One of the enigmas of the Gospel of Matthew is the apparent contradiction between Jesus’ program not to abolish but to fulfill the law found at the beginning of the Gospel (5:17–18) and the risen Jesus’ commission of the disciples to preach all that he has commanded to all nations (28:16–20). The closing scene in the Gospel appears to be a deliberate christological rereading of issues dear to the life and practice of the Judaism of the post-war period: all authority is given to Jesus (see Deut 6:4–9; Dan 7:14). He breaks through national and religious boundaries as he invites his disciples to preach to all nations, replacing circumcision with baptism.\(^1\) He teaches the observance of what Jesus has commanded them (\(\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\ \delta\sigma\alpha\ \ἐνετειλάμην\)

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\(^{1}\) This is widely, but not universally, accepted. See, e.g., Michel-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1927), 544–45: “On comprend très bien que la restriction au brèbis d’Israel (Mt. X, 5s) ait été levée en ce moment.” See also Wolfgang Trilling, *Das Wahre Israel. Studien zur Theologie des Matthäus-Evangelium* (3rd ed.; Munich: Kösel, 1964), 21–51. For David C. Sim (*The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* [SNTIW; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 252–55), every aspect of the law was still practiced in the post-Easter Matthean community, including circumcision. Ulrich Luz (*Matthew* [trans. James E. Crouch; 3 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001–2007], 3:631–32) says that we do not know whether the practice of circumcision continued. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997], 3:685) argue, “That he expected Jewish Christians to circumcise their male children is plausible; but he evidently did not think such necessary for Gentiles.” As Davies, Allison, and Luz all argue that 5:17–18 means that the law must be rigorously kept till the end of all time (see below), Sim (*Gospel of Matthew*, 252) is rightly critical of their lack of logic.
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ὑμῖν) as the law (see Exod 29:35). This puzzle is intensified by Jesus’ sending of his disciples only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6), and his explanation of his own mission as “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). At the same time, Jesus is actively involved with Gentiles in two miracles stories (8:5–13; 15:21–28), which are directed toward Gentiles, but are instructive for Israel (see 8:10–12; 15:26–28).

In this essay, offered with respect and gratitude to Frank Matera, scholar, colleague and dear friend, I argue that the contradiction should not be regarded as an unresolvable tension in Matthew’s narrative. It points to the situation of the Matthean Jewish Christian community, struggling with its own identity vis-à-vis the Judaism of its time, and initiating a Gentile mission. This context determines the Evangelist’s appreciation and presentation of Jesus, his mission, and the mission of the church.4

Time in Matthew’s Narrative

Focusing our attention on the temporal element in the passages that highlight the contradiction between the accepted ways of Judaism and the new openness to “all the nations,” we notice that the passages that limit Jesus’ and his disciples’ activities to Israel are located at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and then during his public ministry (5:17–18; 10:5–6; 15:24). The mission to “all the nations” is the final scene of the Gospel (28:16–20).

The temporal element of Jesus’ words in 5:17–18 calls for a closer examination. His words open the Matthean Jesus’ interaction with the law in verses 21–48. They form part of one of Matthew’s favorite themes: Jesus

2. This affirmation must be nuanced, as Matthew by no means regarded the Mosaic law as abolished (see, e.g., 9:14–17; 13:52), but it is Jesus’ teaching as the interpretation of the law that must be taught (28:20). See the excellent comment by Luz, Matthew, 3:633–34. See the annotated discussion of 28:16–20 in John P. Meier, Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel: A Redactional Study of Mt. 5:17–48 (AnBib 71; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 35–40.

3. Robert H. Gundry (Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 8), eliminates the problem by claiming that “in their numbers and in their following Jesus during his earthly ministry, the Jewish crowds symbolize the international church, including the many Gentiles who were later to become disciples (4:25–5:1 with 7:28–8:1; 21:8–9, 11).”

4. This perspective, and much of the study that follows, depends upon Meier, Law and History; and Roland Deines, Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora im Reich des Messias (WUNT 177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till [ἕως ἄν] heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until [ἕως ἄν] all is accomplished.

The two expressions of time in the passage refer to some future “time,” using the same Greek words to point to the future: ἐως ἄν. There is the “now” of Jesus’ preaching in his first discourse, but there is a time “yet to come” when the present order of things will be changed. These expressions refer to a time in the future when the perfection of the law will be completed: “till [ἐως ἄν] heaven and earth pass away … until [ἐως ἄν] all is accomplished.”5 In the light of our understanding of Jesus’ eschatological teaching beginning in the Christian narrative tradition in Mark 13 and importantly present in Matt 24, most scholars continue to read Matt 5:17–18 as a reference to the traditional Jewish notion of the end of time.6

This understanding of the future events referred to in 5:17–18 strengthens Jesus’ limitation of his disciples’ and his own preaching to the lost sheep of Israel (10:5–6; 15:24), and his hesitation before working two miracles for Gentiles (8:5–13; 15:21–28). However, in 28:16–20 Matthew reports words of the risen Jesus that reach outside the narrated events of the Gospel. The disciples are sent on a mission to the ends of the earth, and Jesus promises that he will be with them till the close of the age. If the future time of 5:17–18 referred to the end of all time, the command of Jesus that the law be observed, without changing even the tiniest detail, would still be in force in the post-Easter Matthean community and in any subsequent Christian community using this document as Sacred Scripture, awaiting Jesus’ final coming.7 But whatever one makes of Jesus’ relationship to the law during his ministry, he abandons the perfect observance (“not an iota

5. See Meier, Law and History, 48: “It is important for the subsequent exegesis that ‘until’ is the only possible meaning. There are no solid grounds for changing the meaning to ‘in order that’ “ (emphasis original).


7. This is argued by Luz, Matthew, 1:218: “If the Matthean Jesus had temporarily limited the validity of the Torah, that would have been a completely surprising mes-
or a dot”) of the law in 28:16–20 when he sends his disciples on a mission to all nations.8

For many exegetes these tensions reflect tensions already existing in pre-Matthean traditions. They remain within the narrative, once these traditions have been incorporated into Matthew’s story of Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection. In the end, we are left with ragged tensions that cannot or should not be resolved as they reflect the Matthean experience.9 This study takes a different methodological approach. The Gospel must be read as a single utterance that made sense to an author. Matthew did not leave these contradictory understandings of his community’s relationship to Torah and its mission to the Gentiles to stand unresolved in the Gospel.10

Between Jesus’ insistence on the mission to Israel at the beginning and during the course of his public ministry (5:17–18; 10:5–6; 15:24), and his final commission as the risen Lord to the Matthean disciples to go out to the whole world (28:16–20), something happens that dramatically changes the future roles of both Jesus and his disciples. John Meier has drawn attention to the account of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Two descriptions are found there—reported only in Matthew—of events that could be regarded as signs of “heaven and earth passing away” (see 5:17–18). The first of these moments is at the death of Jesus:

From the sixth hour there was darkness all over the land until the ninth hour…. The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead. (27:45, 51–53)

sage for the Jewish Christian readers of the Gospel. It would not at all have been in keeping with the one who wants to keep the same Torah down to its last iota.”

8. There is some ambiguity over the meaning of τὰ ἔθνη in 28:19. Jews and Gentiles are included in this expression. See, among many, the summary in Luz, Matthew, 3:628–31. For Deines (Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 183–256), Matt 5:13–16 is already a clear indication of Jesus’ preparation of his disciples for a universal mission.


10. See Meier, Law and History, 44; Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 28–30.
The second of these moments is found in the Matthean description of the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus:

All at once there was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. (28:2–4)

For Meier, heaven and earth are passing away. Matthew has taken some of his imagery and language from the Christian tradition concerning Jesus’ death. It is found in Mark’s report of the tearing of the veil, the darkness at the death of Jesus, and the whiteness of the robe of the figure at the tomb, although he was a “young man,” not an angel (Mark 15:38; 16:5). However, it is obvious that Matthew has changed the Markan scenario considerably. He has drawn upon some traditionally “apocalyptic” symbols from Jewish thought but has shifted their timing. The events described—darkening of the skies, splitting of the rocks, earthquakes, lightning, the rising of the dead, the appearance of angels, and men struck down as if dead—are events that were expected at the end of all time when YHWH would return as Lord and Judge (see Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10; Hag 2:6; Zech 14:5; 1 En. 1:3–9; 71:1–2; Jer 15:9; Ezek 37:7, 12–13; Isa 26:19; Dan 7:9; 10:7–9, 16; 12:2; T. Levi 4:1). Matthew indicates that these events will take place not only at the end of history, as was held by Jewish traditions, well represented in Matt 24. They have already happened at the death and resurrection of Jesus.12

11. It is often easily assumed that Mark’s young man is an angel. For a different opinion, linking the young man in Mark 14:51–52 with the young man in 16:5, see Francis J. Moloney, The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 344–46. It is only the more apocalyptic Matthew who introduces an angel. Luke (24:4) has two men.

12. See Meier, Law and History, 30–35. Donald Senior (“The Death of Jesus and the Resurrection of the Holy Ones [Matthew 27:51–53],” CBQ 38 [1976]: 312–29) argues that the addition of these eschatological events are part of the Matthean redaction. Dale C. Allison (The End of the Age Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 40–50), against Senior, claims that Matthew is incorporating a pre-Christian eschatological tradition. Jesus’ death and resurrection draw eschatological events into the human story. To use the language of Meier, this marks the “turning point of the ages.” It is not the end of human history. The Matthean Christians were firmly located in a time and a place, living in the “in-between time,” awaiting the final end of history (see Matt 24; 28:20). See Allison, End
Roland Deines agrees that the future time indicated in 5:17–20 is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but regards Meier's limitation of the fulfillment to the paschal events as too narrow. For Deines, everything that is said about Jesus (Son of God, son of David, Messiah, the fulfillment of the Scriptures) and the kingdom, from the beginning to the end of the Gospel, must come into play when the theme of “righteousness” emerges in the narrative. Jesus' coming (5:17), his fulfillment of the abiding validity of the Torah (v. 18), and his instruction to the teachers (v. 19) establish the righteousness that leads to heaven (v. 20). The disciples' righteousness as God's righteousness establishes the kingdom of God (6:1, 33). Israel's traditional link between righteousness, the law, and Davidic messianic expectation is maintained but transformed and “fulfilled” in the life, teaching, ministry, and eschatological events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, son of David, Son of God, Messiah.\textsuperscript{13}

Matthew shows that Jesus lived out the perfection of the Mosaic tradition not only in what he does but also in who he is. Before the story of Jesus begins, in the incontrovertible information provided for the reader in the Gospel's prologue (1:1–4:16), Jesus is portrayed as son of David and son of Abraham (1:1, further spelled out in 1:2–17), Messiah (1:16), king of Israel (2:1–6), and Son of God (2:15; 4:1–11). The events of the birth and infancy of Jesus bridge the time between the former covenant and the days of Jesus. They are a fulfillment of the promises of the law and the prophets. Almost every scene in the Matthean prologue indicates that the events of Jesus' birth and infancy are “to fulfill what was said by the prophet” (see of the Age, 49–50. For a recent and very different reading of these apocalyptic elements as a figurative presentation of Jesus as the firstborn from the dead, corresponding to the birth of the believer, see Serge Wüthrich, “Naître de mourir: la mort de Jésus dans l'Évangile de Matthieu (Mt 27.51–56),” *NTS* 56 (2010): 313–25.

\textsuperscript{13} One cannot do justice to this remarkable study in a few lines. For his closing summary, see Deines, *Gerechtigkeit der Tora*, 639–54. In terms of “the turning point of the ages,” see p. 449: “Matthäus beschreibt in seinem Evangelium die eine heilsgeschichtliche Wende, in der die Offenbarungsgeschichte Israels in Gestalt von Gesetz und Propheten in Jesus kulminiert und durch ihn einen neuen Anfang zu den Völkern der Welt nimmt.” One of the strengths of Meier's position is his location of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the moment “when heaven and earth pass away.” See Deines acceptance of this in *Gerechtigkeit der Tora*, 359. For Deines's inclusion of Meier's thesis as a culmination of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection, see ibid., 278–79, 355–57.
The members of Matthew’s community are caught up (perhaps, for some, unwillingly?) in the Gentile mission (28:19). Nevertheless, Matthew makes clear that they are products of the perfection of the law and the prophets in the person and teaching of Jesus, and that they are summoned to follow his way till the end of the age. Then the Son of Man will come in final judgment (ch. 24). As this is the case, the Evangelist can claim that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth must still strive to live and teach what Jesus has taught them as they await, assured of the presence of their risen Lord, the end of this age (chs. 24–25; 28:20). For Matthew, the synagogue-centered religion of postwar Judaism, which rejected and expelled the followers of Jesus, had said a definitive no to Jesus’ teaching of God’s law.16

The breakdown between Jesus and the leaders of Israel that dominates 11:2–16:12 and the harshness of the Matthean presentation of Jesus’ Jewish accusers during the final days in Jerusalem and his death and resurrection (21:1–28:15) are the major, but not the only, pointers to this truth. Only in Matthew’s Gospel do we find the chilling words on the lips of “all the people” (πᾶς ὁ λαός): “His blood be upon us and on our children!” (27:25). Only in Matthew do the leaders of Israel pay those whom they set to guard the tomb, so that a lie could be spread abroad: Jesus was not raised; his disciples stole the body (27:62–66; 28:11–15). The Matthean church was living out God’s saving history, from Abraham to Jesus (see 1:1–17) into the Gentile mission (28:16–20).


15. This is not the place to enter into an extended proof of this affirmation, but see Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 453–638, with extensive focus upon Jesus’ fulfillment and transformation of Torah, righteousness, and Davidic messianic expectation (pp. 469–500), as found in the use of Torah and righteousness in the Prophets (pp. 501–74) and the Psalter as a Davidic Torah (574–638).

16. As Luz (Matthew, 1:55) succinctly and correctly points out: “The Gospel of Matthew is a response to the no of Israel’s majority to Jesus. It is an attempt to come to terms with this no by defining the community’s position and to contribute to forming and preserving its identity in a situation of crisis and transition.”

17. For a recent tracing of a saving history through Matthew, see Marvyn Eloff, “Από… ἐως and Salvation History in Matthew’s Gospel,” in Built upon the Rock: Stud-
any historical scheme behind Matthew’s narrative. It is generally coupled with a tortured attempt to understand how Matthew understood the role of the law, and the need for the Christian community to adhere to every detail until the end of all time. Every suggestion stumbles over several elements in Jesus’ life and teaching that transcend the law. Outstanding, in this respect, is the almost total neglect of the extreme tension that exists between (at least) 5:17–20, 21–48; 10:5–6; 15:24 and 28:16–20.

**The Matthean Use of Δικαίοσύνη**

I was initially drawn to consider Matthean use of δικαίοσύνη by the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus in 3:14–15: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now [ἀφες ἀρτί]; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness [πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαίοσύνην].’ Then he consented.” This is the first time that the word δικαίοσύνη appears in the Gospel. These are the very first words Jesus utters in the Gospel of Matthew. They do not depend upon the Markan version of this encounter (as does Luke 3:21–22), there is no evidence that it may have come to Matthew from Q, and the passage thus represents a Matthean use of a time scheme of “now … later.”

Matthew uses the expression δικαίοσύνη seven times (3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32), and it is universally accepted that every usage reflects...
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The Matthean redaction. The expression is chosen and used by Matthew.\(^{20}\) The discussion of this usage is clouded by two issues. Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, and the interpreter leans naturally toward an interpretation of δικαιοσύνη within the broad semantic range of “law-righteousness.” This interpretation is supported by Matthew’s many uses of the adjective δίκαιος, all of which, with different nuances, describe law-abiding characters (sometimes unfavorably) within the narrative (1:19; 5:45; 9:13; 10:41; 13:17, 43, 49; 20:4; 23:28, 29, 35; 25:37, 46; 27:19).

The shadow of the Pauline use of the expression δικαιοσύνη looms large. Current scholarship supports a blanket understanding of Matthew’s use of δικαιοσύνη or “righteousness” as “moral conduct.”\(^{21}\) One of the driving principles of this interpretation is a distinction between Paul and Matthew. God’s action (Paul) must be eschewed in favor of human action (Matthew). “Hence ‘righteousness’ does not refer, even implicitly, to God’s gift. The Pauline (forensic, eschatological) connotation is absent.”\(^{22}\) What follows attempts to show that this blanket exclusion of the action of God has narrowed interpretation too severely.

The temporal and spatial location of Matthew’s use of δικαιοσύνη deserves attention. Five of the seven sayings appear in Jesus’ first discourse and are associated with the instruction of his disciples on the perfect living of the law (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). They are flanked by the remaining two sayings, both of which are associated with John the Baptist (3:15; 21:31). Jesus’ first words are marked by the use of δικαιοσύνη in his discussion with John the Baptist, his first discourse is studded with its use, and his final reference to John the Baptist returns to the expression. The first two of these

\(^{20}\) See, among many, Luz, Matthew, 1:142.

\(^{21}\) My analysis will refer especially to the outstanding commentaries of Davies and Allison and Luz.

\(^{22}\) Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:499. See also, among many, Gundry, Matthew, 70: “No evidence leads us to think that in a Pauline manner he means a sentence of justification when he uses the term. Ordinarily in his Gospel ‘righteousness’ refers to right conduct on the human side.” As Georg Strecker (The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary [trans. O. C. Dean Jr.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988], 98) comments, “the integrity of Jesus’ disciples is expressly characterized as human doing (ποιεῖν) and not as divine gift.” For the discussion, see Benno Przbylski, Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1–8; Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 152–54.
sayings (3:15; 5:6) are future oriented, while the remaining five address a “present” challenge or reality.  

Matthew 3:15

Jesus’ command to the Baptist: ἄφες ἄρτι, well translated by the RSV as “let it be for now,” indicates to the reader (as well as to John the Baptist) that for “now” unexpected events must take place, and that the Baptist must be associated with God’s design for Jesus in his response to this “now”: “it is fitting for us” (πρέπον ἡμῖν). However, there will be a later time when all righteousness (πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην) will be fulfilled (πληρῶσαι). Commentators are unwilling to read this passage as a reflection of Matthew’s view of salvation history. But it is a time “now” when the Baptist must associate himself with Jesus as that is part of God’s present design. There will be a later time, when God’s intervention in the human story by means of his Son, Jesus, when such actions will no longer be needed. “John no longer simply points to the fulfiller, as did the Law and the prophets. Now, along with the fulfiller, John is also fulfilling God’s prophesied plan for salvation.”

23. For an introduction to the principles guiding literary readings of narrative passages, see Moloney, *Beginning the Good News*, 19–42.  


This passage comes before 5:17–18 and thus guides the reader better to understand the references to the “now” of the perfect living of the law and the prophets, and the “later” when the law and the prophets will be fulfilled (v. 17) and heaven and earth will pass away (v. 18). In the context of a discussion between Jesus and the Baptist, present practices are to continue—for now. When all righteousness is fulfilled, this will no longer be the case. The same promise will be made later in the story when Jesus instructs his disciples, “This generation will not pass away till all these things take place [ἐώς ἄν πάντα πάντα γένηται]” (24:34). Jesus’ first words immediately alert the reader that there will be a time when all righteousness will be fulfilled (πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην, 3:15), when the law and the prophets have reached their eschatological fulfillment (πληρῶσαι, 5:17). The reader is led by these words of Jesus, his first δικαιοσύνη saying, to recognize on arrival at 5:17–18 that Jesus is pointing forward not to the final end of all time, but to the moment in the story of Jesus when all righteousness will be fulfilled.

This interpretation is strengthened by asking when of some crucial Matthean texts. On three occasions during his ministry Jesus threatens Israel that the kingdom will be taken away from them and given to others (8:11–12; 21:42–43; 22:1–10)—when? The prologue to the Gospel (1:1–4:16) is framed by a reference to Abraham, the father of all nations (1:1), and Galilee of the Gentiles (4:16). Hope, nourishment, and forgiveness of sins are offered universally (3:13–19; 12:15–21; 14:13–21; 15:32–39; 26:28), and Jesus teaches that the gospel will be preached to ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν (24:14) before the coming of the end of time. When will all these things happen? All these things (πάντα, 5:18; 24:34) will be experienced in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For the readers of the story the fulfillment of all these things has already taken place. They do not have to wait until the end of all time for the fulfillment of “divine expectation.” For those living in the presence of the risen Christ

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27. On 5:18 and 24:34, see Meier, Law and History, 57–65.
(28:20), it has already taken place in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This “temporal” aspect in the reading process is central to an understanding of the shift from Jesus speaking of the fulfillment of righteousness in the future (3:6 and 5:6) to the present experience of the disciples (5:10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32), living in the period after that fulfillment.

This interpretation of 5:6 must be influenced by the meaning of δικαιοσύνη in 3:15. The beatitudes as a group, the fourth beatitude (5:6) among them, promise a future blessedness dependent upon a way of life. Within that context Jesus points to a future time when God will satisfy those who now hunger and thirst for righteousness. The “now” of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who will be blessed with a “future” satisfaction (χορτασθήσονται). As we will see, this “now and after” scheme is not found in the eighth beatitude (v. 10), where righteousness is attained in the “now” (“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”) by enduring persecution (see also vv. 10–11). As Jesus asked John the Baptist to join him (πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν, 3:15) in God’s design “to fulfill all righteousness,” the disciples are invited to a restless yearning and search (hunger and thirst) for righteousness that they may be eschatologically satisfied.

The first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew (3:15) generate a narrative tension that leads the reader to look beyond the immediate context for the meaning of δικαιοσύνη, toward some future time in the story. Those who seek this eschatological gift of δικαιοσύνη are blessed (5:6) because their result of hungering and thirsting “now” for the righteousness that only Jesus can offer in its fullness (3:15) will eventually experience satisfaction. At this stage in the story, the search for true righteousness marks the present experience of the listeners, while their satisfaction lies in the future. Those who hunger and thirst will come to final satiation in their search for the righteousness that God offers in and through Jesus. “The disciple, in effect, is to live now the life that is to be realized fully at the end of time, yet, through Jesus, is already breaking into the world.”

From now on, however, as the disciples are drawn more deeply into the

28. See also ibid., 77–80.
kingdom by means of their association with Jesus, all the “righteousness” sayings point to a present challenge or situation.

**Matthew 5:10**

Continuing to read the narrative in the light of the first use of δικαιοσύνη in 3:15, now reinforced by the promise of eschatological satisfaction in the immediate context of 5:6, one can see that this text hints at commitment to righteousness that will lead to persecution. For most interpreters, hamstrung with their limited understanding of the Matthean use of δικαιοσύνη, moral achievement is again at stake: “‘Righteousness’ here can only be something people have, namely their obedient, righteous conduct.” But the immediate and broader context suggests that Christology is involved. The fullness of righteousness is yet to be achieved in the story (see 5:17–48; 27:45, 51–53; 28:2–4, 16–20), but the Matthean disciples are promised that persecution for the sake of righteousness (ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης) brings (present tense: ἐστιν) the kingdom of heaven. A christological reading of ἑνεκεν δικαιοσύνης is demanded by the expansion of what is meant by verse 10 in verses 11–12. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you … because of me [ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ]” (v. 11). The parallel between ἑνεκεν δικαιοσύνης (v. 10) and ἑνεκεν ἐμοῦ (v. 11) must be respected, since verses 10–11 are a Matthean addition to the tradition in order to relate verse 10 to the experience of the community.

The theme is repeated in Jesus’ instructions to his community in 10:22: “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake [διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου].” The suffering experience of the Matthean community was not primarily caused by their “obedient, righteous conduct.” If persecution is the result of the Matthean disciples’ living obediently, what distinguished them from their Jewish contemporaries? Were they also persecuted for their...

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L. Blomberg (*Matthew* [NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 95) speaks of “inaugurated eschatology.”


“obedient, righteous conduct”? The immediate context spells out that Matthean disciples are reviled and persecuted because their commitment to Jesus renders the kingdom present “now” (5:11–12). In the next discourse (10:1–11:1, the community’s mission) this is further reinforced. Disciples are instructed that they will be hated for the sake of Jesus’ name (10:22).

Persecution for righteousness’ sake (5:10) is the consequence of a commitment to God’s design for the fulfillment of all righteousness (see 3:15), the yearning for the perfection of God’s will and design (5:6), in imitation of Jesus, who came to fulfill the law (see 5:17) and who called his disciples to follow him into a perfection of love that matches the perfection of God (5:48). Rightly has David Garland commented on 5:10:

It is one thing to pronounce blessed those who are persecuted because of righteousness or devotion to the law (2 Macc 7:9, 11, 23, 37; 4 Macc 6:24–30); it is something else to pronounce blessed those who are persecuted because of their relationship to Jesus, “for my sake” (see also 10:18, 39; 16:25; 19:29). This beatitude reflects the high christology of the Gospel.

Matthew 5:20

Matthew 5:17–20 is generally regarded as an introduction to verses 21–48. But it is a continuation of what has been said since 5:3, an argument that is not completed until 5:48, and beyond. The exhortation of the disciples in the Beatitudes, and especially in the parables of 5:13–16, continues to...
determine the argument. They are to be salt and light. God’s righteousness must be manifested in them.

Meier has shown that verses 17–18 are the result of Matthew’s reworking of the tradition, and that verse 19 probably came to Matthew from a prior reworking of Q. The association of the Matthean verses 17–18 with the traditional verse 19 “resembles an undigested morsel in our text.”38 If everything in verses 17–19 was meant by Matthew to indicate that each commandment (v. 19) of the law and the prophets (v. 17) was binding until the end of all time (v. 18), as that event is described in Matt 24, and if anyone who dared to relax even the minutiae in life and teaching was to be least in the kingdom, then Jesus stands among the least in the kingdom of heaven (v. 19). Obviously, Matthew did not want to say that!

While verse 19 continues the argument of verses 17–18 by indicating the penalty (“least”) or blessing (“great”) flowing from one’s observance of the various commandments that make up the law and the prophets, it looks forward to the series of reinterpretations of individual commandments (ἐντολαί) that Jesus puts in place in the antitheses of verses 21–48. And it leads into verse 20. In the light of 3:15 and 5:6, the warning that compares the believers’ righteousness with the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (v. 20) cannot only be a plea that the disciples be more moral than their Jewish contemporaries.39 It has to do with the fulfillment of God’s design, intimately associated with Jesus’ understanding of the law, and his request that his disciples join him (5:3–13). The theme of righteousness that has appeared in this early section of the discourse has called followers of Jesus to a qualitatively “different righteousness” (3:15; 5:6). The believer’s righteousness “exceeds [περισσεύσῃ] that of the scribes and Pharisees” because its measure is the person of Jesus Christ. The disciple is to “exceed” the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, and exceed it πλεῖόν. The comparison is a “qualitative” exceeding of the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, as it is to reflect the eschatological righteousness of God.40

Jesus’ authoritative reinterpretation of Torah across verses 21–48, stated categorically with the rhythmic repetition of ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν (vv.

38. Meier, Law and History, 104.
39. Major commentators point to the comparison with the scribes and the Pharisees as an indication that v. 20 is about better moral performance. See Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:499; Luz, Matthew, 1:221–22.
22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44), maps out what it means to fulfill (πληρῶσαι) the law and the prophets. At the end of his reinterpretation of Torah, he turns to his disciples and informs them that they are to parallel his life and ministry in their performance of reinterpreted Torah. He commands them: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). Jesus claims that he has come to “fulfill” (πληρῶσαι) the law and the prophets. The “perfection” (τέλειοι) of the disciples, matching that of their heavenly Father, is the way in which they are to greatly exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. It is this “perfect righteousness” that leads to the eschatological gift of the kingdom of heaven. The association of the disciples with a christological principle is prepared in 5:3–16 and established in verses 17–20. In Jesus’ teaching on the practice of disciples, outlined in verses 21–48, the accent is upon the eschatological style of their living, determined by the fact that they are disciples of Jesus who do not abrogate the Mosaic law but perfect it (v. 17).41 “Despite appearances, despite all the eschatological sharpening and rescinding of the Law that goes on in the antitheses, Jesus’ eschatological mission is not to do away with the Law and the prophets, but to give them their eschatological fullness.”42 Jesus’ request that the righteousness of his disciples (v. 20) reflects the perfection of God (v. 48) draws them into this eschatological fullness.43 In 6:1 and 6:33 the reader will learn that the disciples’ righteousness is God’s righteousness, and as such establishes the kingdom of God.

Matthew 6:1

A new section in the discourse opens with 6:1.44 The theme of authentic religious practice, over against the falsity of the “hypocrites,” dominates 6:2–6 (ὑποκριταί, v. 5) and its parallel in 6:16–18 (ὑποκριταί, v. 16). The identity of the hypocrites who parade their virtue is not specified, but their

41. See Meier, Law and History, 168: “The rule of life for the Christian is thus an ‘umbrella concept’: ‘all things whatsoever I commanded you’—be that secundum, praeter, or contra the Mosaic Law.”
42. Ibid., 69.
43. For a detailed analysis of vv. 17–20, set within its broader Matthean context, that supports this view, see Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 257–434.
44. There is some doubt about the originality of the first δέ in 6:1. The textual evidence is evenly balanced. It makes no difference to the interpretation of δικαιοσύνη. See further Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 435–46.
association with the synagogue (see vv. 2, 5) links Jesus’ instruction in 6:1 with his parallel instruction in 5:20. The exhortation to δικαιοσύνη in 6:1 acts as a “hinge passage” between 5:21–48 and 6:2–28. The formal link with 5:20, in the light of 3:15, 5:6, 10, warns against making light of this Matthean expression, used consistently to speak of the fulfillment of divine expectation. The “doing” (ποιεῖν) of “righteousness” looks to the future reward (μισθόν) from the Father in heaven. This is contrasted with those whose public parading of accepted practices “already” (vv. 2, 5, 16) have their reward. The Matthean Christology demands that the disciples being instructed must live as Jesus lived, “doing” the righteousness that he has already “fulfilled” (3:15; 5:6, 10, 17–20). Although the expression “kingdom of heaven” is not explicit, the reward from the Father who is in heaven is not lost or gained only from right religious practice before God (5:20; 6:1); it is a participation in the life that is available to Jesus’ disciples by means of their participation in the eschatological gift of a righteousness that comes from God (3:15).

Matthew 6:33

As 5:21–48 was introduced by describing its relationship to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets (5:17–20), 6:19–7:11 closes with a description of the relationship that exists between right living and the law and the prophets (7:12). Many regard 6:33 as an “end point” or a summary of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:28). The search for righteousness is intimately linked with the kingdom of God. The joining of τὴν βασιλείαν
τοῦ θεοῦ and τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ with καί can generate a hendiadys.51 “the co-ordination of two ideas, one of which is dependent upon the other.”52 It is impossible to equate the kingdom with moral performance. As Meier rightly observes, “dikaiosunēn appears next to basileia as the co-equal object of the seeking.”53 Disciples are to seek, before everything else (ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον), the righteousness that is the kingdom of God (τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ) in their lives. The kingdom is further described as his (i.e., God’s) righteousness (τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ). If “righteousness” in Matthew has “to be uniform in meaning—moral conduct according to God’s will,”54 how can this be said of God?55 “No exegete would claim that the kingdom in Mt. is simply to be equated with Christian moral effort or the end result of that effort.”56

This final use of the expression in the Sermon on the Mount reinforces what Matthew has taught to this point: the imperative to search for the kingdom of God and his righteousness indicates that “the righteousness of God” describes the fulfillment of God’s design in and through the life, teaching, and especially the death and resurrection of Jesus that has fulfilled all righteousness (see 3:15). Disciples are not to seek “entry” into the kingdom, but to devote themselves assiduously to the spread and the strengthening of the kingdom in the world. It is an exhortation that they take seriously their universal mission as followers of Jesus.57 The eschatological, beyond (but not excluding) the moral, aspect of the δικαιοσύνη

51. There is some doubt about the presence of τοῦ θεοῦ in 6:33. A stronger textual tradition supports it and is a reading that would not have been easily omitted. However, Matthew almost always uses βασιλεία without a modifier. I am retaining it also because of the textual evidence, and the literary and grammatical balance that exists between the τοῦ θεοῦ (after “kingdom”) and αὐτοῦ (after “righteousness”). There is no textual doubt about the latter, which would have no antecedent noun if the former were omitted.

52. BDF, §442 (16). If this is not a hendiadys, recourse can be had to the use of the epexegetical καί where the second noun is an explanation of the first (§442 [9]).

53. Meier, Law and History, 78. See also Hagner, Matthew, 1:166.

54. Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:327.

55. This problem is well discussed in Nolland, Matthew, 314–15; Strecker, Sermon, 139–40.

56. Meier, Law and History, 78. However, exegetes do make this claim for 6:33.

57. Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 446: “Zusammenfassend ergibt sich für 6,33, dass der Imperativ ζητεῖτε nicht im Sinne von eingehen in die Basileia zu interpretieren ist, sondern als sich bemühen um die Ausbreitung und Geltung der Basileia in der Welt, d.h. er ist Aufruf zu einer missionarischen Existenz” (emphasis original).
sayings in evidence throughout the discourse of 5:1–7:28 is summarized in 6:33.\(^{58}\)

**Matthew 21:32**

The final use of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew is in 21:32. The first such saying appeared in a discussion with John the Baptist that asked the Baptist to accept the situation of Jesus’ baptism and to look forward to a time of the fulfillment of righteousness (3:15). This final saying, coming after a series of such sayings in 5:1–7:28, returns to a context that involves John the Baptist and is Matthew’s last reference to this figure.\(^{59}\) It again associates him with righteousness. Located in the larger section of the story dedicated to the definitive breakdown between Jesus and Israel that leads to his death and resurrection (21:1–28:15), it is part of a bitter series of conflicts between Jesus and the leaders of Israel (21:12–23:39). As with 5:17–20 and 6:1, the expression δικαιοσύνη appears in a major introductory section of the narrative (21:12–33).

Following Jesus’ action in the temple (21:12–17) and the cursing of the fig tree (vv. 18–22), Jesus’ authority is questioned by the chief priests and the elders of the people (vv. 23–27). He addresses this situation of unbelief by means of the parable of the Two Sons (vv. 28–31). Interpreting the parable, he attacks the leaders of Israel as having given lip service to the commands of God, but doing what they want, while there are “outsiders”...
who have responded. This was also the case in the time of John the Baptist, described as one who came to them “in the way of righteousness” (ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης, v. 32). This phrase is regarded as a traditional expression used to indicate a good life. Matthew’s use of “the way” (see 3:3; 4:15; 5:25; 8:28; 10:10; 13:4, 19; 15:32; 20:17, 30; 21:8, 19; 22:16) is dependent upon Mark.

The Baptist’s coming “in the way of righteousness” brings Jesus’ instruction to John the Baptist in 3:15 to closure. In their first encounter, the Baptist accepted his role as he waited for the fulfillment of righteousness. As with Jesus, so with the Baptist: both were rejected by a false Israel that claimed righteousness but did not live that way (see especially 15:10–20; 21:28–32, 33–41; 23:1–10, 11–36). The consequence of this situation is that the “outsiders” (tax collectors and prostitutes) who join John and follow Jesus accept the fullness of righteousness present in Jesus (3:15). Israel will not repent and believe. This is already an initial fulfillment of Jesus’ threats in 8:11–12, 21:42–43, and 22:1–10, and has been foreshadowed by Jesus’ words on the reception of John the Baptist in 11:7–19. “Yet wisdom is justified [ἐδικαιώθη] by her deeds” (11:19). The situation will worsen from 21:33 through 28:16.

Given the complex of δικαιοσύνη sayings, their arrangement across the Gospel narrative, and the cumulative reading experience that leads to this final saying, understanding 21:32 as an indication that John the Baptist lived a morally upright life is unsatisfactory. The Matthean uptake of the Markan theme of “the way” indicates that the dynamic sense of journey-
ing, both physically and spiritually, is also congenial to Matthew. 64 John the Baptist, instructed by Jesus to attend to the fulfillment of righteousness (3:15), was ἐν ὑπὸ δικαιοσύνης; but the chief priests and the elders of the people (see v. 23) do not join him on this “way.”

Israel’s final rejection of the perfection of all righteousness that was first articulated during the Baptist’s ministry (3:15) and further explained in Jesus’ first discourse (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33) is near at hand as Jesus turns toward the death and resurrection that will mark the turning point of the ages (21:32). Meier comments: “Both eschatological gift and man’s moral effort may come together in 21:32.” 65 The Matthean use of δικαιοσύνη marks both Jesus’ first encounter with John the Baptist in 3:15 and his final comment on John’s role in 21:32. This “location” of the sayings enhances the possibility that the theme of “eschatological gift,” so prominent in 3:15, is also present in 21:32. This is further enhanced by the cumulative effect the sevenfold use of δικαιοσύνη has upon the reader. As Donald Hagner comments: “Probably this is to be understood as a reference to the process of the accomplishment of salvation in history through God’s sending of John as the forerunner of Jesus.” 66

Conclusion

In this study I agree that the Matthean δικαιοσύνη is not Pauline. 67 But I attempt to indicate that mainstream scholarship has overreacted against possible Pauline interpretations of Matthew by insisting that all Matthean δικαιοσύνη sayings are to be associated with human action, and never with God’s design. This appears to be a straitjacketing of the Matthean text.

65. Meier, Law and History, 79. See also Meier, “John the Baptist,” 401.
66. Hagner, Matthew, 2:615, with reference to 3:15. See also Gnilka, Matthäusevangelium, 2:222.
Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises made to Israel, as he obediently responds to all that God asks of him (5:17–18). In his final act of obedience and God's response, death and resurrection, Matthew makes clear that a new era has dawned (27:45, 51–53; 28:2–4). Although, apart from δικαιοσύνη, Pauline language is not used (e.g., “in Christ,” “grace,” “sonship,” “new creation,” etc.), Matthew tells of the establishment of an eschatological people (28:16–20; see also 16:13–19; 18:15–20).68

As he opens his ministry, Jesus points to the future fulfillment of righteousness (3:15). A future (eschatological) orientation is maintained in 5:6. But, from that point on, there is a righteous way of living “now” that reflects the fulfillment of all righteousness (5:10, 20; 6:1, 33). This “now” of the life of Jesus closes as he returns to John the Baptist and shows that Israel has made its decision (21:32). From that point on in the story, Israel's no to the fullness of righteousness is played out. Jesus fulfills all righteousness. He is the perfection of the Davidic messianic promises, the Son of God, the perfection of Torah and the prophets. A final “turning point of the ages” is revealed when heaven and earth pass away (5:17–18; 27:45, 51–53; 28:2–4).

The search for righteousness, for Matthew, is not primarily commitment to required moral response. It is a discipleship transformed by Jesus' fulfillment of righteousness through his life and teaching as the son of David, son of Abraham, Messiah, and Son of God (1:1, 23; 4:1–11; 16:16–18), and climactically in and through his eschatological death and resurrection.

In Matthew … this age and the age to come seemingly overlap. Although the consummation lies ahead, although this age is still full of tribulation, and although the Christian casts his hope in the future coming of the Son of Man, saints have already been raised, the Son of Man has already been enthroned in the heavenly places, the resurrected Jesus is ever present with his followers (28:20). If we may so put it, Matthew's eschatology is, in some ways, more realized than that of Mark.69

68. Note the important closing comment of Deines, Gerechtigkeit der Tora, 654: “Das letzte Wort in dieser Sache haben aber weder Matthäus noch Paulus, sondern der auferstandene und wiederkommende Christus. Bis dahin wird die Christenheit gut daran tun, beiden Zeugen des Evangeliums mit ganzer Leidenschaft zuzuhören zu tun, was sie sagen” (emphasis original).

69. Allison, End of the Age, 49–50. See Meier, Law and History, 38: “There is much more ‘realized eschatology’ in Mt’s theology than is usually admitted.”