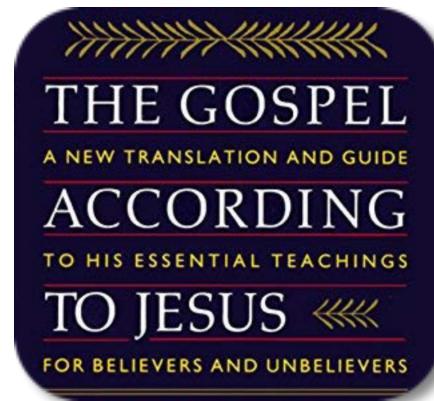


The Gospel according to Jesus

. . . His essential teachings. . . (a summary by Pat Evert)

• Introduction

Because Jefferson was our great champion of religious freedom, he was attacked as a rabid atheist by the bigots of his day. He would compile a version of the Gospels that would include only what he considered the authentic accounts and sayings of Jesus. In a letter to John Adams he wrote, "It is as easy to separate those parts, as to pick out diamonds from dunghills. "To the corruptions of Christianity," he wrote, "I am, indeed, opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wanted anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other." It is precisely because of his love for Jesus that he had such contempt for the "tricks" that were played with the Gospel texts. In this book I have followed Jefferson's example. I have selected and translated, from Mark, Matthew, Luke, and (very sparingly) from John, only those passages that seem to me authentic accounts and sayings of Jesus. I found, as Jefferson did, that **when the accretions are recognized and stripped off, Jesus surprisingly, vividly appears in all his radiance.** Like the man in Bunyan's riddle, the more we throw away, the more we have. Ultimately my decisions were based on what Jefferson called "internal evidence": the evidence provided by the words themselves. Once the sectarian passages are left out, we can recognize that Jesus speaks in harmony with the supreme teachings of all the great religions: the Upanishads, the Tao Te Ching, the Buddhist sutras, the Zen and Sufi and Hasidic Masters.



What is the gospel according to Jesus? Simply this: that **the love we all long for in our innermost heart is already present**, beyond longing. Like all the great spiritual Masters, Jesus taught one thing only: presence. Ultimate reality, the luminous, compassionate intelligence of the universe, is not somewhere else, in some heaven light-years away. It didn't manifest itself any more fully to Abraham or Moses than to us, nor will it be any more present to some Messiah at the far end of time. **It is always right here, right now.** That is what the Bible means when it says that God's true name is I am. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he was not prophesying about some easy, danger-free perfection that will someday appear. He was talking about a state of being, a way of living at ease among the joys and sorrows of our world. It is already ours. All spiritual Masters, in all the great religious traditions, have come to experience the present as the only reality. The portrait of Jesus that emerges from the authentic passages in

the Gospels is of a man who has emptied himself of desires, doctrines, rules—all the mental claptrap and spiritual baggage that separate us from true life—and has been filled with the vivid reality of the Unnamable. What is purity of heart? If we compare God to sunlight, we can say that **the heart is like a window**. Cravings, aversions, fixed judgments, concepts, beliefs—all forms of selfishness or self protection—are, when we cling to them, like dirt on the windowpane. The thicker the dirt, the more opaque the window. When there is no dirt, the window is by its own nature perfectly transparent, and the light can stream through it without hindrance. He wants to tell everyone about the great freedom: **how it feels when we continually surrender to the moment and allow our hearts to become pure, not clinging to past or future, not judging or being judged**. In each person he meets he can see the image of God in which they were created. They are all perfect, when he looks at them from the Sabbath mind. He has no ideas to teach, only presence. He has no doctrines to give, only the gift of his own freedom.

We can't begin to see who Jesus was until we remove the layers of interpretation which the centuries have interposed between us and him, and which obscure his true face, like coat after coat of lacquer upon the vibrant colors of a masterpiece. Jesus begins with the kingdom of God in the heart. His teachings have such a deep moral resonance that they take us beyond the realm of the moral and make righteousness seem like the most beautiful thing on earth. In this he is prototypically Jewish. What is required of us is to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Not "behind": "with." But few people are ready to enter the kingdom of God. So Jesus has a second focal point: forgiveness.

The first thing we ought to realize about Jesus' life is that **he grew up as an illegitimate child**. It is true that the angel was a ministering spirit, but he wasn't a meddler: he didn't appear to the other girls in Israel and say, "Don't despise Mary; the extraordinary is happening to her." The angel appeared only to Mary, and no one could understand her. Has any woman been as humiliated as Mary was, and isn't it true here also that the one whom God blesses he curses in the same breath? As for the social effects on a young child: growing up with the shame of being called a bastard must be almost as painful as being illegitimate in fact. I don't think that we can fully appreciate who Jesus became unless we realize the overwhelming difficulties he must have had as an illegitimate child in a small provincial town, which one has to assume was fairly harsh and moralistic when it dealt with such matters. But there is a deeper piety of the actual. And that deeper piety shows us that God is to be found not in the should be, but in the is. It is remarkable what an opposite and complementary shape the life of the Buddha had. He was born the son of a king, and in order to become himself, he had to overcome the difficulties that arise from being rich, all the temptations of luxury and power, the camel-and-the-eye-of-the-needle syndrome. We can see the respective beginnings of these two great men as opposite ends of the spectrum that is the human condition.

Only one word has come down to us directly from the lips of Jesus in its original Aramaic: *abba*, "father." For Jesus, the Father is pure generosity, pure creativity, the archetypal power that generates the whole universe, And not only absolute creative power, but also absolute mercy, a

quality we associate more with mothers.

If there is one reality that marks what we might call the emotional life of Jesus, as glimpsed through his various sayings, it is **the presence of the divine father and the absence of a human father**. This is entirely in keeping with the probability that he grew up as an illegitimate child. We know nothing about **Jesus' enlightenment experience**, which changed him from carpenter to Master, from “son of a whore” to a son of God. We know nothing... we know nothing.... perhaps as he was fasting and meditating in the wilderness. And in his own view of himself, he undoubtedly felt, like anyone who has spent a great amount of time in prayer or meditation, that he was just one partial expression of the divine whole: the moon reflected, however clearly, in a dewdrop. That he felt imperfect and fallible simply means that he was one of us. Jesus' parable of **the Prodigal son** was primarily intended for the righteous. Its lesson is that those who have always remained with God, as the older son remained with his father, shouldn't feel resentful toward those who have truly repented and returned, but should receive them openheartedly, with joy, as the father received his younger son. There is an almost unbearable sense of degradation. The son is treated, and feels like, the lowest of the low. He is cut off from all human society, reduced to spending his days taking care of pigs, the unclean animal par excellence, and is too disgusted to eat the carob pods that they feed on in their contented piggish way. He has entered so deeply into the younger son because he himself had once felt that way. **Not even the greatest Masters were spared the process of spiritual death and rebirth**. Suddenly the younger son comes to himself, becomes himself, no sooner does he realize that he can return, than he does return; no sooner does he realize that he is unworthy to be called his father's son, than the father runs to him and embraces him and treats him like the most worthy of sons. After he returned to his Father, was there no mother to greet him?

Jesus gives us a most vivid example of what it feels like to live in the continual presence of love, in the present and only tense of the verb God. We can use different metaphors to describe the experience that changed Jesus. It is the kind of experience that all the great spiritual Masters have had, and want us to have as well. Jesus called this experience “**entering the kingdom of God**.” We can also call it “rebirth” or “enlightenment” or “awakening.” Two examples. First, Paul of Tarsus, came to his experience with a particularly difficult character: arrogant, self-righteous, filled with murderous hatred of his opponents, terrified of God, oppressed by what he felt as the burden of the Law, overwhelmed by his sense of sin. In terms of the metaphor, his windowpane was caked with grime. We can feel in the writings of Paul the Christian some of the same egotism, superstition, and intolerance that marred the character of Saul the Pharisee. As a second and contrary example, perhaps the greatest example of patience and meticulousness in the history of religion, I would like to propose Chao-chou, who lived during the golden age of Zen in T'ang dynasty China. Anyone who has undergone the experience of spiritual transformation knows **how agonizing it can be**. It is like cleaning the heart with a piece of steel wool. After his teacher died, Chao-chou remained in the monastery for a three-year mourning period; then he set out on a twenty-year pilgrimage to hone himself against the greatest Masters of his time. He said, “If I meet a hundred-year-old man and I have something to teach him, I will teach; if I meet an

eight-year-old boy and he has something to teach me, I will learn.” Only when he was eighty years old did he feel mature enough to set up shop as a teacher. He taught for the next forty years, and his sayings are a marvel of lucidity, compassion, and humor. Jesus must have undergone **a good deal of spiritual development** outside the story that has come down to us, before his enlightenment experience. After it, there was still one place of vivid pain and darkness left in his heart, **a residual sorrow from his childhood**: Jesus was unclear on one point, that he couldn’t yet fulfill the commandment to honor father and mother. **you cannot devote your life to two divinities: God and the person you are married to.** Your first job is to kill the Buddha.” I had read that phrase in the old Zen teachings, and I knew what it meant—to let go of any concepts of a separate, superior, enlightened being outside myself. Then he said, “Your second job is ‘Killing your parents’ means accepting them just as they are. Then he said, “Your third job is to kill me.” It has been urged that the harsh bearing of Jesus towards his mother and family may be explained and justified on the grounds (a) that his family did not understand or believe in his mission, (b) that his whole soul was so filled with this mission that there was no room in it for family ties and interests, and (c) the most important of all, that his special work implied and demanded a separation from, an abandonment of, all worldly connections and occupations. Integration of this new self into one’s life and family and society is the greatest and most difficult challenge in spiritual practice. The work may take seven years or seven lifetimes, but people who are in love with God do it gladly. While no other great spiritual teacher I know of had to face such a difficult childhood as Jesus did, all others had to give up their attachments to personal relationships, especially to the powerful centrifugal force of the family. In this story, the people of Nazareth can’t believe that the Jesus whom they knew as an illegitimate child has been transformed into a prophet. They see him through the distorting lens of the past, and therefore are completely unaware of his presence. even the greatest Master may still appear to his family as the child he was—small, needy, untransformed.

It is Jesus’ most important teaching for those who aren’t ready to enter the kingdom of God. The most that Jesus could have taught these two unhappy people would be to forgive themselves. In these sayings of Jesus, God is a mirror reflecting back to us our own state of being. We receive exactly what we give. The more openhearted we are, the more we can experience the whole universe as God’s grace. **Forgiveness is essentially openness of heart.** It is an attitude, not an action. All Israel, all each of us, needs to do is to return to the love that is always ready to receive us.

In Jesus’ sayings, and in his one recorded meeting with his mother, it is apparent that he hasn’t yet forgiven her. His gruffness, his resistance to anything that has to do with family, indicate that **he hasn’t let go**. But there is a hint: the story of the Woman Caught in Adultery. “Let whoever of you is sinless be the first to throw a stone at her.” Here Jesus is including himself with all human beings, as capable of making mistakes. He is certainly not saying, “Only I, who am sinless, have the right to throw a stone at her,” but rather “None of us has the right.” In the story of the adulteress, Jesus is brought face to face with a woman who symbolically and psychologically stands for his mother. She too has committed adultery, and he is being asked to judge her. it can

nevertheless serve as a symbolic reminder of how we must come to peace with parents, lovers, friends and enemies, and with the most difficult, unlovable parts of ourselves. **The more fully we accept them and thus let them go, the more light we allow into our hearts.**

• **The Gospel**

This is the book of **the good news that Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed**. John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of renewal for the forgiveness of sins. And at that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And afterward the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness for forty days, with the wild animals.

And he began to **teach and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God**. And people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them like someone who has authority, and not like the scribes. And Simon and his companions searched for him, and when they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next villages, so that I can proclaim the good news there too.” And he went through all of Galilee, proclaiming the good news in their synagogues and healing many diseases. And the man (cleansed of leprosy) went out and began to talk about it excitedly, and the news spread, until Jesus could no longer go into a village, but had to stay out in the countryside. And people came to him from every direction.

And he taught them many things in parables, and said, “**What is the kingdom of God like? It is like a man who sows a seed on the earth**: he goes about his business, and day by day the seed sprouts and grows, he doesn’t know how. The earth bears fruit by itself, first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, the man goes in with his sickle, because it is harvest time. “**The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed**, which is smaller than any other seed; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes the largest of shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky are able to make their nests in its shade. “**The kingdom of God is like yeast**, which a woman took and mixed in with fifty pounds of dough, until all of it was leavened. “**The kingdom of God is like a treasure buried in a field**, which a man found and buried again; then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field. “**Or the kingdom of God is like this: there was a merchant looking for fine pearls**, who found one pearl of great price, and he went and sold everything he had and bought it. “Thus, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of God is like a householder who can bring forth out of his treasure room both the new and the old.” And someone asked him, “When will the kingdom of God come?” And he said, “The kingdom of God will not come if you watch for it. Nor will anyone be able to say, ‘It is here’ or ‘It is there.’ For **the kingdom of God is within you.**”

And many people who held the Law in contempt began to follow Jesus. And the scribes said to him, “Why do you eat with traitors and whores?” And Jesus said to them, “It isn’t the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. My teaching is not meant for those who are already righteous,

but for **the wicked**.” And he went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. And the Twelve went with him, and also certain **women** whom he had cured of diseases and infirmities: **Mary of Magdala, who had been insane**, and Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Kooza, and Susannah, and many others, who provided for them out of their own resources. And his fame spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee, and people brought the sick on stretchers to wherever they heard he was staying, and whenever he came to a town or village, they would lay down **the sick** in the marketplace. And they brought him **those who were suffering** from many kinds of diseases and torments, and demoniacs, and epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.

And he began to teach them, and said, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.** Blessed are those who grieve, for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Don’t think that my purpose is to destroy the Law; **my purpose is not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. For I tell you that unless your righteousness is deeper than the righteousness of the scribes, you will never enter the kingdom of God.** Don’t be like them, for your Father knows what you need even before you ask him. But pray like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our wrongs as we forgive those who have wronged us. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

“Don’t judge, and you will not be judged. For in the same way that you judge people, you yourself will be judged. Why do you see the splinter that is in your brother’s eye, but don’t notice the log that is in your own eye? **First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.** Therefore, whatever you want others to do to you, do to them. This is the essence of the Law and the prophets. Everyone who hears what I say and does it is like a man who built his house upon rock; and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it didn’t fall, because it was **founded on rock.** And everyone who hears what I say and doesn’t do it is like a man who built his house upon sand; and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was its fall.”

And **when his family heard about all this**, they went to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.” A mute demoniac is healed... A woman in the crowd, who had been bleeding for twelve years, is healed... The child of a Roman leader is raised... Many people who heard him were bewildered, and said, “Where does this fellow get such stuff?” and “What makes him so wise?” and “How can he be a miracle-worker? Isn’t this the carpenter, Mary’s bastard, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they

were prevented from believing in him. And Jesus said, “A prophet is not rejected except in his own town and in his own family and in his own house.” And he was **unable** to do any miracle there, **because of their disbelief**.

A Syrophenician woman gains favor for her daughter... A deaf man is made to hear and speak... A blind man made to see... A demon possessed son is cleansed... And he called a child over, and put him in front of them; and taking him in his arms, he said, “Truly I tell you, **unless you return and become like children, you can’t enter the kingdom of God.**”

A certain scribe asks, “Rabbi, what must I do to gain eternal life?” ... Love your neighbor in the Parable of the Good Samaritan... Another time, the tax-gatherers and prostitutes were all crowding around to listen to him. And the scribes grumbled, and said, “This fellow welcomes criminals and eats with them.” The Parable of the lost sheep and the ninety nine... the parable of the lost coin found... And the parable of the prodigal son(s)....

Jesus saw this, he was indignant, and said to them, “**Let the children come to me**, don’t try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, **whoever doesn’t accept the kingdom of God like a child cannot enter it.**” And he took them in his arms, and put his hands on them, and blessed them. And Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, “**Children, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.** It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The next morning, as Jesus was teaching in the Temple, the scribes brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and they stood her in the middle. And they said to him, “Rabbi, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Moses in the Law commanded us to stone such women to death; what do you say?” He stood and said to them, “Let whoever of you is sinless be the first to throw a stone at her.”...

And Jesus said, “Sit here, while I pray.” And going off by himself, he prostrated himself on the ground and prayed. And he said, “Abba, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. **Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want.**” And all the disciples abandoned him, and fled.

And they took Jesus to the High Priest. And early the next morning, the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, bound Jesus and took him away and handed him over to Pilate. And Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, and flogged him, and handed him over to his soldiers to be crucified. Jesus uttered a loud cry, and died.

• **Commentary**

Baptism - Mark or his source, followed by Matthew and Luke, heavily mythologizes this incident: sky opening, spirit descending in the form of a dove, heavenly voice acknowledging Jesus as the divine Son. But any good spiritual teacher will discourage us from taking them too seriously, and will teach us to let them come and go like any other experience.

He teaches the good news: What is “the good news”? That true life, eternal life, has been found—it is not something promised, it is already here, **it is within you: as life lived in love, in love without subtraction or exclusion, without distance. Everyone is the child of God**—Jesus definitely claims nothing for himself alone—and as a child of God everyone is equal to everyone else.

The first disciples - These two incidents, the calling of Simon and Andrew and James and John, are what the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann called “ideal scenes”: incidents which the Evangelist or a previous editor **created as examples of actual events**. Here, although the scenes are obviously stylized, they give a sense of the great personal magnetism that Jesus must have had.

At Capernaum - And they came to Capernaum. And on the Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and taught. And people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them like someone who has authority, and not like the scribes. In a larger sense, the scribes are those who have made themselves a cozy den in the religious doctrine of their time. In certain ways they are admirable, and if their lives are decent and generous they deserve much praise. But they are not good teachers of spiritual truth, because they only believe in—they haven’t experienced—God. They don’t realize that all holy texts are provisional, and that **the true word of God is the word that has become flesh**. When Jesus spoke, he didn’t need to quote scripture; his own heart was scripture. That is why he could speak with authority.

First healings - Further “ideal scenes”: **stylized examples of actual, typical events**. Almost nobody thinks the preserved stories are accurate in all details, but few scholars would deny that at least some of them probably derive from reports of “cures” that actually occurred in Jesus’ presence and were understood by the patients, the observers, and Jesus himself as miracles performed by him. Such cures made Jesus famous. To understand their importance, we must remember that ancient Palestine had no hospitals or insane asylums. The sick and insane had to be cared for by their families, in their homes.

The kingdom of God - The parables originally circulated as independent sayings, as did all the words of Jesus; only much later were they placed in their current settings by the Evangelists or by previous editors. The subject of this first parable is **the birth of spiritual awareness, its mystery and wonder**. Just as a seed, under the proper conditions of sunlight and water, sprouts in the ground, effortlessly and beyond our control. The next five parables (A mustard seed, yeast, treasure buried in a field, merchant looking for fine pearls, a householder who can bring forth out of his treasure room both the new and the old) tell about **the discovery and growth of the kingdom of God**. Here Jesus is talking about two different aspects of the experience. When we first discover the kingdom, we are overwhelmed by wonder and joy, and we realize that nothing in the world of birth and death has ultimate value, and that therefore everything does. From the first moment, the kingdom is fully present, like a treasure, like a pearl. But in terms of its effect, the kingdom of God is something that grows gradually. When we discover it, we are still clogged

up with many kinds of selfish concerns, which divert our attention from it and obstruct its power in our life. Gradually, as our transparency grows, its power grows. Not that the light isn't fully present, from the beginning; it's just that we can't yet allow it to shine through. Meister Eckhart said, "The seed of God is in us... and God seeds grow into God."

And someone asked him, "When will the kingdom of God come?" And he said, "The kingdom of God will not come if you watch for it. Nor will anyone be able to say, 'It is here' or 'It is there.' For **the kingdom of God is within you.**" My experience tells me that the Kingdom of God is within us. If, therefore, we wait for the Kingdom to come as something coming from outside, we shall be sadly mistaken. (Mohandas K. Gandhi). It always refers to the inward parts of a person, "**my heart** within me."

With the wicked - And many people who held the Law in contempt began to follow Jesus. And the scribes said to him, "Why do you eat with traitors and whores?" And Jesus said to them, "It isn't the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. My teaching is not meant for those who are already righteous, but for the wicked." It is essential to understand that **what is at issue here is associating with the wicked**, not forgiveness of the wicked. The traditional Christian view falsifies the issue. The point of the passage is that the scribes were shocked at Jesus' association with the wicked; being ordinary pious people, they thought that it was dangerous and futile to mix with such characters. Their attitude was exactly the same as the attitude of Paul and the early church—for example, "Have nothing to do with any fellow-Christian who is a fornicator or a greedy man". This is **not a question of conscience, but of vision**. Because the Master's vision comes from beyond good and bad, he can love the essential humanity in all people, and he can see the good within the bad. He doesn't do anything to help others; in simply being himself he is helping them in the best possible way. When we look with the eye of non-judgment—that is, with the eye of love—our vision includes all of humanity. We can be sure that Jesus felt he had a particular mission to the wicked, and it is very probable that he was misunderstood and bitterly criticized for this.

The beatitudes - Meister Eckhart defines a person who is poor in spirit as "one who wants nothing and knows nothing and has nothing." Blessed are the pure in heart: Not that selfish concerns don't arise for them; but they aren't attached to these concerns; they have no self for selfishness to stick to; hence they can be carried along in the clear current of what is.

Fulfilling the law - He is affirming the Law, but taking it to an even deeper level of compassion. Don't think that my purpose is to destroy the Law; my purpose is not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. For I tell you that unless your righteousness is deeper than the righteousness of the scribes, you will never enter the kingdom of God. For if you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you: But love your enemies, and give, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. Jesus, like other Jewish prophets, doesn't use this word in a moralistic sense. By a righteous man he means a man whose whole being is illuminated in God's light, and who therefore naturally acts with justice and compassion.

Jesus is asking for a deeper level of righteousness here. Not only are we to compensate our neighbor when we injure him; we are to compensate him when he injures us. Not only are we to pay him what is fair; we are to give him what is more than fair: good in return for evil, love in return for hatred. “Love” in biblical usage, both in the New Testament and the Old, refers not so much to an interior emotion as to outward actions. **One “loves” someone by treating her or him in the right way.** Leviticus 19: 18, “love your neighbor as yourself,” is a summary of commandments in 19: 9-17, which require leaving food in the field for the poor, not stealing, not oppressing one’s neighbor or cheating one’s servant, and so on. The person who acts in these ways “loves” the neighbor. The first step in becoming perfect is to accept your imperfection, just as the first step in becoming merciful is to treat yourself with mercy.

Prayer - When you pray: These instructions on prayer are helpful as a regular practice at the beginning stages of spiritual development, and as a reminder later on. But for those who hunger and thirst for God, even the Lord’s Prayer is insufficient, as all words ultimately are. When you first begin, you find just a darkness and, as it were, a cloud of unknowing, you do not know what, except that you feel in your will a naked intent toward God. This darkness and this cloud, no matter what you do, is between you and your God, and hinders you, so that you can neither see him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason nor feel him in the sweetness of love in your affection. Therefore, prepare to abide in this darkness as long as you must, evermore crying after him whom you love. **For if ever you are to see him or feel him in this life, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness....** but upon God himself, no man can think. And therefore I wish to leave everything I can think, and choose for my love that thing which I cannot think. Because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he may be gotten and held; but by thinking, never.

Go into your inner room: This should also be taken metaphorically: **go into yourself, into the quietest place in your heart.** Inside that inner room you will find your Father. May your kingdom come: May we realize that the kingdom of God has already come. By finding heaven in ourselves, may we begin to make heaven on earth. Meister Eckhart has given the definitive commentary on this verse: You might ask, “How can I know if something is God’s will?” My answer is, “If it were not God’s will, it wouldn’t exist even for an instant; so if something happens, it must be his will.” **If you truly enjoyed God’s will, you would feel exactly as though you were in the kingdom of heaven, whatever happened to you or didn’t happen to you.** The point of this verse is not that we ask God to do “his” will—as if there were any possibility that God’s will would not be done—but that we wholeheartedly assent to it. A hundred and fifty years ago there lived a woman named Sono who said, “Every morning and every evening, and whenever anything happens to you, keep on saying, ‘**Thank you for everything. I have no complaint whatsoever.**’

Give us this day our daily bread: Give us what nourishes our spirit; give us not what we want, but what we need.

Forgive us our wrongs: “Once we have righted the wrong, **help us to forgive ourselves.**”

As we forgive those who have wronged us: **Only by constantly letting go of the self that feels wronged can we forgive others.** The more we cling to it, the more paranoid and self-righteous it becomes, blaming the whole world for its sufferings. It is best to treat it like an abused child. As it feels loved and nourished by our compassionate attention, it will no longer act like a separate entity in a dangerous world. Eventually it will feel confident enough to disappear. When you feel offended, **allow yourself to feel offended, and then let go.** As you keep letting go of your self, you also let go of the capacity to be offended, and eventually you come to experience the whole universe as grace.

You receive exactly what you give - These teachings are simple, essential, and worthy of our closest attention. Don’t judge, and you will not be judged. For in the same way that you judge people, you yourself will be judged. Why do you see the splinter that is in your brother’s eye, but don’t notice the log that is in your own eye? First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.

Don’t judge: This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t see people clearly, or recognize where they and we ourselves stand in the moral and spiritual realm. That kind of judgment is as necessary to compassionate action as headlights are to night driving. What Jesus means here is that we shouldn’t accuse or condemn, that we should **keep our hearts open to everyone.**

In the same way that you judge people: We attract the same kind of energy that we send out. If we act compassionately toward others, we find that, lo and behold, others are compassionate toward us. If we are judgmental toward others, others are judgmental toward us. This is not a matter of reward and punishment imposed from the outside; it is a law of nature, as pure and impartial as the law of gravity. If you don’t judge, you will not be judged: Jesus doesn’t mean that if we judge others we will be judged by God. **God’s being is non-judgment.** The more we seduce ourselves into believing that our own judgments, of others or of ourselves, are reality, the farther we are from that being. Judgment is eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; non-judgment is eating from the Tree of Life.

The narrow gate - Jesus is not being exclusive here, or dividing humanity into a small group of the elect and a mass of the rejected. He is simply stating a fact: **it is difficult to enter the kingdom of God, and it takes a great deal of painful inner work.** “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to suffering, and those who go through it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few.”

Accusations of sorcery - “When a pickpocket sees a saint, he sees only his pockets.” Even the purest of teachers will face bitter criticism from those who feel threatened by him. The temptation (in the early, unripe stages) is to take the criticism personally, to get caught in the substance of the accusation, rather than seeing it as the voice of the accuser’s pain. The immature

teacher stiffens against adversity; the mature teacher bends in the wind. “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” (For they had said, “He is possessed by an unclean spirit.”) (Mark 3: 29f.) “Jesus” says, in other words, that because the scribes have mistakenly accused him of healing by demonic means, God will never forgive them. This statement, it seems to me, is itself blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, in that it slanders the infinite mercy of God. The truth is that there is no sin too grave to be forgiven; once the sinner truly repents, truly returns, forgiveness is already there, waiting for him. Jesus’ response to the accusations seems to me entirely inauthentic. Could he have been so insecure about the source of his healing power as to lose his composure in this way? I don’t believe it.

The Syrophenician Woman - One of the most touching stories in the Gospels, because it shows us a **Jesus who makes a mistake and admits it with humility and good humor**, a Jesus who is flexible enough to learn. From a Gentile yet. From a woman! If sin means “missing the mark,” this is an example of a sin immediately and gracefully corrected, to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs (Matthew 15:22-24): I can never read this verse without a thrill of dismay at Jesus’ harshness. The words would be harsh at any time, but especially when said to a mother about her sick child. Jesus’ irritability, along with his desire for privacy, may indicate that he was feeling overworked and emotionally drained by the demands of the crowds. But like a young child, he doesn’t cling to his mood. He is open to each new moment as it comes, and his harshness can change into delight as easily as a child’s tears change into laughter.

True, sir; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps: She takes the metaphor and returns it to Jesus. What wit, and what presence of mind, even in the midst of her grave worry. Well said: Jesus is delighted with the woman’s answer and softens his tone. This is, if not the admission of a mistake, an acknowledgment that his attitude was too harsh. He honors the woman by learning from her. As soon as we blame other people or refuse to acknowledge our own fallibility, **we step outside the kingdom of God**. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes; the trouble comes with making mistakes about our mistakes. The more powerful you grow, the greater the need for humility. Humility means trusting the Tao, thus never needing to be defensive. When the Master makes a mistake, she realizes it. Having realized it, she admits it. Having admitted it, she corrects it. She considers those who point out her faults as her most benevolent teachers. She thinks of her enemy as the shadow that she herself casts (chapter 61).

You must become like children - Jesus’ almost maternal tenderness toward children is one of his most attractive qualities. There is no condescension on Jesus’ part. On the contrary, **he speaks of children as equals**, as patterns, recognizing the natural trust and intelligence that shine through even the most deprived or abused among them. Once, when they were in Capernaum, the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is **the greatest in the kingdom of God?**” And he called a child over, and put him in front of them; and taking him in his arms, he said, “Truly I tell you, unless you return and become like children, you can’t enter the kingdom of God.” One could say, with equal accuracy, that the child’s mind is marked by complete selfishness; at an early age children start to scream “Mine!” and to be caught up in the cycle of greed, hatred, and ignorance. But

Jesus' teaching points to the child's presence, trust, openness, love of play, and capacity for wonder.

The Good Samaritan - And Jesus said, "A certain man, while traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, was set upon by robbers, who stripped him and beat him and left him on the road, half dead. And a priest happened to be going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And a Levite, too, came to that place and saw him and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion, and he went over to him and bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, and put him on his own donkey and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and if it costs more than this, I will reimburse you when I come back.' 'Which of these three, do you think, turned out to be a neighbor to that man?'

Eternal life: A synonym for "the kingdom of God": **a life lived in such a way that the personality becomes transparent and the light of God shines brilliantly through**; a life lived fully in the present moment, beyond time.

A Samaritan: Hence it is clear that Jesus had intentionally chosen an extreme example; by comparing the failure of the ministers of God with **the unselfishness of the hated Samaritan**, his hearers should be able to measure the absolute and unlimited nature of the duty of love. oil and wine: The oil would mollify, the wine would disinfect.

The one who treated him with mercy: It would have been enough to say, "The Samaritan"; but the scribe shows a deeper understanding by making the lesson explicit, and an additional gracefulness in referring to the man not by his race but by his action. Jesus can see that he has entered fully into the spirit of the parable. Go then, and do as he did: The scribe has taken the lesson to heart; now he just needs to act in accordance with his understanding.

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin - And the scribes grumbled: Jesus here doesn't take the grumbling personally. He just proceeds, compassionately and with great patience, to explain the truth to the scribes.

One of them strays: This is the clear-minded way of seeing a wicked person: not as someone who "is" wicked, but as someone who through ignorance has lost his way.

The Prodigal Son - The heart of Jesus' teaching, and one of the most beautiful stories ever told (Luke 15:11-32). The final, overjoyed statement by the father—"For this son of mine was dead, and he has come back to life; he was lost, and is found"—is the only kind of resurrection that Jesus ever spoke about.

There once was a man who had two sons: It would be more accurate to call this "The Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons," since in this context its subject is not the younger son but

the older son's reception of him.

he divided his property: The older son was entitled to a double portion (Deuteronomy 21: 17); thus his share would have been two-thirds of the property.

squandered his inheritance in riotous living: We aren't told that he has injured other people; he has only cheapened his own life and injured himself.

his father saw him: Even from a great distance he immediately recognizes him and was moved with compassion.

and ran to him: A most unusual and undignified procedure for an aged oriental, even though he is in such haste.

the older son: The older son is a figure for the ordinary pious person, not for the truly righteous. He is a good man, but not a wise one; that is, **he obeys God's word, but the word hasn't become flesh.**

he was angry: he has done everything right, yet **he has never felt accepted in the way that he sees his no-good brother being accepted.** This is a dangerous situation, as when Cain's offering of fruits is rejected, and it calls for all the father's understanding and love. The point here is that there are pious people who are feeling hurt and resentful that a repentant sinner has been forgiven and reinstated. How can Jesus help them understand? What can the father say to the older son that will allow him to break free of his resentment and accept his younger brother with open arms?

tried to soothe him: One of the marks of an authentic saying of Jesus is its tolerance and freedom from blame or rancor. We never find a character acting this way in the church's parables. For example, in Luke's version of the parable of the Great Supper (14: 16ff.), after the invited guests beg off, the master of the house becomes enraged and vows that none of them will ever taste his banquet (Matthew 22: 2ff.).

The rich man - And one day, as he was setting out, a man ran up and fell on his knees before him, and said, "Good Rabbi, what must I do to gain eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother." And the man said, "Rabbi, all these I have kept since I was a boy." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, "There is one thing that you lack: go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me." But when he heard this, his face clouded over, and he went away sick at heart, for he was a man who had large estates. And Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, "Children, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Why do you call me good? No one is good except one: God." This verse goes so much against the grain of the Evangelists' desire to portray Jesus as "sinless" that it must be authentic. By good Jesus means "absolutely good; perfect." This is a touchingly clear statement of how he thought of himself: as fully human and no more than human, as fully capable of making mistakes. Blake said, "It is not because angels are holier than men or devils that makes them angels, but because they do not expect holiness from one another but from God only." In order to

teach people that they are all sons of God, you have to realize that you are the son of God; but in order to teach people that they are only human, you have to realize that you are only human.

What makes someone a Master is not that he never makes mistakes; it's that when he makes a mistake, he doesn't cling to it.

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him: This verse is significant as the only verse in the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus is said to love any particular person. The clause is, of course, an editorial comment, but the fact that both Matthew and Luke find it uncomfortable enough to eliminate (both almost always portray scribes and Pharisees in a negative light) may mean that it contains an authentic memory of the event. If it does, it gives us a moving example of Jesus' response to true righteousness. The rich man has answered with sincerity and longing, and Jesus' heart goes out to him. Jesus intuited that the man's only attachment was to his wealth, and that if he could give it up he would step right into the kingdom of God.

I feel a twinge of sorrow that I can't include many beautiful verses in my version of the Gospel, like the parables of the last judgment. But they are imbedded in a parable filled with as much hatred as love, as much vindictiveness as compassion.

he went away sick at heart: **This reaction testifies to his relative maturity.** If he were less mature, he wouldn't be troubled by Jesus' words and would go back to his life unchanged; if he were more mature, he would realize that there is nothing at all that he lacks, that eternal life has been here all the time, and he would thank Jesus with a bow of deep gratitude. The man truly wants to gain eternal life, and is **caught between his attachment and his longing.** This is a spiritual condition that can be as productive as it is painful. The end of the dialogue may be the beginning of a new life for him. We don't know how he will proceed. I hope that Jesus' words prove to be a rich and strange irritant inside him, like a grain of sand in an oyster.

Tax to Caesar - The point of his response is not to take a position, either for or against obedience to the Roman empire. Rather, it is to say: first things first; **if you get caught in politics, it will be hard to enter the kingdom of God;** whereas entering the kingdom is the greatest blessing you can bring to your friends, your neighbors, and your country.

One day, as he was teaching in the Temple, some scribes said to him, "Rabbi, is it lawful to pay the tax to Caesar, or not?" And Jesus said, "Bring me a coin." And they brought one. And he said, "Whose image is on it?" And they said, "Caesar's." And Jesus said, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

A woman caught in adultery - The next morning, as Jesus was teaching in the Temple, the scribes brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and they stood her in the middle. And they said to him, "Rabbi, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Moses in the Law commanded us to stone such women to death; what do you say?" But Jesus stooped down and with his finger wrote on the ground. And as they continued to question him, he stood up and said to them, "Let whoever of you is sinless be the first to throw a stone at her." And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. And when they heard this, they went out one by one, the older ones first. And Jesus was left alone, with the woman still standing there. And Jesus stood up, and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And she said, "No one, sir."

And Jesus said, “I don’t condemn you either. Go now, and sin no more.”

what do you say: An editor has added the following explanation: “(They said this to entrap him, so that they might bring a charge against him.)” The question may have been adversarial. But all talk of plots by the scribes and Pharisees is likely to be early church propaganda, as Professor Sanders and other good scholars have shown. This is the only Gospel scene in which Jesus is asked to act as a judge. He unequivocally refuses, thus **practicing what he preached in the Sermon on the Mount.**

Let whoever of you is sinless: We may condemn a crime, but not a person. **Blame is always a dangerous weapon**, and it points both ways. Angels are happier than men because they are not **always prying after good and evil in one another** and eating the Tree of Knowledge for Satan’s gratification.

Gethsemane - And the day before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread, in the evening, he came into the city with the Twelve, and they ate supper. And after they had sung a psalm, they went out to the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron valley, to a garden called Gethsemane. And Jesus said, “Sit here, while I pray.” And going off by himself, he prostrated himself on the ground and prayed. And he said, “Abba, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want.” And when he got up from his prayer and went to the disciples, he found them asleep. And he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Couldn’t you stay awake for even one hour?” And they didn’t know what to answer. all things are possible for you: We simply don’t know the limits of the possible. If we think that something is impossible, then it is (for us). When we realize that we don’t know, **we become open to all possibilities.**

Take this cup from me: A touching prayer, and a very human one. **Jesus had no conception of his death being sacrificial or redemptive**. Like a child, like any natural being, he wanted to avoid suffering, and he asked to be spared the bitter cup of the crucifixion.

Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want: This is a prayer of great simplicity and beauty. It is the paradigmatic prayer, not only upon confronting suffering, but upon confronting any possibility, joyous or painful. The more we understand how infinitely superior the intelligence of the universe is to our own tiny, conscious mind, **the more we can let go into God’s will**. Full acceptance can take place only in awareness. We begin the most difficult adventures in life—marriage, for example, or spiritual practice—without knowing the length and breadth of their difficulty; if we knew, we might never begin. As we become more fully aware, we are able to choose again, with open eyes and with all of ourselves, what we have already, half blindly, chosen.

The arrest - Judas: **There is an early tradition in which Judas wasn’t a traitor**: Matthew 19:28 includes him on one of the twelve thrones, judging the tribes of Israel; and in I Corinthians 15:5, Paul says that the resurrected Jesus “appeared to Kephas, then to the Twelve.” The story of the betrayal, which is probably later, may have been influenced by Psalm 41: 9 (“ Even my friend, whom I trusted, who ate at my table,/ exults in my misfortune”), which John 13:18 quotes as a

fulfilled prophecy. None of the Evangelists provides a motivation for Judas' treachery that is even remotely believable. Mark has him betray Jesus spontaneously and for no reason; according to Matthew, greed is the motivation, and Judas goes to the priests to trade information for money; according to Luke, he goes because Satan has entered into him. In John's Gospel, too, Satan enters into Judas, but with the complicity of Jesus himself, and only after Jesus gives Judas a piece of dipped bread at the Last Supper. From what I know of Jesus, **it seems to me most likely that there was no betrayal**, and that the legend originated in the disciples' need for villains. If this story is a legend, Judas may have elicited the other apostles' enmity because he differed from them in some essential and threatening way. Did he disbelieve in the resurrection? Did he understand that Jesus' death couldn't and shouldn't cause a change in Jesus' gospel? We'll never know. If the Gospel accounts of Judas' betrayal have any basis in fact, there must have been some deep, unacknowledged drama that was played out between disciple and teacher. Was Judas so complicated and deceitful a man that he gave no signs of his mental torment? Did Jesus, with all his openheartedness, have an inadequate insight into human character?

The trial before Pilate - I have kept the trial scene to its bare minimum, since the Gospel accounts are certainly fictional. And early the next morning, the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, bound Jesus and took him away and handed him over to Pilate. And Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, and flogged him, and handed him over to his soldiers to be crucified. And they took him out to crucify him, and seized a man named Simon of Cyrene, who was passing by on his way in from the country, and made him carry the cross.

Many more scholars recognize that the earliest Christians knew only the general course of events (a Jewish interrogation, the handing over to Pilate, the crucifixion), but not the details.... I doubt that the earliest followers of Jesus knew.... Once we grant that we do not know what went on inside—that is, when we admit that the long trial scene of Matthew and Mark is not historical—then we must also grant that we do not know (1) if there was a trial; (2) if the whole Sanhedrin actually convened; (3) if there was a formal charge; (4) if there was a formal conviction under Jewish law.... highly probable, they were wrong about Jesus' being convicted by a formal Jewish court for blasphemy. Whatever Pilate's reason for deciding to have Jesus put to death, it is not true that the Jewish crowds shouted out that Jesus should be crucified (Mark 15: 12ff.) or that they took his blood upon themselves and their children (Matthew 27: 25). Nor did the chief priests tell the prefect, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19: 15). These sentences, which were later written into the account of Jesus' passion, are the products of a bitter polemic between early Christianity and Judaism and have helped to cause the horrors of two millennia of anti-Semitism. As for the Barabbas episode, when viewed objectively, as a reported transaction between a Roman governor, who was supported by a strong military force, and native magistrates and a native mob, the whole account is patently **too preposterous and too ludicrous for belief....** Pilate: Pontius Pilate was procurator (governor) of Judea from 26 to 36 C.E. Far from being the sympathetic figure portrayed in the Gospels (he was later declared a saint by the Coptic church), he is described by Philo as "naturally inflexible and stubbornly relentless," and prone to "acts of corruption, insults, rapine, outrages on the people, arrogance, repeated murders of innocent victims, and constant and most galling savagery."

to be crucified: Crucifixion was a sentence passed by the Romans on three classes of offenders: rebellious slaves, habitual criminals, and conspirators against Roman rule. Cicero called it “that most cruel and disgusting penalty,” and Josephus, “the most wretched of deaths.” The flogging which was a stereotyped part of the punishment would make the blood flow in streams. Presumably Jesus was so weakened by loss of blood that he was unable to carry the beam of the cross to the place of execution; this is also the best explanation of his relatively speedy death.

The crucifixion - The final scene, in which all we can know with certainty is the stark fact of the crucifixion. Yet we can be certain that Jesus didn’t see his own suffering as tragic, since it happened according to God’s will. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). And some women offered him drugged wine, but he wouldn’t take it. And at about nine o’clock they crucified him. And above his head the charge against him was written: THE KING OF THE JEWS. And with him they crucified two Zealots, one on his right and one on his left. And at about three o’clock in the afternoon, Jesus uttered a loud cry, and died.

but he wouldn’t take it: He wanted to die fully conscious.

the charge against him: Even if this is not historical, it is clear that the Romans executed Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary.

and died: The Evangelists add an account of the burial: “And late in the afternoon, since it was Friday and the Sabbath was approaching, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, who was himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked him for the body of Jesus. And Pilate ordered that it be given to him. And Joseph bought a linen cloth, and took the body down, and wrapped it in the cloth. And he laid it in a tomb that had been cut in the rock. And he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed” (Mark 15: 41, Luke 23: 54; Matthew 27: 58; Mark 15: 46; Matthew 27: 60). These verses may be historical, or they may be apologetic, **to prepare for the myth of the empty tomb**. Some scholars think it probable that Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross by the soldiers and thrown into a mass grave.

It was only the death, this unexpected shameful death, only the cross, which was in general reserved for the rabble. Only now did the chasm open up: “Who killed him? Who was his natural enemy?”—this question leaped forth like a lightning bolt. Answer: ruling Judaism, its upper class. From this moment they felt themselves in rebellion against the social order, in retrospect they understood **Jesus as having been in rebellion against the social order**. Until then this warlike, nay-saying and-doing trait had been lacking in his image; even more, he was the contradiction of it. Obviously the little community did not understand the main point, the exemplary character of this way of dying, the freedom, the superiority over every feeling of resentment:—an indication of how little of him they really understood! Jesus himself couldn’t have intended anything by his death except to publicly give the sternest test, the proof of his teaching.... **But his disciples were far from forgiving this death**—From now on, step by step, there enters into:

- the figure of the redeemer the doctrine of a judgment and a second coming,
- the doctrine of his death as a sacrificial death,
- the doctrine of the resurrection, with which the whole concept of “blessedness,” the whole and only reality of the gospel, is conjured away—in favor of a state after death! (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichristian*).

But because Nietzsche's insight bristles with offense and antagonism, I want to end this commentary by making the same point in the sweet, serene tones of Lao-tzu:

The Master gives himself up to whatever the moment brings. He knows that he is going to die, and he has nothing left to hold on to: no illusions in his mind, no resistances in his body. He doesn't think about his actions; they flow from the core of his being. He holds nothing back from life; therefore he is ready for death, as a man is ready for sleep after a good day's work. (chapter 50).