

Excerpted from: *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, Glen H. Stassen & David P. Gushee, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003, pp. 141 to 143.

Traditional	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
1. You shall not kill	Being angry, or saying, You fool!	<i>Go, be reconciled</i>
2. You shall not commit adultery	Looking with lust is adultery in the heart	<i>Remove the cause of temptation (cf. Mk 9:43-50)</i>
3. Whoever divorces, give a certificate	Divorcing involves you in adultery	(Be reconciled: 1 Cor 7:11)
4. You shall not swear falsely	Swearing by anything involves you in a false claim	Let your yes be yes, and your no be no
5. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth	Retaliating violently or revengefully, by evil means	<i>Turn the other cheek, give your tunic and cloak, go the second mile, give to beggar and borrower</i>
6. Love neighbor and hate enemy	Hating enemies is the vicious cycle that you see in the Gentiles and tax collectors	<i>Love enemies, pray for your persecutors; be all-inclusive as your Father in heaven is</i>
7. When you give alms,	Practicing righteousness for show	But give in secret, and your Father will reward
8. When you pray,	Practicing righteousness for show	But pray in secret, and your Father will reward you
9. When you pray,	Heaping up empty phrases	<i>Therefore pray like this: Our Father ...</i>
10. When you fast,	Practicing righteousness for show	But dress with joy, and your Father will reward you
11 Do not pile up treasures on earth (cf. Luke 12:16-31)	<i>Moth and rust destroy, and thieves enter and steal</i>	<i>But pile up treasures in heaven</i>
12 No one can serve two masters	<i>Serving God and wealth, worrying about food and clothes</i>	<i>But seek first God's reign and God's justice/righteousness</i>
13. Do not judge, lest you be judged	<i>Judging others means you'll be judged by the same measure</i>	<i>First take the log out of your own eye</i>
14 Do not give holy things to dogs, nor pearls to pigs	They will trample them and tear you to pieces	<i>Give your trust in prayer to your Father in heaven</i>

The Pattern Continues Throughout The Sermon

We have examined three of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and have seen that their basic pattern is threefold. They are not impossible ideals but transforming initiatives based on God's grace. They are the way of deliverance

from the vicious cycles in which we get stuck. Thus we have taken a major step in overcoming the “hard teachings and high ideals” interpretation that has caused evasion of the Sermon. We have begun to see how the Sermon on the Mount consists of transforming initiatives that give real, practical, grace-based guidance for Christian ethics. This is a major step in the recovery of the way of Jesus for Christian ethics.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the pattern of threefold teachings, climaxing in grace-based transforming initiatives, continues throughout the central teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. For now, table 6.1 offers a road map, diagramming the Sermon on the Mount.

As we hope to show in subsequent chapters, the threefold transforming initiatives structure can be verified in seven ways:

1. It is remarkably consistent throughout the fourteen triads, with strikingly few exceptions.
2. It fits the consistent tendency throughout Matthew’s Gospel to prefer triads over dyads—with about seventy-five triads and almost no dyads.
3. Its emphasis on the third member of each triad, the transforming initiative, is confirmed by the Gospel of Luke. When Luke presents the parallel teachings, he most consistently presents the transforming initiative, while often not presenting the first two members of the teachings. (Where Luke parallels what Matthew reports is indicated by the italicized print in table 6.1.)
4. Once we see the triadic structure, the Greek verbs line up with remarkable consistency. The main verbs in the teachings of traditional righteousness are almost all futures or subjunctives, depending on the source in the tradition. The main verbs in the vicious cycles are all continuous process verbs—indicatives, participles, infinitives. The main verbs in the transforming initiative members are consistently imperatives.
5. The number three-times-fourteen was important to Matthew. The Sadducees and Pharisees saw a mystical significance in this number, and Matthew’s rival group claimed their teachers were descended from a triad of fourteen generations. So Matthew began his Gospel by pointing out that there were three-times-fourteen generations from Abraham to Jesus (Davies, *Setting of the Sermon*, 303-4). It fits neatly that here, too, he gives us fourteen threefold teachings.
6. It gives a fruitful clue for the likely meaning of the hitherto baffling Matthew 7:6, on not giving our holy things to dogs and pigs, as we will show when we discuss that passage.
7. It shows that Jesus’ teachings engage us in transforming initiatives that participate in the reign of God, the presence of the gracious God who acts in Jesus—who reconciles us with enemies, who is present with us in secret, who is faithful and trustworthy, and who brings deliverance from the vicious cycles that cause violations of the traditional righteousness. The second member consistently names vicious cycles; the Sermon is by no means based on an idealistic assumption that we do not get stuck in vicious cycles of sin. And the third member points the way of deliverance in the midst of this real world of sin. This corrects the idealism that sought to hallow Jesus’ teachings by making them simply calls for hard, strenuous, even impossible human effort. Instead it suggests a hermeneutic (a way of interpretation) of grace-based, active participation in eschatological deliverance that begins now. The split between attitudes and actions, in which Jesus allegedly emphasized intentions and not actual practices, falls away. Legalism falls away too; Jesus is pointing to participation in the grace of the deliverance that characterizes the inbreaking of the reign of God. Jesus is indeed the prophetic Messiah who proclaims the inbreaking reign of God and points to specific ways of participation in the kingdom.