

6.25

The Bias against Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's narrative presupposes an anti-gentile prejudice on the part of its readers:

In 5:47, Jesus tells his disciples, "If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" The word "gentiles" is used in parallel structure to the term "tax collectors" in the preceding verse ("Do not even the tax collectors do the same?").

In 6:7, Jesus tells his disciples, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words." The word "gentiles" is used in parallel structure to the word "hypocrites" in 6:5 ("Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites").

In 6:25–32, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

In 10:5–6, Jesus sends his disciples out on a healing mission to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out

demons” (10:8). He tells them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Here the word “gentiles” is in parallel structure to “Samaritans.”

In 10:18, Jesus warns his disciples, “You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.” Here gentiles (along with “governors and kings”) are cited as one example of wolves into whose midst Jesus’s disciples are sent as sheep (10:16).

In 18:17, Jesus concludes his instructions to the disciples on how to deal with unrepentant sinners by saying, “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Again the word “gentile” is parallel to the term “tax collector.” Notably, the only other word with which “tax collector” is sometimes paired is “prostitute” (21:31–32).

In 20:25–26, Jesus tells his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.”

Gentiles are associated with vanity, tyranny, and sin. Even their best behavior is self-serving. God does not want to hear their long-winded prayers or heal their diseases. They can pretty much be put in the same class with hypocrites, traitors, and whores—people whom Matthew’s readers are expected to despise.