

I do not want to leave the impression that these warnings of the coming judgment were the *only* things Jesus taught about during his public ministry. As we'll see in the next chapter, that's not the case at all. But it's important to understand fully the framework within which his other teachings are to be fitted. Many people—Christian and non-Christian alike—think of Jesus as a great moral teacher whose ethical views can help produce a better society for those of us who are determined to make our lives together as just, peaceful, and enjoyable as possible. On one level, I think that's probably right. But it's also important to realize that Jesus himself did not see it that way. He did not propound his ethical views to show us how to create a just society and make the world a happier place for the long haul. For him, there wasn't going to be a long haul. The judgment of God was coming soon with the arrival of the Son of Man—and people needed to prepare for its coming by changing the way they lived. Preparation for the Kingdom—*that's* what ultimately lies at the heart of Jesus' ethics, as we'll see now in the chapter that follows.

*a place for everything:  
jesus' other teachings in their apocalyptic context*

CONTEXT MAY NOT BE EVERYTHING, BUT IT'S NOT FAR OFF. THE WORDS "JUST KIDDING" MEAN SOMETHING PRETTY DIFFERENT IF SPOKEN BY THE SELF-APPOINTED COMEDIAN WHO LIVES across the hall from you, a sheep farmer in the barn of his Wyoming ranch, or the president of the United States speaking into a red phone in the Oval Office.

And so I've tried as best I can to set the context within which Jesus' teachings were delivered. As I indicated at the end of the previous chapter, Jesus taught about a lot of things other than the coming judgment of God to be brought by the Son of Man. In this chapter, we'll be looking at some of these other teachings in light of the overarching framework of his apocalyptic message. In particular, I'll be examining Jesus' "ethical" teachings to show how they relate to his proclamation of the Kingdom. In short, Jesus' followers were to live in ways that prepared for this coming Kingdom and that embodied the values that would be manifest completely and finally when it arrived.

I should emphasize that I won't be able to discuss each and every word found on Jesus' lips in our earliest sources, but only sayings that I think can reasonably be established as going back to him (in most instances I'll be giving the grounds for this judgment). Even among

these, though, I'll need to be a bit selective, since I don't mean this to be an exhaustive study. I hope I won't overlook any of your favorites.

### Jesus and the Jewish Law

To this point in my discussion of Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist, I've focused more on the noun than the adjective. Now it's time to shift focus. Jesus was Jewish. Realizing the Jewishness of Jesus is critical if we are to make sense of his teachings. For despite the fact that the religion founded in his name quickly came to be filled with non-Jews—and eventually, in fact, became itself *anti-Jewish* (on ugly occasions, violently so)—it was founded by a Jewish teacher who taught his Jewish followers about the Jewish God who guided the Jewish people by means of the Jewish Law. Jesus kept and discussed Jewish customs like prayer and fasting, he worshiped in Jewish places of worship like the synagogue and the Temple, and he kept Jewish festivals like the Passover. Like just about every other Jew that we know about from the ancient world, Jesus believed in the one Creator God of Israel and insisted that his people were to worship no other gods. He understood that this one God had made a special pact with Israel from the beginning, to be their God in exchange for their exclusive worship and devotion. He maintained that God's will was revealed in the books written by Moses, especially in "the Law" that was delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai, as recounted in these books (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). And he believed that when the people of Israel violated the Law, God punished them.

Most of Jesus' teachings, in fact, relate in one way or another to his understanding of this Jewish Law.

The Jewish Law, of course, included the Ten Commandments, but it contained much more besides. The Law consisted of stories of the ancient Jewish ancestors, from the time of Adam and Eve up to the death of the law-giver himself, Moses. Perhaps more important, it contained the other laws God had given to his people—laws pertaining to how they should worship and honor him, for example, by observing kosher food laws and requirements for tithing all produce, and laws pertaining to how they should relate to one another, for example, by not destroying one another's property. The Law was central to Jewish life. Jewish teachers taught this Law, Jewish lawyers were expert in this Law, Jewish scribes copied this Law.

Jesus was neither a scribe nor a lawyer. But he was a Jewish teacher who taught about the Law. Evidence of Jesus' attachment to the Jewish

Law is evident in multiple layers of our traditions, scattered throughout a range of independent traditions. Consider some of the following (this list simply gives examples; it is by no means exhaustive):

#### 1 Mark

When a man runs up to Jesus and asks him what he must do to "inherit eternal life," Jesus' immediate response is to list some of the Ten Commandments. (In Matthew's version of this story, he actually tells the man: "if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mark 10:17–22; Matt. 19:16–22; see also Luke 18:18–23).

#### 2 Q

Jesus states that it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a single dot of the Law to pass away (Luke 16:16; Matt. 5:18).

#### 3 M

Jesus states that he came to fulfill the Law and that his followers must keep the Law even better than the scribes and Pharisees if they want to enter into the Kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17, 19–20).

#### 4 John

Jesus argues with his opponents about the Law, and points out to them that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:34–35).

In fact, throughout the Gospels Jesus spends his time arguing and debating aspects of the Law—teaching his followers what God really wants and disagreeing with his opponents about it. In Mark he claims that Pharisees violate God's commandment in order to preserve their own traditions (Mark 7:8–9); in M he attacks his opponents for never considering what is written in the Law about the Sabbath (Matt. 12:5); and even in John he claims that Moses gave the Law but none of his opponents keeps it (John 7:19).

My point is not that each and every one of these accounts must be historically accurate exactly as it's reported, but that the idea that Jesus was principally concerned about understanding and teaching the real meaning of the Jewish Law, often in opposition to other Jewish teachers, is thoroughly rooted in our tradition. It is therefore to be trusted as historical.

What, though, did Jesus teach about the Law? Perhaps it is easiest to explain his views by setting them in contrast with other perspectives that we know something about. Unlike certain Pharisees, Jesus did not think that what really mattered before God was the scrupulous observance of the laws in all their details. Going out of one's way to avoid doing anything questionable on the Sabbath or to tithe all produce, whether bought or sold, was of very little importance to him. Unlike some Sadducees, Jesus did not think that it was of the utmost importance to adhere strictly to the rules for worship in the Temple through the divinely ordained sacrifices. Unlike some Essenes, he did not think that people should seek to maintain their own ritual purity in isolation from others in order to find God's ultimate approval. For Jesus—as for some other Jews from his time about whom we are less well informed (see, e.g., Mark 12:32–34)—what really mattered were the commandments of God that formed, in his opinion, the very heart of the Law, the commandments to love God above all else and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

This emphasis on the dual commandments to love is found in our earliest surviving Gospel, in a passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

And one of the scribes who came up heard them arguing, and noticing that [Jesus] was giving good answers, he asked him: "What is first among all the commandments?" Jesus answered, "The first of all is this, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole understanding and your whole strength.' [Deut. 6:4–5] This is the second: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [Lev. 19:18] There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him: "You are right, teacher; you speak the truth, because 'He is one and there is none other than him,' and 'to love him with all one's heart and understanding and strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself' is much more than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he replied intelligently, he said: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12:28–34).

Notice: the Kingdom of God again. Earlier when someone had asked Jesus how to have eternal life (which was to come in the Kingdom), Jesus told him to keep the commandments of God (Mark 10:17–22). Here when someone agrees that the chief commandments, above all others, were those of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (love the Lord your God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor as yourself—a commandment, I

should perhaps emphasize, that Jesus himself did not come up with! He was simply citing one of the laws of Moses), Jesus tells him that he is near to entering God's Kingdom.

The commandment to love is at the heart of the Law for Jesus, and keeping it is an apocalyptic necessity, as people prepare for the coming Kingdom.

### The Value of the Kingdom

It could easily be argued, in fact, that all of Jesus' injunctions to love others, to give oneself to others, to serve others, and so on were instructions on how to inherit the Kingdom that was soon to appear. For Jesus, everything else paled in comparison. People should eagerly wait for the Kingdom and sacrifice all to its appearance. According to parables found in M (and attested independently in the Gospel of Thomas), the Kingdom is like a treasure that a man discovers in a field; he goes out and sells everything he owns to purchase the field (Matt. 13:44; cf. G.Thom. 109). The treasure of the Kingdom, in other words, is more valuable than the sum total of everything else a person owns. And it's like a merchant in search of fine pearls; when he finds the pearl he really wants, he sells everything (everything!) in order to buy it (Matt. 13:45–46; G.Thom. 76). It may seem bizarre and radical to sell all one's possessions in order to get a solitary pearl. What does one do with it, but sell it to regain what one sold to get it? But as odd as it might seem to others, that is what the Kingdom is worth—everything one has. It's worth more, in fact, than one's entire life: "for what does it profit a person to gain the entire world but to forfeit his life? And what will a person give in exchange for his life?" (Mark 8:36–37). For Jesus, the answer is obvious. One should give up everything.

That's why, for Jesus, the present life holds no real attractions. Life in the present age should be at best a matter of indifference. One shouldn't be concerned about such trivial matters as what kind of clothes to wear or what kind of food to eat. As he says in the Q source, "seek first the Kingdom of God, and all its right way of living, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). What does its "right way of living" entail? It entails loving God, the one who brings the Kingdom, and one's neighbor as oneself. All else should be completely secondary in importance. If thieves want to take your clothes—let them! If bullies want to force you to do their work for them—let them! If the government wants to take your money—let them! If thugs want to beat you—let them! If enemies want to kill you—let them! None of these things

matters. You should give away your shirt as well as your coat, you should go an extra mile, you should render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, you should turn the other cheek, you should not fear the one who can destroy your paltry body. The Kingdom is coming, and the concerns of this life are trivial by comparison (see Matt. 5:39-42; 10:28; Mark 12:17; Luke 6:29-30; 12:4-5).

Your focus instead should be on God (the first great commandment) and taking care of others (the second). No one who is tied to the things of this world can put God above it. As Jesus is reported to have said in early and independent sources: "No one is able to serve two lords; he will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You can't serve God and material things" (from Q: Luke 16:13; Matt. 6:24).<sup>1</sup> And serving God means serving one's fellow human being. At the root of the second commandment, to love one's neighbor as oneself, is the so-called "Golden Rule," as found, for example, in Q: "Just as you want people to do for you, do for them" (Luke 6:31). Matthew adds the line that seems entirely appropriate for Jesus' own views: "for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12)—that is, treating your neighbor as you want yourself to be treated is the point of the entire Scriptures. So, too, the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas: "Love your brother as your own soul, keep him as the apple of your eye" (G.Thom. 25). Even traditions preserved only in the Gospel of John agree: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that a person lay down his life for his friends"; "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 15:12-13; 13:35).

In sum, the coming Kingdom should be the complete focus of one's attention. The charms of this age have no allure, the present life is a matter of indifference. Jesus' hearers were to give up their entire lives for the coming Kingdom, loving God above all else and sacrificing their lives for the sake of others. Recall the passages we discussed earlier in chapter 9, for example, those that deal with the reversals to be brought in the coming judgment. Those who make themselves lowly servants now will be exalted then, those who tend the needs of others now will be rewarded then. In the judgment of the sheep and the goats this involves feeding the hungry, clothing the destitute, visiting the sick and imprisoned (Matt. 25:31-46).

As a corollary, people should give all they have for the sake of others. In our earliest accounts Jesus not only urges indifference to the good things of this life (which, when seen from an apocalyptic perspective, are actually not all that good—since they too will be destroyed in the

coming Kingdom), he rails against them, telling his followers to be rid of them. And thus, when a rich person comes to Jesus to ask about inheriting eternal life, upon finding out that he has already observed the commandments of God found in the Law—he hasn't murdered, committed adultery, stolen, or borne false witness, for example—Jesus tells him, "You still lack one thing: go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mark 10:17-21).

The man is said to have gone away crestfallen because he was rich. Ever since, readers of the story have gone away crestfallen as well, especially those who suspect that Jesus meant what he said, and that his injunction wasn't limited to this one particular fellow. Interpreters have tried to get around the problem since it was first written (especially interpreters who weren't willing to give away everything for the coming Kingdom); but doing so ignores its logic. *Everyone* who saves his life will lose it. Jesus' demands were simple, in that they weren't that difficult to figure out; but they were also radical. The Kingdom required an absolute commitment. No one should look for it without considering what it would cost (cf. Luke 14:28-33)—for it will cost everything.

No wonder it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to inherit the Kingdom. What person with wealth has really, actually, loved others as himself or herself? If there are people starving on the doorstep—and there are always people starving on the doorstep—how can one keep one's possessions and claim to have followed the Golden Rule or kept the second great commandment? This wasn't a matter of debate and nuance for Jesus, but of clear pronouncement. Anyone who adhered to this teaching would be like a person who built his house on a rock. The house would withstand the beating of the wind and rain when a violent storm arose (the coming judgment!). But anyone who held back would be like a person who built his house on sand—the shifting sands of this world and what it has to offer—who would experience great loss when the storm came (Q: Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49). And the Kingdom would not come to those who simply paid lip service to his commands to give up everything in this world, but to those who had actually done what he said (cf. Q: Matt. 7:21; Luke 6:46).

Such people would be willing to cut off a hand or foot rather than hurt someone else (Q: Matt. 5:28-30; Luke 9:46-48). Such people would become like little children who own nothing and can lay claim to nothing (Mark 10:13-16). Such people would become slaves who do the bidding of others (Mark 10:42-44; cf. John 13:12-17). It is people like these who will enter into the Kingdom, not the powerful, wealthy,

and important. And just about everyone is powerful, wealthy, and important in comparison to toddlers and slaves.

That's why Jesus' own disciples evidently gave up everything they had and held dear in order to follow him. As Simon Peter allegedly said, "See, we have left everything behind and followed you." Jesus' reply, as we have seen already, seems consistent with his entire message:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left a house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and the sake of the good news, who will not receive them all back a hundredfold in this present time—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and lands, along with persecutions—and in the age that is coming, life that never ends. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first (Mark 10:29–31).

### The Family and the Kingdom

Does, then, seeking the Kingdom above everything else also mean leaving even one's *family* behind? Yes indeed. The common sense shared by modern proponents of "family values" notwithstanding, Jesus was quite unambiguous that even parents, siblings, spouses, and children were to be of no importance in comparison with the coming Kingdom. Consider the words preserved in Q: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he is not able to be my disciple" (Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37).<sup>2</sup> A person must *hate* his or her family? The same word is used, strikingly, in the saying independently preserved in the Gospel of Thomas: "The one who does not hate his father and mother will not be worthy to be my disciple" (G.Thom. 55). If we understand "hate" here to mean something like "despise in comparison to" or "have nothing to do with," then the saying makes sense. And it helps explain Jesus' reaction to his own family, as we'll see in greater length in chapter 11. For there are clear signs not only that Jesus' family rejected his message during his public ministry, but that he in turn spurned them publicly (independently attested in Mark 3:31–34 and G.Thom. 99).

Jesus clearly saw the familial rifts that would be created when someone became committed to his message of the coming Kingdom:

You think that I have come to bring peace on earth; not peace, I tell you, but division. For from now on there will be five people in one house, divided among themselves: three against two and two

against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother; a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Luke 12:51–53; Matt. 10:34–46; independently attested in G.Thom. 16).

And family tensions would be heightened immediately before the end of the age, when "a brother will betray his brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise up against their parents and kill them" (Mark 13:12).

These "antifamily" traditions are too widely attested in our sources to be ignored (they are found in Mark, Q, and Thomas, for example), and show that Jesus did not support what we today might think of as family values. But why not? Evidently because, as I've already emphasized, he wasn't teaching about the good society and about how to maintain it. The end was coming soon, and the present social order was being called radically into question. What mattered was not, ultimately, the strong family ties and social institutions of this world. What mattered was the new thing that was coming, the future Kingdom. It was impossible to promote this teaching while trying to retain the present social structure. That would be like trying to put new wine into old wineskins or trying to sew a new piece of cloth to an old garment. As any winemaker or seamstress could tell you, it just won't work. The wineskins will burst and the garment will tear. New wine and new cloth require new wineskins and new garments. The old is passing away and the new is almost here (Mark 2:18–22; G.Thom. 47).

### Some "Ethical" Corollaries

This new thing that was coming, then, required a complete commitment to love God and one's neighbor as oneself, even to the point of abandoning all else—including one's own family and home—in order to do so. Jesus appears to have maximized the commandment to love and minimized, in comparison to it, everything else. It is difficult to know whether the so-called antitheses preserved in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21–48) are authentic sayings of Jesus—they aren't independently attested, for instance. But they certainly bear out this theme that is found throughout our earliest traditions. The Law says not to murder, and Jesus, in light of the commandment to love others as oneself, radicalizes it to say that one shouldn't even express anger. The logic: if anger leads to murder, then you shouldn't be angry. The

Law says not to take someone else's wife; Jesus radicalizes it to say that you shouldn't passionately desire her. The logic: if desiring her leads to taking her (and thereby taking her away from the one to whom you are to be showing love), then you shouldn't desire her. The Law says to show mercy in judgment, so that the penalty you mete out fits the crime ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"); Jesus radicalizes it to say that you should show complete mercy, by turning the other cheek.

The supreme importance of love is probably what led Jesus to minimize the importance of other aspects of the Law that other Jewish teachers emphasized. As we'll see more in the next chapter, for example, Jesus probably did not disagree with the Pharisees in principle that the Sabbath should be observed. *Of course* it should be—it's part of God's Law. But if abstaining completely from work on the Sabbath means letting someone else suffer, then it's not what God wants, since God is ultimately concerned with humans and their welfare. "Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath!" (Mark 2:27). So, too, Jesus may well have agreed with the Pharisees that it's a good thing to tithe agricultural produce—doing so, after all, is commanded in the Law. But to focus on tithing while ignoring more important things, like human needs, is against God's Law. And so, in a tradition preserved in Q: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you tithe mint, and rue, and every herb, and you bypass justice and the love of God. True, you should have done those things, but not passed by these others" (Luke 11:42; cf. Matt. 23:23).

Similarly, Jesus agreed that one should worship in the Temple and, evidently, perform the proper sacrifices there. That is part of the Law given to Moses, and Jesus does, for example, keep the Passover in Jerusalem. But the sacrificial cult in the Temple was not nearly as important as meeting human needs: "for I desire mercy and not sacrifice," says Jesus, quoting the Hebrew prophet Hosea twice in the M traditions (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; see Hos. 6:6).<sup>3</sup> And he completely agrees that love of God and neighbor is much more important than "burnt offerings and sacrifices," according to Mark (12:33).

Some of Jesus' best-known ethical teachings relate directly to this radicalization of the love command as the heart of the Law. We have already seen that those who are wealthy should give what they have for those in need. Consider as well the following ethical corollaries.

#### Divorce

As today, the grounds for divorce were hotly debated in Jesus' day, some Jewish teachers claiming that a man could dismiss his wife for just about any reason he chose, others insisting that the grounds be weighty. Jesus'

own sayings on divorce come down to us in several different forms. Probably the most familiar today (in part because it fits more closely with a *modern* common sense) states that one has no right to get divorced *except* in cases of adultery (Matt. 5:31–32). But in Mark and the earliest form of Q (as preserved in Luke) Jesus forbids divorce altogether (Mark 10:4–12; Luke 16:18). In fact, anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery—since the Law itself indicates that when a man and woman join together, they are one flesh, not two. And that which God has united should not be separated.

Divorce leads to serious hardship still today, of course. But throughout history things have been, as a rule, even worse. In Jesus' time, when women were not able to go out to find a second job, but were for the most part reliant, by necessity, on the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, and sons), divorce could lead to abject poverty and misery. Jesus' understanding of the Law (with love as the guiding principle) forbade the practice altogether—even though the Law itself allowed it! Thus love for others means radicalizing the Law. Rather than providing documented grounds for a divorce by giving a certificate (as in Deut. 24:1–4), you shouldn't get divorced at all.

#### Forgiveness

The Law taught that anyone whose property was stolen or damaged by another could expect full restitution plus an additional 20 percent as a penalty (see, e.g., Lev. 6:1–5). For Jesus, though, the material things of this world were a matter of indifference, and the love you show another should be manifest in your willingness to forgive whatever was owed you. Just as everyone is eager for God to overlook the ways they've mistreated him (by breaking his laws, for example) so, too, they should be willing to overlook the ways others have mistreated them.

This, in fact, is one of the most widely attested teachings of Jesus. For example, in Mark Jesus says, "When you stand praying and have anything against someone, forgive it, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). In the Lord's Prayer, given in Q, God is asked to "forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4; cf. Matt. 6:12). Also in Q Jesus tells his disciples to forgive anyone who repents (Luke 17:3; Matt. 18:15); in L Jesus specifies that you should do so as many as seven times in a single day (Luke 17:4); in M he says you should do it seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22). Moreover, both M and L tell parables that stress the need to forgive in light of God's own forgiveness (Matt. 18:23–35, the parable of the unforgiving servant; and Luke 7:40–43, the parable of the two debtors).

### Judging Others

If following the heart of the Law meant forgiving one another's debts, it makes sense, as a corollary, that one should not stand in judgment on the faults, shortcomings, and misdeeds of others. Another constant refrain of Jesus' teaching is summed up nicely in Q: "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged" (Luke 6:37; Matt. 7:1). I probably don't need to add that the teaching is clearly linked to an apocalyptic notion of the future comeuppance; in Matthew, for example, the saying continues: "for you will be judged [i.e., in the coming judgment!] with the measure that you yourself use to judge" (Matt. 7:2). Luke moves in a similar direction: "Don't condemn and you won't be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37-38).

This teaching appears to relate closely to Jesus' general condemnation of those who don't practice what they preach, who condemn the faults and deeds of others while paying no heed to their own. The Pharisees in his acquaintance were not the only ones liable to the charge. As again he says in Q, in one of the most memorable and witty of his metaphorical gems,

And why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but pay no attention to the log stuck in yours? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me get that speck out of your eye," without even noticing the log that's in your eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your eye, and then you'll see clearly to get the speck out of your brother's (Luke 6:41-42; Matt. 7:3-5; independently attested in G.Thom. 26).

### Love of Enemy

Jesus insisted that people love not only their friends but even their enemies. This is another of those teachings that some who call themselves Jesus' followers have wanted to explain away over the years. Some of us like to have enemies, and others realize that our enemies' acts of hatred and violence are inexcusable and unforgivable. Nonetheless, it appears that Jesus maintained that one should forgive even the most senseless and cruel acts of others and pray to God on their behalf. And why not? This world that provides our sworn enemies with all their power and authority is to pass away; they will soon be faced with the wrath of God and their humiliation will be complete. Better to try to turn them now to the right path than to hate and despise them. If they don't turn, they will soon pay the price, quite independently of our enmity. Thus in Q, for example, Jesus tells his followers to "love your enemies" and to "pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27; Matt. 5:43-44), in L materials he

says to "do well to those who hate you and bless those who curse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

### Care for the Underprivileged and Oppressed

Jesus' insistence on the love for others was particularly manifest in his concern for the destitute of society, those who were impoverished, terminally ill, mentally diseased, and socially outcast. It was people like this who would inherit the Kingdom when the Son of Man arrived. Possibly their suffering now was a direct result of the forces of evil rampant here at the end of the age. God, though, would overthrow these forces in the end and vindicate those they had overpowered. In the meantime, anyone awaiting his Kingdom was to show the same kind of love for them. This is evident throughout the sayings materials of our earliest sources. Jesus pays particular heed to those with little or no standing in his society (e.g., women and children) and to those who were oppressed and suffering (e.g., the poor and the weak).

We have already seen Jesus' particular interest in children, as those who have no standing, position, wealth, or claim. Throughout first-century society, children were viewed as imperfect adults who would eventually mature into full human beings with rights and privileges. For the time being, though, they were obviously weak, dependent, and inferior.

Women, for their part, were often restricted to doing work in the home—and grueling work it was, for the most part. Just raising a family was a drain. Childbearing women of that era had to produce on average five babies just to keep the population *constant*. Women did the domestic chores—washing, cooking, teaching the children, and so on. In the poorer homes (such as those of most of Jesus' followers), they did so with no help. How draining was the work? Just take a solitary example. Today it takes just a few seconds to toss a loaf of bread into the shopping cart at the store. In Jesus' world, it took around three hours for a woman to grind enough grain for the next day's bread. There wasn't a lot of time for the finer things in life. Most women were illiterate and worn out. No wonder then that in daily prayers attested later, Jewish males thanked God that they were neither a child nor a woman.

Jesus, though, had a special place for both children and women. In our earliest Gospel, he claims that anyone who welcomes a child in his name welcomes him; and whoever welcomes him welcomes the Father (Mark 9:37; Matt. 18:5; Luke 9:48). And he may have had children in mind when he later says that anyone who causes "one of the least of these who believe in me to stumble" would be better off drowning in the sea (Mark 9:42). Perhaps most memorably, when some young chil-

dren were kept from him, he rebuked the disciples, "Let the small children come to me, don't forbid them. For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). Note: the Kingdom of God again. The theme recurs independently in the Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus is said to have seen some infants being nursed, and to have commented to his disciples, "These little ones who are being nursed are like those who enter into the Kingdom" (G.Thom. 22).

These various traditions appear to pass the criterion of dissimilarity. We know that at a later time Christians were mocked for being attractive to unsophisticated and uneducated children. Christianity was widely thought, then, to be a religion of ignorant nobodies. Not everyone, of course, disdained kids on principle; presumably, most parents more or less liked their own. But given the general disdain of children in that society it seems unlikely that someone would make up the idea that Jesus was especially keen on them.

Jesus was at least as concerned with the status of women. The sayings traditions are more scattered here, but Jesus does speak with women in public and instructs them one on one (something unusual for a reputed teacher; see the independent traditions in Mark 7:27-28; John 4:7-26; 11:20-27); he urges at least one woman to be more concerned with hearing his teaching than doing womanly duties about the house (Luke 10:38-42); he publicly praises one for an act of kindness (Mark 14:6-9); and so on. And as we'll see more fully in chapter 11, women were clearly a central part of his mission.

Finally, we have already seen Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed. When he tells those with material goods to give them away to the poor, he doesn't seem to be concerned only that those with ties to this world remove them—else he could have told them simply to toss their stuff into the sea. The destitute should be cared for. Nowhere are Jesus' concerns for such people more clear than in the Beatitudes, as discussed in chapter 9. Those who were poor, hungry, thirsty, oppressed, and in mourning would be lifted up in the coming Kingdom. No wonder Jesus called this message "good news." In the short meantime, such people should be cared for by those willing to abandon everything for God, in accordance with the Law he's given his people.

### I Can See It Already! The Foretaste of the Kingdom

As I've already intimated, since Albert Schweitzer published his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1906, scholars have wrangled over the meaning

of the Kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus (they were actually wrangling about it before, but the issue became focused after Schweitzer). Some have basically agreed with Schweitzer that for Jesus, the Kingdom was a future, actual rule of God on earth. Others have urged that the apocalyptic language of the Gospels was completely metaphorical, and that the Kingdom was, for Jesus, already present on earth in his ministry. Those who have argued this latter view point to such verses as Luke 17:21, where Jesus reportedly said, "The Kingdom of God is among you." Unfortunately for this view, as most of its opponents have been quick to point out, the verse is found only in Luke (i.e., it is not multiply attested), a Gospel, as we have seen, that went some way to tone down the apocalyptic dimensions of our earlier sources. The fact is that there are apocalyptic pronouncements throughout all of our earliest accounts of Jesus' teachings, predictions of the coming judgment, of the imminent arrival of the Son of Man, of the future Kingdom on earth—and these pronouncements need to be taken seriously.

At the same time, there *are* other indications, even in these earlier sources, that in some sense Jesus and his followers thought they were already enjoying aspects of the future Kingdom in the present. As a result, probably the majority of scholars have been content to say that Jesus talked about the Kingdom as both future and present.

I think this general view (and as stated, it is very general!) is right, even though I'm not confident that most scholars have understood in what sense it's right. It should be quite clear by now that Jesus' predictions about the coming Kingdom cannot be watered down, compromised, Milquetoasted to death. For they form the very core of his teachings. His entire proclamation consisted in a call to prepare for the coming Kingdom, which would be brought in by a final judgment through the imminent appearance of the Son of Man. Jesus' teaching of what we might call "ethics" was advanced to show people how they could be ready.

At the same time, since the end represented an act of God to reclaim his creation for himself, Jesus understood that God was even now, in the present, ultimately sovereign over this world, notwithstanding the fact that the forces of evil had been unleashed against it. God was still, in the final analysis, in control, and could act, even in the present, on behalf of those who followed his will. Moreover, those who followed his will in the present—who would, then, inherit the Kingdom that was coming in the future—were in some sense practicing the ethics of the future Kingdom. In that sense, they were experiencing a kind of foretaste of what life in the Kingdom would be like.



### *God's Care for His Children in the Present*

The fact that God is sovereign over this world is what allows people the freedom to give themselves completely to others in preparation for the coming Kingdom. When Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31), he is referring specifically to food and clothing: "Don't be concerned about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you should wear. For your life is more than food and your body more than clothing." And so, since God will provide what is needed to live in the present, people should give completely of what they have for others: "Sell what you own and give it away; make for yourselves wallets that don't grow old, a treasure that will never forsake you.... For where your treasure is, there also is your heart" (Q: Luke 12:22-34; Matt. 6:19-21, 25-34).

That is why, even in the present age, people can trust God as a good parent who will give his children what is necessary. All they need to do is ask, and they will receive it:

Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. For what father among you has a son who asks for a fish, and he gives him a serpent instead; or who asks for an egg, and he gives him a scorpion? If then you who are evil know to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him? (Q: Matt. 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13; cf. G.Thom. 2, 92, and 94).

Thus a central element of Jesus' teaching involved trust in God to give what is needed to his children. In particular, those who follow Jesus' words can trust that God will give them the Kingdom that is soon to come. But trust in God—or "faith," as it is usually translated—is related not just to the future but to the present as well. This can be seen in the multiply attested sayings about faith attributed to Jesus in our earliest sources. Thus, for example, when Jesus heals a person (see chapter 11), he indicates that "your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34); he tells his would-be followers that everything is possible to the one who has faith (Mark 9:23); he tells his disciples that faith can (literally) move mountains (Mark 11:23); even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is enough to uproot an enormous sycamore tree (Q: Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6).

Those who anticipate God's act of judgment and salvation in the future can trust that he will care for them and do what they need now, even in the present evil age. And what is more, those who live lives of

faith and love (i.e., trusting God to bring the Kingdom and loving others as themselves in preparation) have already begun to experience a bit of what that Kingdom will be like.

### *Growing into the Kingdom*

Some of Jesus' best-known parables suggest that in some sense the Kingdom is already being experienced in the present, leading some scholars to make the mistake of thinking that there was nothing radically new to come in the future. That this is a misreading of these parables should be obvious by now. And it should be emphasized that even these parables themselves stress the enormous difference between the small and inauspicious experience of the Kingdom in the present and the enormous and cataclysmic coming of the Kingdom in the future.

Most of these parables have to do, in one way or another, with illustrating this immense difference. For example, in a parable independently attested in Mark and Thomas, Jesus likens the Kingdom to a mustard seed, that begins as a tiny seed (the "smallest on earth," according to Mark) but then becomes a huge shrub, large enough for birds to nest in ("the greatest of all," Mark 4:30-32). Scholars have had a field day with this parable, trying to make it mean all sorts of things. Most recently in vogue is the view that since the mustard plant was seen as a completely undesirable weed, the image was meant to shock Jesus' hearers into realizing that the Kingdom wasn't at all what they hoped for or wanted, but would be something completely unexpected.<sup>4</sup> A clever reading, but not at all what the text itself emphasizes: in both Mark and Thomas, the point is that something with a tiny beginning has such a huge result. Jesus and his followers had not exactly taken the world by storm! But when the Son of Man arrives, as they anticipate, a storm will be the least of the world's problems. Thus the Kingdom was like a mustard seed: a small beginning in Jesus' ministry, but an immense outcome on the day of judgment.<sup>5</sup>

So, too, in the parable of the woman putting leaven in three batches of dough (Q: Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20). The leaven is hidden at first, but it eventually permeates all three batches in their entirety. The Kingdom of God is like that: inauspicious beginnings with enormous consequences.

Other images are more directly horticultural. In our earliest source, Mark, Jesus speaks of the kingdom as seed that someone sows on the ground. The farmer doesn't really know how the seed grows, but it does: "On its own, the ground brings forth fruit: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." The parable ends with an ominous note of judgment: "And when the fruit has become ripe, immediately the

farmer sends forth his sickle, because the harvest arrived" (Mark 4:26-29). The inauspicious sowing of the seed will lead to a time of harvest (not by human effort!), in which the good fruit will be saved and all else destroyed.

Finally, one of the most famous parables of all, found in both Mark (along with Matthew and Luke) and Thomas, the parable of the sower, whose seed falls on different kinds of ground: on the path, on rocky soil, among thorns, and—thank goodness—on good soil. Only the seed on good soil produces a crop, and what a crop it is! Not due to the efforts of the sower (who doesn't appear to have been overly scrupulous in where he sowed his precious seed), but to the mysterious workings of nature, the seed sown on the good soil brings forth a huge harvest, multiplying itself many times over (according to Mark, thirty-, sixty-, and a hundredfold; according to Thomas, sixty- and a hundred-twenty fold; Mark 4:26-29; G.Thom. 9).

The seed of God's coming Kingdom is being sown on the earth. Most of those who hear of its coming fail to act. They are like the beaten earth of a pathway, or rocky or thorny soil. But some who hear give up everything they have in order to prepare. And they indeed will bear fruit worthy of the coming harvest.

#### *The Foretaste of the Kingdom*

In what sense, though, is it true to say that those who heard Jesus' proclamation were already participating—even in a small and seemingly insignificant sense—in the Kingdom that would be brought in a major cataclysmic way by the appearance of the Son of Man? In what sense had the Kingdom already begun, if even in a feeble and largely unnoticed way, to make its appearance on earth?

It's important to remember what the coming Kingdom would bring. In the Kingdom the forces of evil would be eliminated. The demonic powers in control of this age would be overthrown. There would be no more death or war or disease or sin or oppression or injustice or hatred. And Jesus' followers who were preparing for the Kingdom had already begun to implement the ideals of the Kingdom in the present. Jesus himself had allegedly begun to overcome the forces of evil that would be annihilated in the imminent appearance of the Son of Man (as we'll see in the next chapter). In the Kingdom, there would be no more demonic powers; Jesus allegedly cast out the demons that haunted people and shattered their lives. In the Kingdom there would be no more disease; Jesus allegedly healed the sick. In the Kingdom there would be no more death; Jesus allegedly raised the dead. These were not simply acts of kindness. They were parables of the Kingdom.

In the Kingdom there would be no more war. Jesus' disciples were not to engage in acts of violence *now*. In the Kingdom there would be no more poverty. Jesus' disciples were to give away all they had and give to the poor *now*. In the Kingdom there would be no more oppression or injustice. Jesus' disciples were to treat all people equally and fairly *now*—even the lowest classes, the outcasts, the destitute; even women and children. In the Kingdom there would be no more hatred. Jesus' disciples were to be living examples of God's love *now*, giving of themselves completely in the service of others.

The ways Jesus' disciples were to live in the present in preparation for the coming Son of Man reflected life as it would be when the Kingdom fully arrived. They had not, obviously, yet begun to experience the Kingdom in its fullness. But they had experienced a foretaste of the glories that lay ahead, in a world in which there would be no demonic powers, disease, or death, a world in which no one would suffer from poverty or oppression, where no one engaged in acts of violence or malice, no one hurt another, hit another, or hated another. In a small way—a very small way—they had begun to see what it would be like when God once and for all established his Kingdom on earth.

No wonder that Jesus saw this coming Kingdom as good news and invited his hearers to join him in preparing for it, implementing its ideals in the present, seeking to turn others away from the anxieties and pains of this life in expectation of the new life that was coming. For Jesus, the news of the Kingdom was a bright light that couldn't be hid under a basket, a secure city that couldn't be obscured, built high on a hill (cf. Mark 4:21; Matt. 5:14-16; G.Thom. 33). Those who saw the light and beheld the city needed to abandon everything and take up the message, so that all might be prepared for what was soon to take place. These beginnings may have seemed inconsequential, but the harvest would be great, and there was need of many laborers (Q: Matt. 9:37; Luke 10:2; cf. John 4:35; G.Thom. 73). And Jesus himself was leading the charge into the fields.