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TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES: LEADERSHIP ETHICS FROM THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount has been widely discussed in Christian literature and scholarly writings since the first circulation of the Gospels. Some feel the Sermon on the Mount is the foundation for, and a good representation of, a strong Christian ethic. Others, such as Niebuhr (1935) and Allison (1989), believe the Sermon sets ethical ideals and standards that are lofty and impossible to attain. This discourages contemporary Christians from seeking any practical application of the ethics from the Sermon on the Mount to the everyday practice of real life. Niebuhr, for example, saw the ethic of Jesus as a radical ideal concerned only with the individual's attainment of complete moral perfection. He considered the ethic of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to transcend human possibility and demand an uncompromising self-emptying love, marked by complete self-abnegation. Even Justin Martyr called the Sermon on the Mount "ultrapiety" and alluded that it would be cruel of Christ to expect total conformity to the teachings of the sermon. Eschatologists, such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, take a middle ground approach when they suggest the Sermon on the Mount is an interim ethic presented by Jesus as a temporary way of life for Christians until the second coming of Christ (Collins, 1986). Stassen and Gushee (2003), however, offer an excellent counter to these arguments by suggesting that Jesus is providing practical guidelines that are effective in transforming the life of the believer, thus breaking the vicious cycles of greed, judgment, lust, hatred, and violence.

Some critics doubt the Sermon on the Mount should actually be included with the rest of Matthew's Gospel (Betz, 1995; Baxter, 2004). However, this article argues the Sermon on the Mount cannot be isolated from the Gospel, nor from the life and person of Jesus. Furthermore, the leadership ethics taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount repeatedly surface throughout the Gospel narrative and in the life of Jesus himself.

The article begins with a general understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, its application to Christian ethics, and the various approaches taken by scholars to interpret the Sermon. The article narrows in focus to identify transforming initiatives (Stassen, 2003) that provide the structure of an ethical process for those who follow the Sermon's teaching. The article narrows more specifically to examine the six antitheses in Matthew's account of the Sermon; murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, eye for an eye, and love your enemies. The purpose of a narrow focus upon this isolated section of the Sermon is to identify specific leadership ethics taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The article concludes by identifying six ethical principles that Christian leaders can apply in any leadership setting: (1) keep short accounts, (2) keep a pure thought life, (3) realize that your irresponsible actions can adversely affect others, (4) always tell the truth, (5) be a peacemaker with your opponents by doing more than is expected of you, and (6) love those who oppose you.

APPLYING THE ETHICS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Many Christian leaders in high profile positions are demonstrating the conviction that their faith values should apply to every aspect of life. They bring their faith to the workplace and allow their Christian beliefs to influence their actions. This is having a profound effect on those who often view Christian morality with skepticism. Non-Christians are learning to appreciate the ethics and morals of the Christian leader when they realize these leaders are not hypocritical in word or action. This does, however, place a heavy burden upon the Christian leader to live and act in such a way as to never be regarded as hypocritical, even by the strongest critic.

In some cases, sinful human nature gets in the way of our Christian example. This may cause others to see no discernable difference between the ethics of Christian leaders and the ethics of non-Christian leaders. To help us with this struggle, Jesus provides us with some transforming initiatives in the Sermon on the Mount that can help any leader become a better, more highly respected leader. Jesus taught that we should

1. Keep short accounts with other people and settle disputes and conflicts quickly before they escalate.
2. Keep a pure thought life. Eliminate the temptation of illicit sexual thoughts toward others.
3. Respect marriage, and/or, your irresponsible actions can adversely affect others.
4. Always tell the truth and do not make promises you cannot keep.
5. Be a peacemaker with your opponents, and do more than is expected of you.
6. Love your opponents and show genuine concern for them.

The Context of the Christian Ethic

In Matthew's account of the Sermon, Jesus states that he did not come to abolish the Judaic laws, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). This statement sets the scene for the rest of the Gospel and invites the reader to observe and evaluate the life and conduct of Jesus in light of the Sermon on the Mount. The remainder of Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus living the principles he taught in that sermon. He demonstrates love for his (spiritual) enemies (5:43-48) by associating with known sinners such as tax collectors and prostitutes. He repeatedly demonstrated his principles concerning prayer and fasting (6:5-18), and his example of turning the other cheek (5:39) is transparently obvious in his crucifixion (26:67, 68; 27:30). In short, Jesus lived his core values in every aspect of his life.

Many Christians today cite Scripture verses out of context to illustrate their core values and support their legalistic, pious attitudes. They carry these snippets of Scripture like a banner into their workplace and hang them as plaques upon their walls as an excuse to attack and condemn the actions of unethical colleagues. However, when we derive moral guidelines from de-contextualized parts of Scripture, the result tends to be legalistic and lifeless. Rossouw (1994) writes, "Simply citing a chapter and verse for the moral statement you are making is not sufficient to make a Christian ethic. . . . Adhering to a Christian ethic is not the same as adhering to a set of Christian moral values" (p. 562).

Hauerwas (1981) continues this concept by arguing that the Christian ethic is not a morality, but rather a response that follows upon seeing reality through the Christian faith. Fedler (2006) writes, "Jesus is calling his followers to a higher righteousness that involves a transformation of the entire person, not just their actions" (p. 34). Actions or motives, in and of themselves, are not inherently moral or immoral. They derive their moral status from a prior understanding of the context in which they appear (Rossouw, 1994). To say that something is good or bad only makes sense when one is able to

explain good or bad (Leahy, 1986; Treddenick, 1978; Williams & Murphy, 1992). In this sense, ethics provide us with a basis for explaining what is good or bad. Since the Christian ethic derives its basis from the teachings of Christ, it is the entirety of Christ's teachings and not only a selected passage, such as the Sermon on the Mount, that identifies what is good or bad to the Christian man or woman. This article focuses upon the Sermon on the Mount; however, it should be noted that an effective Christian ethic cannot be so narrow and myopic as to focus exclusively on this sermon. Instead, the Christian ethic must encompass the entirety of the life and teachings of Christ.

Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount

There are those who seek to understand the Sermon on the Mount as a collection of ethical maxims. Inevitably, they evaluate the Sermon as a code of law. Subsequently they de-contextualize the sermon from the rest of Scripture and dispute among themselves as to the type of law contained in the Sermon.

Others, such as American ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr (1935), see the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible ethical ideal, which serves only to illustrate the sinfulness of humanity. They see the Sermon on the Mount as a pedagogical device used by Jesus to reveal humanity as sinners that stand in need of redemption. Niebuhr saw the ethic of Jesus as a radical ideal concerned only with the individual's attainment of complete moral perfection. He considered the ethic of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to transcend human possibility and demand an uncompromising self-emptying love, marked by complete self-abnegation.

Dale Allison (1989) also follows this line of thinking when he cites the work of Justin Martyr, holding that the sermon presents so high an ideal that no one can keep its commands. He joins with Justin Martyr in calling the sermon "ultrapiety."

One problem with this approach is that many will use this argument as an excuse to avoid the hard work of trying to transform their lives in conformity to the pattern of Christ (Fedler, 2006). If the principles are impossible to attain, why even try? Stassen and Gushee (2003) provide an excellent counter to this argument by suggesting that Jesus is providing practical guidelines that are effective in transforming the life of the believer, thus breaking the vicious cycles of greed, judgment, lust, hatred, and violence. They write, "Jesus taught practice norms. They are not merely inner attitudes, vague intentions, or moral convictions only, but regular practices to be engaged" (Stassen & Gushee, p. 136).

Finally, eschatologists, such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, see the Sermon on the Mount as an interim ethic "developed and proclaimed as a temporary way of life by Jesus under the pressure of an imminent Parousia" (the eschatological second coming of Christ) (Collins, 1986, p. 224). The danger in this approach is the suggestion that these teachings might be seen as rules, regulations, and requirements that a believer must rigidly keep in order to qualify for heaven rather than presenting the teachings of Christ as a way of living that permeates the life of the believer. The Christian faith is not about maintaining a list of "dos and don'ts" in order to prove your self-worth and goodness. Instead, the Christian faith should be a way of life that governs, guides, and saturates the character of the individual believer as well as the faith community in general.

Transforming Initiatives

Stassen (2003) presents a solid approach to the Sermon on the Mount by identifying a triadic structure within each pericope (passage of Scripture). He supports those who see a “careful craftsmanship and striking symmetry in the way the pericopes are grouped” (Stassen, 2003, p. 267). Stassen writes, “The first member of each triad is traditional righteousness. The second member is a diagnosis of a vicious cycle and its consequence. The third member is a transforming initiative that points the way to deliverance from the vicious cycle” (p. 268). These transforming initiatives identified by Stassen become the focus of this article in the examination of the leadership principles drawn from the six antitheses (5:21-48) taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Christian faith is not about maintaining a list of “dos and don’ts” in order to prove your self-worth and goodness.

Stassen (2003) argues that when the focus for interpreting the Sermon on the Mount is only upon the prohibition of such things as anger and lust, the teaching is primarily negative and the sermon becomes a series of impossible ideals seen in the arguments mentioned above. Instead, Stassen would rather approach the sermon in a positive way, focusing upon the deliverance that these transforming initiatives can supply. Furthermore, by emphasizing the prohibition, the focus is upon the hard human effort to comply with the demands of renunciation rather than the gracious deliverance that God provides. Perhaps the most piercing argument from Stassen is his suggestion that emphasis upon prohibitions, and subsequently interpreting the teaching of Jesus as impossible demands and high ideals, will cause the Christian to “praise Jesus for his high idealism while actually following some other ethic, a condition most accurately called hypocrisy, which Jesus did not favor” (Stassen, 2003, p. 269).

The Six Antitheses

If the teachings of Christ do not destroy the law, but actually bring it to fulfillment, how might we apply these teachings in the contemporary world of today? The remainder of this article will examine the six antitheses (Matthew 5:21-48) immediately following Jesus’ proclamation that he came to fulfill the law (5:17). The purpose is to extract leadership ethics from the transforming initiatives (Stassen, 2003) contained within each of the antitheses.

Calling these six teachings antitheses is a bit misleading. As Fedler (2006) points out, “an antithesis is analogous to an opposite, and Jesus is certainly not proclaiming the opposite of the original law” (p. 169). Jesus is not contradicting the law, but rather intensifying it by calling for a standard higher than that of the Pharisees. For example, the law forbids murder (5:21), prohibits adultery (5:27), restricts divorce (5:31), condemns swearing falsely (5:33), restricts revenge (5:38), and commands love for (some) neighbors (5:43). Jesus did not reject those ancient laws, but instead rejects any interpretation that is satisfied with external limits on the expression of anger, lust, deceit, revenge, and self-centeredness. This approach to righteousness leaves “the moral agent untouched by its

attention to the limits of conduct, so that even observance of the Law can be grudging the external” (Verhey, 2002, p. 412). That is to say, a person can simply satisfy these external requirements while the inner heart of the person remains untouched. Verhey states it in this way:

In the righteousness that exceeds “that of the scribes” (Matt. 5:20) people will be disposed to reconcile with their neighbors, not to be angry with them (Matt. 5:21-26). They will be disposed to chastity, not to reduce the neighbor to a sexual object (5:27-30). They will be eager for fidelity, not for divorce (5:33-37). They will be eager for peace, not revenge (5:38-42). And they will be ready to love even the enemy, even the one who is hardly ready to return their kindness (5:43-47). So they will “fulfill” the Law and the prophets (5:17); so they will be “children of your Father in heaven” (5:45), the “light of the world,” and that most political of images, “a city built on a hill” that “cannot be hid” (5:14). (p. 412)

The six antitheses are countercultural principles that radicalize the demands of the law. They outline an identity for the followers of Christ that is not to be mistaken for a new legality. They suggest a character on the part of the followers of Christ that overcomes anger with reconciliation (5:21-26), disciplines lust (5:27-30), honors marriage through lifelong fidelity (5:31-32), and loves those they might otherwise hate (5:43-48). It may appear that this is a new, revolutionary ethic for Christians, but it is, at the same time, a fulfillment of the deepest truth of the Old Testament Laws. These six antitheses, as well as the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, challenge the radical, countercultural community that Jesus is calling into existence, to live a righteousness that is higher than the traditional teachings of the Pharisees. Collins (1986) is quick to point out that these six antitheses are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. They are an effort on the part of Jesus to acknowledge the totality of God’s original will.

These six antitheses have often baffled those who seek to follow the will of Christ. They appear very clear in the requirements Jesus is making of his followers, yet they are extremely difficult, if not impossible to keep. As a result, some have proposed the interpretations mentioned earlier that mitigate the hard demands of the text. All of these interpretations fall short in that they drastically underestimate God’s ability to reconcile humanity to himself. They posit either an impossibility to please God or a complete inability on the part of humans to grow in moral character. This article argues that it is possible for humans to learn from these six antitheses if we interpret them in the manner in which Jesus intended.

In each of the six antitheses, Jesus sets the contrast between the traditional, externalistic teaching of the law and his fulfillment ethic by two phrases, “You have heard that it was said . . .” and “But I tell you. . .” In a sense, these phrases mark a distinction between the public and private responsibilities of those who follow Christ. The first deals with external actions in the public realm that demonstrate obedience to the law. The second deals with the private, inner response in the heart of the believer.

Murder (Matthew 5:21-26)

In the first of the six antitheses, the contrast is between the law regarding murder and

the everyday human emotion of anger. The public, or external responsibility for each of us is, “do not murder” (5:21), but Jesus has in mind a private responsibility that each of us should uphold in our everyday lives.

The passage Jesus refers to in 5:21 is Exodus 20:13, the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder.” The simple interpretation is that murder means to kill or take someone’s life. However, the word translated “to kill” is quite a different word than that which appears here and in Exodus. “Murder” is the correct translation since “the underlying Hebrew (*ratsach*, sometimes translated kill) did not include killing in self-defense, wars ordered by Yahweh, capital punishment following due process of law, or accidental manslaughter” (Bloomberg, 1992/2001, p. 106).

In this passage, Jesus is teaching that not only is the act of murder wrong, but also the internal attitude that lies behind the action. Countless murders have been the result of a crime of passion caused by anger among friends, relatives, or even total strangers. Jesus makes the connection between anger and murder when he says, “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (v. 22). In short,

Jesus is not simply saying that anger leads to murder; he is saying that anger is murder.

The six antitheses are countercultural principles that radicalize the demands of the law. They outline an identity for the followers of Christ that is not to be mistaken for a new legality.

Some may confuse what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount and what Jesus actually does in Matthew 21:12-17 when he drives the moneychangers out of the temple in an apparent rage of anger. This poses one of two possibilities. Either Jesus was a hypocrite, a practice that he often condemned, or there is a different kind of anger that is appropriate in certain situations. Many call what Jesus did with the moneychangers a righteous indignation and favor the interpretation that

supports an appropriate display of anger. Just as murder does not include accidental death or self-defense, we can discern from the actions of Jesus in the temple that the anger he speaks of in 5:22 does not include righteous indignation.

Schrage (1982) suggests in Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus is not simply defining an internal ethic for the way disciples are to treat each other. Instead, this teaching applies to the way in which followers of Christ are to treat everyone. Christians cannot lead double lives, treating the community of believers one way and treating non-believers another. Just as Jesus taught that we cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), neither can we live a life of double standards. Stassen (2005) writes, “The protection of God’s command extends not only to brothers and sisters who belong to the church-community but beyond” (p. 93). Intentional ridicule robs a person of their dignity and seeks to make other people despise them. The aim is spiteful destruction of that person’s internal and external existence. Some call it character assassination. Jesus tells us that this is murder!

In his approach to the Sermon on the Mount, Stassen (2003) identifies the triadic structure mentioned earlier. In 5:21-26, Stassen (2005) sees the following: “Do not

murder” (v. 21) is the “traditional piety” (p. 97); “. . . anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (v. 22) is the “vicious cycle” (p. 97); and the “transforming initiative” (p. 98) is “. . . leave your gift in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother” (v. 24). Stassen (2003) suggests that if Jesus were actually teaching that we should never become angry, the result would be a high ideal that is too difficult to follow. Instead, Stassen sees Jesus diagnosing “a vicious cycle that leads to judgment, destruction, and murder . . .” (p. 272). When a doctor diagnoses an illness that leads to death, action or treatment is necessary. In the same way, Jesus is diagnosing a vicious cycle that leads to destruction and provides a transforming initiative to remedy the diagnosis. Stassen sees verses 23-26 as the transforming initiative. He writes:

It is not merely an illustration, but a new way of deliverance that is neither murder nor anger nor merely their negative prohibition. It is rather a command to take initiatives that transform the relationships from anger to reconciliation. To avoid ever being angry would be an impossible ideal, but to go and be reconciled with a brother or sister is the way of deliverance from anger that fits prophetic prophecies of the reign of God in which peace replaces war. (p. 272)

In this regard, the believer does not just give up anger, but clears away the potential for future anger by going to the person with whom there is conflict and seeking reconciliation.

A Leadership Ethic

We have already established that Jesus is not teaching about murder or even anger, but rather reconciliation. The word Matthew uses for angry is *argizo*, which means “provoking or enraging another, to become exasperated, or to become angry with another” (Winston, 2002, p. 98). How many leaders can say with certainty that they have never become exasperated with an employee or someone under his or her direction? Who can honestly say that they have never become angry?

As we have noted, Jesus is not talking about getting angry, but rather an inner attitude that expresses itself with harsh words and hostility. Not only does anger hurt others, but it also twists, distorts, and wounds the life of the one who is angry. Most will agree that it is destructive; nevertheless, we still get angry. Winston (2002) argues that Jesus is not talking about all anger, but specifically being angry without cause. He illustrates the application to leadership with the example of a leader who gets angry at the sight of an idle employee. If the leader has not attempted to understand why the employee is idle, Winston suggests that the leader is angry without a just cause and in violation of what Jesus is teaching in 5:21-26. As Winston points out, there may be a very good reason why the employee is idle.

Even when we define Jesus’ teaching to mean we should not get angry without reason, this admonishment still seems too difficult to accept. We have all jumped to conclusions and gotten angry when it was not justified. How can we live under this admonishment? As noted earlier, Jesus is not giving us a prohibition or renunciation, he is teaching us what to do when our sinful human nature gets the best of us and we get angry without a just cause. Therefore, the transforming initiative for our leadership ethic is simply this:

keep short accounts. If you are angry with someone, stop what you are doing, even if it is a sacred act of worship before the altar of God. Go to the person with whom you are angry and reconcile. Jesus said it himself: “Settle matters quickly” (v. 25) and do not let anger run its destructive course.

Adultery (Matthew 5:27-30)

At first glance, the second antithesis regarding adultery seems quite drastic. As with the previous antithesis, Jesus is referring to the Ten Commandments, specifically Exodus 20:14, “You shall not commit adultery;” however, we have established that Jesus is not focusing on the prohibition. There is no difficulty in agreeing that adultery is wrong. What seems so drastic is the action that Jesus proposes; “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away” (v. 29) or “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (v. 30). Why would Jesus want his followers to mutilate their bodies? As Stassen (2003) pointed out, “literally getting rid of the right eye or right hand would not prevent what causes the sin: one could go on looking with the left eye” (p. 275). This passage makes many people uncomfortable because of the extreme measures Jesus seems to expect. Consequently, they choose to avoid it by calling it radical or absurd. Many commentaries suggest that “cut off” and “throw away” are exaggerations for effect, but what does it mean in practice?

The Pharisees taught that the only way to commit adultery was through the actual act of sexual intercourse with a married person. They are correct according to the literal commandment, but they missed the point. Adultery begins with the act of looking lustfully and culminates in the act itself (Walvoord, Zuck, & Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983/1985). In this passage, Jesus makes it clear that he is not simply talking about a prohibition against the act of adultery, nor does he simply teach that we are to renounce lust. What Jesus is emphasizing is action that eliminates both.

As was identified in the prior antithesis, this passage also has a triadic structure. The traditional teaching is “You shall not commit adultery.” Jesus identifies the vicious cycle of lust: “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery . . .” (v. 28). In other words, lust, when left unchecked, will eventually lead to adultery. In the Greek, *blepōn* refers to one who keeps looking beyond a mere passing glance (Bloomberg, 2001). The word here translated as “lust” refers to a continued mental dwelling on the thought rather than a passing temptation. The transforming initiative focuses upon the action necessary to break the vicious cycle. The action imperatives are “gouge it out and throw it away” and “cut it off and throw it away.” The question remains, does Jesus expect us to dismember our bodies? His justification suggests we would be better off living with a dismembered body than to have the whole body go into hell (v. 30).

The action imperatives stated by Jesus are quite radical. Guelich (1982) suggests that this teaching represents preventative measures intended to protect oneself from breaking the seventh commandment. In other words, Jesus is commanding us to engage in whatever action is necessary that will deliver us from the vicious cycle of lust, which leads to adultery. Twice Jesus uses the phrase “causes you to sin.” The emphasis is not on the eye

or the hand but rather the object that “causes you to sin.” One might argue that Jesus did not intend a literal gouging out of the eye or cutting off the hand, but the mention of eye and hand are representative of looking and touching. To paraphrase the passage, if looking causes you to lust, take whatever action is necessary to eliminate looking and if touching causes you to lust, take drastic action to eliminate touching. To be specific, take the initiative to get rid of the practice that causes the vicious cycle of lust. Jesus is not simply suggesting a change of attitude. He is teaching us to change the practice that leads to lust. Guelich goes on to suggest that the only way to meet the requirements of this demand is to form a new type of relationship between men and women.

A Leadership Ethic

How often have we heard of a leader who ended an illustrious career on the sour note of inappropriate sexual action? Perhaps there was no adultery, but in today’s workplace, even the insinuation of sexual harassment is enough to severely hamper or even end a leader’s career. It seems the higher the level of leadership, the more severe the harm done to both the leader and the victim of the inappropriate sexual activity.

Augsburger (1982) suggests that the Old Testament law applied only to married men, but Jesus broadens the commandment to include single men as well. The purpose is to advocate the need to respect other people with the highest regard. Lust originates in the heart of the individual (Eddlemann, 1955) and the only way to avoid it is with the specific intent to do so. Eddlemann writes, “Christ did not call for actual mutilations of the body, but rather mastery of it” (p. 54).

Winston (2002) argues that this passage is not limited to men only. He sees this passage as “commanding leaders to control lustful thoughts toward employees” (p. 104). Lust is a powerful emotion that quickly moves from thought to action. It does not remain in the mind only, but compels the person who is entertaining thoughts of lust to take action toward the person they desire. Therefore, Jesus is teaching that we must bring lust under control.

The transforming initiative for our leadership ethic from this passage is to **keep a pure thought life**. Adultery is scandalous, and it never occurs without premeditation. If looking or touching cause thoughts of lust, take immediate action to eliminate those things that create the lustful thoughts. In so doing, you will be able to maintain a thought life that is pure, and which focuses upon the things of God as well as your leadership responsibilities. Thoughts of lust quickly crowd out all other thoughts and consume the mind. Just as you cannot serve two masters, you cannot, at the same time, entertain thoughts of lust and maintain your God-given responsibilities as a leader.

Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32)

Few ethicists address these two verses in their discussion of the Sermon on the Mount. Most simply skip these verses and treat them as if there were not there. It might be plausible to suggest that these two verses are an afterthought Jesus tosses in as a continuation of the previous section. Bloomberg (2001) suggests that these two verses follow naturally after the preceding section in that sexual sin usually leads to divorce.

To say that these verses are an afterthought, however, humanizes the mind of Christ and minimizes his divinity. Furthermore, the organization of the entire Sermon on the Mount is well constructed. To suggest that this is a random afterthought of the previous section is to suggest that Jesus is incapable of the mental aptitude evident in the remainder of the sermon. In short, there must be a reason why Jesus included these two verses in the midst of his teaching on ethics.

Even Stassen's (2003) triadic structure falls short in interpreting these two verses. Stassen recognizes divorce as the traditional teaching. He names the vicious cycle as divorce and remarriage, which causes adultery. However, Stassen acknowledges that, in the literary structure of the passage, there is no transforming initiative. In the absence of a transforming initiative, Stassen constructs one by borrowing from the teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 wherein Paul states that his teaching comes from the Lord.

Just as you cannot serve two masters, you cannot, at the same time, entertain thoughts of lust and maintain your God-given responsibilities as a leader.

Paul recognizes the same traditional teaching on divorce, and the same vicious cycle that leads to adultery, but Paul adds a transforming initiative of reconciliation between the married couple. Stassen believes that since Paul acknowledges that his teaching comes from the Lord, reconciliation must be the missing transforming initiative of Matthew 5:31-32. He claims that reconciliation was likely a part of Jesus' teaching on divorce, but by the time Matthew got around to writing

his Gospel, the male dominated society had eliminated reconciliation from the teaching in order to preserve the male prerogative to divorce. Even if this were true, however, the teaching, as it now appears, still prohibits divorce regardless of a male prerogative. Furthermore, this argument ruthlessly damages the textual credibility of Matthew's Gospel. It is likely there is another transforming initiative contained in this passage, albeit somewhat implied. Let us examine the passage more closely to discern the ethic Jesus is teaching.

The ancient Jewish leaders held two different interpretations regarding matters of divorce. The followers of Hillel considered it permissible for a husband to divorce his wife for any reason. Those following Shammai believed divorce was permissible only when there was a major offense (Walvoord et. al, 1985). Jesus, however, teaches that God views marriage as indissoluble, "except for marital unfaithfulness" (v. 32). Bloomberg (2001) recognizes that Jesus holds his followers to a higher standard than the traditions of the Jewish leaders. In the Jewish tradition, divorce was legislated but never banned. Jesus bans divorce altogether, except for cases of marital unfaithfulness. Since there is a stark contrast between Jesus and the traditional Jewish teaching, it is worth the effort to understand why Jesus would allow the traditional practice to continue.

The Greek word Matthew uses for unfaithfulness is *porneias*, which has four meanings: (a) a single act of adultery, (b) unfaithfulness during the period of betrothal, (c) marriage between near relatives, or (d) continued promiscuity (Walvoord et. al, 1985). At least

three of these meanings involve conjugal infidelity, which constitutes a severing of the marriage contract. This suggests that Jesus is teaching an obligation to marriage that goes beyond all offenses with the only exception of sexual infidelity. In this way, Jesus is fulfilling the original intent of the law and expecting his disciples to adhere to a standard beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). If we are to follow this line of thought, the implied transforming initiative is to respect your marriage. The traditional teaching allowed men to divorce their wives for any reason, but Jesus does not want his followers to violate the marriage relationship frivolously. Richards (1991) tells us, “This example also calls us to examine motives in marriage and our level of commitments in relationships” (p. 607). In short, there must be a deep abiding commitment to marriage for life.

A Leadership Ethic

If we are to interpret these verses to mean that the leader must have a strong commitment to marriage, what does this passage teach for the unmarried leader? It is absurd to suggest that someone must marry before he or she can lead. However, a strong marriage can be a significant benefit to the leader. When the leader has a strong marriage, he or she is less likely to be guilty of lust mentioned in the second antithesis. Is it possible, however, to draw a leadership ethic from these two verses that applies to all leaders, married or unmarried?

There is a phrase in this passage that most, if not all, ethicists and commentators overlook. Jesus teaches, “anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, *causes her to become an adulteress*” (v. 32) (emphasis mine). In other words, Jesus is teaching that a frivolous abuse of the marriage commitment causes the spouse to fall into adultery as well, something the law clearly prohibits (Exodus 20:13). This is to say, the irresponsible actions of one person can cause another to sin. Not only would a reckless divorce cause the spouse to sin, but also Jesus tells us that anyone who marries the divorced person is also guilty of adultery.

The intent here is not to argue the particulars of divorce and remarriage. As we have already established, the Sermon on the Mount is not about prohibitions or renunciations, but rather a higher standard of living that fulfills God’s original intent for his people. Perhaps the more appropriate transforming initiative that provides us with a leadership ethic is that our irresponsible actions negatively affect others. The leader must always be aware that his or her actions impact more than his or her personal life; but followers are influenced and affected by what he or she does as well, and the ramifications of that impact often extend to those with whom their followers come into contact.

By way of illustration, consider a long line of ice skaters linked hand in hand in an activity that ice skaters call cracking the whip. The leader of the line makes only small movements and adjustments, but these small movements result in a drastic whipping action for the people at the end of the line. The moral is simple, and leaders must always keep in mind that even small actions by the leader can have an enormous impact on followers. This is especially true when the leader is guilty of irresponsible or immoral actions.

Oaths (Matthew 5:33-37)

The fourth of the six antitheses deals with oaths. Unlike those before it, this antithesis comes from the Levitical and Deutero laws (Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:21). In the traditional teaching, God is warning the people that they are not to swear falsely and they are to be quick in paying their vows to him. Notice the prohibition is not against swearing an oath, but against swearing falsely and breaking an oath to God. Walvoord et al. (1985) wrote this about oaths:

The Pharisees were notorious for their oaths, which were made on the least provocation. Yet they made allowances for mental reservations within their oaths. If they wanted to be relieved of oaths they had made by heaven . . . by the earth . . . by Jerusalem, or by one's own head, they could argue that since God Himself had not been involved their oaths were not binding. (p. 2:31)

Jesus is objecting to this practice of the Pharisees by teaching that oaths should not be necessary at all. The basis for oaths is actually a relationship of distrust, deceit, and manipulation (Stassen, 2003). To make the practice worse, a deceitful person would invoke God, or some symbol referring to God, as a witness in order to manipulate others into accepting his or her deceit. Eventually oath taking became a practice more often aimed at avoiding a promise than keeping it (Hagner, 1993).

Stassen (2003) identifies the traditional teaching in this passage as “do not break your oath” (v. 33). The vicious cycle he identifies is the practice of “using an invocation of God who is faithful to betray those who give their trust” (Stassen, 2003, p. 278). The transforming initiative Stassen identifies is “let your yes be yes and your no be no” (v. 37). In other words, the way to avoid the deceit and distrust of oaths designed with an escape clause is to simply tell the truth (Keener, 1997). Truthfulness, rather than deceit, is the fulfillment of God’s original intent.

Unfortunately, many in the Christian church have reduced this teaching to a legalistic prohibition against swearing an oath. Some even go so far as to teach that it is a sin to swear an oath. It is important to notice that Jesus is not emphasizing a prohibition or a renunciation. His emphasis is upon telling the truth at all times and in every situation. The reason Jesus gives for total truthfulness is that “anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (v. 37).

A Leadership Ethic

The leadership ethic drawn from this transforming initiative is quite obvious: always tell the truth. Winston (2002) asks if it would really be necessary to have so many attorneys and all the legal documentation they generate each year if everyone practiced this leadership ethic. Covey (1989) includes this principle in his *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It is his recommendation that leaders carefully consider their words before making promises lest they make promises they cannot keep. In a similar fashion, Winston writes, “Jesus calls leaders and supervisors to be careful in what they promise and then to always fulfill what they promise” (p. 105). When the leader is always honest, followers quickly learn to trust and respect the leader. Winston proceeds to make a very

good point. He reflects upon an earlier lesson wherein Jesus taught His disciples that they (we) are like “a city on a hill” (5:14). Just as the light from a city on a hill “cannot be hidden,” so, too, is the example of the Christian leader. He writes,

Christian leaders must not exaggerate, or allow others to exaggerate for them. For the world will judge Christians by what they say, what they do, and what they permit. And ultimately, what others think of Christian leaders they will also attribute to Christ. (p. 108)

An Eye for an Eye (Matthew 5:38-42)

The fifth of the six antitheses deals with revenge. In this teaching, Jesus once again refers to Exodus. The traditional teaching comes from Exodus 21:23-25: “But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. . . .” In other words, the punishment should fit the crime. Jesus is pointing out, however, that the vicious cycle the traditional teaching leads to is “violence for violence.”

How often have we heard the stories of escalating “violence for violence” in the Middle East? Lebanese Hezbollah captures and kills a handful of Israeli soldiers. The cycle of violence immediately escalates as Israel bombs civilian populated areas in Lebanon. Violence always begets more violence.

A number of commentators recognize the transforming initiative in this passage to be peacemaking. Hagner (1993) emphasizes “the true disciple does more than is expected The conduct of the disciple is filled with surprise for those who experience it” (p. 132). Betz (1995) elaborates:

The original purpose of the talio principle was to limit, or even eliminate, revenge by revising the underlying concept of justice. . . . The talio principle is closely related to the ethical principle of the Golden Rule. . . . The Golden Rule as an ethical principle considers and recommends preventive initiatives to be taken after the offense has occurred and instead of the expected revenge, so as to break up the cycle of violence and counterviolence. (p. 281-281)

Stassen (2003) points out that many interpret this passage as a call to renounce the right to take revenge. This places the emphasis, however, back on the vicious cycle. Each of the transforming initiatives we have looked at thus far has focused on something positive. As this article has repeatedly pointed out, the repeated pattern of transforming initiatives in the Sermon on the Mount is not a prohibition or a renunciation. Strecker (1988) argues that the transforming initiative is not a renunciation, but rather peacemaking. In this regard, the theme becomes “restitution rather than revenge” (Stassen, 2003, p. 280).

A peculiar phrase many find confusing occurs in verse 38. Jesus states: “Do not resist an evil person.” After all, Jesus resisted evil by confronting it directly. Should Christians not resist evil men? Some, such as Guelich (1982), suggest that this comment is limited to legal proceedings in a court of law, but this does not fit well with the context of the passage. Clarence Jordan (1972) hits upon a viable solution when he recognizes an alternative translation, “do not resist by evil means” (p. 69). Ferguson (1979), Hagner (1993), and Lapide (1986), among others, have a similar interpretation. Hagner goes so far as to

suggest the translation, “do not render evil for evil” (p. 131). This approach suggests that we are not to practice violence for violence, but it does not suggest that we are to give up nonviolent resistance, nor does it suggest that we are to give up our rights in complete submission. Romans 12:17-21, Luke 6:27-36, and 1 Thessalonians 5:15 are passages that also support this interpretation.

This approach, as Winston (2002) points out, does not fit well with Jesus’ violence in driving the moneychangers out of the temple. Jesus also drove demons out of people, a form of spiritual violence against the demons. Furthermore, Winston points to Ephesians 6:10-18, which encourages the believer to prepare for battle.

Many Christians have legalized this passage to the point that they believe Jesus is teaching total pacifism, while others suggest that there is a proper time for violence, battle, and resisting evil. Verhey (2002) suggests that the emphasis of this passage is forgiveness:

To forgive, however, is not simply to ignore the offense—or to ignore the offender, treating the brother or sister as a stranger. The guidelines insist both on the offended individual’s responsibility to undertake the process of reconciliation and on the church’s responsibility for communal discernment and judgment. (p. 428)

In this argument, Verhey extends the teaching to an obligation not only to forgive when someone imposes a wrong, but also to go to the extra effort of reconciliation. Collins (1986) tells us that “the intention is certainly to draw a contrast between juridically directed conduct and the voluntary conduct of the disciples of Jesus” (p. 233). This emphasizes a stark contrast between law and grace. The Christian duty goes beyond that of his or her legal obligation. Jesus himself resisted the temptation to wield his divine power in the passion narrative. “Thus the death of Jesus exemplifies the same character qualities that are taught as normative for Jesus’ disciples in Matthew 5” (Hays, p. 322).

A Leadership Ethic

This passage provides the Christian leader with a lot to think about. Often the leader is the target of criticism, verbal attacks, and spite. When something goes wrong in an organization, everyone looks for someone to blame. If the leader is following the leadership principles taught by Christ, to quote a famous president, “The buck stops here.” Augsburg (1982) points out that Jesus called his disciples to be salt and light to the world, and yeast in the loaf of bread. As such, we are not to dominate and force others into submission, but rather to bring about change by the influence of our presence.

The transforming initiative of this passage indicates that we are to be peacemakers who go above and beyond legal and technical responsibility. This kind of influence can literally change the behavior of the one making inappropriate demands or venting improper hostilities. Covey (2002) tells the story of a middle level manager whose boss made inappropriate demands with little or no explanation. Rather than getting angry and responding by doing as little as possible, this man tried to anticipate his boss’s needs. Not only did he provide what the boss asked for, he also went beyond the demand by providing an analysis, and/or additional supporting information. In short, the boss

received all he asked for and more. As a result, the boss came to appreciate the extra work and was, in Covey's words, drawn into the middle manager's circle of influence. Eventually, the boss would not do anything without first consulting this middle manager. The real leader in this scenario was not the boss but the middle manager who looked beyond the hostility of his boss and went the extra mile.

History is replete with examples of leaders who went the extra mile even when it meant they had to endure attacks and persecution. They did the right thing because it was the right thing to do, not because of some legal requirement, but because it was within their character to do so. As Winston (2002) points out, Carnegie gave away 90 percent of his income near the end of his life. Carnegie often said "his gain came from what he gave, not from what he made" (Winston, p. 111).

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln during his term as president of the United States. One of his opponents was particularly vehement in his attacks toward Lincoln. A cabinet member asked Lincoln why he did not retaliate for these attacks. Lincoln responded by telling a story of a dog owned by a widow who lived down the street when Lincoln was a boy. Every month, during the full moon, the dog would howl at the moon all night. After relating the story, Lincoln turned back to his work. The cabinet member asked the meaning of the story, to which Lincoln replied, "The moon just kept shining." The moral of the story is simple. As a leader, you will be unjustly accused and criticized. The leadership ethic drawn from this transforming initiative is to be a peacemaker with your opponents, and do more than is expected of you.

Love Your Enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)

The last of the six antitheses is, perhaps, a continuation of the fifth. In fact, some ethicists commenting on the Sermon on the Mount treat the fifth and sixth antitheses as one passage and one topic, i.e., to be a peacemaker. This passage, however, does emphasize Jesus illustrating that "the real standard for correctly interpreting the law is the law of love" (Schrage, p. 148). This brings a climax to the six antitheses and underscores the teaching that perfection does not come through a shallow, outward obedience of the law, but through the law of love. It is through the law of love that the followers of Christ can emulate God the Father (v. 48).

The command to love your neighbor is taken from Leviticus 19:18; however, there is no mention anywhere in the Old Testament commands to "hate your enemy." Some suggest this phrase appears as an inference in Psalm 25:17-19, or Psalm 139:21. The Pharisees taught the Jews to love those near and dear to them, but to hate Israel's enemies. The implication of this Pharisaic teaching suggests that hatred is God's means of judging our enemies (Walvoord et al., 1985).

Once again, Jesus begins with the traditional teaching and enunciates a higher ethical expectation for his followers. Stassen (2003) suggests this section is unlike the other antitheses in that the vicious cycle appears third in the triadic structure rather than second. He believes this to be an intentional altering of the triadic structure to emphasize the climax of the six antitheses. The transforming initiative is "love your enemies" (v. 44), while the vicious cycle indicates that loving only those who love you back makes

you no better than the tax collectors or Gentiles. The latter is a cutting remark against the Pharisees and their traditional teaching (Stassen, 2003; Walvoord et al., 1985). By loving only those who love you back, “you can expect no reward from God—you are not living in the gracious breakthrough that is the reign of God” (Stassen, p. 282).

Richard Horsley (1987) provides an interesting interpretation of this passage as he seeks to define what Jesus means by the word “enemy.” He argues the term *echthroi* (“enemies,” v. 44) does not refer to foreign or military enemies, but only to “personal enemies” whom he identifies as other residents of small Palestinian villages. These villagers often found themselves pitted against one another for scarce economic resources. Since they are unable to express their resentment against the ruling power, for fear of harsh punishment, “subject peoples tend to vent their frustration in attacks against one another” (p. 255). His approach has direct application to today’s small business owners who view

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one another as competition. By taking this approach, Horsley believes the primary focus of Jesus’ teaching was to encourage the poor peasants to stop squabbling with one another and start cooperating for their mutual economic benefit. However, with this interpretation, Horsley suggests “love your enemies” is not a general ethical principle, nor can it be applied in war and/or conflict between nations (Horsley, 1986).

Horsley’s (1986, 1987) approach has intriguing implications; however, Hays (1996) offers several objections to Horsley’s argument. The context of the passage offers no support that indicates Jesus was talking about squabbling villagers. In fact, the immediate context would suggest Jesus is talking about loving “those who persecute you” (v. 44). The term *echthroi*, in biblical Greek, often refers to national or military enemies. Finally, this approach “seeks to reconstruct the hypothetical meaning of the saying in the lifetime of the Jesus of history, as opposed to its meaning within the setting of Matthew’s Gospel” (Hays, p. 328). This article has argued for a proper interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount cast in the context of Matthew’s Gospel, as well as examples from the life of Christ.

As a climatic end to the six antitheses (Hays, 1996), Stassen (2003) believes the summarizing explanation is so that we can “be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). However, Stassen does not believe that this means we must live up to “an ideal of moral perfection” (p. 282). Instead, Jesus is pointing to the creative care that God has for the just as well as the unjust. Schrage (1982) wrote, “It does not mean painstaking fulfillment of the law as in pietistic perfectionism, nor does it refer to an elitist double standard. It should be interpreted in the sense of Hebrew *tamin* and *shalim* as meaning ‘whole, without division’” (p. 149). Hays suggests the point of this verse is that “the community of Jesus’ disciples is summoned to the task of showing forth the character of God in the world. That character is nowhere more decisively manifested than in the practice of loving enemies (5:44-45)” (p. 329).

A Leadership Ethic

The prevailing attitude in the corporate arena today seems more of a mind-set to crush the opposition, rather than love your opponent. The transforming initiative from this passage, however, stands in opposition to this carnal mind-set. Jesus teaches a leadership ethic from this particular transforming initiative that encourages the Christian leader to love those who oppose him or her. Winston (2002) relates an encouraging story from a time when he was in the printing business. There was a small fire in his printing company, which did not do a lot of damage, but did merit mention on the 6:00 p.m. news. By 6:30 that evening, Winston received a phone call from a major competitor offering the assistance of one of his printing presses while Winston made repairs for the damage done by the fire. Winston responded to this caring action:

The competitor's action showed love and concern. . . . I can tell you from that moment on, my attitude toward the competitor was one of support and concern. Our two firms later worked together on joint ventures that benefited both our firms, and especially our mutual customers. (p. 116)

This illustration provides a great example of the leadership ethic Jesus is teaching in Matthew 5:43-47: love your enemies, even when they are competitors in business.

CONCLUSION

The Sermon on the Mount provides us with many more leadership ethics, which extend beyond the scope of this article. The focus of this article is the six antitheses, which, when taken together, form a unity for Christian ethics. Maston (1967) summarized it well:

Those who are committed to follow Jesus, however, are not to withdraw from the world and live in isolation. There is a sense in which they are liberated from the world, but, in turn, they are sent back into the world to pervade, to persevere, to reveal, to heal (Matt. 5:13-16). This means, among other things, that the teachings of Jesus which are directed primarily to His disciples are to be carried by them into the world, and to be applied by them to the structures of society. (p. 165)

In a summary to his comments on the Sermon on the Mount, Collins (1986) makes a similar statement. He writes, “. . . the Sermon describes man in communion with the Father and with Jesus” (p. 236), as well as in relationship with others. This underlines the intent of this article to find the leadership ethics taught by Jesus in the six antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, and to apply those ethics in a contemporary setting that demonstrates the Christian leader's relationship with God and others. We have discovered six leadership ethics drawn from the transforming initiatives of the six antitheses.

1. Keep short accounts with other people and settle disputes and conflicts quickly before they escalate.
2. Keep a pure thought life. Eliminate the temptation of illicit sexual thoughts toward others.
3. Respect marriage, and/or, your irresponsible actions can adversely affect others.

4. Always tell the truth and do not make promises you cannot keep.
5. Be a peacemaker with your opponents, and do more than is expected of you.
6. Love your opponents and show genuine concern for them.

The application of these six leadership ethics in a contemporary leadership setting can revolutionize the way the world sees, understands, and practices leadership.

With the onslaught of recent corporate scandals, today's society is eager for leaders that exhibit strong ethics such as those mentioned here. Leaders with high moral integrity are in great demand. This demand for ethical leaders provides today's Christian leaders with amazing opportunities to demonstrate to the world that Christian values work in real-life settings. Corporations and secular organizations today are openly inviting the influence of religious ethics and the values they bring. Some are even hiring workplace chaplains (Lawrence & Weber, 2008). As Christian leaders, we dare not miss this opportunity.

A great number of books and articles address the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. However, there is still a great need for additional research that will extrapolate and apply the other leadership ethics taught by Jesus and treasured within this amazing sermon.

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