights violations occur against the civilians who live in the frontier areas and who have faced oppression and persecution for a long time.160 As these civilians have for a long time faced persecution and oppression, loss of rights, loss of properties and loss of their loved ones, they are longing for peace and justice. Yet hatred and lack of forgiveness for the offenders are still alive in their memories, even among believers.161

The eight beatitudes and the ethics of forgiveness, reconciliation, not taking oaths and non-retaliation in the six-case studies are challenging the Christian

160 See chapter one above.
161 See chapter one, pages 26-30 above.
communities there to be salt and light in the midst of these crises. As the Christian communities live amongst these sufferers in the urban as well as in the frontier areas, the narrative of the Gospel text and its context offer a clear way for guiding the Christian community of Myanmar to embody these kingdom teachings in their midst. The kingdom teaching of Jesus that speaks to the Matthean community thus seems also to be directly speaking to the Christian community of Myanmar.

In chapter two (E) I outlined four areas of dialogue — four powerful points of contact — between the contexts of ‘Matthew’ and of ‘Myanmar’ namely:

(i) the violence of imperial power;
(ii) the fragmentation of society resulting from imperial policies;
(iii) the inflexibility and dominance of traditional ways of thinking; and
(iv) the tension between being an open, inclusive community or a defensive, inward looking community.

These four areas have implicitly and explicitly focussed the Matthean texts I have chosen and the exegetical methods I have used above. For this I make no apology — it cannot be otherwise for a reader in my position.

From my perspective, as a reader shaped by the context of Myanmar, the Matthean kingdom teaching of Jesus has many more specific encouragements and challenges that emerge out of these four areas of dialogue for the Christian community of Myanmar. For example:

(1) We, members of the Christian community of Myanmar, need to stand up for Jesus’ radical and alternative way much more clearly.

(2) We need to see our identity firstly as disciples of Jesus and then secondarily as Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burmese and so on, so that our lives are shaped by Jesus and not by revenge, hatred or fear.
(3) We need to live more clearly day by day as beacons of light, contributing to the healing of a broken society and helping to preserve it, being exemplary citizens in a context of civil war.

(4) We need to depend more on God in a time of persecution, and articulate a faith that, while not trying to explain away suffering, is founded on the assurance that God suffers with us and sent his Son to die precisely because the evil in this world is so pervasive, and that the risen Christ is our hope through all of this.

(5) We need to focus more on discerning what the narrow way is and not so much on judging those who seem to have given in or sold out or lost their faith; the church is, and always will be, a mixed community until the eschaton.

(6) We need to explore much more creatively the possibilities — against all the odds — of creative non-violent action with respect to the enemy, at the very least endeavouring to love them and possibly even engaging in innovative and risky transforming initiatives (walking the extra mile clearly won’t work in our context, but is there some other way that will force persecutors to face up to their actions?).

(7) We need to maintain the vision of inviting all to follow Jesus, even though the natural tendency is to hide away for survival and draw the boundaries more clearly against the enemy.

(8) We need to continue to care for the displaced, the imprisoned, the hungry, the ill, the homeless, the refugees and those whose hope is being smashed, for in this we are caring for Christ himself and being the salt and light of the gospel.
Through reading the kingdom teaching of Jesus and entering into the context of the Matthean community, I can see how the Christian community of Myanmar can interpret Jesus’ kingdom teaching in a way that helps us to build up a new way of community life. This means that not all Jesus’ kingdom teaching in Matthew may directly fit the context of Myanmar (e.g., 5:38-42). As Flemming rightly suggests,

The contemporary church must therefore be shaped not only by what the New Testament says (the message), but also by what it does (the process of doing theology). This does not mean that we can imitate the contextualizing activity of the New Testament apostles and theologians in a direct cookie-cutter fashion. They articulated the good news in specific historical and sociocultural circumstances that are quite different from our own. Rather, the New Testament precedents function for us primarily in an analogous and exemplary sense.

I have already argued (see Introduction, D, above) that in addition to the “analogous and exemplary sense”, we need to take seriously the ongoing dialogical sense, since we know that “people in different cultural settings do not simply give different answers to the same questions, they ask different questions.” Thus in wrestling with the dialogue between texts and context, we may gain some insights to reinterpret and apply them to our context in life-giving ways. We are given analogies as to how to embody Jesus’ way of forgiveness, non-violent response and reconciliation, and are given a way to respond to the offenders so as not to surrender but at least potentially to transform the offenders’ way of life. The kingdom teaching of Jesus thus confronts our Christian communities to articulate the essence of righteousness and radical discipleship. It calls us to be faithful and steadfast in fulfilling radical discipleship and to continue a wider mission even among the persecutors. It reminds us not to be like foolish salt or a lamp under a bowl, but to be salt that preserves in our corruptive world and light that guides the way for others. It reminds us to be prepared for the last day.

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164 So Khok-Khng Yeo, Charles H. Cosgrove, and Herold Weiss, Cross-Cultural Paul: Journeys to Others, Journeys to Ourselves (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 32.
whenever it may come (‘interim ethics’, cf. 25:1-13), to discern Jesus’ way of love and mercifully and practically to reach out our hands to the little ones in our midst (‘realised or inaugurated ethics’, cf. 25:31-46).

As evil works with a worldwide scope, the Two Ways Theme of Matthew also reminds members of the Christian community of Myanmar to evaluate ourselves and the way we are following. The narrow way of Matthew’s Two Ways option is hard, but it alone leads to life and the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven (7:13a, 14a; 13:30, 43, 49; 25:10b, 46b). The wide way is easy, but its final result is destruction (7:13b; 13:30b, 41-42, 50; 25:11, 46a). Members of our Christian communities must learn and practise the better righteousness of Jesus as well as the way of authentic or radical discipleship. We need to discern the kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and recognise the essence of Matthew’s kingdom ethics for the Matthean community and realise how to embody the kingdom teaching in our daily lives in order to allow God’s kingdom presence to transform the country of Myanmar from the corruptive and destructive nature of its culture.

The salt and light metaphors following the beatitudes are calling the Christian community of Myanmar to be salt and light in the wider society.165 As salt and light, we need to accept our minority status, but just as a little salt and light can produce a great effect, we too can carry the promise and ethics of Jesus to the whole country. Thereby we can offer the double function for the world of Myanmar of preservation — by prolonging the time of grace — and of illumination — by giving direction. We need to seek the most appropriate community strategies for setting the person of Jesus before our world, remembering that “prayer and evangelism are the supreme way of

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165 Liebschner convincingly argues that the deliberate change of the pronoun from the third to the second in the double parables of the salt and the light, underneath kingdom beatitudes (5:13-16), refers not only to the Matthean community but also for all faith communities. It refers primarily to the twelve disciples of Jesus, secondary to the Matthean community, and then to the faith communities of all ages. See Siegfried Liebschner, “Salt of the Earth”, EuroJTh 2 (1993): 101.
carrying out the worldwide mission”.

These are the characteristics of discipleship, which Jesus pronounces in the beatitudes, and reinforces in the commissioning.

D. Matthew’s Kingdom Teaching in Analogous Contexts Today

It is not only members of the Christian community of Myanmar that are encountering similar crises to the Matthean community. Countries around the world in Latin America, Africa and Asia such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Bhutan, Myanmar, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan face crises of human rights violations due to the “existence of elite-dominated political systems and a pervasive climate of religious and ethnic intolerance”.

Thus there is no doubt that people in these areas face ethnic crises and persecutions as well as religious problems, and are reading Matthew and other biblical texts in similar ways.

In such countries suffering socio-political and religious crises, people are longing for peace and justice. Christian communities thus need “an ethics of responsible action, confrontation of power, and transforming initiatives”.

Christian communities need “shared practices that transform social experiences” and that “form and transform people morally” and ethically, and that “provide a meaningful sense of

166 Liebschner, “Salt of the Earth”, 101-103.
167 As rightly argued by Liebschner, “Salt of the Earth”, 102.
170 Stassen, “Healing the Rift”, 95.
membership” of a transformative community. Such communities can “support the critical teaching of the difference between obedience to the subtle powers and authorities of our society” and “radical obedience to the rule of God”. Our reading of the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew and of Jesus’ entire ministry with the eyes of those facing persecution and division not only leads us to endorse certain kinds of political engagement, but also to situate such engagement within a broader approach to the public witness and social ministry of Christian communities. It also calls us to rethink this intense political engagement in our own current context. As Stassen and Gushee state:

Political activism carries unique dangers for the church while offering real, but limited, kingdom opportunities. The danger is to become too close to a particular political ideology and to accommodate Jesus’ call to discipleship to a worldly power strategy or power center. We should not give our trust and loyalty to the political left or right. Instead, we should give practical attention to what government can do best and what churches and private groups can do best to transform the lives of the poor. The challenge for Christians is to ground political efforts in a healthy understanding of church, state, society and the reign of God.

The kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Sermon, in parables and in the eschatological discourse of Matthew can shape the lives of Christians today towards wise discernment and correct actions. It presupposes a life embedded in community and encourages not an inward-looking church but the “positive impact for the common good as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and the city on a hill”.

Reading Matthew from the context of Myanmar heightens both the necessity and the challenge of maintaining this outward focus when under pressure to survive.

The Great Commission of the Risen Lord calls us to engage in a wider mission to all nations. We are called to live and spread the Good News about Jesus. We are called to teach believers to observe everything that Jesus has commanded. As salt and

171 Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 476.
172 Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 476.
173 Stassen and Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, 479.
light, which are small but effectively offer their dynamic power to the whole earth and world, Christian communities are called to transcend our minority status and bring dynamic power to the world. As a star in the east led the magi to see and worship the newborn king Jesus (2:2, 9-11),\textsuperscript{175} Christian communities are called to shine forth light, that is, our sincere and practical good works to guide the world. Through lighting our light, like the city built on a hilltop, the world will see the light and will have the opportunity to come and share the salvation of Jesus in glorifying the Father (cf. 2:2, 9-10; and 5:16). The kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew thus envisions that in times of crises, we need to discern the real essence of the kingdom message and enact it in our daily life in order to transform the world.

Just as the Matthean community was challenged by the Gospel to live faithfully in a context of persecution, division and suffering, the story of Matthew challenges Christian communities today that face similar situations to enact the way of Jesus.\textsuperscript{176} As Flemming rightly observes,

\begin{quote}
Today there is a burgeoning recognition among Christians around the globe that in order for the Christian message to be meaningful to people it must come to them in language and categories that make sense within their particular culture and life situation. It must be contextualized.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

The crises we face may be different. Our reading lens and our perspectives on the kingdom teaching of Matthew may be different. I believe, however, through reading the texts and the contexts behind the Gospel, we will encounter the real essence of the texts and context of Matthew’s Gospel and God will speak to us through the kingdom teaching of Jesus in some way in the midst of our contemporary crises. The kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew thus calls us to “a way of life that helps to build a better

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{175} Only Matthew tells us about the light of a star as leading the way for the magi in the darkness.
\textsuperscript{176} Cf. Jacob, “Discipleship”, 108.
\textsuperscript{177} Flemming, \textit{Contextualization}, 13.
\end{flushright}
Matthew’s way of reworking of his earlier sources thus enables us to hear anew the voice of Jesus in his kingdom teaching, and, by demonstrating an ability to tailor Jesus’ message especially for Matthew’s own context, compels us to interpret, adapt, and apply it in our daily Christian lives in our own context.179

E. Summary and Reflection: Kingdom Ethics in Context

In this chapter, I have explored the ethical implications of Jesus’ kingdom teaching in Matthew in the context of the Matthean community, and the socio-political and religious crises it encountered. I have argued that the kingdom teaching of Jesus is particularly important for describing the ethics needed for the survival and identity of Matthew’s community. Just as Jesus taught his disciples, Jesus’ kingdom teaching also speaks to every community of followers since. Matthew affirms that Jesus is not like the scribes and the Pharisees who are righteous in word, but is the one who has fulfilled all the Law and Prophets by his teaching and deeds. Matthew presents to his community Jesus as the Son of God, vindicated as the Risen Lord who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. Thus just as the Risen Lord has commanded (28:19-20), they should interpret the Law according to Jesus and embody Jesus’ way of a better righteousness through radical discipleship. They are called to be salt and light in the midst of their crises. Just as Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations, to practise baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and

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178 So Jacob, “Discipleship”, 108.
gave his promise to be with them always, so these instructions and promises are
directly speaking to Matthew’s community.

As the Christian communities in Myanmar confront strikingly similar sorts of
social and political problems, the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew also speaks
clearly to these Christian communities today. I believe that the kingdom teaching not
only speaks in a relevant way to the Matthean community and the Christian community
of Myanmar, but particularly directly to every Christian community which encounters
similar sorts of crises.