

The Scribe: Distinguishing Between
the Important and the More
Important

Disciples as Scribes

Matt. 13:52 And he said to them, “Therefore every **scribe** (γραμματεὺς) who has been trained (γραμματεὺς) for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Matt. 23:34 Therefore I send you prophets, wise men, and **scribes** (γραμματεῖς), some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town,

The Problem

Matt. 23:28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and **lawlessness** (ἀνομίας).

Matt. 24:12 And because of the increase of **lawlessness** (ἀνομίαν), the love of many will grow cold.

- The problem with Israel and the nations is not legalism or an absence of laws, but rather an active rebellion against God and his ways.

The Solution: Jesus as Scribe?

- Jesus is not explicitly presented as a scribe but rather as a giver of the law (no Ezra imagery)
- Nevertheless, he does what scribes do. He frequently interprets the law and the prophets (cf. chp. 5)
- He is asked for and gives his opinion on a range of halakhic matters such as table fellowship (9:11), fasting (9:15), divorce (19:3), and Sabbath observance (12:1-8, 10)
- He is presented as one who could read (cf. Matt. 13:54; Luke 4:16). He challenges his opponents, “Have you not read?” (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31)

The Solution: Jesus as Scribe?

How does Jesus relate to

- The traditions of the elders? (Matt 15:1-3)
- The ritual law? (Matt. 8:4)
- The moral law? (Matt. 23:23)
- Ritual/moral laws such as the Sabbath?

Matt. 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **judgement/justice and mercy and faith**. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

The Weightier Matters of the Law/Gospel

1. Canonical Background
2. Judgement/Justice
3. Mercy
4. Faith

Canonical Background

1. The OT prophets highlighted the weightier matters of the law:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do **justice** (κρίμα), and to love **mercy** (ἔλεον), and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mich. 6:8)

This is what the Lord says:

Keep **judgment** (κρίσιν); do righteousness (δικαιοσύνην,
For my salvation has drawn near
And my **mercy** (ἔλεός) to be revealed. (LXX Isa. 56:1)

Canonical Background

2. Paul

1 Corinthian (**faith**, **hope**, love)

1 Thessalonians (faith, hope, love)

Galatians/Romans (faith, hope, love)

Ephesians (faith, hope, love + knowledge)

3. John:

faith vs unbelief

love vs hatred

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

1. Judgement Involves Reciprocal Treatment

The *lex talonis* principle (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Matt. 5:38) is found throughout the Gospel.

- “the measure you give will be the measure you get” (7:2)
- If we acknowledge Jesus before others, he will acknowledge us before his Father (10:32-33)
- If we shed innocent blood, our blood will be shed (21:41; 23:29-36)

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

1. Judgement Involves Reciprocal Treatment

- “And forgive us our debts, **as we also** have forgiven our debtors. [...] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:12, 14-15)
- “In everything, do to others **as you would have them** do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12)
- The high priest who judges Jesus will be judged by Jesus (26:63-64)

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

1. Judgement Involves Reciprocal Treatment

- When the Son of Man comes, he will **repay** everyone for what they have done (*praxis*, ‘the totality of one’s deeds’), whether good or evil (Matt. 16:27)

These works include, according to Anders Runesson (*Divine Wrath*, p. 165-171), our external deeds (e.g., ‘good fruit’, Matt. 3:10; 7:17-19; hospitality, 10:40-42), our verbal deeds (e.g., insults, 5:22; blasphemy, 12:32; careless words, 12:36), and our internal deeds (e.g., those things that happen in secret, 6:2-4, 16-18).

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

2. Other Criteria for Judgement

One's response to Jesus or his vulnerable followers:

1. To accept or help Jesus or his followers is to experience peace (Matt. 10:12-13; 25:31-46)
2. To ignore Jesus or his envoys is to make judgement day worse (Matt. 10:14-15)
3. To kill Jesus or one of his followers is to hasten judgement day (Matt. 23:34-35)

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

3. Comparative Judgement

“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the **judgment** with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (12:41)

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

3. Comparative Judgement

Matt. 11:21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, on the **day of judgment** it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum,

will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

4. Judgement of both the Individual and Community

Individuals are clearly subject to judgement, as illustrated by the many judgement-related statements directed to a **non-specific audience** (e.g., Matt. 7:1-5, 24-27). The assumption is, however, that the individual can survive judgement independent of the fate of their city.

Elsewhere, **cities and nations** are singled out for judgement, whether it be Sodom and Gomorrah (10:15; 11:23-24), Tyre and Sidon (11:21-22), Chorazin (11:21), Capernaum (11:23), Nineveh (12:41), Jerusalem (23:37-39) or the nations (25:31-32).

Judgement/Justice (κρίσις)

- Justice is achieved through judgement
- Judgement is relentlessly negative in Matthew ('weeping and gnashing of teeth' (ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων; 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30))
- The *parousia* is **repayment/reward/punishment** rather than **liberation** ("How long, O Lord?")

Mercy (ἔλεος)

1. Requesting Mercy in the Context of Divine Judgement

The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed. The LORD will afflict you with madness, **blindness**, and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as **blind people** grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help. (Deut. 28:27-29; cf. Lev. 26:14-16; Ps. 38:3)

Mercy (ἔλεος)

1. Requesting Mercy in the Context of Divine Judgement

Two blind men follow Jesus, crying out, “Have **mercy** (ἐλέησον) on us, Son of David!” (Matt. 9:27). Jesus heals them after he has elicited a confession of faith in him (9:28).

A Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus, “Have **mercy** (ἐλέησόν) on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon” (15:22). Jesus responds to her cry and heals her daughter after affirming her “great faith” (μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις, 15:28).

Mercy (ἔλεος)

1. Requesting Mercy in the Context of Divine Judgement

The father of an epileptic boy kneels before Jesus after the disciples had failed to help him due to their lack of faith and requests, “Lord, have **mercy** (ἐλέησόν) on my son” (17:15). Jesus heals him.

Two blind men sitting by the roadside shout out as Jesus passes by, “Lord, have **mercy** (ἐλέησον) on us, Son of David!” (20:30).

Mercy (ἔλεος)

1. Requesting Mercy in the Context of Divine Judgement

The cries for mercy directed to Jesus evoke the **Psalmist's cry for mercy when subject to divine wrath** (cf. ἐλέησόν με, κύριε in LXX Ps. 6:3).

Appealing to mercy in order to remove divine wrath is found in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-35), in which, as a result of his appeal, the servant, a stock image for God's people, receives mercy manifested in the removal of his great debt and punishment (Matt. 18:26, 33).

Mercy (ἔλεος)

2. Mercy is Conditional

In the same parable, the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the servant's **failure to extend mercy** to his fellow servant results in him becoming subject once again to the king's anger (Matt. 18:34). For justice to prevail, the servant is under an obligation to imitate his king by extending mercy to others, without which forgiveness of his own debts will be withdrawn (18:34-35; cf. 6:14-15).

Mercy (ἔλεος)

2. Mercy is Conditional

Forgiveness of sins is thus dependent upon two factors, **divine compassion** and **our willingness to treat others as we would want to be treated by God**. The reciprocal nature of divine mercy and our forgiveness of others ensures that it is infused with justice.

Mercy (ἔλεος)

2. Mercy is Conditional

A second condition which is that the demands of the **covenant curses** are still met. Justice is maintained even when mercy is given.

This is found in the fact that Jesus will give his life as a “**ransom** (λύτρον) for many” (20:28). The ransom, a payment of what is owed, ensures that justice is served when mercy is extended. Jesus’s words at the Last Supper evoke the righteous suffering Servant of Isaiah 53: “for this is my blood of the covenant (cf. Exod. 24:8), which is poured out for many (τὸ περὶ πολλῶν) for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

Mercy (ἔλεος)

2. Mercy is Conditional

A third condition, although it is debatable whether this is actually a condition or not (see discussion on faith below), is that *faith* is required in order to receive forgiveness of sins.

Faith (πιστός)

1. There are Three Levels of Faith

1. The lowest level of faith is not just the absence of faith, but rather **the presence of an active and hostile unbelief.**

This is the case in Nazareth, where the unbelief (ἄπιστία) of the inhabitants of the town limits Jesus's ability to perform many deeds of power (Matt. 13:58). It is not just Jesus who is affected by such unbelief.

This “faithless and perverse generation” (γενεὰ ἄπιστος καὶ διεστραμμένη) inhibits the disciples' ability to heal an epileptic boy (17:17).

Faith (πιστός)

1. There are Three Levels of Faith

2. The next level of faith includes those who have 'little faith' (ὀλιγόπιστοι).

In a general sense, this includes all those who fail to trust God to provide for their daily needs, whether it be for food, drink, or clothing (cf. ὀλιγόπιστοι in Matt. 6:30).

Faith (πιστός)

1. There are Three Levels of Faith

2. More specifically, however, a minimal faith in God is manifested in a failure to trust in Jesus.

The disciples are described as 'little faithers' due to their failure to trust in him when in two storms (8:26; 14:31). They also fail to trust in him to provide their daily bread (16:5, 8), the supply of which is taken elsewhere in the Gospel as a sign of God's care (6:11, 25-34).

A failure to trust in Jesus equates to a failure to trust in God. Those of 'little faith' are not subjected to immediate judgement,

Faith (πιστός)

1. There are Three Levels of Faith

3. Maximum faith exemplars

- The centurion in Capernaum (Matt. 8:5-13; 'faith' in 8:10, 13)
- The paralyzed man (Matt. 9:2-8; the 'faith' of those who carry him in 8:2)
- The woman suffering from haemorrhages (Matt. 9:20-22, 'faith' in 9:22)
- Two blind men (Matt. 9:27-31, 'mercy' in 9:27; 'faith' in 9:28, 29)
- The Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28, 'mercy' in 15:22; 'great faith' in 15:28)

Faith (πιστός)

2. The Testing of Faith

There may be times, expressed through the Evangelist's repeated use of πειράζω ('to put to the test') and πειρασμός ('an attempt to learn the nature or character of something'), when testing is required to **determine one's faithfulness to God**.

Disciples are to pray to their Heavenly Father that he will not find it necessary to test them (πειρασμός, 6:13).

Implications

1. Christian scribes are to ensure that the principles of the law — judgment/justice, mercy and faithfulness, are embedded in the affairs of the nation
2. Non-scribal figures understand the law better than the trained scribes
3. The weightier matters of the law/Gospel may operate within both case law and code law systems
4. A political theology/ideology that is based upon a single principle becomes oppressive. The three weightier matters of the law provide a multi-varied, dynamic covenant-shaped basis for politics.
5. Compare these weightier matters with the four cardinal virtues of the Stoics (wisdom, courage, justice, temperance) and Epicureans (freedom from fear/pain)

Ezra as the Archetypal Scribe

Ezra 7:11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the **priest Ezra, the scribe** (τῷ ἱερεῖ τῷ γραμματεῖ) of the text of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel:

Ezra as the Archetypal Scribe

Ezra 7:25 “And you, Ezra, according to the **God-given wisdom** (ἡ σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ) you possess, appoint **scribes** (γραμματεῖς) and judges (κριτάς) who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. ²⁶ All who will not obey the **law of your God** and the **law of the king**, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.”

Ezra as the Archetypal Scribe

- A movement of people starting out on the first day of the month from bondage to the place of God's habitation, whether Sinai or the temple (Exod. 12:2; 13:4; Ezra 7:9; 9:9).
- Moses brings the people to the foot of the mountain from where he reads to them the law (Exod. 19—29). Ezra comes to the site of the temple, a mount, from where he reads to the people the law (Ezra 7:10).

- In both accounts a covenant is made (Exod. 19; Ezra 10). The people affirm their willingness to follow the covenant before they have heard its terms, a preliminary acceptance that treaty arrangements may proceed (Exod. 19:8; Ezra 10:2, 3).
- Moses ascends to the mountain top from where he receives the law. Upon his descent he instructs the people to purify themselves and to abstain from sexual relations for three days (Exod. 19:14-16). Ezra instructs the people to appear before him in three days whereupon they are told to put away permanently their foreign wives (Ezra 10).

- Before arriving at Sinai, Jethro tells Moses to teach the people the statutes and the laws and to appoint judges over them (Exod. 18:20, 22). Ezra is told by King Artaxerxes to teach the law of his God and to appoint judges (Ezra 7:25).
- God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” (Exod. 3:4) “[...] suddenly a voice came out of a bush opposite me and said, “Ezra, Ezra!” And I answered, “Here I am, Lord”. (*4 Ezra* 14:1-2)