

## **Bible Study**

### **“Go; First Be Reconciled”<sup>1</sup>**

**(Matthew 5:24)**

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#### **Matthew 5:21-26**

<sup>21</sup> ¶ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

#### **1. Introduction**

The chapters in Matthew which contain the commandments, "Go; first be reconciled to your

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Consultation on Peace, Reconciliation and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula: Towards an Ecumenical Vision beyond the Tozanso Process Conference held in Hong Kong between October 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> in 2009.

brother or sister" (Matthew 5:21-26), "Do not seek retribution" (Matthew 5:38-42) and "Love your enemies" have often been interpreted as ethical commandments or lofty ideals that were given to his disciples by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Since they require extremely high criteria of virtues, some scholars even argue that they are impractical instructions to follow.<sup>3</sup> However, Jesus' Message in the Sermon on the Mount is, rather than teachings on ethics, the eschatological proclamation that says about the impending judgment for those who turn away from God.<sup>4</sup> To understand these passages appropriately, we need to view to whom and in which context the commandments are given. The following questions will be whether these words of Jesus should still be practiced by Christians today, and whether they are unjustly applied to the weak and dispossessed of today's world to further inflict injustices and to silence any responses to the evils conducted by those in power. In this study, I would like to pursue the exegetical significance of the passages, especially focusing on the saying of Jesus, "go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister."

The "*audience*" of the Beatitudes in Matthew *is described* as "the disciples" and "the multitude" (Matthew 5:1). Therefore, Gerhard Lohfink says that, although he points out that the audience of the Sermon on the Mount is "the multitude," he considers the main target of Jesus' saying is the disciples, and thus the disciples represent the people of Israel in this scene.<sup>5</sup> It is

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<sup>2</sup> Schweitzer says, "it is clear that the Sermon on the Mount contains the ethics of disciples, who are required more strict righteousness than the Pharisees. E. Schweitzer, *Mataeo Bokeum (Das Evangelium nach Matthäus)* Trans. Korea Theological Study Institute, Das Neue Testament Deutsch Teilband 2 (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1976), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *San Sang Sul Gyo (Die Bergpredigt)*, Trans. Sang Rae Park (Seoul: Bundo Publishing Company, 1976), 7-20.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 125. Strecker suggests that Jesus' message here is eschatological because he has divine authority (Mat. 7:29).

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *San Sang Sul Gyo neun Nuguaegaero? (Wem Gilt Die Bergpredigt?: Beiträge au*

here worth noting that the audience remaining at the end of the sermon are only “ the multitude” and they are amazed at Jesus' teaching. This was because his teaching was different from their scribes (Matthew 7:28-29). The mention of the multitude indicates that It would be more appropriate to view the main hearers of Jesus as “ the multitude.” Those who were listening to Jesus teach were in fact the very people who had been educated in the laws by the scribes, who had, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees, actually used the laws and their interpretation in a way which justified their unjust actions and utilized the structurally unjust system of the Jerusalem temple to oppress and exploit the weak.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is challenging and questioning the righteousness of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees throughout his Sermon on the Mount.<sup>7</sup>

In Matthew 5:21-26 Jesus tells his listeners to go and first be reconciled, urging them toward true reconciliation. However, his words were not directed toward his disciples or the general population. His words were for the teachers of the law in Jerusalem who had conspired to kill the people of Galilee who were struggling for their livelihood during the last years of the war in AD 70 as murderers. The words of Jesus commanding his listeners not to seek retribution or to love one's enemies were neither utopian ideals given to Christians, nor were they new ethical commandments. His commandments were for the legalists in Jerusalem who had devised

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*einer christlichen Ethik*), Trans. Han Gyo Jung (Oegwan: Bundo Publishing Company, 1990), 47-48. Also, Lohfink, *Jaesu neun Otun Ghdehdchaereul Won Hat Na?* (*Wie Hat Jesus Gemeinde Gewollt?*), Trans. Han Gyo Jung (Oegwan: Bundo Publishing Company, 2000), 69-74.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus calls the scribes and the Pharisees “evildoers” (Mat 7:23). Furthermore, they “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them” (Mat. 23:4). On the other hand, the people who are judged as sinners by them are actually “weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (Mat 11:28).

<sup>7</sup> Jesus teaches that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not enough to enter the Kingdom of God in Matthew 5:1-20. He goes on to criticize the scribes who interpret the law to adhere to their best interests in 5:21-48, and then the Pharisees who engage in hypocritical religious

ethical codes taking advantage of *lex talionis*<sup>8</sup> to seek "Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth" (Matthew 5:38-42) and thus escalating the desire for revenge and teaching the Israelites "To love your neighbors and hate your enemies" (Matthew 5:43-48).<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Looking into the text : Who will effect true reconciliation first and how?

After warning his audience that the righteousness of the Pharisees is not sufficient for one to enter the Kingdom of heaven and criticizing their hypocrisy Jesus contradicts the legal restraint of "do not commit murder." He says, "but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." (Matthew 5:22) This saying of judgement on the fire of hell is not simply the judgement in future but implies Israel's historical experience and is reiterated in describing the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the holy temple in Matthew 24.

Amazingly, Jesus states that it is not the murderer but the one who is angry at his brother and curses him that is to receive the judgment of a murderer. As discussed above, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reflects the historical context of the Judean War in A.D. 70.<sup>10</sup> The Jews

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acts of worship, prayer and fasting while indulging in injustices in chaps. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" is known to have its origin in the legal code of Hammurabi. It was formed not to encourage retaliation but rather to stop it (Gen. 23-24). The code protects the further offense by limiting the retaliation for an eye only to an eye, and then for a tooth only to a tooth. Schweizer, *Mataeo Bokeum*, 136

<sup>9</sup> Actually Leviticus 18:18 says, "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." Theissen observes that the Jews had formulated the teaching to hate the enemies throughout the adverse experience of the Jewish war.

<sup>10</sup> Kümmel says that the Gospel of Matthew was written right after A.D. 70 and thus the book reflects

who had been divided North and South from the time of Solomon frequently clashed and were in a state of actual division. The leaders of Jerusalem, situated in the South regarded their brothers, in other words, fellow Jews from Galilee<sup>11</sup> as unclean heathens and demeaned them. This did not stop them from exploiting the Galilean and exacting taxes from them.<sup>12</sup> As a result the hungry and poor Galileans resorted to theiving and taking up struggles until in the end they engaged in open warfare against Rome during A.D. 67-70.<sup>13</sup>

The religious leaders who should have spoken on behalf of the oppressed and supported the cause of the weak and deprived people of God chose to ignore their predicament and engrossed themselves in hypocritical religious rites.<sup>14</sup> They disowned the Galilean who were struggling for survival and handed them over to the Roman authorities to be killed.<sup>15</sup> In

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the context of the Judean War around A.D. 67-70, especially the tragic situation in Israel. W. G. Kümmel, *Jungkung Gaeron (Einleitung in das Neue Testament)*, Trans. Ik Soo Park (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1988), 122-123.

<sup>11</sup> Strecker says that the "brother" in Mat. 5:22 meant "fellow Jew" before the New Testament period and later was taken as the Christian fellow in Christian tradition. According to Mat 7:1-5 and 18:15-35, the term "brother" seems to represent the people who were considered as sinners by the religious leaders of Jerusalem. In light of the situation of Israel in A.D. 70, the "brother" can mean the people who were originally the Israelites but then came to be labeled as foreigners, and the Zealots who were considered as enemies, rebels and murderers. Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Byung Moo Ahn discusses that the Galileans were more harassed and oppressed by the Jews rather than the Romans, after reviewing the political-cultural situation and economic state of the ancient Galilee. "Marco Bokeumae Dae Han Sahoehakjuk Ihae ( Sociological Understanding of the Gospel of Mark)," *Sahoehakjuc Sungsu Haesuk (Sociological Biblical Exegesis)*, Ed. Byung Moo Ahn (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1983), 216-224.

<sup>13</sup> Bo Reick, *Neutestamentlich Zeitgeschichte, Die Biblische Welt 500v.-100n* (Chr. Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin, 1968), 270-275.

<sup>14</sup> G. Theissen, "Mataeo Bokeum eui Sahoeshajuk Baekyung Yonku (Socio-Historical Background of the Gospel of Matthew)," *Sahoehakjuc Sungsu Haesuk (Sociological Biblical Exegesis)*, Ed. Byung Moo Ahn (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1983), 177-181.

<sup>15</sup> This is implied in the following verses, "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another." (Mat 24:9-10).

response, the Zealots in Galilee considered the aristocrats and priests of Jerusalem as their worst enemies and assassinated them.<sup>16</sup> Within this context Jesus declares the innocence of those who are suffering under the yoke of sin constructed by the unjust legal system of the leaders (Matthew 12:7).<sup>17</sup> He goes on to state that it is those who use the unjust legal structures and religious doctrines to oppress and condemn the weak and poor, causing those who are struggling for survival to "stumble and fall," that is to say, to commit sin (Matthew 18:6-7) are the ones who are breaking the laws of God and acting unjustly (Matthew 23).

Criticizing the injustices conducted by the legalists who oppress their fellow Jews in Galilee with the law "you shall not murder" Jesus says, "so when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24) Leaving the altar in the middle of an offering was considered a very grave offence of temple regulations. However, Jesus is arguing that one must stop performing an unfaithful act of worship and first go to be reconciled with one's brother.

The reconciliation Jesus is telling his *hearers* to enact is not one in which a party simply gives in partially or simply wipes away the wrongs of the past and forgets all. The Greek word for reconciliation is "*diallasso*" and means "to change the situation of". In other words, changing

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<sup>16</sup> Theissen notes that the history of Jews in Josephus' work only describes the Zealots as those who fought against the Sanhedrin and the priests of Jerusalem with no mention on attacking the Roman soldiers. Theissen, "Mataeo Bokeum," 220.

<sup>17</sup> When the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of plucking heads of grains on the Sabbath, Jesus responds to them by saying that it should not be blamed to break the code of the Sabbath because of the hunger. He goes on to say, "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Mat 12:7). The parallel passages, Luke 6:1-5

the situation so that justice is established is true reconciliation. That is why Jesus is saying that in order to be reconciled one must go to the person who has been suffering and living a painful and sorrow-filled life and seek forgiveness. Not only that, but retribution must be made so that not even a penny is left (Matthew 5:26). The strong must first, and urgently, remove the very fundamental causes that make the others to stumble and fall.<sup>18</sup> They must remove the legal structures and religious dogmas and false ideologies which oppress the weak and institute laws which liberate the weak and dispossessed.

If the unjust powerful fail to go and be reconciled, Jesus warns, "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." (Matthew 5:25-26)

The weak and disenfranchised who have no avenue in which to seek justice will have their grievances brought before the judge of heaven by God himself. God will judge their tears and bloodshed with justice and return their lost rights and powers (Matthew 18:10; Luke 18:1-8). Therefore, the unjust must first be reconciled with those who are taking them to the court of God while still on the way. They must return all that they have illegally taken and exploited and establish the laws of justice. If they do not hurriedly seek reconciliation then they will find they have run out of time. God does not ignore the cries and tears of the suffering and will address their grievances. He will put in prison those who speak against their brother so that they will

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and Mark 2:23-28 does not have this verse. It reveals Matthew's unique theology.

<sup>18</sup> Jesus strictly commands for the strong to remove the fundamental cause so that the weak would not stumble down and sin by saying as follows: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to

stay there with no possibility of freedom or escape (Matthe 5:26).

The reference to the court, the judge, the officer and prison all refer to the judgment of God. However, the writer of Matthew is not depicting the apocalyptic judgment of God as something that will come in the distant future but is relating it with the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem. When the leaders and prophets and priests who should have properly instructed the people became corrupt and unjust, the Jews became slaves of stronger nations and their leaders were the first to be taken away as slaves and to lose their lands and all their possessions, and even be killed.

### **3. Jesus' Commandments in the Light of the Contemporary Context and Our Task as Christians**

In an age of tight control when simply speaking about the issue of reunification was enough to land one in prison the Tozanso meetings that were organized by the WCC provided the space in which the churches of North and South Korea could come together and discuss the issue of reconciliation and reunification together. During the past twenty years the sacrificial commitment by a small number of people who listened to the commandments of Jesus and gave themselves for the reconciliation and reunification of the two Koreas has seen the crumbling of walls and the streams of history have begun to leave their mark.

However, the present government in South Korea is trying to turn the tides of time of reconciliation and peaceful reunification by wanting to reclaim their "Lost Ten Years". As a result the relations between North and South Korea have again become constricted and projects such as the Keumgang Mountain tours, the economic cooperation through the Kaesung

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lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell" (Mat. 5:29-30).



Industrial Complex and the reunion of separated families are facing severe challenges and obstacles. The present government sought to strengthen their ties with the United States and threatened North Korea with joint military exercises and followed the North Korea Policy of the United States by participating in the move toward economic sanctions and the PSI. The North Korean government regarded all such actions as a direct threat to their security and has consequently stopped all channels of communication with the ~~current~~ South Korean government and has even openly declared that they will wage war if they need to. As a result the Korean peninsula is once again gripped in a state of panic and fear where the possibility of a regional conflict flaring up and a second internecine tragedy has become likely.

Next year marks the centenary of the secret agreement between the United States and Japan which allowed the Japanese to forcefully seize Korea as their colony. It also marks the 60th year since the division of the Korean peninsula by the superpowers. Within such a context, the powers which have thus far been responsible for the division and continued disunion of North and South Korea continue to try and exert their domineering influence through the so-called Six Party Talks. Today I would like to propose the following as tasks which must be undertaken by Christians to attain national reconciliation and a peaceful reunification of Korea.

First, we Christians must not simply be satisfied with sitting silently and praying as the weak are oppressed and violated. Just as the widow sought the judge and persisted until she got her wish we must persist in our protests. We must call these nations to account for their injustices and seek retribution and apologize from them. No longer should their schemes and plots to exploit the Korea and her people be allowed to stand. Those stronger countries which decry the human rights of North Korea and its nuclear armament but currently hold a third of all nuclear weapons on earth while trampling on the human rights of the weak must forfeit their injustices

and illegal actions. They must be called to account for their actions and encouraged to seek justice.

Second, we Christians must not look upon the struggles and resistance of the weak through the eyes of the strong and thus mistakenly label such acts as terrorism or violence. Rather, we must look upon such acts as a process for establishing true peace while shattering the false peace that pervades this world, and we may even need to regard them as a necessity in order to effect change.<sup>19</sup> Our Lord, Jesus also brought his sword and fire to bear upon the unjust powerful of this world in order to secure a true peace that liberates the oppressed. As such, Christians must not be disillusioned by the deceptive ideals of separation between Church and State and use this as an excuse to remain silent against the unjust political systems.<sup>20</sup> We must stand together across the divisive lines of nation, race, class and gender and oppose these systems of injustice.

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<sup>19</sup> During the Japanese colonial period, the colonial government imprisoned and executed those Koreans who resisted against the colonial rule and fought for the independence of Korea as "terrorists" and "murderers." However, Koreans respect them as "freedom fighters" and "martyrs" who sacrificed their lives for the freedom and emancipation of the Korean people. Hence, what is still important in contemporary realities is whose perspective should take precedence when we discuss history. In this regard, many of the resistance and fights taking place at every corner of the world today should be construed as the underprivileged people's little "struggles" and "desires" for justice that wish to accomplish the true peace and justice of Jesus Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese Resident-General who governed the Korean peninsula during the Japanese colonial rule, made a secret deal with foreign missionaries in Korea. He allowed their mission activities in exchange for their disengagement in politics. But this was not in accordance with the teachings of the Bible nor those of Jesus Christ. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus criticized the power holders' logic of domination and urged repentance to Herod and the ruling class. While he condemned the Jerusalem Temple, which was used to oppress the weak, and fought against the unjust laws and religious doctrines, he was turned in to the Roman Empire with the accusation of "perverting the nation" and "stirring up the people by teaching" (Luke 23:1-15) and was crucified.

Third, the leaders of North and South Korea must stop committing the injustice of trying to strengthen their political power by using the state of division as an excuse. More than anything else North and South Korea must step forward and take the initiative in resolving the issue of the Korean peninsula into their own hands under the agreed upon principles of national cooperation. The prophets of the Old Testament criticized the actions of the Israelites who had been divided north and south and were each running after the support of the stronger nations, Assyria for the north and Babylon for the south, as those of a prostitute. The prophet Ezekial labeled the leaders of Jerusalem as prostitutes who give their children over to adultery and receive no ransom (Ezekial 16:33).

Forth, the Armistice must soon be replaced with a Peace Agreement which declares an end to hostilities and calls for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the Korean peninsula who remain under the pretext of providing security in a divided land. It is only then that peace will come to the Korean peninsula and to the wider North East Asia region, as well as the rest of the world. We have seen through the witness of the Bible how the leaders of Jerusalem sought the favor of stronger nations and oppressed their own people, labeling them as gentiles and enemies and sinners, handing them over to the Roman authorities and ultimately ending in the downfall of their nation. Today, the Korean peninsula is in a similar situation. The only way for our nation to survive is not to threaten or oppress the other by labeling them as enemies but resolving the suffering and sorrow that fills the hearts of the people, sharing in their pain.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whenever there happen conflicts and rivalries between different nations, races, social classes, genders, we claim that we need to enact “ reconciliation,” composing beautiful phrases on the subject, and seeking for the consensus everybody can agree on. Nevertheless, we have

never been able to access to the period of true reconciliation but only of the superficial and unsound compromise. How can we make the true “ reconciliation” happen in our history? We first need to define what the true meaning of “ reconciliation” as appears in the Bible. The following question will be who needs to lead it, and how we can attain it. This study has discussed that the lessons put forth in the Sermon on the Mount were not directed primarily to the disciples or to Christians but to the religious leaders of his time who exploited and oppressed their fellow Israelites under the pretexts of law, order, preservation of the status quo and doctrine. The problem that looms up by trying to apply the scripture to the present reality is that those who call themselves Christians and thus are supposed to seek for the reconciliation for peace continue to oppress the weak without any consideration of the lessons that Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount.

But it is not only the superpowers that behave in unjust ways. The weaker nations which had been their victims have become blind followers of their exploitative ways to take advantage of the people of countries that are weaker than they. Shamefully, Korea is no exception.<sup>21</sup> In a world where the patristic and militant characteristics pervade our societies and even influence the church, it is all the more difficult to attain true peace and reconciliation which Jesus has called us to.

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<sup>21</sup> Korea had long experienced the control of a neighboring superpower China and was colonized by the Japanese Empire which left much “*han*” to the Korean people’s lives. Despite such history, contemporary realities of Korea include the nation-state’s participation in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars in the name of the “Korea-US Alliance” and the “Korea –US Collaboration,” social oppression of “immigrant women” and “foreign workers” from poor Asian countries, and the creation of many problems through some churches’ imperialistic mission efforts. However, there are also faithful Korean Christians and churches that have repented such injustice through their deeds. For example, they visited Vietnam to apologize for the past wrongdoings, provided medical services there and supported the children who were abandoned by their Korean fathers during the Vietnam War. In Korea, they have made an effort to help “immigrant women” and “foreign workers” to solve their problems.

However, in faith, I believe that Jesus has already begun the historical work of attaining peace and reconciliation through his death on the cross and the power of his resurrection. I also believe that the history of peace, reconciliation and unity has already begun by those who did not fear being labeled sinners, who endured imprisonment but continued to cross the barriers of division and to share the pain and suffering of their neighbors. And as Christians unite with these brave souls to stand against the darkness of injustice and light the candles which will once again rise up to become a roaring flame we will see the walls dividing our land and people crumble and the road to peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula and the world will open up before us.