'Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table': Matthew's Gospel and economic globalisation

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ABSTRACT

One of the effects of economic globalisation is that it strengthens the superiority of the developed and intensifies the dependency of the undeveloped nations. Christian ethicists typically address this problem by emphasising the need for social justice and the ethics of love expressed through sharing and generosity. This article offers another contribution to this discussion – an analysis of the subversive understanding of power and identity that underlies the story of Jesus in Matthew's narrative. It concludes that Matthew's Gospel offers a message of encouragement and accountability. It encourages the underprivileged to work for a change of conventional hierarchies that favour the privileged and calls them to actively participate in the creation of just relationships. At the same time, it reminds those who manage to improve their conditions that they should be transformed by the grace shown to them and strive for righteousness that exceeds the ethical standards of their former superiors.

INTRODUCTION: ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION AND THE CHURCH

Economic globalisation, a free flow of goods and services across national borders and consolidation of wealth and power through the rapid integration of national economies into one global economic order, is a modern phenomenon that is, in the opinion of many experts, unstoppable. It has created new ties among peoples and nations and transformed the world into an interconnected village. The global impact of the current economic crisis is the most conspicuous proof of this phenomenon. The driving ideology of economic globalisation is that disengagement from the global economy leads to isolation and non-competitiveness on the global market, with detrimental effects on the quality of the lives of citizens. The supporters of economic globalisation argue that overall, everyone benefits from this process. Even though the poorest countries might not participate in the creation of wealth to the same degree as developed countries, they are still given the chance to improve the living conditions of their people, which would not happen otherwise. The critics of economic globalisation, in contrast, point to the devastating consequences of the global market system that is driven by economic and consumer agendas: accelerated exploitation of the poor, dehumanisation of human beings, merciless destruction of natural resources and unjust distribution of the proceeds. Indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms of economic globalisation is that it increases the gap between the rich and the poor by strengthening the superiority of the developed and intensifying the dependency of the undeveloped nations (Milanovic 2005; Sutcliffe 2001). In this way, globalisation not only promotes but also reinforces the already existing inequalities between different groups and cultures.

The data released by the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Department of Economic Affairs and the World Bank pointedly illustrate this trend. According to these sources, less than 1% of the world's richest people have more income than 57% of the poorest people taken together. Nineteen per cent of the world population has an income of $1 per day or less and 48% struggle to live on $2 per day or less (United Nations Development Programme 2005:3–4). The gap between rich and poor is accelerating. The ratio between the income of the richest and poorest countries was 3 : 1 in 1820, 35 : 1 in 1950 and 72 : 1 in 1992 (United Nations Development Programme 1999:38). According to *Forbes Magazine*, the number of billionaires in 2008 was 1 125, while more than a billion people have to live on less than $1 per day (Special report 2008).

How should the church respond to this development? Opinions vary, from those who believe that the impact of the church is inconsequential, to those who believe that the church could and should become an important voice in the public dialogues on economic globalisation. The disillusionment felt by the former is certainly understandable. After all, it is quite obvious that economics and politics are the only two spheres that have a direct impact on the processes that govern economic globalisation. Moreover, various examples of the failed projects attempted by some churches to counteract economic globalisation are quite disheartening. At the same time, however, economic and political actors in this global drama are human beings whose worldview and understanding of reality is shaped by, among other things, their religious beliefs. In particular, Western consciousness has been influenced, in various degrees, by Judeo-Christian values. Some of the most fervent advocates of the expansion of the deregulated free market are those who believe that human beings are created to rule and exploit the earth, that material blessings are a visible demonstration of God's favour and that the resulting polarisation between the rich and the poor is part of God's created order. Puleng LenkaBula (2002:11) notes that many prosperity churches in South Africa uphold the rich and 'often suggest that the poor are poor either because they do not work hard enough or because they are sinners'. An article published in *Time* magazine on 3 October 2008 suggested that the prosperity Gospel, which promises material blessings to its followers, may have helped create sub-prime mortgage victims in the current mortgage crisis in the USA (Van Biema 2008).

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If religious values have the ability to influence, albeit indirectly, economic behaviour, then alternative theological visions based on different readings of the biblical narrative, offered by the critics of economic globalisation, can become an important factor in the discourse on this topic (Hollenbach 2003; Stackhouse *et al*. 1995). Even if the impact of these contributions on public policy might remain modest, the church should not abandon its critical and orientation-providing role in society. Only in this way can it fulfil its task of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

Christian ethicists and theologians typically address the problem of economic globalisation by emphasising the need for social justice and the ethics of sharing and generosity. James Childs (2000:82), for example, believes that 'even when generous behaviour is a cover for greed, such as cunning public relations on the part of a business, it is still a testimony to the fact that people admire generosity, even if they are grudgingly willing to accept greed'.

One of the most important contributions in this area comes from liberation theology, which underlines God's preferential care for the poor. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, among others, accentuate the perspective of the poor as the locus of God's revelation and liberation (Ellacuría 2000:187–218; Sobrino 1995:115–140; *cf.* Lee 2003:226–243). Other voices emphasise human responsibility for the earth and its natural resources. Donal Dorr, for example, points out that the church

> *must help people to explore and develop models of human development which are more sustainable, more respectful of the Earth, more just and more humane than the present approach of development.*
>
> (Dorr 1991:126)

Scriptural resources for these ideas are abundant, such as the creation narratives that emphasise human responsibility for the created world, prophetic texts that uphold social justice and the care for the needy, and Jesus' preaching about love toward the enemy and generosity toward the marginalised.

In this article, I wish to explore another venue that can contribute to this discussion – a subversive understanding of power and identity that underlies the story of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. Hierarchical restructuring of power is one of the most fundamental characteristics of a new global humanity and many Christians feel as if they are at the very bottom of the pyramid. In his analysis of this complex phenomenon, Max Stackhouse sees hierarchy as 'the very structure of nature – *fallen* nature, from a Protestant theological point of view' (Stackhouse 1995:55). This does not mean, Stackhouse continues, that every form of hierarchy is equally evil. Rather, Christians are called to a 'selective approval of hierarchy, where it recognizes genuine excellence', and 'the resistance to any hierarchy that oppresses unjustly' (Stackhouse 1995:55). I believe that a fresh analysis of Matthew's narrative, which challenges the conventional distribution of power in hierarchical structures, could offer valuable resources in this process.

At first glance, it might seem counterintuitive to seek help for the current economic problems through the reading of Matthew's Gospel. Not only is globalisation an unheard phenomenon in the ancient world, but this particular gospel seems to exhibit an extraordinary lack of interest in economic issues altogether. Matthew's version of the Beatitudes promises the reversal of fortunes not to 'the poor' (Lk 6:20b) but 'the poor in spirit' (Mt 5:3), not to those 'that hunger now' (Lk 6:21a) but 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Mt 5:6). With these additions, Matthew shifts the emphasis from the economic to religious realm. In the Matthean version of the Lord's prayer, the petition for daily bread delimits the need for food to only one day ('today' – Mt 6:11), as if material needs in the future were irrelevant. In Matthew 6:19–21, the Matthean Jesus urges his followers not to lay up for themselves earthly possessions, because they are temporary and fade in comparison to spiritual realities. The Q warning, 'You cannot serve God and mammon', preserved in Matthew 6:24, emphasises that God demands absolute allegiance, which excludes attachment to and care for wealth. Another Q section, preserved in Matthew 6:25–34, advises Jesus' followers not to be anxious about daily necessities, such as eating and clothing, because, as Davies and Allison note, 'compared with God's kingdom, "all these things" are of secondary import' (Davies & Allison 1988:658). After warning his disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees (Mt 16:5–12), the Matthean Jesus expresses his frustration with the disciples' lack of understanding by rephrasing Mark's general exclamation, 'Do you not yet understand?' (Mk 8:21) into a more specific allegation, 'How is it that you fail to perceive that I did not speak about bread?' (Mt 16:11a). Matthew's narrative expects that the disciples, and so the implied reader, comprehend that bread stands not for material goods but for spiritual realities. Even the reply of the Canaanite woman, 'Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table' (Mt 15:27), which appears in the title of this article, has nothing to do with food but functions as an analogy to Jesus' power to heal.

How then can a narrative, which seems to consciously downplay the material aspects of human existence, inform our understanding of the global economic issues that we are facing today? I suggest that the answer should be sought in the layers of the text that deal with the distribution of power among different groups, regardless of whether they belong to the same or different ethnic and cultural communities. If hierarchical restructuring of power characterises new global humanity, as I have suggested above, then even an ancient text, such as Matthew's Gospel, could offer some guiding principles to modern interpreters as they seek to find an appropriate response to the power structures in the global economy. The following analysis consists of two parts. In the first section, I will consider several key Matthean passages that illustrate how various groups, who are at the bottom of the hierarchical distribution of power that governs the Matthean story world, become empowered. The selected examples are not meant to be exhaustive but representative. I will argue that in each case, the implied author challenges the conventional distribution of power by inviting the reader to imagine a different, more inclusive community that is based on the principles of justice and fairness. In the second section, I will argue that Matthew promotes a new understanding of the in-group, which is based on the constant self-examination of its members and a desire for 'better righteousness'. In the conclusion, I will try to relate these insights to the question of how the church should respond to the problems created by economic globalisation.

CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Jesus' elaboration of the principle of the *lex talionis* in Matthew 5:38–42 is frequently understood as a call to the victims of injustices to endure them and not retaliate. Such an interpretation retrieves the original intention of the *lex talionis* as a restrictive measure for personal vengeance and juxtaposes it to Jesus' teaching on non-retaliation, which fulfils the intention of the law because it sets additional, more radical, restrictions on revenge (Betz 1995:276, 285; Davies & Allison 1988:540–541; Schottroff 1992:231). However, Jesus' exhortations to turn the other cheek to a perpetrator, offer one's outer garment to a person who demands an undergarment, freely go another mile although only one was demanded and openhandedly give to a person who begs or asks for a loan are anything but passivism.

This is quite surprising given the fact that in the context of asymmetrical relationships, which are presumed in the Matthean story world, submission is the most natural response of an underdog. Luise Schottroff's analysis of different life situations in which the renunciation of vengeance was practised in antiquity (Schottroff 1978:17–22) shows that submission

was expected from inferiors. Submission to injustices was an expression of slavish mentality that was considered most appropriate for lower classes (see Seneca, *De ira* 2.33.2). Submissive behaviour and acceptance of injustices were the consequences of their dependent state and represented their only way of self-preservation. Yet, the examples enumerated in Matthew 5:39b–42 defy this understanding because they illustrate neither submission nor passivism. The victims do not passively accept wrongs done to them, but actively respond by offering to endure more wrongs. Such responses are astounding because they illustrate an attitude that is neither natural nor required by the law. Without doubt 'they run directly counter to all human instinct, individual or societal' (Weaver 1992:55).

The deeply unsettling nature of the responses of the victims becomes more apparent if one takes a closer look at each of the examples mentioned in Jesus' response. For the purpose of this article, the first illustration will suffice. It envisions a situation in which one person is slapped on the right cheek. Even though such an act violates the physical integrity of the offended person, the primary purpose of the perpetrator is not to inflict pain but to humiliate. Various Old Testament examples illustrate this intent: 1 Kings 22:24 (Zedekiah slaps Micaiah on the cheek in indignation), Job 16:10 (Job complains that others have slapped him on the cheek to express their contempt), Psalms 3:7 (God's action against David's enemies is metaphorically described as striking them on the cheek, which conveys the sense of their total humiliation), Isaiah 50:6 (the servant of the Lord says that he voluntarily offered his cheeks to those who wanted to humiliate him) and Lamentations 3:30 (a person who faces tragedy should give his cheek to the smiter as a sign of acceptance of insult and reproach). What is more, the humiliation of the victim in Matthew 5:39 is of an exceptionally grave nature. Unlike Luke, who speaks about a slap on a cheek in general (Lk 6:29a), Matthew specifies that the slapped cheek is the right cheek. In the world where right-handedness was the norm, one could hit another person on the right cheek only with his back hand, which was regarded a greater offence than a slap with the palm of the hand. The section on penalties in *m B Qam* 8.6–7 indicates that the rabbis regarded a backhanded slap twice as offensive as a front-handed slap. In addition, Matthew's version of the offence apparently assumes that this insult is committed in the context of an asymmetrical relationship – as an act of a superior over an inferior. Passive acceptance of humiliation would be, in such a case, a more natural and certainly more appropriate response.

Yet, Jesus advises none of these. Rather, he counsels the injured party to take initiative and turn the other cheek also. This surprising gesture of the victim achieves two goals. Firstly, it shows that the victim was able to restore his injured dignity. He has refused to be humiliated. Secondly, he has created a new situation that forces the perpetrator to react. Walter Wink believes that this act robs the perpetrator of the power to humiliate. If his intention was to disgrace his inferior by hitting him on the right cheek with his back hand, he would now have to slap him on the left cheek with his front hand and, by doing so, recognise him as his equal (Wink 1992:105–106). But would the perpetrator really be unwilling to hit again? And if he decides to hit again, would a slap on the left cheek really restore the dignity of the victim? The next slap might be less humiliating than the first, but it would still be an insult. The perpetrator might even understand the turning of the other cheek as an act of provocation and hit harder than the first time (Davies & Allison 1988:543). If he decides to hit again, injustice will be doubled (Betz 1995:290; Schottroff 1992:231).

Since the text presumes that the perpetrators are not members of the community of Jesus' followers, the latter are not in a position to correct wrongs through some disciplinary measures, such as those described in Matthew 18:15–20. In such a situation, the responses of the victims are the only means of addressing injustices. They enable them to restore their lost dignity and start acting not as inferiors who are forced to endure humiliation out of necessity, but as equals or even superiors who freely offer to suffer more wrongs. Furthermore, their readiness to suffer additional damages exposes covert injustices as overt injustices. It is very difficult to recognise unfairness when it becomes embedded into the economic and political systems that give it a form of legality. Even the victims of injustices could internalise them to such a degree that they start developing 'both servile actions and a servile mentality' (Wink 1992:111). Injustices must be seen and acknowledged as such, before any restoration of justice can take place. If so, then Matthew 5:38–42 challenges the existing distribution of power by giving the victims a new sense of dignity and empowering them to act and expose the existing injustices.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon, narrated in Matthew 15:21–28, offers another example that challenges the conventional distribution of power. A non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite, approaches Jesus asking for help for her sick daughter. Her request, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon' (Mt 15:22b), resembles a similar request by two blind men, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David' (Mt 9:27), found earlier in Matthew's narrative. In that instance, Jesus readily fulfilled the petition and healed the blind. In chapter 15, however, the Matthean Jesus surprises the reader, because his initial reaction to the plea of the Canaanite woman is silence. It becomes clear in the next scene that Jesus' non-responsiveness represents, in fact, a blatant refusal. His disciples, apparently annoyed by the cry of the foreigner, ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus' response to their request clarifies that he has no intention of healing the daughter of a non-Jew, because he 'was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15:24). Gerd Theissen argues that Matthew's employment of the image of a shepherd is exegetically more appropriate to the woman's petition than Jesus' response found in Mark's version, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mk 7:27), because she did not ask for food, but for his help as a physician. Yet, although this modification might have solved the exegetical problem in the traditional material, it only highlights the offensiveness of Jesus' answer (Theissen 1991:61). However, the woman, who might have overheard his words, still does not give up. She comes closer, kneels before Jesus, and asks again, 'Lord, help me!' This time, Jesus has to respond directly to her, and when he does, he only reiterates his earlier point: 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (Mt 15:26).

There is no doubt about who the children and who the dogs are in this saying. The statement about Jesus' exclusive mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, which Matthew inserts before the saying about the children's bread and the dogs, makes it perfectly clear that the 'dogs' are those who do not belong to the house of Israel, meaning Gentiles. The diminutive 'little dog', which appears in Jesus' saying, might be a reference to house pets, who used to get the table leftovers (*Jos Asen*. 10:13), but the insult is thereby not diminished. In ancient world, the term 'dog' was generally a term of contempt (1 Sm 17:43; 24:15; 2 Sm 9:8; 16:9; Ps 22:20; Pr 26:11; Is 56:10–11; Phlp 3:2; Rev 22:15; 1 Enoch 89:42–49; Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 6.60; Ignatius, *Eph*. 7:1). Moreover, Jesus' command, 'Do not give dogs what is holy' in Matthew 7:6a shows that Matthew understands it as a negative term – the very opposite of what is sacred. Although there is no evidence that the term 'dog' functioned as a standard reference to Gentiles (Tagawa 1966:118–119), the association between dogs and Gentiles is presumed in the Matthean dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

There is also no doubt about who has the right to a greater, if not exclusive, share in the presumed limited amount of bread on this imaginary table. By dropping the introductory line, 'Let the children first be fed' (Mk 7:27a), from the Markan source, the Matthean Jesus no longer speaks about priorities – that is, who comes first and who second – but about the exclusive right of one

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group over the other. In the Matthean version, the children have the right to everything and the dogs to nothing. The irony is that Jesus gives preference to the children in the saying but refuses to heal a suffering child in real life. The metaphorical and the literal clash as the saying compares the rights of a sick foreign child to the rights of a hungry dog: they are nonexistent. The underlying question is, of course, concerned neither with health nor food but with spiritual rights of one nation – Jews – over non-Jews. Yet, this conventional understanding of spiritual privileges, which governs the Matthean story world, is accentuated in the narrative only to be subverted. Its repudiation starts with a shrewd and slightly defiant observation of the woman: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'. She turns the analogy between the children's bread and Israel into an analogy between the master's table and God's gift (Konradt 2007:69–70), which enables her to find room for a hope that even she, an undeserved Gentile, might get a little something from the abundance of the privileged. Her reply successfully turns the insulting term 'dog' into a positive image of a devoted dog who hangs around the master's table. Even if this dog could not claim justice, it can at least expect generosity.

What should be emphasised, however, is that despite the shrewdness and apparent effectiveness of the woman's response, it still reveals a servile mentality that accepts the world as it is. Indeed, the woman does not challenge the status quo, which privileges one group over the other, but only seeks to survive under these conditions. She does not challenge the spiritual priority of Israel – that is, religious hierarchy defined in national terms, which is presumed in Jesus' words. Jesus' final response, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire', sounds like an endorsement of her position, especially if viewed in isolation from the larger flow of Matthew's narrative. But, seen as a proleptic pointer toward the great commission at the end of the Gospel, when the risen Jesus charges his disciples to 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19), Jesus' eventual decision to heal the sick child of the Canaanite woman no longer appears as a simple acknowledgement of her point of view. Rather, it serves as an occasion to expand the limits of God's grace beyond the nation of Israel. By fulfilling her request, Jesus allows her to share in the blessings originally reserved only for Jews. With this, he refutes her second-class status and gives her and her daughter the dignity of the children at the master's table, who have the right to the equal share of his benevolent gifts.

A further development of this theme can be found in Matthew's parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:1–14). The Matthean text represents an allegorised version of an earlier version of the parable, preserved in Luke 14:16–24 and the Gospel of Thomas 64. The Matthean adaptation contains a number of incongruities on the story level, which seem to make sense only on the spiritual level. A king prepares a marriage feast for his son and sends the servants to call the invitees. In this context, they are the king's clients who owe him allegiance. They, however, refuse to come, which is 'tantamount to rebellion' (Carter 2000:434). Yet, the king does not give up and sends his servants again. This time, however, some of the invitees not only ignore the invitation, but also mistreat and kill the servants. The king, in turn, punishes them by destroying these murderers and burning their city. At the end of this military endeavour, the king declares that the wedding meal is still ready and decides to invite anyone who is willing to come. And so they come, both good and bad. None of this corresponds to the conventions that governed social interactions in the ancient Mediterranean world (Davies & Allison 1997:196). It is therefore not surprising that Matthew 22:1–10 has often been interpreted as an allegory of salvation history – an account of God's election of Israel, Israel's rejection of God's gracious gift and Israel's replacement by Gentiles (Crossan 1975:117–118; Jeremias 1972:69, 176).

Yet, a straightforward identification of the first group with Israel and the second group with Gentiles is problematic. The broader context of Matthew's Gospel does not confirm the presupposition that the mission to Gentiles started after the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather with Jesus' resurrection (Mt 28:16–20). Also, it is not certain that Matthew's church had abandoned the mission to the Jews. Chapter 10, which is addressed to Matthew's contemporaries, seems to suggest that such a mission was still on the agenda of the Matthean community. In view of these objections, it is more likely that the second group refers not to Gentiles but to the church – a boundary-crossing community that is not defined by ethnic categories. This identification, however, should not obscure the fact that at the beginning of Matthew's parable, this group of guests was not supposed to be invited at all. They do not belong to the circle of the king's clients and dignitaries. The invitation of the king gives them a new status, which subverts the conventional notion of power and privileges. As in Matthew 15:21–28, the privileges envisioned here are religious privileges, but Matthew shows that they are not static, because in the kingdom of heaven, 'the last will be first, and the first last' (Mt 20:16).

The conventional distribution of power is most poignantly questioned in the parable of the judgement of the nations (Mt 25:31–46). In this story, both the righteous and the unrighteous experience a big surprise. The former are praised because they gave food to Jesus when he was hungry, gave him drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, clothed him when he was naked, visited him when he was sick and came to him when he was in prison. The latter are condemned because they did not do any of these things. The most astonishing thing, however, is that the members of neither group realised that they were performing, or not performing, these acts. The Son of Man must explain to them how this could have happened without their explicit knowledge. His answer in each case is the same: When they did or did not do these things to 'one of the least of these' who belong to his family, they did it or did not do it to Jesus himself.

The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this text is massive (Gray 1989). All interpretations can be grouped, broadly speaking, into 'restrictive' and 'universalist'. The latter is, in my view, better supported by Matthew's theological and literary context. One of the central aspects of this parable is human inability to perceive the true character of his/her acts. Yet, the reader is not left without the guidance as to what counts as the service to Jesus and what does not. Through a fourfold, almost tedious repetition, the implied author seeks to commit to memory that the service to Jesus is equal to the service to the people who occupy the lowest level in social hierarchy – the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick and prisoners. This list does not correspond to the list of afflictions experienced by Christian missionaries found in Matthew 10:9–31, such as acceptance or rejection, persecution, flogging, legal indictments, betrayal and hatred (1 Cor 4:8–13; 2 Cor 6:1–10; 11:27). Rather, as Davies and Allison note, this is 'a list of mundane deeds of mercy' (Davies & Allison 1997:425). Yet, to limit the scope of these acts to only acts of mercy is not completely justified by the plot of the parable. After all, charity is expected in most human societies, but in Matthew 25:31–46, everyone is quite surprised by the expectations of the Son of Man. If, however, the Matthean Jesus identifies the needy with all who are in distress and invites his followers to 'ignore distinctions between insiders and outsiders' (Davies & Allison 1997:429), the surprise of all involved becomes plausible. It is indeed counterintuitive to cross the social boundaries and act contrary to the conventional distribution of power. Yet, Jesus alleges that those who will be declared righteous on the judgement day are those who disregard the prevailing understanding of societal hierarchies by serving its neediest members.

The passages surveyed above, scattered throughout Matthew's narrative, subvert the conventional distribution of power, which favours the privileged and disfavours the underprivileged, and invite the reader to envision a more inclusive community based on justice and fairness. Matthew 5:38–42 empowers the inferiors to address injustices and actively participate in the creation of

just relationships. Matthew 15:21–28 encourages the excluded by giving them hope that they can have equal share in the abundance of God's grace. Matthew 22:1–10 redefines the notion of who is in and who is out by extending the invitation to all regardless of their social and religious status. Finally, Matthew 25:31–46 invites the economically and socially privileged to become attentive to the needs of the distressed and serve them as if they were serving Jesus himself.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE IN-GROUP

According to many interpreters, Matthew's Gospel was written for a Christian community that was threatened by the Jewish synagogue (Davies & Allison, 1988:78–90; Keener 1999:36–51; Overman 1990:6–34, 150–161; Saldarini 1994:11–26) and, as increasingly recognised in recent studies, imperial Rome (Carter 2001; Riches & Sim 2005). Within this historical framework, Matthew's stress on the subversive nature of Jesus' proclamation gives the marginalised community a new dignity and reminds the readers that the current power structures do not have the last word. In addition, the conflict with the synagogue and imperial Rome serves as a catalyst for the identity formation of the Matthean church. This is achieved not only by denouncing the opponents (Yates Siker 2005: 109–123) but also by turning inward and demanding higher righteousness from its own members. Indeed, the Matthean Jesus tells his disciples that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:20). The righteousness that Jesus expects of his followers is not limited to the mere fulfilment of the requirements of the law but fulfils the will of God that stands behind these requirements. The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount show that Jesus' demands claim the entire person, not just his/her outward behaviour. His followers should not merely satisfy moral obligations but also be internally transformed (Davies & Allison 1988:498).

This inner transformation is vividly illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35. The latter functions as a response to Peter's question about how often he should forgive his brother who sins against him. The term 'brother' indicates that the question presumes the relationships within the community of Jesus' followers. Jesus' parable consists of three scenes. In the first scene, a king forgives the enormous debt of one of his servants who is unable to repay it. In the second scene, the servant who had just been released from his incredible debt encounters one of his fellow servants, who owes him a much smaller amount of money. The first servant, who now finds himself in the position of power in relationship to one of his peers, refuses to behave like the king from the first scene and forgive the debt. In the third scene, he is brought back to the king, who revokes his initial act of clemency and punishes the servant by delivering him to the jailers until he pays all his debt.

Although there is an astounding exaggeration of the debt of the first debtor, which highlights the paradox between his own experience of grace and the lack of grace shown toward the second debtor, the parable vividly illustrates the conditions of permanent economic indebtedness in first-century Palestine. In that context, the behaviour of the first debtor toward the second debtor is 'brutal but by no means unusual' (Luz 2001:473). The scandalous aspect of his attitude is perceived only in the light of an inconceivable debt release that he experienced in the first place. What could be normal in typical circumstances is no longer normal in extraordinary circumstances. The Matthean Jesus uses this imaginative story about monetary issues to point to an analogy between divine and human forgiveness. 'Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' asks the king (Mt 18:33). The point of the parable is not an enormous difference between the magnitude of a person's guilt toward God and the pettiness of a person's guilt toward his/her fellow human beings, as usually assumed in the history of interpretation since John Chrysostom, but the lack of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Someone who has experienced divine pardon cannot remain unchanged. The behaviour that appears acceptable, even justified in ordinary circumstances, becomes intolerable in the light of God's grace. Divine mercy makes a claim on a person and expects an adequate transformation that should be demonstrated in interpersonal relationships.

The parable presumes intricate power dynamics among the characters. The king is at the top of the power pyramid. His resolution to 'settle accounts with his servants' (Mt 18:23b) focuses attention on the financial sphere and the king's presumed wealth. His decisions demonstrate that he has power over the life and death of his servants and their families. The first servant, who is unable to pay the debt to the king, is completely at the king's disposal. Yet, the sheer size of his debt suggests that he is 'some sort of dignitary' (Luz 2001:471; see also Carter 2000:371–372). This is further confirmed in the second scene, in which he appears no longer as a debtor, but a creditor of one of his fellow-servants. The relatively small amount of debt of the latter does not make him less vulnerable in the situation of financial delinquency. Since Matthew 20:2 suggests that one *denarius* was a day's wage for a labourer, a sum of one hundred *denarii* would represent the wages for several months of work, but its relative value is inconsequential when compared with the debt of the first servant. The second servant is not only thrown into prison until his debt is paid, but he is also exposed to cruelty and public humiliation. The first servant 'seized and choked him' (Mt 18:28). Even though such behaviour was socially unacceptable (Pollux, *Onom*. 3.116; Lucian, *Dial. mort*. 2 [22].1), it was tolerated. Warren Carter suggests that the first servant's action functions as his 'damage control, a means of reasserting his power after his shaming experience before the king which exposed his vulnerability', so that 'the exchange is about power more than it is about money' (Carter 2002:373). The first servant therefore appears in the positions of dependence and independence, vulnerability and ruthlessness, unable to fulfil his obligations and able to insist on his rights. In each of these roles, he acts according to the conventions of the day. As a debtor unable to pay his debt, he begs for mercy; as a creditor unable to get his money back, he enforces his rights. But the unexpected experience of grace, while leaving intact the inner power structure, redefines the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. Claiming one's rights is no longer appropriate to the situation of another person's misery. Persons who have experienced God's overwhelming forgiveness cannot continue 'business as usual'. Rather, they should be compassionate toward each other and forego their own rights and privileges. But, if they refuse to practice kindness in their mutual relationships, divine mercy will be revoked. The judgement scene at the end of the parable serves as a warning to the community of Jesus' followers, reminding them that 'being in' does not give them spiritual immunity.

A related message can be found in the Matthean addition to the parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:11–14). Matthew narrates how a king, who had just filled the wedding hall with the people from the streets, comes to take a look at his new guests and discovers a man without a wedding garment. He asks for an explanation and does not get any. Vividly agitated, he summons his servants and orders them not only to remove the man from the wedding hall but also to punish him by casting him 'into the outer darkness' (Mt 22:13). The entire scene lacks coherence on the story level. It is puzzling how a man, who had just been brought in directly from the street, could have been expected to wear a wedding garment. Yet, the story apparently presumes the inexplicable. It seems that all guests were properly dressed except this man, because the king was clearly surprised when he saw him. This guest had offended the king like the elite leaders who rejected the invitation to come to the wedding feast.

This appendix to an earlier version of the parable plays an integral part in its present context. Following the suggestion of Andries van Aarde (1986:66–68), Matthew 22:1–14 can be divided into two complete narrative lines. The first narrative

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line includes the commission of the servants to bring the invited guests to the wedding feast, their refusal and their punishment by the king. The second narrative line includes the commission of the servants to bring whomever they find on the streets, the acceptance of these, initially uninvited, guests, and the punishment of the man who came to the wedding without a wedding garment. The parallel structure of both narrative lines points to an analogy between God's rejection of the Jews who did not accept Jesus – which has already happened – and God's future rejection of some members of the church who in like manner appear to be unworthy of the invitation to participate in the messianic banquet. Matthew 22:11–14 therefore offers an interpretation of the original parable of the great meal in a different setting. It contains a message for the church that has already established its self-understanding over its Jewish opponents. This self-definition is now called into question. Matthew warns his readers that a positive response to God's call is not sufficient to guarantee eschatological salvation. Jesus' followers must be transformed by striving for righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of their Jewish counterparts. If this transformation does not take place, they will be rejected like the Jews who have not accepted God's gracious invitation in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

If Mark can be called 'a master of surprise' (Juel 1994), Matthew can be even more. In the world governed by military and political power and divided across ethnic and religious lines, Matthew's Gospel offers a new vision of human relationships. On the one hand, it encourages the underprivileged to work for a change of conventional hierarchies that favour the privileged. It restores the lost dignity of the inferiors and calls them to engage in the creation of just relationships. It empowers the excluded by giving them hope that they can have equal share in the abundance of God's grace. And it appeals to those in power to become attentive to the needs of the distressed and serve them as if they were serving Jesus himself.

At the same time, Matthew issues a warning that those who manage to improve their conditions and find themselves in a position of power should not replicate unjust relationships. They should not seize the opportunity and start behaving like their former superiors. Rather, they should be transformed by the grace shown to them and strive for righteousness that exceeds the ethical standards of their opponents. If they fail to do this, they will be held accountable and eventually be condemned by God as unworthy.

Matthew's dynamic message of encouragement and accountability offers valuable resources to Christian communities that might be discouraged by the complexities of economic globalisation. The churches that relinquish their responsibility to address injustices fail to live up to the higher standards of righteousness advocated by Matthew's Gospel. Withdrawal and passivity are not the options, even in the direst circumstances. Limiting the church's task to merely lessening the casualties of the system is not sufficient in the global world in which we live. The churches as communities and ordinary Christians as individuals should engage in seeking the alternative models of production and consumption that will be less exploitive of the poor and more respectful of the environment.

The concrete forms of these alternatives depend on the particular circumstances of individual Christian communities. In some cases, this could take place through the promotion of the decentralisation of power and more participatory style of decision making. In other cases, this could take place through the rise of knowledge that shapes the moral sensibilities of market societies in order to promote the ideas of sharing and generosity. In democratic societies, Christians have various opportunities to participate in the formation of social policies and/or elect the political structures that support the economic order that aims at serving the general well-being instead of serving just a few at the top. Even if the churches as institutions have limited political power, individual Christians, as the participants in the global economy, might find themselves at various levels in the hierarchical structures that influence decision making. Economic order is not a separate entity, but an entity in which we all participate. To those who are at the bottom, Matthew's Gospel declares that they should not fall into passivity but censure economic policies that serve self-interest. To those who are at the top, Matthew's Gospel declares that they should not forget their responsibilities toward the underprivileged and their obligation to promote economic policies that implement the principles of fairness and care for the needy.

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