

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 35 · Number 3 · July 2011

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Out of Context—the Gospel According to Jesus

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KEYWORDS: *Discipleship, goodness, faith, love, obedience, repentance, violence*

MODERN BIBLE SCHOLARSHIP tells us that when we read the Scripture we should read it in context. That is, we should understand the things being said in the context of their historical and cultural settings. That might be good advice in places but it is not always good advice when it comes to attempting to understand the Gospels. That is because there is no context for us to understand Jesus. What possible context could there be for the God who created the universe having become a human being?

One day at a faculty meeting at my college I heard a professor say, 'How are Ph.D.s supposed to believe that a man was in the belly of a fish?' Another faculty member responded, 'We believe that an infinite God became a finite man, after that everything is a piece of cake.' The idea that 'a stable

once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world'¹ is much more difficult to understand than a man being inside a fish. For those who believe in the incarnation, what possibly could serve as a context from which to understand another human being who, although being human, was also the eternal God who spoke the universe into existence? For such a person there is no context. Such a person is out of context.

Indeed, Jesus defies all contexts, and if we try to set him in the context of any human culture or history it only distorts the things he said and did. The only way to really take in the Jesus revelation is to allow the things that Jesus said and did to do violence to our understanding and destroy many of the concepts we use to sort, analyze, and judge the circumstances of our human condition. If we fail to do this and we leave our understanding intact, the

¹ Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1970), 141.

things that Jesus said and did do not appear to be good news.

It is only with the destruction of our understanding that we really get at the good news that is hidden in what otherwise appears to be the bad news of the gospel. For example, Jesus tells us that in his Kingdom the last are first and the first are last.² This is not good news since most of us seek to be first and not last. We think that it is good to be first and bad to be last. Equally, we think it is good to be good and bad to be bad, but, throughout the Gospels, Jesus continually turns the tables on us.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son. In that story, the older brother really is good, but that turns out not to be good. The younger brother, on the other hand, really is bad but that turns out to be good. The story ends with the older brother refusing to enter into the party that the father has prepared for the younger brother who was not good.³ He doesn't enter in because he doesn't like the way being bad is treated as if it were good, and being good is not rewarded as it should be. The older brother thinks that the father should only have parties for good sons, and we, for the most part, think the same.

The gospel is especially violent to the understanding of those who consider themselves good people. Good people may like the sound of the name Jesus, but they cannot be happy with the things he says and does. In his own day, Jesus constantly had hard things

to say to those people whom the gospel presents as the prototypical 'good people.'

The Pharisees of Jesus' day probably kept the Jewish law better than any Jews who had ever lived, yet Jesus condemns what they think is their goodness. Of course, the reason for this is because Jesus sets forth the real standard for goodness, and, as we will see, it is a standard that is way out of our reach. This is bad news for people who aspire to be good. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan.

I The Good Samaritan

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher', he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your strength, and with all of your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him for dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling

2 Mt. 19:30. (All quotations from New Revised Standard Version)

3 Luke 15:11-32.

came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.⁴

Jesus goes on to tell how the Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, took him to an inn and paid for his keep until he was well. Jesus then asks, 'Which of these three... was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?'⁵ The man answers correctly and Jesus tells him to 'go and do likewise'.⁶

In typical fashion, Jesus does not answer the man's questions. In fact, throughout the Gospels although Jesus is asked 183 questions, he answers only a handful of those questions.⁷ When asked a question, Jesus' normal response is: either to ask a question in return, answer a question other than the one asked, or simply remain silent.

In the above story of the Good Samaritan he starts by asking a question in return. When the lawyer asks what he must do to gain eternal life, Jesus responds by asking, 'What is written in the law?' When the man answers correctly that we are to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, the man then asks, 'Who is my neighbour?'

The man is obviously asking a ques-

tion of geography. He knows he has to love the one who lives next door, but what about the person down the road, or the person on the other side of the river. Are they his neighbours as well? This is what he wants to know, but instead of answering that question Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan.

That story does not tell the man who is his neighbour and who is not his neighbour. We are not told which side of the river the man who fell into the hands of robbers was from. What we are told is what it means to love our neighbour.

This is not good news since, if this is what it means to love our neighbour, very few of us are doing what we must in order to inherit eternal life. None of us is the Good Samaritan on any kind of regular basis. We all regularly see people in need along the road and do nothing. Of course, if we saw someone seriously hurt, we would call the police, but if we were asked to pay for their hospital stay very few of us would respond the way the Good Samaritan did.

This bad news of the gospel gets even worse when we consider and take seriously other things Jesus said and did. In other places, Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies.⁸ Loving our enemies goes way beyond loving neighbours or loving strangers, as is the case with the Good Samaritan. If we are to love enemies then there are no boundaries concerning who we are to love and who we are not to love. That was what the man in the story of the

4 Luke 10:30-33.

5 Luke 10:36.

6 Luke 10:37.

7 Lord, teach us to pray. (Luke 11:1); What is the greatest commandment? (Mt. 22:37); How many times are we to forgive? (Mt. 18:21-22); There may also be an answer to a question with the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22); The other two are questionable as to whether they are actually answers. Jesus is asked: 'Are you the son of God?' And he answers, 'You say that I am' (Luke 22:69-70); Or, 'are you the king of the Jews?' To which Jesus again says, 'You say so' (Mt. 27:11 & Mark 15:2).

8 Mt. 5:43-45, & Luke 6:35-36.

Good Samaritan wanted to know with his question about who is my neighbour. What he wanted to know, and what we want to know, is who do we have to love, and who can we kill and be praised for it?

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies, and be 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'⁹ in order that we might be like our heavenly Father. Again, more bad news since none of us is consistently kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Neither do we believe that God would want us to be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, but Jesus tells us that he does.

II The Sermon On The Mount

It gets even worse with the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus tells us that not only are we to love our enemies but that we are also to turn the other cheek to those who do us harm. He says when someone 'strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also'.¹⁰ Of course, that is exactly what Jesus did. He turned the other cheek and refused to be possessed by anger or a sense of justice that so easily possesses and directs so many of us. Jesus was led by God alone and he calls us to be led in the same way. His warnings throughout the Sermon on the Mount focus on those things that so easily lead us away from God's lordship in our lives. This is our real sin. It is that we are easily led away from God's presence and purpose for our lives.

God's ultimate desire is for us to live

as Jesus lived. The way that Jesus lived was in a constant state of awareness of God's presence. For Jesus, the omnipresence of God was not a theory or mere belief as it is with most of us but an experience—a way of life. He tells us that it can be our way of life as well, but we must repent and turn away from those things that distract us from an awareness of God's presence in our lives.

Jesus tells us that God's desire is not that we refrain from murder or adultery, but that we refrain from anger and lust.¹¹ The reason Jesus speaks against anger and lust is because those are the kinds of things that capture and possess our attention in a way that only God should. We wander from an awareness of God's presence and purpose for our lives, not when we commit murder or adultery, but when we become possessed by anger or lust.

Anger and lust, along with the other things that Jesus mentions in the Sermon on the Mount like worry or earthly treasure,¹² are the things that turn our attention away from God, and away from the things that God has for us. Jesus' attention and focus was never distracted by such things, and he calls us to live as he lived.

This is a great offence to our understanding of goodness. We want to think that it is good that we refrain from murder or adultery, but Jesus tells us that our real sin is that our anger and lust cause us to constantly wander from God's presence and purpose for our lives. What grieves the heart of

⁹ Luke 6:35.

¹⁰ Mt. 5:39.

¹¹ Mt. 5:21-28.

¹² Mt. 6:19-21; & Mt. 6:25-34.

God, and what constitutes our real sin is that we fix our attention on things other than God and try to find life and meaning in them. God's heart is grieved as we choose so much less for our lives than what he has for us.

We are constantly distracted by all of the petty little things that so easily possess us. Even our enemies can serve as distractions that capture and occupy our consciousness in a way that only God should. Our desire for vendetta, or what we call justice, can easily become the thing we look to for meaning and purpose in our lives. The Jesus wisdom of turning the other cheek, and suffering the offence with forgiveness, is meant to keep us from having our attention possessed by a spirit of revenge.

Of course, like almost everything else Jesus says, we reject what he says about turning the other cheek. In spite of the fact that we claim that Jesus is God incarnate, and the Bible is God's infallible word, we do not take seriously the things that Jesus says. We convince ourselves that we must retaliate and meet violence with violence. That, however, is what we have been doing for thousands of years and it has gotten us nowhere. By contrast, when Jesus, Gandhi, or King suffer the offence and respond with forgiveness rather than retaliation, the world takes notice and we get a little glimpse of the divine.¹³

The problems in Palestine, and everywhere else where hatred breeds

violence, will come to an end only when someone decides to employ the Jesus solution and suffer the offence in order to bring the violence to an end. In contrast to what Jesus preached, and so beautifully demonstrated from the cross by responding to the violence being done to him by asking that his torturers be forgiven, we forever insist that if we can just inflict enough harm upon our enemies, they will yield, and we will have brought the evil to an end. Of course, that never does bring the evil to an end. It just resurfaces somewhere else.

Evil is brought to an end only when someone suffers the offence in an act of forgiveness. As Mohatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King demonstrated, the Jesus way works in a way that thousands of years of exchanging violence for violence does not work. Sadly, however, loving our enemies is simply too radical and too contrary to our nature to be taken seriously. So we look away from the things that Jesus says and build our Christianity around other portions of Scripture that give us a more human, and less divine, picture of who God calls us to be.

III Hating Father and Mother

If the things that Jesus says about loving our enemies are not enough to convince us of how radical the gospel is, consider the fact that Jesus tells us that 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciples.'¹⁴ Are we really to take Jesus seri-

13 Of course, the thing that Jesus, Gandhi, and King also all have in common is they were all killed. Perhaps it is for that reason that we don't like that solution.

14 Luke 14:26.

ously when he tells us that we are to hate *our own* fathers, mothers, wives, children, brothers, sisters, and even *our own* selves? That is just the opposite of what we think is good.

We think it is good to love *our own* family, *our own* country, and *our own* selves, but Jesus knows that the love of such things can easily possess us in a way that we should only be possessed by God. Once the love of our own, rather than the love of God, becomes the thing for which we live all manner of evil follows. Wars are fought because we love our own and we do not love those who are not our own.

The reason we love one and hate the other is because the one is mine and the other is not mine. Of course, this is the great lie. They are all God's and none are mine. From God's perspective it is evil when we love what we wrongly consider our own part of his creation and do not love other parts of his creation. The evil is rooted in our turning our attention away from God and toward what we erroneously consider our own.

The nineteenth-century author George MacDonald tells a story about an evil man who had little in the way of redeeming qualities. At one point in describing him, MacDonald says that he did love his children but only because they were *his*, not because they were children. As natural as it may be, there is certainly something wrong about believing that something is mine rather than God's.

A colleague of mine recently told me of his experience of being raised without a father. He had a friend who had a father who did a lot of things with his son, and the man would include my colleague in many of those activities. That

sounds like such a good thing, and by human standards the man was certainly good to do so. My colleague, however, said that, as nice as the man was, he always knew that the man preferred his own son to him. My colleague went on to say that he always thought that there was something evil about that. In fact, the only way it would not be evil is if there were a father who loved all children the same. Of course, that is exactly who God is.

IV Follow Me

As difficult as these sayings of Jesus are, however, the most difficult thing Jesus ever said was, 'follow me'. What makes it especially difficult is that he says it repeatedly. In contrast to Jesus saying, 'no one can see the kingdom of heaven without being born from above',¹⁵ which he says once, late at night, to a single individual, Jesus says 'follow me' seventeen times throughout the Gospels.¹⁶ Of course, 'follow me' is a metaphor for do what I do. Many of us are eager to do that when we think that doing what Jesus did amounts to working miracles. That made people think that Jesus was special in his day, and it will make people think we are special as well.

Unfortunately, we mistake the spectacular for the miraculous. What is truly miraculous is the supernatural and not the spectacular. Restoring sight or bringing people back to life is certainly spectacular, but it is not nec-

¹⁵ John 3:3.

¹⁶ Mt. 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, Mark 2:14, 8:34, 10:21, Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22, John 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19.

essarily supernatural. Modern medicine is able to perform such feats and they do it within the realm of what is natural.

The truly supernatural things that Jesus did were not the spectacular things. In fact, many of the truly supernatural things that Jesus did were mundane rather than spectacular. For example, the last thing that Jesus did with his disciples was not to perform some spectacular miracle but to wash their feet. He washed Judas' feet. Voluntarily washing your enemy's feet is certainly not spectacular but it is supernatural. It is outside and above the realm of human nature.

Or consider the fact that from the cross, Jesus prayed for his torturers to be forgiven in order that they might spend eternity with him. That had to be the most supernatural thing that Jesus ever did. If we believe that miracles are for today, and that God wants to work miracles through us, we should not be satisfied with healings that even doctors can do. That may be spectacular but it is not supernatural. We should seek the supernatural rather than the spectacular and look to practise the miraculous forgiveness that was at the core of Jesus' ministry. Who among us, however, does that?

When we base our idea of the gospel upon the things that Jesus actually said and did, it certainly does not appear to be good news. The gospel according to Jesus convicts us of our sin and points to our failure to live by God's standard for our lives. Indeed, the gospel is much more convicting than was the law of the Old Testament because it sets forth God's ultimate standard for our lives.

That ultimate standard is Jesus. He

is the Good Samaritan and the lover of his enemies. God desires that we should all live as Jesus lived. The way that Jesus lived was in a constant awareness of God's presence, and a never wavering desire to fulfill God's purpose for his life. That is God's desire for our lives as well, although none of us lives such a life. We all very easily wander from an awareness of God's presence and purpose, but hidden in the bad news concerning our failure to live the way that God calls us to live is the good news that God's forgiveness is greater than our sin. This is the nature of the gospel.

That is, that what appears to be bad news turns out to be good news. What appears to be the bad news of the crucifixion turns out to be the good news of the resurrection, and what appears to be the bad news about our sin, which Jesus shows us is much greater than we imagine, turns out to be the good news that God's forgiveness is greater than our sin.

Of course, in order to realize that good news, and experience the greatness of God's forgiveness, we must agree with Jesus concerning the greatness of our sin. Sadly, this is the one thing that religious people do not want to do. They do not want to see themselves as sinners, but that is exactly what the teachings of Jesus are intended to do.

The Jesus revelation is intended to convict us and convince us of our great need of forgiveness and mercy. Many of us have difficulty taking in that revelation since our inclination is to want to be good. We want God to love us because we are good, but God loves us because he is good and not because we are good. He loves us because of his

forgiveness and mercy, and he wants us to love others as he loves them, not because of their goodness but because we have become forgiving by having received much forgiveness.

This is the good news that is hidden in what otherwise appears to be the bad news that none of us measures up to the standard that Jesus sets forth. Like the good news of the resurrection which is hidden in the bad news of the crucifixion, we need to see the good news that is hidden in what appears to be the bad news of the fact that the standard that Jesus sets forth is way beyond us.

In the story of the rich, young man who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to have eternal life, Jesus ultimately tells him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and come and follow him.¹⁷ The Gospel says the man 'became sad; for he was very rich'.¹⁸ Jesus responds by saying, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'¹⁹

At this point the disciples seem to realize just how radical Jesus' teachings are and respond by asking, 'Then who can be saved?'²⁰ To which Jesus says, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'²¹ It is possible for God because of the greatness of his mercy. But that is not the end of the story.

The reason God sets before us an impossible standard that only Jesus

could achieve is because it is our failure to achieve that standard that produces the transformation that God intends for our lives. The purpose of the gospel is to convict us of our sin and convince us that our need for forgiveness is much greater than we imagine.

The good news that comes out of this is not simply that God's forgiveness is greater than our sin. The gospel is not ultimately about being forgiven. Ultimately it is about us becoming forgiving as he is forgiving. In the passages right after those passages which have become known as the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says,

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.²²

The Christian life is all about becoming like Jesus in regard to forgiveness and love. The process by which that happens is a matter of being forgiven much in order that eventually we would become forgiving people ourselves. Jesus says, 'He who is forgiven little, loves little.' In order to love much, we must be forgiven much. This is one of the reasons why the last will be first and the first last.²³ It is also why the righteous do not find favour with God. They believe that they have no need of forgiveness and therefore they never become the forgiving and loving people God intends them to be.

The idea of being forgiven much in

17 Mt. 19:21.

18 Luke 18:23.

19 Mt. 19:24.

20 Mt. 19:25.

21 Mt. 19:26.

22 Mt. 5:14-15.

23 Mt. 19:30.

order that we might love much does not mean that we need to be forgiven for some great sin. We easily forget being forgiven for big sins just as easily as we forget being forgiven for little sins.

Recall the parable Jesus tells of the man who was forgiven the great debt and then turned around and demanded payment from someone who owed him only a little.²⁴ It is not the size of the sin that is forgiven that makes us into forgiving people, but the number of times we have been forgiven. We are dull creatures and slow to learn. In order to become forgiving, we need to repeatedly experience God's forgiveness. The way we do that is to live in an almost constant state of repentance.

Of course, this does not mean that we should sin in order that forgiveness may abound.²⁵ That is not necessary. If we take Jesus words seriously, we already are sinning. None of us is living the way Jesus lived and calls us to follow. None of us is being the Good Samaritan to all who are in need. None of us is practising forgiveness the way Jesus practised forgiveness. None of us is living in a constant awareness of God's presence the way Jesus did.

The good news, however, is that every time we find ourselves distracted from an awareness of his presence—every time we find ourselves not following Jesus into the kind of love and forgiveness that he modelled—all we need to do is to turn back to God in repentance.

Since our hearts are so prone to wander, this turning back to God should be the almost constant state in

which we find ourselves. By doing so, we put ourselves in a place of receiving an almost constant flow of forgiveness, and it is that constant experience of God's forgiveness that eventually makes us into the forgiving people that God desires us to be.

V Repentance

Although this is ultimately good news, a gospel of repentance is not something that most people find appealing. The idea of living in an almost constant state of repentance seems morose rather than joyful. That, however, is only because our understanding of repentance is based upon our experience with human beings. With human beings repentance does indeed involve remorse. If someone offends us and then seeks forgiveness, we require some degree of remorse on their part or we think that their repentance does not deserve our forgiveness. If we feel that they are not sorry for hurting us, and that they are not deeply committed to never hurting us again, we think it foolish to extend forgiveness. This is not at all how it is with God.

Repentance, from God's perspective, has almost nothing to do with remorse, but rather is simply a matter of turning back to him. In the story of the Prodigal Son there is no remorse on the part of the prodigal. He returns to his father because he is hungry. Furthermore, the father in the story does not look to see if the son is sorry for what he had done. The father cares about nothing but the fact that the son has returned.²⁶

24 Mt. 18:23-35.

25 Rom. 6:1.

26 Luke 15:11-32.

Likewise, when the man on the cross turns and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom,²⁷ there is no indication that the man is sorry for having offended God with his sin. Indeed, he most likely is not even aware of having offended God. He does know that he has committed a crime against the state, and is paying for it, but there is no indication that he is aware of having offended God. That is the case with most of us. It is easy for us to see that we have offended another person by stealing their money or lying to them, but it is not so easy to see how we have offended God.

Of course, we could imagine that our disobedience to God's commandments offends God's honour. This is the notion of sin that is behind the medieval theory of atonement that claimed our disobedience dishonoured God, and therefore Jesus suffered God's wrath in our place. Or, we could imagine that our stealing or lying brings harm to people whom God loves, and therein is the offence. There may be some truth to this, but it does not get at the heart of the matter concerning sin.

The truth is that our sin or offence against God occurs long before anything shows up in our behaviour. Long before our behaviour could dishonour him or harm people who he loves, God's heart is grieved because we do not live as Jesus lived. God wants us to experience the fullness of life just as Jesus did. That fullness of life begins and ends with a constant awareness of God's presence. Whenever we are distracted from an awareness of God's

presence by some idol that captures our attention, God's heart is grieved because he knows the evil and destruction that will follow when we try to find life and meaning apart from him. We, however, are almost always oblivious of God's great love for us, and how he is grieved by the destruction we bring upon ourselves when we wander from his presence.

If God required that our repentance be based upon genuine remorse for our offence rather than simply turning back to him, there would be no hope for any of us, since we are all woefully ignorant of the extent of our sin and how grieved God is over our wanderings. Indeed, we will never understand our sin, and how we have offended God, until we see how much God intended to bless us, and how we rejected those blessings in order to pursue trivial existences largely spent apart from God. Since we cannot experience much of that in our earthly existence, repentance is, for the most part, remorseless and simply a matter of turning back to him.

This is not to say that we do not often experience remorse when we repent, but that is something that we bring to the experience because of our all too human understanding. It is natural to sense that God requires such remorse since that is what we have experienced so universally with human beings, but that sense comes from what we bring to the experience rather than what God brings.

VI Understanding Our God Experiences

Our God experiences are always a com-

27 Luke 23:39-43.

posite of our becoming aware of God's presence and our all too human interpretation of that experience. Furthermore, our understanding of any God experience is always different from the experience itself. This should not be surprising since our understanding of even the most mundane experiences is different from our later understanding of those experiences.

That is because we do not record experiences objectively but rather what is presented to us in experience is filtered through our concepts, values, desires, moods, and philosophical perspectives. These filters, of which so many of us are oblivious, create our interpretation of the experience. That interpretation is always different from what was given in the experience. Many people have God experiences but their filters do not allow them to interpret anything of God in those experiences. Likewise, others have God experiences, but, because they are unaware of their all too human filters, they think that it is all God and they cannot recognize anything of themselves in the experience.

The truth is somewhere in the middle, and what we record as our God experiences are the product of both God and ourselves. It is, however, very difficult to separate out from these convoluted experiences what is our part and what is from God. The best way to sort out what is from God and what is our own stuff that we bring to our God experiences is to hold our interpretation up to the light of the gospel. The gospel has a way of exposing the dross

and all the religious junk that plays such a big part in creating an interpretation of our God experiences.

What the light of the gospel reveals is that we are all sinners. We have all grieved the heart of God. None of us lives the way Jesus calls us to live, and we are all in need of forgiveness and mercy. This needs to be the major element through which we filter and come to understand our God experiences. When we understand our God experiences through such a perspective, we spend our lives seeking God's forgiveness and mercy, and in time becoming like him in regard to forgiveness and mercy.

Without Jesus' gospel to filter our God experiences, we almost certainly become like the Pharisees of Jesus' day or the religious people of our day. That is, we become a people who strive to become holy by doing what we believe God commands and thus avoid the need for forgiveness and mercy.

The gospel, however, tells us that we become holy not by doing it right and avoiding the need of forgiveness but by realizing that we do it wrong and are in great need of forgiveness and mercy. Like the law of the Old Testament, everything that Jesus taught was meant to convict us and show us our great need for forgiveness and mercy in order that in time we would become forgiving and merciful. This is the holiness to which the gospel calls us—not that we would become sinless but that we would become forgiving as he is forgiving.