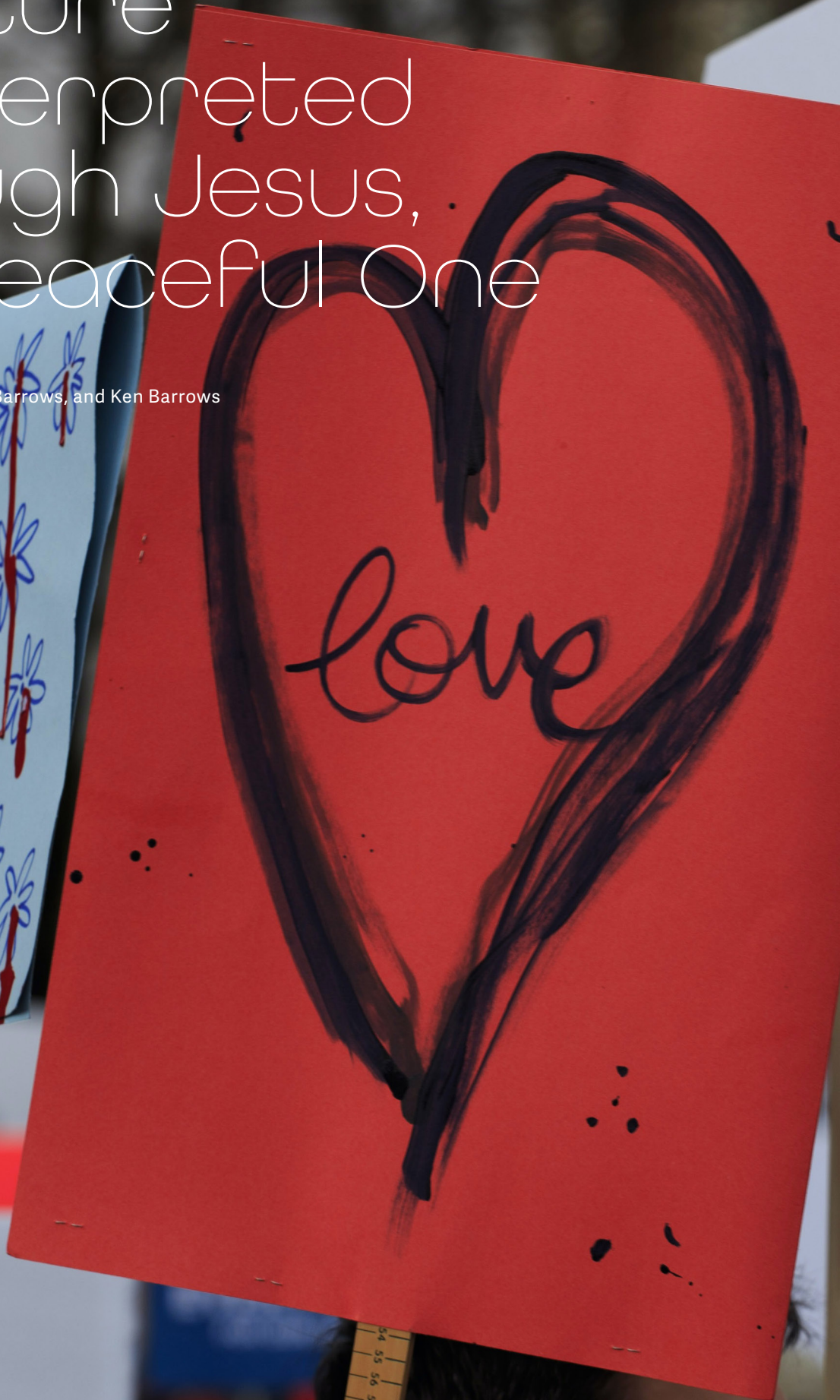


# Scripture as Interpreted through Jesus, the Peaceful One

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To many in his time, Jesus did not meet their expectations of a Messiah. Even today, Jesus' message calls us to reexamine our assumptions and explore new ways of understanding and responding to God's boundless love.

*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you...*  
—Matthew 5:21-22

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*  
—1 Corinthians 13

#### HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND ISRAEL'S STORY

In his book, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Walter Wink recounts ancient creation stories about gods engaged in gruesome cosmic battles. Great systems of domination evolved from these tumultuous origins, beginning with the powerful empires of Mesopotamia from around 3000 BC. In this worldview of domination by imposing one's rule over others, kingdoms rose and fell based on power.

The Hebrew story contrasts with this context of violent domination. Their story told of God creating the universe solely by his word and declaring that it was a good place for humankind (Genesis 1). God made a covenant with Abraham that by being God's

people, Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). It is a story of God upholding that covenant by redeeming God's people from oppression in Egypt and preserving them. Israel was counterculture in the ancient world because it was defined by a covenant with God. Other kingdoms were defined by their place in the hierarchical web based on the person in power.

Israel wavered between wanting to be a power-driven kingdom like its neighbors and being covenant people called to be a blessing to the world. The Hebrew scriptures reflect this struggle. Stories of their warrior God protecting them from their enemies through vengeance and violence exist side-by-side with stories of a loving God who sought the welfare of all.

Sometimes Israel chose to embrace the culture of domination. Then the prophets stepped forward to remind them they were God's covenant people delivered from captivity. As covenant people they were to take care of one another when they faced difficulties, and to care for foreigners, orphans, and widows (Leviticus 25:35-38, Deuteronomy 24:17-22).

#### JESUS AND THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

By Jesus' time, the people of Israel yearned for a promised Messiah who they assumed would liberate them from Roman occupation. Instead, Jesus connected them with the peaceable God of their history. Donald Kraybill, in *The Upside-Down Kingdom*,



explains how Luke used the Jewish symbolism of 40 days in the desert to tell how Jesus rejected the temptation of using economic power (bread), political power (kingdoms of world), or religious power (temple) to achieve God's purposes (Luke 4:12). Jesus would not use power to inflict violence on others (Kraybill, page 33).

Instead, in Luke 4:16-30 Jesus affirms the prophet Isaiah's depiction of a God who cared for people. He declared that he was the sought-for Messiah. Different than anticipated, he was sent to bring good news, proclaim release, recover sight, free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19 and Isaiah 61:1-2a). At first the people cheered, until they realized he left out the part about the expected day of vengeance when God would punish the wicked (Isaiah 61:2b). Jesus was telling them he would be a different Messiah—not one who organized vengeance and violence, but who showed them how to live with peace and justice for all people.

Mark describes Jesus' approach another way. After his baptism Jesus says, "... repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14). Instead of repent, many scholars believe the Greek word for it, *metanoia*, is better understood as reform your thinking. This passage might be rendered as think in a new way and believe this good news. Jesus encouraged his disciples to think in a new way—that in contrast to the power-driven kingdoms around them, relationships and actions in God's kingdom were based on love. That was the good news.

Paul echoes Jesus' emphasis in 1 Corinthians 13. He affirms that no matter what we say or know or do—regardless of how eloquent, insightful, or noble we are—without love we are just making meaningless noise. Paul closes with the affirmation that "faith, hope and love abide... but the greatest of these is love."

At that time people believed that when bad things happened in their lives, it was because someone had sinned (John 9:1-34). But in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus taught that all parts of life are sacred and blessed—whether painful, sorrowful, joyful, productive, or struggling. Among the many examples, Jesus affirmed that peacemakers were part of God's family, assuring them that bringing peace into another's life was a blessed act.

Later in Matthew 5, Jesus explained that he was not trying to replace Jewish traditions or what the prophets said but that he was there to fulfill them—to make them into reality. Over and over, he expanded on those traditions, saying "You have heard that... But I say to you..." Using the lens of love-based relationships, Jesus was again saying, "There is a new way to look at this."

## LOVE AND SHALOM

Jesus focused on bringing about God's kingdom through love. It would be unfaithful to the witness of the New Testament to reduce the love modelled by Jesus to being only about nonviolence. Jesus sought for a bigger peace than simply the absence of violence. His teaching and actions were about how we treat one another if we replace the rules of human cultures with interactions grounded in love, as God loves. He taught how acting in this kind of love would bring shalom—a Hebrew word that captures the ideal of complete well-being in every facet of life, of being in balance with the best of what God wants for each one.

A culture's rules often indicate that it's acceptable to care only about people who are like us. In contrast, Jesus offered the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Its lesson is that when confronted with the suffering inflicted on those who are other, loving as God loves calls us to go beyond the indifference encouraged by our culture. Jesus tells us to be like the Samaritan who chose instead to respond to suffering with compassion and action.

Jesus' embodiment of God's love for all did not mean that he avoided confrontations. He actively pushed back against the political, religious, and economic injustices of that day. He did not hesitate to criticize people in power for wilfully not living up to the best of what they knew was taught in their scriptures, traditions, and by God. Through his words and actions, Jesus affirmed God's love and presence was for everyone, even those who opposed him.

## JESUS AND A NEW WAY

Jesus especially confronted religious leaders who fixated on obeying every detail of the Jewish law while forgetting that their traditions and rituals were supposed to serve the people. He chastised those who used legal loopholes that deliberately abused those they were supposed to protect. He challenged the scribes and Pharisees, the bureaucrats of the day, for rules and policies that exploited the poor and widows (Mark 12:38-40). He reminded them that religious practices, like the Sabbath, were intended to serve people's needs, not enslave them to a set of rules (Mark 2:27). Jesus also pushed back against cultural rules by recognizing the "unclean" woman who touched his garment (Mark 5:25-34) and challenging the double standards of those who brought the adulterous woman before him to be judged (John 8:1-11).

In his interactions with people, Jesus refused to take easy shortcuts based on his perceived authority or social power over people. Instead, he listened to others and responded in grace. Mark recounts how a Syrophenician woman begged Jesus to heal her

daughter (Mark 7:24-30). At first Jesus turned her away because his mission was to Israel, saying it was, "... not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Dogs being a term used to describe foreigners.) Although the woman absorbed his rebuke, for the sake of her child she claimed only "the children's crumbs left for the dogs." Touched by her insight and humility, Jesus blessed her daughter.

Jesus also rejected the assumption that the only choice was between reacting with violence or with complacency. In another "You have heard that it was said..." lesson, Jesus challenged people to resist without responding in kind. In *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink explains we should not understand Jesus' teaching to "turn the other cheek," "give your cloak also," and "go the second mile" as a prescription for passivity (Matthew 5:38-41). Instead, Jesus was providing examples of nonviolent active resistance that were fitting for that culture.

The experience between Jesus and the woman at the well models the shalom in God's upside-down kingdom (John 4:10-15). It was upside-down because their meeting violated all the rules of Israelite culture and identity. It broke political rules because she was a Samaritan, with whom an upstanding Jew would never associate. It broke religious rules because she was a woman, with whom a Jewish man would never converse. It broke cultural rules because she was a social outcast, with whom nobody (Jew or otherwise) wanted to be seen.

Despite these clear cultural signals that she was not worthy of his attention, Jesus saw her as a person, as one beloved and blessed in God's kingdom. He offered no condemnation. Instead, he offered her the same "living water" that he offered everyone.

#### APPLYING SCRIPTURE TO OUR CONTEXT

Scripture compels us to ask ourselves what signals in our cultures shout "unworthy!" "unfair!" or "unclean!" Are these signals in our scripture, tradition, culture, or relationships with one another? When do we need to hear Jesus saying, "But I say to you... think in a new way..."? Instead of simply parroting "turn the other cheek" advice that was specific to that time, Jesus is asking us to do the hard work of finding creative ways to actively resist injustices in our own time and culture.

God continues to work toward the peaceable kingdom and calls us to be part of what is already here and what is yet to come. God invites us to live Christ's mission by embodying love in our lives and relationships, as did Jesus, the peaceful One. 