

Jesus, the Seeker of the Out-Groups

by Sunny Hong

Nicknames can say a lot about a person. They can reflect how a person is perceived by his family or friends, but they may also identify a person's motivation and purpose. Among the many labels applied to Jesus, one was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Matt. 11:19) Not only did this appellation convey Jesus' purpose in coming to the earth—to save people from their sins (Matt. 1:21–23)—it also characterized him as one who searched for those his society considered sinners. He spent time with them in order to bless them.

In this article, I examine the vital concept of in-group and out-group in the Jewish worldview of the first century and draw implications for mission today. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus intentionally sought out people who were in an out-group to God's kingdom and invited them to become members of his in-group. Through that process, Jesus dealt with the issue of sin. God's grace in the Jewish worldview of the first century is demonstrated in the process of Jesus' making out-group members into in-group members. At the same time, Jesus challenged Jewish culture to be more biblical in demonstrating God's grace across group divisions.

In-Group/Out-Group in First-Century Jewish Culture

Biblical scholarship has identified the *dyadic personality* as one of the core elements of first-century Jewish culture. Members of that society always identified themselves with a group and did not think of themselves as individuals.

Because dyadic persons perceive themselves in terms of qualities specific to their ascribed status, they tend to presume that human character is fixed and unchanging. Every family, village or city would be quite predictable, and so would the individuals who are embedded and share the qualities of a family, village, or nation. (Malina and Neyrey 1991, 75)

From the moment of birth, one is already provided with identity, status, and a job based on family background. Their family was the first in-group to which every Jew belonged. And from that family connection, first-century

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Jews proceeded to join other in-groups as they reached a certain age or encountered new circumstances. The in-group's positive interdependence and care for its members provided an identity, a sense of belonging, pride and even a sense of superiority. Therefore, members did not consider themselves as individuals apart from the in-group, but their whole being was defined by the group. Individual desires were not important, but rather the interests, needs, views, goals, and well-being of the group.

Individualism as we know it is also unusual. Persons are not oriented towards themselves as individuals, but towards the groups to which they belong. Everyone finds a place in society by being embedded in one or more groups, such as the family, which is by far the most important, and in craft association, religious cults or even military units. (Esler 1994, 29)

The individual's fate was tied to the fate of the group. His or her interpersonal relationships were defined by whether or not the other person was an in-group member. This concept of in-group made people anxious about what other people thought about them. How the individual behaved reflected on the group's reputation. If an individual achieved something great, the achievement enhanced the reputation of the group, and not necessarily that of the individual. Honor and prestige were all connected with the concept of the in-group. Therefore, it was very important to live up to the expectations of others.

The narratives of the Bible contain many examples of in-groups. When people were introduced, they were usually introduced by stating who their father and family were. Jesus was recognized as the son of Joseph (Matt. 13:55) and Matthew was recognized as the son of Alphaeus (Mark 2:14). Indeed, the book of Matthew, which was written to a Jewish audience, starts with the genealogy of Jesus. Not only did paternity define group, but the locality was also an important factor in

identifying in-group members. Jesus was called "Jesus of Nazareth" and many of his disciples came from Nazareth. Occupation was another category denoting an in-group. Jesus was known as a carpenter, which was the occupation of Joseph, his earthly father (Mark 6:3). Paul was a tent maker and he associated with other tent makers like Priscilla and Aquila. Political or religious affiliation was another category denoting an in-group. The Pharisees drew their identity from the party to which they belonged (Matt. 13:55). Also, race or nationality was another important category for marking an in-group. People in the gospels are usually referred to as Samaritans, Gentiles, Jews, Romans, and so on,



according to the in-group/out-group distinctions at that time.

While an in-group provided for the needs of its members, it could breed an in-group favoritism that would result in out-group hatred and rejection.

In-group bias and out-group prejudice are studied interchangeably as if discrimination for in-groups and discrimination against out-groups were two sides of the same coin. (Brewer 1999, 430)

It is in the nature of in-group/out-group dynamics to seek out differences. Once members form an in-group's unique identity, then any small difference with an out-group could be the basis for misunderstanding, hatred,

and rejection. "In-group bias is still often assumed to be synonymous with in-group antipathy or rejection of the out-group" (Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1979, 188). It was natural to be hostile toward an out-group, and people did not treat out-group members as their equals. The Jews had a different standard for the members of an out-group.

"Thou shalt not kill or steal from in-group members" is balanced by "Thou shalt kill and steal from out-group members." (Hartung 1995, 94)

They were expected to treat out-group members with either disrespect or indifference, to deceive and to take advantage of out-group members.

The distinction between in-group and out-group also provided a basis for stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Nathanael's comment about Jesus, "Can anything good come from there (i.e., Nazareth)?" (John 1:46), reveals a stereotype based on locality. Nathanael's in-group had certain notions about Nazareth, and he was reflecting this attitude in his treatment of Jesus the Nazarene. Another example of a stereotype can be found in Jesus' meeting with a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28). The Jews had negative attitudes toward the Canaanites, treating them as an out-group. Jesus uttered what was the common Jewish sentiment toward Canaanite women: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26). The Jews distinguished clearly between their race, which they believed was chosen by God, and that of the Gentiles, which they believed to be inferior.

The Out-Groups that Jesus Sought Out

The biblical narratives make it clear that Jesus was always looking for the out-groups in order to draw them into the in-group. His conception and identification of an out-group was very different from that of the religious leaders of his time. This section examines the different out-groups Jesus sought out, in the Gospel narratives.

The Sick

Matthew's invitation to Jesus is recorded in three places in the Bible (Matt. 9:9–13; Mark 2:14–17; Luke 5:27–32). This invitation came after Jesus called Matthew to be his disciple. Matthew invited Jesus, as well as his fellow tax collectors and many other “sinners.” The Jews only associated with people who had a similar background, social status, or who were members of their in-group. It was natural for Matthew to be with other fellow tax collectors and sinners because they made up the group with whom he normally associated (Malina 2001, 95).

During the party, the Pharisees reproached Jesus for eating with sinners. Then Jesus replied, “It is not the healthy people who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matt. 9:12). Jesus explained the meaning of his response by quoting Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). Here Jesus implied that the sick were the ones who recognized the need for a doctor and admitted that they were not adequate. In reality, those who were in Jesus’ out-group, and could not be included in the in-group, were “the ones who thought they were already good enough or qualified” and did not need Jesus. For the Pharisees, their concept of the out-group consisted of sinners with whom they avoided association. And their concept of the in-group consisted of those who gave sacrifices, implying ritual observance without really understanding the meaning. Jesus used the concept of a doctor and patient to indicate that he came for the sick to be cured, the sinner to be made righteous, and marginalized and excluded people (the out-group) to be drawn into his in-group (Green 1997, 247).

The pronouncements Jesus made about the sick appeared to be contradictory to the concept of holiness. The Jewish concept of holiness is outlined in detail in Leviticus 12–15 and explains

T*o be accepted into the in-group of the kingdom of God required a paradigm shift from first-century Jewish culture.*

not only dietary laws but instructions about many other areas, including uncleanness or defilement resulting from childbirth, skin diseases, and bodily discharges (Sanders 1983, 12). The whole purpose of the concept of cleanness or purity was to reflect God's holiness (Lev. 11:45). Therefore, keeping oneself clean was very important to the Jews. Once a clean person had contact with an unclean person, the clean person became defiled (Pilch 1991, 207–209). This might be one of the reasons why the religious leaders in the first century did not associate with the sick, who were clearly an out-group. The religious leaders considered the sinners to be unclean, and they could potentially become defiled from having contact with them. However, the religious leaders only kept the outward appearance of cleanness and did not understand the core concept of inward cleanness or holiness. Jesus challenged their notions by associating with the out-groups.

Jesus and his followers regularly associate with and frequently “cleanse”/“sanctify” unholiness persons.... They also disregard the purity lines drawn around holy behavior.... Holy times are also violated.... Finally, holy places and personnel are criticized and disrespected. (Elliott 1991, 222–223)

Jesus' association with the sick, the unclean, and the out-group, and his care and affirmation of them provoked the wrath of the Pharisees and the scribes. They could not comprehend the cleansing and healing power that Jesus had but only reacted according to their understanding of cleanness. If Jesus wanted to be a member of their in-group, or at least not to be in their out-group, he should not associate with the sinners, but rather with them, and he should affirm their beliefs and practices. It is obvious that the

religious leaders did not understand the main purpose of Jesus coming to the earth and were furious about the way Jesus related with the “sinners” (Walker 1978, 234).

Jesus' reputation was probably damaged by his association with Matthew and his friends. But he was not afraid of losing his reputation so that the sinners and the sick could be healed and included in God's in-group. To Jesus, every person was a sinner who needed a Savior.

[There are] two types of sinners: law-keepers and lawbreakers.... Law-keepers often condemn lawbreakers as “sinners.” Lawbreakers generally look at law-keepers and shout “hypocrites.” (Bailey 2008, 247)

No matter whether they were law-keepers or lawbreakers, whoever recognized their need for a Savior was included in God's in-group.

Clearly, Jesus had been proclaiming his message that God loves sinners. The Pharisees did not agree, because in their view God cared for the righteous who kept the law. (Bailey 2008, 242).

This same principle is also found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.... (Luke 18:13–14)

Jesus clearly showed who the real sinner was, and what the real sin issue was that needed to be dealt with for people to be accepted into the in-group of the kingdom of God. This is a paradigm shift from the concept of the in-group/out-group in first-century Jewish culture.

The Samaritans

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) starts with an expert of the law asking Jesus about the definition of a neighbor, intending to justify himself. This legal expert's concept of "neighbor" must have been the in-group people of his own culture.

In-group members are shown the greatest courtesies, but those courtesies are rarely if ever, extended to nonmembers. Strangers cannot be regarded as members of the in-group. (Malina 1993, 92)

Therefore, he probably expected the answer to be "do good to in-group members, who are your neighbors, and do not care about the out-group members."

However, the answer Jesus gave was totally unexpected. In this parable, there is no mention of the race of the person who was attacked by the bandits. For ordinary Jews, it would be very important to find out if the injured person was Jewish or not, before making the decision to help him. This was due to the strong, favorable, in-group bias they had toward other Jews. The ethnicity of the injured person is not identified in this parable. A priest and a Levite passed by "on the other side of the road" from the injured man. They kept their distance from the injured man to avoid contaminating themselves, since keeping clean was very important to them. It might have been a relief for them to not know the ethnicity of the injured man, since then they could have an excuse (Baily 2008, 290–293; Esler 2000, 337–341). But a Samaritan went out of his way to help the injured man, without knowing the man's race. The Samaritan acted as an in-group member to the injured man, regardless of his race. Perhaps Jesus purposely chose a Samaritan to be the friend of the injured man, in order to challenge the attitude of the Jews toward the Samaritans, whom they treated as an out-group and second-class. For the proud Jew, if he was going to help

someone in need, that person must be a Jew, and not a Samaritan—and yet the person actually doing the helping was a despised Samaritan.

Many foreigners were brought in to settle Samaria after the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The Samaritans were descendants of intermarriage between those foreigners and the remaining Jews. The mixed-race people of Samaria were considered unclean according to Jewish standards.

Holiness is related to wholeness... hybrids and imperfect things are an abomination because they do not conform to the class to which they presumably belong. (Neyrey 1998, 166)



Therefore, the Jews had a good reason to treat the Samaritans as the out-group.

For centuries Judeans had treated the Samaritans as a despised out-group and subjected them to the processes of negative stereotyping discussed above. (Esler 2000, 329).

After Jesus finished telling the parable, he asked the expert of the law which person had been a neighbor to the injured man. The expert of the law did not say the Samaritan, but merely "the one who had mercy on him" (Luke 10:37). His answer suggested that either he did not agree with Jesus, or he was not able to change his worldview to accept a Samaritan as the hero. Then Jesus said to the expert of the law,

"Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

The expert of the law was not able to justify himself, as had been his initial intention, but was instead challenged to revise his in-group/out-group paradigm regarding the Samaritans. Jesus made the despised Samaritan a hero for treating a person of unknown race as an in-group member. This demonstrated that his in-group concept went beyond the Jewish-Samaritan ethnic issue.

The willingness of Jesus to make Samaritans members of the in-group can also be seen when he journeyed through Samaria and met a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4). In this encounter, Jesus treated not only a Samaritan as an in-group member but also a woman engaged in a sinful lifestyle. As a result of Jesus seeking her out, many from Samaria became believers (John 4:39). This was another big paradigm shift for the Jews.

The Gentiles

The Jews were very proud of being the chosen people of God and the descendants of Abraham (Luke 3:8). They looked down on the Gentiles, considered them as an out-group and avoided contact with them. Jesus directed his attention to the Gentiles in his encounter with a Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10). The Roman centurion probably had many obstacles to his coming to Jesus: race, pride, doubt, language, and culture (Green 1997, 286–287). Nevertheless, he came to Jesus, not for his own needs, but for the needs of his servant. When the centurion demonstrated his faith in Jesus, Jesus praised him. "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (Luke 8:10). This statement was very shocking because Jesus seldom praised the faith of people. He often lamented and rebuked the lack of faith of his disciples, the people of Nazareth, and the Jews (Matt. 8:26, 16:8, 23:23; Luke 12:28). On the contrary, the faith of the Roman centurion was praised, and it stood as a big contrast to the faith of the Jews.

Jesus said that many Jews would be excluded from the kingdom of God because of their lack of faith, while the Gentiles would be included because of their faith. The inclusion of the Gentiles in God's Kingdom was prophesied in the Old Testament (Isa. 56:3, 6–8; Isa. 66:12, 19; Mal. 1:11). However, in-group pride was too strong to recognize what had been written in Scripture, and the Jews chose to hold on to their religious and cultural traditions rather than the truth of Scripture. When Jesus announced that some Gentiles would be in-group members of the Kingdom, he used the very phrase that proud Jews ascribed to themselves (Isa. 43:5):

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 8:11–12)

In the minds of the religious leaders, mixing the notions of in-group and out-group was not possible.

...“those born to the kingdom” will be replaced by Gentiles—including the Roman centurion whose faith is commended—who will sit with faithful Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven. (Stanton 1992, 384)

The Jews, blinded by their religious and cultural traditions, were furious over Jesus' claim that the Gentiles could be in the same in-group as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To them, the Gentiles would always be the out-group, and would never be part of the in-group.

In another incident, Jesus again recognized the great faith of a Gentile. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus because her daughter was suffering from demon possession (Matt. 15:22–28). Jesus praised her because of her great faith. There are no incidents in the Gospels where Jesus praised the

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faith of the Jews as he did the faith of the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman. This was another paradigm shift for those with a Jewish worldview.

People Who Were Unable to Reciprocate

Reciprocation is another important element in Jewish culture. Jewish interpersonal relationships are based upon the ability to reciprocate. When you receive something, you pay back with other things which are equivalent to what you first received. People who could not reciprocate felt great shame. If you failed to reciprocate a multiple of times, you would lose face and honor in Jewish culture (Neyrey 1991, 372).

However, Jesus sought out people who could not reciprocate and instructed others to do so as well.

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

Jesus taught that the purpose of giving was not to receive back but to simply give and not expect anything in return. But according to Jewish culture, if you are not able to repay, you are not considered an honorable man. In the Jewish worldview, Jesus' teaching about giving with abandon might have two results: the giver's motives (of wanting to receive back something of equal value) are exposed and laid bare; and the receiver's inability to pay back is exposed leading to compounding of shame. The Jews associated with people who had similar status and were in-group members, so that they could

reciprocate good deeds to their in-group members and everyone's honor was upheld. “Honorable persons in the world of limited good were those who knew how to preserve their inherited status” (Malina 2001, 106).

This concept of giving with abandon is demonstrated in Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–23). When the rich young ruler asked about eternal life, Jesus told him:

You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. (Luke 18:22)

What Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to do was to give away his possessions to people who could not pay him back.

A man might play the patron to clients who would then support him in return (Luke 16:1–8); or a man might distribute wealth to kin who would then be obligated in honor to respond with comparable gifts. (Moxnes 1988, 139–43)

But to give the family wealth to strangers who can extend no reciprocal gifts to the giver makes no sense in the honor culture of antiquity. (Neyrey 1998, 62)

In contrast to the notion of reciprocity, Jesus told the rich young ruler to give his possessions away to the poor who could not repay him even as clients. Jesus said this because the real target of the ruler's reciprocal generosity would not be the people he helped, but God. By so doing, he would recognize that all of his wealth came from God originally and that by giving back to the poor who are indeed God's children, the rich ruler was really giving reciprocally back to God and he would accumulate treasures in heaven (Green 1997, 656–657).

Jesus expressed the same concept in the Beatitudes.

And if you do good only to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:33–36)

This passage clearly talks about the concept of the in-group/out-group in relation to the concept of reciprocity. Jesus said that even the “sinners” know how to treat in-group members, to do good in never-ending reciprocity. Jesus commanded them to lend money to people who cannot repay so that their reward will come from heaven. He said this because God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. In this manner, Jesus was asking them to imitate God in giving things away to those who could not pay back.

Jesus himself demonstrated what he taught. He sought out human beings who could not reciprocate what he did. He gave his life for the sinners and out-groups who were not able to pay back what they had received. He wanted those in his in-group who had tasted his grace to do the same for the out-groups in their midst so that they too could become part of the in-group. This was another paradigm shift for the in-group/out-group concept.

Enemies

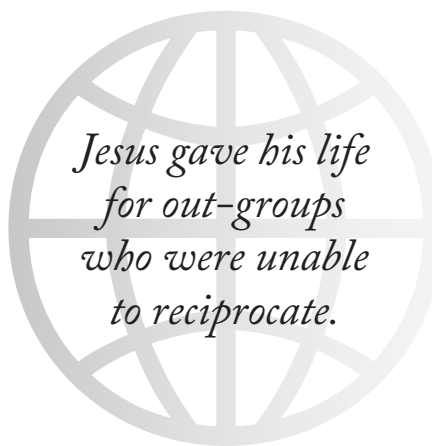
The climax of Jesus’ concept of in-group/out-group is found in his command to love one’s enemies. To the Jews, love meant treating people as in-group members. “To love means to remain practically attached to the group, to act like an in-group member” (Malina 1993, 55). To the Jews, hate

meant treating people as out-group members. The Jews had a clear understanding of enemies as those belonging to the out-group. There was no reason to accept enemies as in-group members.

Jesus asked people to love their enemies, which meant that the enemies should be considered as in-group members according to Jewish cultural understanding—most certainly a radical expectation.

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven... (Matt. 5:43–44)

This is an extraordinary command not only for people of the Jewish culture



but for any human being from any culture whatsoever. Loving one’s enemies is not a part of human nature.

In contrast to these conventions, Jesus proclaims that good deeds are to be done not for the sake of an anticipated reward, but solely on grounds of benevolence and compassion... the primary focus is on the injunction “love your enemies.” The implication of this teaching is that beneficence is to be shown *beyond* the bounds of families and friends, i.e., to “outsiders.” (Marshall 2005, 56)

This was a very foreign concept to the Jews who had a clear understanding of how to treat enemies—as out-group members.

Jesus sought out enemies to be members of his in-group. All sinners are enemies of God. Jesus gave these enemies, out-group members, the power to become in-group members through his death, and brought them redemption and forgiveness. Not only did he forgive his enemies, but he also asked his followers, people who had already become in-group members in his kingdom, to love their enemies, the out-group members. We are to love our enemies so we may be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 6:48). The imitation of God requires loving one’s enemies. Jesus said the reciprocity for your forgiveness comes not from the persons whom you forgive, but from God. “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matt. 6:14). Again, Jesus is telling us that the reciprocal response to our acts of forgiveness comes not from the people whom we forgive, but from God. This teaching of Jesus creates the biggest paradigm shift in the in-group/out-group concept.

Conclusion

What Jesus did to save sinners in his Jewish society is illustrated well by applying the concept of in-group/out-group so prevalent in the Jewish worldview of the first century. With Jesus’ ministry, there was a paradigm shift in this concept of in-group/out-group, for he challenged the more natural in-group/natural divisions to become aligned with a more truly biblical perspective. He wanted to bring people who from a Jewish perspective belonged in their out-groups (the social outcasts and the Gentiles) into God’s in-group. These new in-group members were the ones who recognized their need for a Savior and who had turned and trusted Jesus. The definition of out-group members was radically altered by Jesus to be those who did not feel the need for a Savior. Jesus welcomed all believers as in-group members of God’s kingdom and invited them to the unlimited richness of God.

Jesus used in-group/out-group like a double-edged sword, both as a concept to explain salvation and as a challenge to social and cultural blind spots.

Missionaries in the 21st century may find themselves in cultures which have a very similar orientation towards in-groups and out-groups that Jesus faced in the first century. They are not as individualistic as those societies from which most Western missionaries are sent, but rather are very group oriented. Those contexts will require the missionary to learn about the culture in depth. He will then need to apply this in-group/out-group concept in the communication of the gospel so that the recipients will be able to understand the gospel more easily. At the same time, the missionary will need to challenge the people in that culture to change their understanding of in-group and out-group, much as Jesus did. In dealing with both the missiological issues of contextualization and any potential transformation of culture, our modern-day mission can learn from how Jesus dealt with the social barriers etched into his own world.

Finally, I like to suggest that there's another aspect to this story: joy. When one person from any number of out-groups becomes a member of the in-group of God's kingdom, God rejoices. The greatness of his joy is described in the three parables of the lost in the gospel of Luke (15:7, 10, 32). This joy is also a final response for those who have experienced becoming in-group members of God's kingdom. As Jesus commanded, we who have tasted God's grace are obligated and honored to bring more out-group members into God's in-group, so that we also can enter more fully into God's great joy. **IJFM**

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