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HOW DO WE DEAL WITH A CHALLENGING TEXT?

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WHAT DOES TAKING THE BIBLE “LITERALLY” MEAN?

We are accustomed to emphasize the *sola scriptura* as a crucial indicator of our Lutheran identity and gladly repeat Luther’s critique of the medieval hermeneutics of the “fourfold meaning of the Scripture” and his insistence on the “literal sense” as the only reliable method to unfold the “real” meaning of the holy words. In our discussions, we therefore take it for granted to remain on the safe side by referring to the Bible as “so it has been written” (Mt 2:5).

Yet, what in general terms appears to be simple is rather complicated when we get more specific, such as when it comes to interpreting particular phrases, chapters or books of the Bible. Certainly, Luther’s intentions are quite clear: He wanted to prevent that the Bible is read arbitrarily. He wanted to give the Bible the chance to speak for itself, as it were, not to be forced to fit into a framework of human categories. He wanted interpretation to be *exegesis*, not *eis-egesis*. For example, in the debates on the Holy Supper, he accused Zwingli of obscuring the clear sense of the biblical *est* by introducing rational reflections on whether or not it is possible for Christ to be present in the holy bread and wine and altering that clear sense by claiming that *est* means “signifies” instead of simply maintaining “is.” However, apart from the fact that also Zwingli sought to discover the real meaning of Christ’s words, it is evident that Luther’s insistence on the “is” was also an interpretation and thus implied presuppositions that were not simply “in” the text.

It is clear that Luther’s understanding of the “literal sense” differs significantly from what most of us intuitively think of as the “literal sense.”

For example, Luther claimed that, taken literally, the Psalms were Christ's prayer book. It is well known that Luther concentrated on the "literal sense" of the Bible on the correspondence of Christ and faith. According to the famous formula "*Was Christum treibet*" (what promotes Christ's cause) the real sense of the Bible is to evoke the faith in Christ or, more precisely, faith in being justified by God for Christ's sake through faith alone. To Luther, this is the criterion for evaluating biblical texts and qualifying them if they contradict justification by faith alone. For Luther, taking the Bible "literally," therefore means something other than receiving every single phrase as the Word of God. Therefore, even if interpretation means *ex-egesis* of a God-given meaning rather than *eis-egesis* of human concepts, it implies and requires human activity: the activity of understanding.

From a systematic perspective, Luther's insistence on the "*Was Christum treibet*" reminds us of the crucial fact that a biblical text is not adequately understood unless it is integrated into a coherent theological framework, one that is deeply influenced by basic religious convictions and theological traditions. There is, however, also a second determinant of understanding to be reckoned with which I shall call "cultural plausibility" (*lebensweltliche Plausibilität*). In other words, a biblical word must be plausible in a pragmatic sense. It must be able to give a realistic orientation in life and therefore not contradict basic convictions of life and reality or basic norms and standards of morality. Or, more exactly, a biblical word can actually transform basic convictions of life and reality or basic norms and standards of morality, but these transformed convictions and norms must, in a pragmatic sense, be plausible themselves.

In light of these factors, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 is a particular challenge for interpreters, especially Lutheran interpreters.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: A CHALLENGE FOR LUTHERAN HERMENEUTICS

First, Christ's radical demands have always both fascinated and challenged. While, time and again evoking the impression that they give a clear and convincing picture of how life should be, they also lead us to ask, How, if at all, can they be complied with? And, apart from these pragmatic questions, we could pose the more profound question of whether we should actually wish that these demands were obeyed and complied with? Is it, for instance, responsible behavior in every case to "turn the other cheek" instead of striking back? Could there not be situations where this might lead to "not being of assistance to a person in danger"? Would this not contradict basic Christian charity?

Second, especially for Lutherans, the Sermon on the Mount raises an additional hermeneutical problem: If, according to Lutheran theology, the core message of the gospel is justification by faith alone, how should we deal with the fact that Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount presents himself as a legislator and even sharpens the laws and commandments of the Ancient Covenant? Even the “do not worry” (Mt 6:25–34) is an imperative. Yet, was it not Luther’s basic theological insight that Christ does not encounter us as a legislator and judge but, rather, a redeemer; not as a demander but a giver?

Third, the Sermon on the Mount seems to indicate an intrinsic contradiction in the Bible itself. Whereas Paul emphatically calls Christ “the end of the law” (Rom 10:4), in Matthew Jesus insists that he has “come not to abolish but to fulfill [the law]” (Mt 5:17) and announces that “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Mt 5:18).

Thus, we have to face at least a threefold tension:

- Between Jesus’ radical commandments and our moral responsibility
- Between Jesus as legislator and as redeemer
- Between Matthew and Paul.

These questions are not introduced into the text from outside but emerge in the process of reading and understanding the text itself. Thus, they cannot be ignored in the name of a seemingly “literal understanding.” The challenge is to develop a coherent interpretation that reflects the inner-biblical tensions as well as the theological framework and the cultural plausibility.

How does Luther deal with this challenge? How does he interpret the Sermon on the Mount?

LUTHER ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

I will start with some general hermeneutical reflections and then focus on a series of Luther’s sermons on the Sermon on the Mount which was published in 1532.

A LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT? PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Luther research concurs that Luther was confronted with two ways of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount, which he both strongly rejected.

On the one hand, the medieval tradition which understood Christ's radical commandments as *consilia evangelica*, relevant only to a monastic élite of "perfect Christians," whereas "normal" Christians were simply obliged to respect the norms of the Decalogue. On the other, the so-called *Schwärmer*, left-wing reformers, who claimed that the Sermon on the Mount was the binding norm for the life of a Christian community and therefore abstained from social life, rejected state authority and disregarded the economy, etc. According to Luther, the "monastic way" was wrong to restrict the commitment of the Sermon to a small number of Christians, ignoring that there is no "two-class Christianity." The left-wing reformers were wrong to expand the Sermon's validity to becoming a binding rule for every aspect of Christians' social behavior and ignoring the fact that we still live in an unredeemed world with the need to safeguard social security by means of politics and the police. In theological terms, the first contradicted the idea of the basic equality of all Christians grounded on baptism, the latter missed the elementary distinction of the two realms.

Thus, *via negationis* (by way of negation), we can get a preliminary idea of how Luther himself would interpret the Sermon: Luther would emphasize that Christ addressed all Christians without exception, and would insist that Christ did not want to exempt Christians from the duties of social life, including the enforcement of law and order.

But this seems to lead to contradictions. While Christ's commandment to abstain from revenge and violence and to "turn the other cheek" to the violent evildoer applies to every Christian, it is not supposed to prevent Christians from stopping evildoers, if necessary by using violence.

We are all familiar with the instruments Lutherans have developed to overcome this dilemma. First, we could refer to the doctrine of law and gospel and presume that Luther interprets the Sermon on the Mount within the horizon of the *usus theologicus* or *usus elencticus*, a Reformation concept that suggests that ethical imperatives serve to emphasize the need for grace. This means that the law functions primarily to reveal to us that we have not complied with it. In the mirror of the law we recognize ourselves as sinners. One could conclude that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus radicalized the law so that we are sensitive to our subtle sins: even if we are not guilty of explicit adultery for instance, we cannot proudly absolve ourselves of having disregarded God's commandment to beware of adultery. We cannot save ourselves by fulfilling God's law; we are in need of being saved by Christ. So, indeed, the Sermon on the Mount would be valid for all Christians, but only in a negative sense: proof of that, as Paul puts it, is that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). This apparently is the classical "Lutheran way." Yet, as we will see, surprisingly enough, Luther, in his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, uses this

argument very cautiously. For Luther, the commandments of the Sermon actually have a positive function for the orientation of Christian life.

But, if so, then the only consistent way of dealing with the Sermon seems to be the puritanical, pacifist option of the left-wing reformers: no state, no violence, no compromise with the “world.” This, however, was not the Lutheran way. This leads us to Lutheran theology’s second tool to deal with the dilemma mentioned above: the doctrine of the two realms, the realm of faith and the realm of the world. According to this doctrine, Christians are citizens of both realms (both are realms of God). As individuals, Christians are citizens of the realm of faith: trusting that God has liberated them by grace and thus given them everything that they need both for their temporal and eternal existence. They no longer have to care for themselves, can refrain from striking back, answer hate with love, share with the poor, etc. As social beings, members of society, however, Christians are citizens of the realm of the world and have the duty to commit themselves to defend the neighbor against aggression, to participate in public administration and to fulfill public functions as judges, council members, military officers, etc. All this includes the willingness to use violence. From this perspective, the Sermon on the Mount only addresses the citizens of the realm of faith, but does not apply to the citizens of the realm of the world.

In his interpretation of the Sermon, Luther repeatedly draws on this argument. He emphatically claims that in this Sermon Jesus did not want to tell the disciples how to rule a state or run a business and is convinced that Jesus’s demand to “turn the other cheek,” did not exclude the use of violence in order to defend executing a public function. In his opinion, using the Sermon in order to promote pacifism constitutes an abuse.

According to Luther, the Sermon is addressed to every Christian, but only insofar as they are individuals, i.e., a citizen of the realm of faith.

While this interpretation is consistent it is obviously also ambiguous and might easily be misread. If, for instance, the Sermon does not serve as a moral blueprint for social life, does it then have any use with respect to moral discernment? What does it mean that the Sermon addresses the Christian as an individual? Does it only refer to the private sphere? What are the limits of this private sphere? The individual’s body and soul? Their family? Their non-professional lives (friendship, leisure, hobbies)? One’s behavior in this sphere obviously has implications for social life. For instance, if one lends someone money and does not ask for it back then this could affect the family. The same goes for not defending oneself. It is therefore hardly possible to draw a strict line between the individual sphere, in Luther’s words of the *Christperson* (Christian person), and the social sphere, the *Weltperson* (worldly person). Therefore, an alternative interpretation would be to define the realm of faith as a general intrinsic habitus of selflessness that shapes

and orientates the individual's private life as well as their social life. Then, again, it is difficult to imagine what the impact of the habitus of loving one's enemy might be on the behavior of a judge, political leader, soldier, CEO of a company, etc. Might not the many critics of Lutheranism be right who claim that the Lutheran doctrine of the two realms restricts the impact of faith on the individual's inner life (*Innerlichkeit*) and has no relevance for social life, thus isolating faith from life? If this were true, the Sermon on the Mount would lack any ethical significance. To answer this question, we have to scrutinize Luther's way of dealing with this challenging text.

LUTHER'S EXEGESIS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

It is helpful that we have a comprehensive exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount by Luther himself. In 1532, Luther published a series of sermons in which he continuously interpreted the full text of Matthew 5–7.¹ Luther regularly preached these sermons on Wednesdays while he stood in for the Wittenberg pastor Johannes Bugenhagen during his absence from November 1530 to April 1532. There is no original manuscript as such; the publication results from the notes of a listener (Georg Rörer). For the book version, however, Luther added a preface in which he declared that he was “very happy to see the publication.”² These “three chapters of St. Matthew which St. Augustine calls ‘The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount’ [are] such common sayings and texts that are used so often throughout Christendom.”³ Therefore Luther wishes that “the true, sure, and Christian understanding of this teaching of Christ” be “preserve[d],”⁴ which he is quite confident to deliver in these sermons. According to Luther, to promote this truth is particularly important because “through his apostles the wicked devil has managed so cleverly to twist and pervert especially the fifth chapter, making it teach the exact opposite of what it means.”⁵

How does the devil manage this? And who are his “apostles”? On the one hand, “the vulgar pigs and asses, the jurists and sophists, the right hand of that jackass of a pope and of his mamelukes”⁶ have claimed that Matthew 5 does not apply to all Christians but serves “merely as advice to those who want to become perfect.”⁷ Because, therefore, the twelve “evangelical counsels” are

¹ Martin Luther, “Das fünffte, Sechste und Siebend Capitel S. Matthei geprediget und ausgelegt (Wittenberg 1532),” in *WA* 32, 299–544.

² *WA* 32, 299. Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 21 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *WA* 32, 300; *LW* 21, 4.

not compulsory for the vast majority of Christians, Luther concludes: “I call that forbidding true and fine good works—which is what these vulgar asses and blasphemers accuse us of doing.”⁸ And he regards himself as a defender of Christ’s word—that not a single dot and iota of God’s law shall be altered or qualified until it is all fulfilled. On the other hand, “the new jurists and sophists, the schismatic spirits (*Rottengeister*) and Anabaptists”⁹ refer to Matthew 5 when teaching “that it is wrong to own private property, to swear, to hold office as a ruler or judge, to protect or defend oneself, to stay with wife and children.”¹⁰ By puzzling them (as well as the Catholics), the devil manages “that they do not recognize any difference between the secular and the divine realm, much less what should be the distinctive doctrine and action in each realm.”¹¹ And Luther proudly adds that “[t]hank God, we can boast that in these sermons we have clearly and diligently shown and emphasized this (difference).”¹²

These words give a precise idea of Luther’s hermeneutical perspective on reading the Sermon on the Mount. According to Luther, Jesus aims to show what to teach and to do (“doctrine and action”), but we will only understand this adequately if we respect the difference between the two realms.

Since I cannot give a full picture of Luther’s exegesis in this essay I shall focus on some characteristic examples of how Luther deals with the text. I shall concentrate on his reading of Matthew 5, which he highlighted as the most relevant chapter in Matthew.

MATTHEW—NOT JOHN AND PAUL

It is interesting to see that Luther clearly distinguishes between the different biblical books; they vary in character and emphasis and focus on different aspects of God’s revelation and not every book gives a comprehensive picture of the Christian doctrine as a whole. Luther reflects on the specific character of Matthew by commenting on Matthew 5:16 “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Obviously this emphasis on “good works” is a challenge. Luther comments that this statement:

is in accordance with St. Matthew’s way of speaking; he usually talks this way about works. Neither in his Gospel nor in those of the other two evangelists, Mark and Luke,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ WA 32, 300; LW 21, 5.

¹⁰ WA 32, 301; LW 21, 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

do we find such a great emphasis upon the profound doctrine of Christ as we do in St. John and St. Paul; instead, we find them talking and exhorting about good works.¹³

And Luther adds:

Of course, it is appropriate that in Christendom both should be preached, yet each in keeping with its nature and value. First and highest is the proclamation about faith and Christ, then comes the emphasis upon works.¹⁴

He continues:

The evangelist John discussed the chief article thoroughly and powerfully, and hence he is properly regarded as the highest and foremost evangelist. For this reason, Matthew, Luke, and Mark considered and emphasized the other issue, to make sure that it was not forgotten. On this issue, then, they are better than John while he is better than they on the other one.¹⁵

However, the two aspects must not be isolated from each other. Luther insists: The “statements and instructions about works” must “always be connect(ed) [...] with faith” and be “incorporate(d) (*verleibet*) [...] in it, making them a result and a concomitant of faith,¹⁶ praised and called ‘good’ for its sake.”¹⁷ Luther argues thus in order not to understand the “good works” of Matthew 5:16 as “the sort of faith-less works that the good works of our clergy have been until now, but [...] the sort of works that faith performs and that are impossible apart from faith.”¹⁸ Luther even claims that Jesus speaking of good works here refers to the “exercise, expression, and confession of the teaching about Christ and faith, and the suffering for its sake.”¹⁹ The acts of confessing the faith, according to Luther, are the “light” Christians “shine with before the people.” From these “first and foremost” works then follow the “‘works of love’ which shine, too, but only insofar as they are ignited and sustained by faith.”²⁰

With this interpretation, Luther respects the specific character of St Matthew, but relates Matthew’s emphasis on good works to what he calls the “chief article”: the faith. Yet, it is important to see that he does not do

¹³ WA 32, 352; LW 21, 65.

¹⁴ WA 32, 352–53; LW 21, 65.

¹⁵ WA 32, 353; LW 21, 65.

¹⁶ “[...] *aus dem glauben und jnn den glauben gehen*,” “go from the faith into the faith”—quite certainly an allusion to Romans 1:17.

¹⁷ WA 32, 353; LW 21, 65.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ WA 32, 353; LW 21, 66.

that without reference to the concrete text: not the good works as such but, rather, the faith, which becomes visible within and through them, is the “light” that “shines before the people.”

THE BEATITUDES

From a Lutheran perspective, we might expect that Luther reads the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–11) as an introduction which frames Christ’s sharp words on the law with words of grace and benedictions: God gives, before he demands; the “indicative” of the gospel prevails over the “imperative” of the law. Or we would expect him to emphasize the spiritual dimension of the Beatitudes, stressing, for example, the “poor in spirit” of Matthew 5:3 or interpreting the “hunger and thirst for righteousness” of Matthew 5:6 as an expression of justification by faith.

Surprisingly, this is only partly true. Of course, Luther emphasizes that Jesus begins with the promise of the “kingdom of heaven.” He comments on Matthew 5:3:

This is a fine, sweet, and friendly beginning for His instruction and preaching. He does not come like Moses or a teacher of the Law, with demands, threats, and terrors, but in a very friendly way, with enticements, allurements, and pleasant promises.”²¹

And Luther claims that Jesus strictly contradicts the Jews, because “the essence of their teaching was this: ‘If a man is successful here on earth, he is blessed and well off’.”²² According to Luther, this ideology of prosperity is also supported by the “Turks.”²³ and “the whole papacy.”²⁴ So it was necessary that in the beginning Jesus turned the disciples’ minds away from “mammon” and to the “kingdom of heaven.” Yet, he declines that all Christians have to be poor and “none of them (dare) have money, property, popularity, power, and the like.”²⁵ A worldly authority cannot do without these worldly goods, and to have them is “not wrong in itself” but rather “God’s gift and ordinance.”²⁶ And, conversely, “physical poverty is not the answer (*leiblich arm sein thuts nicht*),”²⁷ because there is “many a beggar

²¹ WA 32, 305; LW 21, 10.

²² WA 32, 305; LW 21, 11.

²³ WA 32, 306; LW 21, 11.

²⁴ WA 32, 306; LW 21, 12.

²⁵ WA 32, 307; LW 21, 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

[...] more arrogant and wicked than any rich man.”²⁸ So, in God’s view, it is not decisive whether we are rich or poor. Rather “before God, in his heart, everyone must be spiritually poor. That is, he must not set his confidence, comfort, and trust (*Trotz*) on temporal goods, nor hang his heart upon them and make Mammon his idol.”²⁹

But, in his interpretation of Matthew 5:5 (“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”), Luther emphasizes that this verse is complementary to the word of being “spiritually poor,” because it entails “a promise about this *temporal* life and about possessions *here on earth*.”³⁰ However, Luther asks, “how does being poor harmonize with inheriting the land?”³¹ He argues that “inheriting the land” does not mean that everyone is promised a parcel of land (“otherwise God would have to create more worlds”³²) but, rather, that “God confers possessions upon everyone in such a way that He gives a man wife, children, cattle, house, and home, and whatever pertains to these, so that he can stay on the land where he lives.”³³ Luther comments that because these earthly goods are gifts of God, Christ not simply blessed “the poor,” but the “spiritually poor,” in order to show that the promise to “inherit the earth” does not contradict the blessing of the “poor.”³⁴

But why are the “meek” promised to “inherit the earth”? Luther hurries to explain, “that Christ is not speaking at all (here) about the government (*Obrigkeit*) and its work (*Amt*).”³⁵ Because it is the government’s work “to bear the sword [...] for the punishment of those who do wrong [...], and to wreak a vengeance and a wrath that are called the vengeance and wrath of God.”³⁶ According to Luther, Christ is here “only talking about how individuals (*einzele personen ... fur sich*) are to live in relation to others, apart from official position and authority.”³⁷ As is well known, Luther distinguishes office (*Amt*) and person. In this sermon, he maintains that “we have two different persons in one man”:³⁸ in the one person,

we are created and born, according to which we are all alike [...] But once we are born, God adorns and dresses you up as another person. He makes you a

²⁸ WA 32, 307; LW 21, 13.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ WA 32, 315; LW 21, 22, author’s own emphasis.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cf. WA 32, 316; LW 21, 22.

³⁵ WA 32, 316; LW 21, 23.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

child and me a father, one a master and another a servant, one a prince and another a citizen.³⁹

This second person, Luther continues, “is called a divine person,” because it “holds a divine office.”⁴⁰

The demand to be “meek” does not apply to this public person, because as public persons we have to adapt to the rules of the institutions we play a role in and are not allowed “meekly” to abstain from executing our duty if this requires to be hard and to use physical power. So, Christ’s word seems to be irrelevant in terms of our public roles. However, Luther warns us not to confuse the two persons: not only to avoid mixing the moral categories of private life into the ethos of the public person, but also the other way round, to abstain from introducing the instruments of power, which are legitimate in the public sphere, into the ethos of the private person.⁴¹ Thus, indirectly, Christ’s demand to be “meek” also has an impact on the public person in so far as strictly limiting the use of power to the requirements of the respective public role. In other words: the individual is called to give space to their private person by not letting the habitus of the public person dominate their lives as a whole.

In this context, it is interesting to see how Luther tackles Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”⁴² Because of Luther’s well-known notorious words in the Peasant Wars—he encouraged the authorities to use the sword against the peasants claiming they would use “God’s sword”—we might expect him to spiritualize the demand to “make peace.” But he does not. From the beginning, he emphasizes,

the Lord here honors those who do their best to try to make peace, not only in their own lives but also among other people, who try to settle ugly and involved issues, who endure squabbling and try to avoid and prevent war and bloodshed.⁴³

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” that means,

anyone who claims to be a Christian and a child of God, not only does not start war or unrest; but he also gives help and counsel on the side of peace wherever he can, even though there may have been a just and adequate cause for going

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cf. *WA* 32, 316f; *LW* 21, 23.

⁴² *WA* 32, 330–334; *LW* 21, 39–44.

⁴³ *WA* 32, 330; *LW* 21, 39.

to war. It is sad enough if one has tried everything and nothing helps, and then he has to defend himself, to protect his land and people.⁴⁴

Luther harshly criticizes “quarrelsome young noblemen who immediately draw and unsheathe their sword on account of one word.”⁴⁵ They should not be called “‘Christians’ but ‘children of the devil’.”⁴⁶ He emphatically demands that every Christian who is “the victim of injustice and violence,” does “not immediately start getting even and hitting back,” but “to think it over, try to bear it and have peace.”⁴⁷ And even if he fails, he is not entitled to take revenge but is supposed to leave it to “law and government in the country” that is “ordained to guard against such things and to punish them.”⁴⁸ In any case, Luther admonishes Christians actively to commit themselves to peace and reconciliation. He literally calls disturbing a peaceful community by spreading bad rumors or lies the work of the “*diabolus*.”⁴⁹

This emphasis on active commitment is striking in Luther’s interpretation of Matthew 5:6: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”⁵⁰ Clearly Luther states that “‘Righteousness’ in this passage must not be taken in the sense of that principal Christian righteousness by which a person becomes pious and acceptable to God (*frum und angenem ... fur Gott*).”⁵¹ According to Luther, the Beatitudes

are nothing but instruction about the fruits and good works of a Christian. Before these must come faith, as the tree and chief part (*heubtstück*) or summary of a man’s righteousness and blessedness, without any work and merit of his; out of which faith these items all must grow and follow.⁵²

Thus, righteousness here means “the outward righteousness before the world, which we maintain in our relations with each other.”⁵³ A “righteous and blessed” person therefore is someone “who continuously works and strives with all his might to promote the general welfare and the proper behavior of everyone and who helps to maintain and support this by word

⁴⁴ WA 32, 330; LW 21, 40.

⁴⁵ WA 32, 331; LW 21, 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. “[...] *das du denckest und trachtest, wie es vertragen und fride werde,*” different translation: “consider and endeavor how to reconcile and establish peace.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Cf. WA 32, 332; LW 21, 42.

⁵⁰ WA 32, 318–321; LW 21, 26–29.

⁵¹ WA 32, 318; LW 21, 26.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

and deed, by precept and example.”⁵⁴ It is interesting that Luther particularly stresses the “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Christ, he says, wanted to indicate that realizing righteousness requires “great earnestness, longing, eagerness, and unceasing diligence”⁵⁵ because the obstructive forces of the devil and the world interfere with the realization of righteousness which easily leads to resignation. Quoting the proverb “despair makes a man a monk,”⁵⁶ Luther explicitly criticizes monastic life as escapism resulting from resignation and vehemently appeals to Christians actively to participate in the struggle for “outward righteousness.”

CONCLUSION

After having provided a few examples of how Luther understood the Sermon on the Mount, let me conclude with the following remarks on Luther’s hermeneutics:

- At least to me it is surprising how clearly Luther reads the Sermon as an instruction for Christian life. The *usus elencticus* does not play a crucial role. Thus, according to Luther, the Sermon is not a utopian text as it were but, rather, it is relevant to Christians’ everyday lives.
- Moreover, it is surprising that Luther does not exclusively emphasize an ethos of passion, e.g., of suffering injustice and leaving it all to God’s providence but, rather, supports an ethos of action, e.g., of struggling for outward righteousness.
- Luther reflects on the specific character of a biblical book. Biblical books may differ in focus, perspective and emphasis. We should not expect a single text to give the whole picture. It is important for the interpreter to get an idea of the text’s genuine profile. Luther, therefore, distinguishes Matthew from John and Paul by emphasizing his focus on the works.
- Luther respects the specific character of the text, but does not isolate it from other aspects of the Christian doctrine which are tackled more intensively in other parts of the Bible. He integrates the “principal article” of (justification by) faith into his interpretation of the Sermon

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ WA 32, 319; LW 21, 27.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

on the Mount, saying it speaks of the “works of faith.” Nevertheless, this is not a simple *eis-egesis*. He does not simply read the “principal article” into the text, but tries to find evidence in the text allowing for his interpretation.

- By reading the Sermon as an instruction for Christian life, Luther has to deal with the challenge that some of Christ’s commands seem to contradict basic, intuitive common sense and morality. In my paper, I refer to this as the dilemma of cultural plausibility. Luther faces this dilemma by claiming that the Sermon does not go to the public person who is called to safeguard the social order and therefore cannot abstain from using (or at least threatening with the use of) violence. According to the hermeneutical focus of this paper, I will not go deeper into the question of whether this is a convincing answer. I would rather like to suggest that cultural plausibility is an essential dimension of biblical hermeneutics in general. Our reading of biblical texts is deeply influenced by what we imagine to be culturally plausible or implausible. And this can change. For instance, when about 100 years ago the conviction that women should not be admitted to academic education lost its cultural plausibility in Europe and North America this changed the reading of biblical texts that were formerly used to restrict the access of women to public preaching and religious leadership. It is wrong to criticize that as surrendering to the *zeitgeist*. Rather, it is a permanent task of theological hermeneutics to draw attention to this dimension in order to create the space for dealing with it in a reflected, responsible way.