

Is Christian Morality Unique? Part 1

The Gospel of Matthew



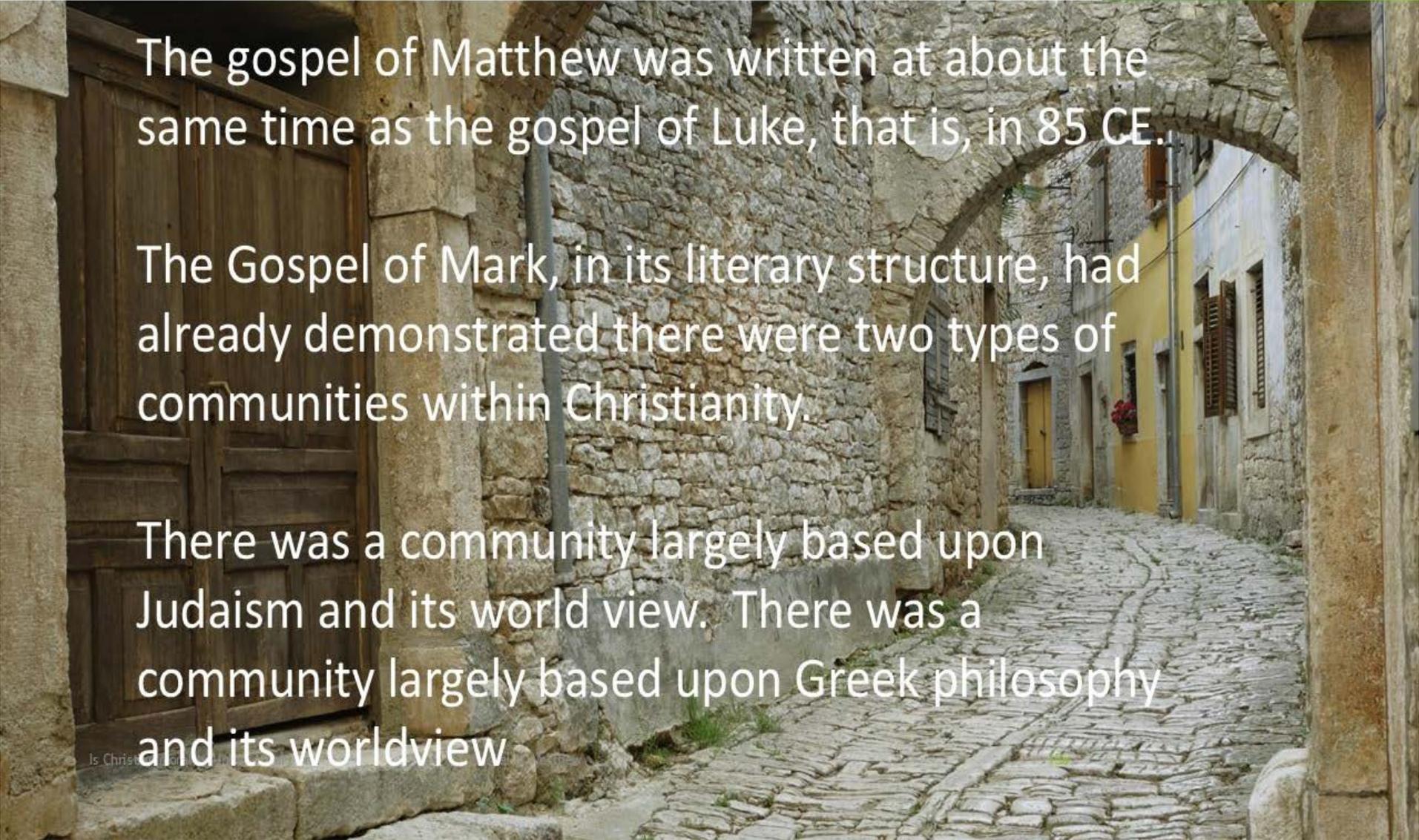
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Michelle Nailon CSB

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Gospel of Matthew

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The gospel of Matthew was written at about the same time as the gospel of Luke, that is, in 85 CE.

The Gospel of Mark, in its literary structure, had already demonstrated there were two types of communities within Christianity.

There was a community largely based upon Judaism and its world view. There was a community largely based upon Greek philosophy and its worldview

If you were Matthew, the writer, what sort of things would you want to highlight in the writing of this gospel?

What about the Gospel of Matthew?

Did that also "raise the bar" of Commandment observance?

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The Gospel of Matthew was written from the base of a Christian Jewish Community. It has a focus on the challenges there.



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Gospel of Mark

As with Luke's gospel, Matthew's gospel was heavily based on the gospel of Mark, the first gospel, which had been written about 70 CE.

Gospel of Matthew
ca. 85 CE

Gospel of Luke
ca 85 CE

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At that time in 85CE, the Jews were still reeling from the loss of their Temple in 70CE.

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The Jerusalem Temple, prior to 70 CE - was one of the wonders of the ancient world



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What about the Gospel of Matthew?

Did that also "raise the bar" of Commandment observance?

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But now in 85 CE, with the Temple gone, so it seemed, was its whole Jewish infrastructure.

For the Jews there were no more priests offering sacrifice. The scholars and scribes etc that had gathered at the Temple were gone. Given the size and status of the Temple it can be assumed it had a substantial library. But that was gone as well.

The population of the city itself had been decimated.



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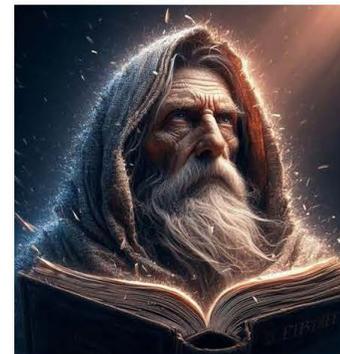
Gospel of

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At the time in 85 CE, Jews in general were trying to understand

- ▶ "Where to from here?"
- ▶ Were they still God's chosen people?

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One section of the Jewish population which had remained largely intact in 85CE, was the sect of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, with their strict following of the law, now emerged as the leaders.

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Gospel of Matthew

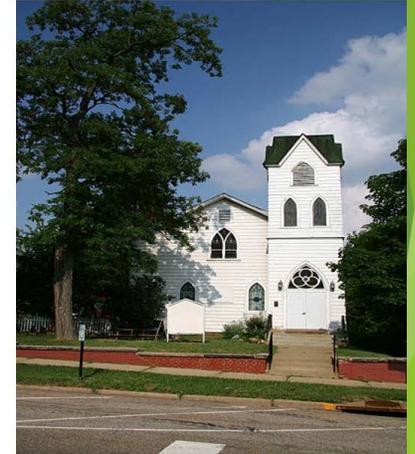
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The Pharisees encouraged and indeed insisted upon meticulous practice of the law and regulations by the rest of the Jews.

The new focal point for Jews in general was to be their own local synagogue.

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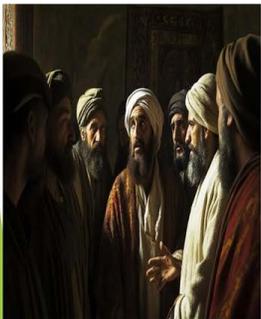
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In a way similar to what was going on in the life of Jesus, the Pharisees remained hostile to the freer, Christian approach.

They told mainstream Jews that Christians did not keep the Jewish law.

In the 50's the Pharisees had accused Paul of not keeping the law and had tried to kill him because of it.

Even Jewish Christians had been very hostile towards Paul (cf. Acts 23:16)



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Around 85 CE there was an edict put out by the Jewish leadership that the local Synagogues were to pray a curse against Christians.

This effectively drove out the Christian Jews, most of whom had deep roots within Judaism. These *people thought of themselves as Jews first* of all and were deeply hurt by the exclusion.

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The gospel writer Matthew, writing in the Jewish Christian milieu, needed to work out where the Christians stood, especially Jewish Christians, who were being forced out of the Synagogue.

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In his writing Matthew put a focus on the need for close **discipleship** of Jesus and the need for a sense of **relationship and community** amongst the followers of Jesus.

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In his Gospel, Matthew insisted that Jesus did keep the law.

Jesus was born a Jew and he had a Jewish heritage.

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In the early chapters of the gospel, Matthew describes how, at the start of his ministry, Jesus went into the desert on a 40 day retreat. He was tempted by the devil there (Mt.4:1).

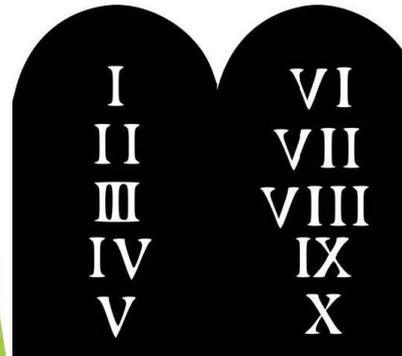


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Jesus resisted temptations that relate to

“Thou shalt not kill”

“Thou shalt not commit adultery”

“Thou shalt not steal”.

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▶ Jesus refused to turn stones into bread (Mt 4:3)

(cf material wealth and

“Thou shalt not steal”)



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In the Temptations Jesus refused to worship the devil, despite the devil's promise to give him power over all the world (Mt.4:8-10).

This temptation to power has a link with the commandment of “Thou shalt not kill” which is also about power and its misuse.

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▶ He refused to jump off the Temple roof in order to show that his Heavenly Father would save him

(a temptation for taking family support for granted and cf. the Commandment of

▶ “Thou shalt not commit adultery”).



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A focus on these same three social Commandments is to be found throughout the Gospel.

It also appears in the texts in which Jesus “raises the bar” of Commandment observance.

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**“You have heard that you shall not kill.....
But I tell you...”**

Consider Chapter 5

- ▶ Jesus says “You have heard that you shall not kill..... But I tell you...” It is not enough to avoid killing another.
- ▶ Rather, one should not even be angry with another, or disparage them, or call them a fool

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Matthew (Mt. 5:21-24).



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Jesus goes on to say it is not enough to avoid stealing.

Rather, if someone “sues you for your tunic, then give him your cloak also” And “give to those who ask”

(Mt.5:40-1)

(Imagine these days if you are fined \$200 and you therefore pay out \$400 !!)

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Matthew



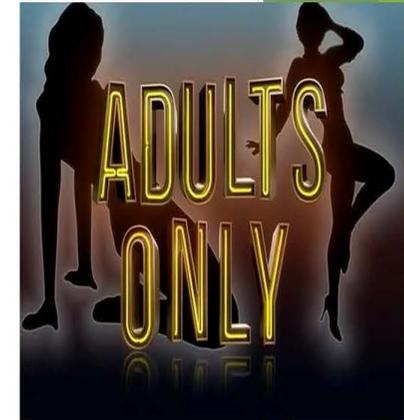
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- ▶ In the same chapter Jesus says “You heard that it was said: thou shalt not commit adultery. But I tell you...” (Mt.5:27-8)
- ▶ That is, it is not enough to avoid adultery. Rather, even if a man looks lustfully at a woman, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- ▶ Again the bar is raised.



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In Matthew's Gospel
Jesus "raises the bar"
of the Commandments

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“Thou shalt not kill”	“Thou shalt not commit adultery”	“Thou shalt not steal”
Avoid labelling others as a “fool”	Avoid a lustful attitude	Avoid ignoring justice and the poor
i.e.	i.e.	i.e.
Failing to respect fellows	Failing to respect women	Failing to observe justice and empathy for the poor

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With such emphasis, Jesus and the writer Matthew challenge gospel hearers and readers to “internalise the law”.

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With such emphasis, Jesus and the writer Matthew challenge gospel hearers and readers to “internalise the law”.

Internalise the Law

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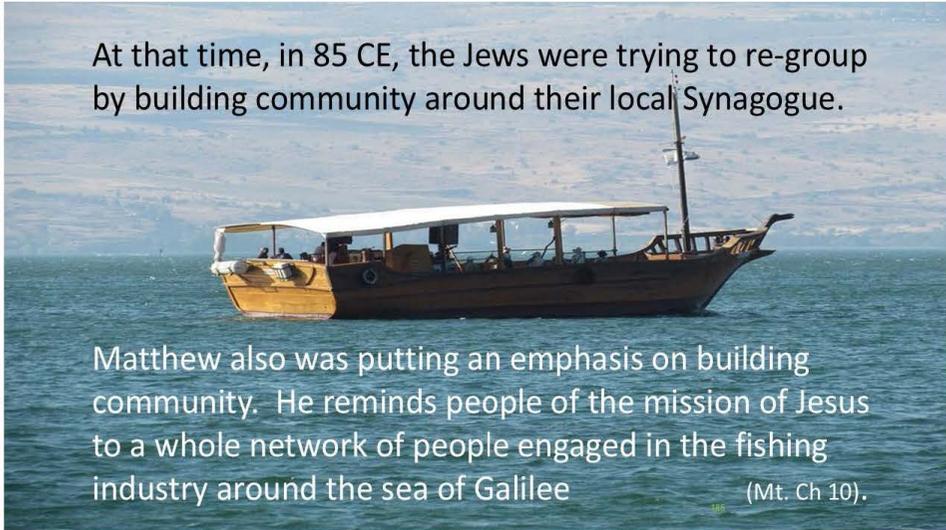
In Matthew’s gospel Jesus challenges his followers to aim for a better quality of

Relationship

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At that time, in 85 CE, the Jews were trying to re-group by building community around their local Synagogue.

Matthew also was putting an emphasis on building community. He reminds people of the mission of Jesus to a whole network of people engaged in the fishing industry around the sea of Galilee (Mt. Ch 10).



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The Jews were trying to re-build their community based on the local synagogue,

Matthew showed how Jesus encouraged his followers to build their own community by reliance on the spirit of the law rather than its technicalities.



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- ▶ Workers in the industry included the fishermen, fish processors, carters, the traders, the tax collectors etc.
- ▶ Jesus called them “the lost sheep of the House of Israel”
- ▶ Many of these subgroups were family based.

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Would agree Matthew puts stress on community and the

Spirit of the Law

www.valuesclarification.org/ischristianmoralityunique.htm

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