

Christianity and the Goat Factor: M2/W2, Crime, and a Christian Response,  
Cedar Valley Mennonite Church, April 17, 2005

*Introduction*

Thank you for the opportunity of communicating the Word of God with you today. I want to begin by acknowledging your longstanding significant support of our agency over the years. Some of you have faithfully served as volunteers; others have served in Corrections while supporting us; Waldy Klassen gave strong leadership to M2/W2 for well over twenty years.

I have come to share about the ministry of M2/W2 – Restorative Christian Ministries, in light of the passage from Scripture read to you this morning.

This story, every time I read it, *gets my goat!* That is, I know all too well the “goat” in me that says, “*Mea culpa*” – I stand guilty as charged.

*The Story of “Tom”*

“Tom” was known to all the helping community in the Abbotsford/Mission area. He had come by our offices numerous times over the years; had taken up huge portions of staff time; had been an all-around nuisance, etc. He was an addict, and all who worked with him more or less gave up on him. In the last place he stayed of which I am aware, he was asked to leave, because once again he had contravened the rules. I remember turning him down to help him partially furnish an apartment, saying he needed to abide by the rules and go back to the place he had just been. A few weeks later, the news came: *Tom* had died of hypothermia under an area bridge during a cold snap. My heart sank, still sinks today, at that news.

*Schindler’s List*

For those of you who saw the movie *Schindler’s List* years ago, one lasting impression about Schindler who did so much wonderful work to protect the Jews, was his own sense that he had failed so greatly at having done vastly more!

In a world teeming with people in great need, it is unavoidable to commit sins of omission. Consider the plight of the homeless alone right here in Mission. Consider your neighbours, the prisoners, in the two federal prisons in your backyard. The needs of these two groups would enormously overwhelm all the human, financial, and spiritual resources of this congregation.

*Ignorance is Bliss*

In relation to human needs and suffering, I am convinced that on one level, *ignorance is indeed bliss*. I once wrote a poem to God where I asked, “How do you sleep at night?” – in response to the horrific pain and suffering heard daily from the world over. You may

recall in the movie starring Jim Carrey and Morgan Freeman, *Bruce Almighty*, that Carrey, taking on God's role for a limited time and place, is overwhelmed by the petitions coming across the computer screen just in his tiny divine bailiwick.

There is a song by Jim and Jean Strathdee that begins,

*"Sometimes I wish my eyes had never been opened..."*

My sentiments too. Yet, while from one angle ignorance is bliss, *wilful* ignorance is damnation. Consider Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Lazarus, full of sores, longing for even the crumbs from the rich man's table, lay at the gate of the rich man, who studiously *ignored* Lazarus; something even the dogs did not do who came and licked his sores.

Then, after both die, the tables are turned. The rich man longs for someone to cool his tongue like Lazarus longed for someone to feed him the rich man's crumbs. But the rich man had obviously known of his deliberate lifelong brush-off of Lazarus, since he asks for Lazarus by name to cool his tongue.

Now that is a story of *wilful* failure to love the neighbour near. This is not to mention yet the enemy far. Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *No Future Without Forgiveness* writes of the deliberate blindness of white South Africa during *apartheid* to the brutality of the army and military. "The former apartheid cabinet member Leon Wessels was closer to the mark when he said that they had not wanted to know, for there were those who tried to alert them (p. 269)." Still, Tutu graciously states: " 'There but for the grace of God go I (p. 253).' " There too readily goes everyone of us.

I worked for two years on a team doing evangelism in West Berlin during the early seventies. I once asked an elderly woman we got to know,

*Aber haben Sie nicht gewußt?* – But didn't you know?

Her voice said *Nein*, but her eyes said *Yes*. One could not live in Germany during the War and not notice the Stars of David worn by Jews, the disappearance of them from neighbourhoods, the closing of their shops, the rumours of concentration camps... and worse. Of course her eyes said *Yes*.

*Matthew 25: 31 – 46*

The text before us is read either in a straightforward understanding that our relationship to God is predicated upon our relationship in turn to the "other", to neighbour and enemy, or it is taken somehow as referring more dispensationally to how we respond to Christ at his Second Coming. I suggest that the two seeming opposite ways of reading the text amount to the same thing: how we respond to God in Christ is function of how we respond to neighbour near, enemy afar.

Please notice a few things about our text today:

There is no mention whatsoever of "justification by faith" in this text, though it is a salvation passage.

The “righteous” do not even know until that moment, seemingly, that they are justified – they are, in other words, the very opposite of *self-righteous*. Christ is found invariably in “the least of these”. If Christ is not found there, Christ is not found – no matter what religious protestations.

A Mennonite Central Committee poster produced a few years ago with reference to prison ministry read: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to ... proclaim freedom for the prisoners ... If the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, find the prison of your choice and go and do likewise.”

*Dr. J.I. Packer, Anabaptism, and James*

Several years ago, Regent College at U.B.C. was looking for a new Ethics Professor, after Dr. Klaus Bockmühl’s sudden death. I was invited as alumnus rep onto the Search Committee. When I was first introduced to the Committee, Dr. J.I. Packer, this year declared one of the Top Ten Evangelical theologians in North America, immediately picked up on the fact that I was Mennonite (though not ethnically) and was working for the Mennonite Central Committee Canada at the time. In a kindly though not unforceful manner, he told me that Anabaptists were at the core wrong in their interpretation of Scripture, but they were also historically great models for the contemporary church, since they long since had learned, and repeatedly, to live in a surrounding hostile culture. Some of you know well that history. Many of your Mennonite forebears lived out that experience.

I responded simply, in a kindly, I hope, though not unforceful way: “Dr. Packer, *But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*”

This of course is James 2:18, a verse in a book Martin Luther described as a “*right strawy epistle*”, so contrary it seemed to the great discovery of Saint Paul, the doctrine of *justification by faith*.

But is it?

May I suggest that justification is not through good works alone as the Reformers discovered - *nor is it possible without them*. *Sola fide* – by faith alone – is however a biblical heresy: a false, unnecessary choice. The Reformers usually failed to teach the corollary to faith/faithfulness: our salvation *is* our good works daily lived out (James 2:18; Phil. 2:12 & 13; Matt. 23:23 - based on Micah 6:8). As one theologian wrote of the Anabaptist embrace of this vision, violently rejected by the Reformers:

“The strength of this plan of salvation lay in the tight bond it created between divine grace and a total human response. Christian conduct did not follow (by some kind of inference or induction) as a consequence of salvation: it *was itself* salvation. The salvific gift of God and its human answer in following Jesus were two sides of one reality (James William McClendon Jr., *Doctrine* (Abingdon

1994), p. 118).”

*Matthew 5:43 – 48*

The text before us is consonant with an earlier part of Matthew’s Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to one part of it:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

There is one more key text in Matthew to consider, of a piece with the Sheep and the Goats passage, and the others just looked at. Please listen to:

*Matthew 22:34-40*

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

The biblical test for love of God is love of neighbour;

The biblical test for love of neighbour is love of enemy.

The measure of our devotion to God is our devotion to the other.

Failure to show love to the other is failure to show love to God.

*How we treat the other is how we respond to God.*

There is no Christian spirituality apart from the other. Christian salvation, Christian freedom, Christian spirituality are consummated in love of the other in the context of overwhelming love of God.

Paul’s witness is:

*“The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Gal 5:14)” James echoes it:*

*“If you really keep the royal law [Kingdom Law] found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right (James 2:8).” Further texts say:*

Love of neighbour is our *“spiritual act of worship (Rom. 12:1ff)”*.

Love of neighbour is *“the perfect law that gives freedom (James 1:25)”*.

### *The Entire Ethical Sweep of the Bible*

The entire ethical sweep of the Bible as negative statement is declared succinctly by Saint Paul in Romans 13:10:

*“Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”*

### *Martin of Tours*

When Martin of Tours (who lived in the 4th century), a young Roman soldier and seeker of the Christian faith, met an unclothed man begging for alms in the freezing cold, he stopped and cut his coat in two and gave half to the stranger. That night he dreamt he saw the heavenly court with Jesus robed in a torn cloak. One of the angels present asked, “Master, why do you wear that battered cloak?” Jesus replied, “My servant Martin gave it to me.” Martin’s disciple and biographer Sulpicius Severus states that as a consequence of this vision Martin “flew to be baptized”. God is gracious and merciful; his love compels us to treat others with mercy and kindness.

### *True Christian Spirituality*

I was raised in a conservative evangelical church tradition. The spirituality sought in that tradition was almost entirely God-directed. Church attendance, prayer meetings, and quiet times were greatly emphasized.

Mission understandings reflected this spirituality – with an additional twist: it was to “rescue the perishing”, get them “saved”, so that they too could join in similar devotion to God – and escape hell.

More positive kinds of this spirituality nonetheless produced great works of devotional literature such as *My Utmost For His Highest*. God was supremely loved and sought, according to the first of the Great Commandments.

In my missionary career, I also encountered Christians strongly oriented towards service, justice and peace as central to Christian mission. But devotion to God sometimes did not get mentioned, or was shunted to the back of the bus. In fact, one Home Church we joined had adherents who simply denied all the exalted language about Jesus in John’s Gospel and Hebrews for instance, and defined spirituality in terms of service. Worship of God in Christ lost all importance. It felt strange singing Christmas carols with this group that denied the Incarnation and adoration of Jesus. I used to think: “They have taken the Lord .... and we don’t know where they have put him!” (John 20:2) When I expressed this to one of the leaders, he said simply that this group had chosen “not to appropriate” certain portions of the Scriptures it found distasteful. One distasteful aspect was a high Christology. We sadly left that church fellowship disillusioned, even though they were great on service to others!

Both traditions seemed to put their eggs into the basket of *only one* of the Great Commandments. *But there are two, not just one!*

The Christian Gospel is an astounding Charter of Freedom (John 8:32, 36; Gal. 5:1)! It is a spirituality centred *not* in sentimental pious devotion to God, nor in only service to others. Jesus taught that such pious devotion was a religious form of idolatry characteristic of hell – a state in Jesus’ teaching of the religiously smug caught in a downward spiral of self-righteousness (Matt. 23:15).

And service of others apart from worship of God is good but ultimately unsustainable. “Can We Be Good Without God?” (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 1989), by Glenn Tinder best demonstrates that. Further, as Gil Bailie argues:

“The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel [22:36ff] did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that’s the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus’ suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: to *love God*. Partly due to the humanists’ romantic idea of basic human benevolence and partly to the rationalistic “where-there’s-a-will-there’s-a-way” spirit of the Enlightenment, the modern world came to believe that it could fulfill the requirements of the second commandment without having to bother with the first. We moderns came to believe, in effect, that, by itself, the second commandment was a civilizing force sufficient to the task at hand. The creaking and groaning, indeed, the shouting and shooting, that we now hear all around us is (*sic*) coming from the collapse of that assumption (*Violence Unveiled* (Crossroad 1995), p. 272).”

True Christian spirituality demonstrates central devotion equally to *God* and the *other* – the neighbour near and the enemy afar – through whom we however uniquely discover God and our true selves.

As the texts say:

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (I Jn 4:20).”

Love of God is unthinkable outside love of neighbour.

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matt 25:40).”

Devotion to the “least of these” is devotion to Jesus.

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:18).” James draws centrally on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which spells out the “what I do” of James. James is reiterating Jesus’ teaching:

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matt 7:21).”* God’s “will” has just been spelled out by Jesus in the preceding “Sermon” as “acts of justice” (Matt. 6:1), which in Matthew are invariably demonstrable love and mercy towards others, to be done by those of whom Jesus then says: *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matt 7:24, emphasis added).”*

*There is biblically no Christian salvation nor spirituality outside love of neighbour and the enemy.* Likewise though, love of the other is dependent ultimately solely upon our love of God.

But for us Evangelicals, I must continue. Our devotion to the other is the only legitimate demonstration of devotion to God. Richard Hays writes:

*“[T]he double love command [Matt. 22:37 - 40] becomes a hermeneutical filter – virtually synonymous with Hosea 6:6 [“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”, quoted twice in Matthew] – that governs the community’s entire construal of the Law... Those who are trained for the kingdom of heaven are trained to evaluate all norms, even the norms of the Law itself, in terms of the criteria of love and mercy. In the community that lives this vision, then, acts of love and mercy should abound (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays, Harper, 1996, p. 101).”*

In light of our opening Scripture, and this commentary, it is hard to understand Evangelicals’ support of war, the death penalty, or any other kind of mistreatment of the neighbour. Yet, of the 80 to 100 million or so white Evangelicals to the south of us, it is estimated that over 90% voted this last election for “born again” President George Bush to continue his perpetual War on Terrorism that in Iraq alone has claimed so far over 100,000 civilian victims.

The only mission for the church is demonstrable love towards others (beginning with fellow-believers, Gal. 6:10), which is both evangelism and acts of justice and mercy. So Jesus prayed:

*“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.... I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:18 & 23).”*

He therefore said later in the Fourth Gospel:

*“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20:21).”*

The supreme model is the Father who loves the whole world (John 3:16) and calls us to a similar love. This is identical to Eph. 5:1 & 2, that summons a consistent love of others, *“Live a life of love.”*, the text says, based upon Christ’s atoning death.

There is no Christian salvation, no spirituality, outside the other. *God is an idol outside*

*the other*. Love of God apart from the neighbour who is our true self is heresy – a false spiritual choice. The only authentic biblical spirituality discovers God and our true self in the demonstrable embrace of the other. If the other is within the church, it means practising the first principle of biblical ecclesiology: endless ( 70 X 70!) gestures of peacemaking/forgiveness toward the other who offends (Matt. 18). If the person is without the church, it means practising just peacemaking towards all – no less our fellow citizen/neighbour than the enemy, domestic and foreign (Matt. 5 - 7; Luke 6).

There is not a footnote theology to John 3:16 whereby God’s love is proffered to the world, “except our enemies”! The text does not begin, “*For God so loved the world, except our enemies, etc.*” That has nonetheless been majority Christendom’s spirituality whenever criminals and national enemies are in view. The Christian “enemy hit list” has also variously included pagans, Jews, Muslims, heretics, witches, slaves, people of colour, whites, Communists, capitalists, socialists, gays, lesbians, straights, pro-abortionists, anti-abortionists, Liberals, Conservatives, fundamentalists, etc., etc. *Christendom throughout history is strewn with the corpses of its enemies*. That is a travesty of true Christian spirituality, its utter inversion.

Thankfully, throughout church history, true Christian spirituality has been found in believers within all the traditions – often however in spite of the dominant theologies at work. It is at least potentially true of evangelicalism, so self-consciously assertive about holding to the faith “once delivered” (Jude 1:3), what Jesus said:

*“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach (Matt 23:2-3).”* Douglas Frank in *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1986), makes a poignant case for this. He writes:

“We are the Pharisees of our time, if anyone is (p. 229).” At the very end of a sweeping historical and sociological analysis of Evangelicalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>, beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, he adds:

“Whether in auspicious or declining times, as we have seen, we display a tenacious commitment to self-deceit. It is true that we are those who like to think that we heed Jeremiah’s words, ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.’ Our history, however, gives evidence rather of Jeremiah’s wisdom in adding these words: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?’ (Jer. 17:7,9). In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits (p. 278).”

Of us Evangelicals it is fair to respond:

*“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Matt 7:2).”*

Our “measure” is Jesus and the Scriptures. And by that very measure, we prove often to be sorely lacking. Judith Haiven’s somewhat scurrilous book about Evangelicals



nonetheless rightly observed what her title sadly reflects about some Evangelicalism: *Faith, Hope - No Charity!* This contrasts starkly with Tertullian's citation of the pagans' assessment of the early Christians: "See how they love...." A fellow Evangelical was right in gently mocking us, when, dedicating a book on Jesus' teaching about wealth and power to his dad, he said:

"He is an unusual fundamentalist; for he believes that inerrancy extends to the teachings of Jesus (*Your Money or Your Life* (Harper, 1986), by John Alexander)."

*M2/W2 and "The Least of These"*

M2/W2 currently has about

350 volunteers annually "matched" to do regular visits of over 600 prisoners throughout the prisons in British Columbia. We take seriously the text, "*I was in prison and you came to visit me...*"

We also work with

socially isolated parents in Chilliwack to have weekly volunteer visits with the parents and kids in the 0 to 5-year range.

We also hold a contract together with Catholic Charities to work with high-risk sex offenders released into our Fraser Valley Communities. The program is called "Circles of Support and Accountability", and has been highly effective across Canada for the past eleven years.

### **Glenn Flett**

Our fall Dinners' speaker two years ago was Glenn Flett.

Glenn spent several years committing robberies with violence, until one day he and a partner shot and killed a man during a Brinks Armoured Truck robbery. Through Christian friends inside and outside the prison, Glenn eventually chose to follow Jesus. Changes happened remarkably quickly. But a supreme test came after a woman in Victoria, a Christian pastor, was brutally murdered. She had been a grandmother figure to Glenn through all his criminal years. She had loved him unconditionally.

By a strange twist of circumstances, the man who murdered her ended up in the same prison as Glenn, and finally, in an English class he was teaching! Glenn was a "wheel" in the prison, had a lot of power, and could have called in favours. He could have had this guy killed. Not only did he not do this, but ultimately helped him successfully apply for and obtain parole. Glenn's new love for Jesus helped him embrace the man who had murdered the most accepting person in his life at that time.

Until recently, Glenn, who also had M2/W2 visits throughout his jail time, serves Jesus by reaching out to ex-prisoners through a local government-sponsored program that helps them reintegrate into society. It is called L.I.N.C.: Long-Term Inmates Now in the

Community. He has told his story widely, and is well-known in the larger criminal justice community, and also works closely with M2/W2. His life has been a tribute to the power of Restorative Justice.

He is going through a difficult time right now, and I would ask the congregation to pray for him and his family, without the specifics.

### *Conclusion*

Lee Griffith, in an amazingly prophetic book, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, writes:

“What would this mean if it were true that we love God only as much as the person we love least? Would it not mean that, when we have finally won the victory in our war on terrorism, when we have finally managed to exterminate all the thugs and Hitlers and terrorists, we will have expressed nothing so much as our total confidence in the death of God? (p. 263)”

We cannot in fact be *good* without God. Also, we cannot be Christians without *doing good* to others.

Such is the dynamic paradox of Christian spirituality. May we go from here *believing* and *doing* likewise! Amen.