



A BETTER WAY

Seek Not to Change the World?

by Greg Mackie

“Seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world” (T-21.In.1:7). This well-known line is frequently used by Course students to say that trying to change things in the external world is not part of the Course’s path. The implications of this stance are massive: Since all behavior by definition is an attempt to produce external change, this stance amounts to saying that behavior—including behaviorally extending help to others—is irrelevant to the Course’s path.

But is this really what the line means? In my opinion, the answer is a definite no. In this article, I’d like to draw out what I think this line really means, and show how the Course’s teaching on the importance of behaviorally extending to others is fully compatible with it. Along the way, I’ll present a process for testing the standard interpretation of this line, a process that can be helpful for any line that has become a part of what we at the Circle call “Course lore.” Finally, I’ll discuss the great practical benefit of taking this line through the testing process: It enables us to wholeheartedly follow our desire to make a positive difference in the world.

A process for testing the standard “Course lore” interpretation of this line

Course lore consists of ideas about the Course that are not (in our opinion) accurate, but repeated so often among Course students that they become part of the accepted wisdom of the community—the standard interpretation, which is now the unquestioned gospel. A lot of Course lore is centered around well-known lines like “Do you prefer that you be right or happy?” (which I wrote an [article](#) about) and “I need do nothing.”

“Seek not to change the world” definitely fits this category. When someone is talking about actively doing something to make a difference in the world—say, attending a peace rally, or supporting a political candidate, or sending aid to the starving people in Darfur—and someone else trots out that line, everyone “knows” what it means. We shouldn’t try to change the world; we just need to change our minds, and that’s all. Go ahead and do acts of kindness when the opportunity presents itself, but know that changing conditions “out there” is not part of the Course’s way; if you think it is, that’s your ego talking. The discussion is now effectively closed.

Instead of automatically slapping our standard interpretation onto the line, though, we need to *stop* and ask ourselves: Is this *really* what the line is saying? The following is a process for determining that.

Are there any self-contradictions in the standard interpretation?

This step isn’t the most important, but I’m putting it first because it often pops up first for me when

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WHAT IT SAYS

A Course in Miracles is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course’s thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course’s thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course’s thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course’s message is that the source of our suffering is not the world’s mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world’s apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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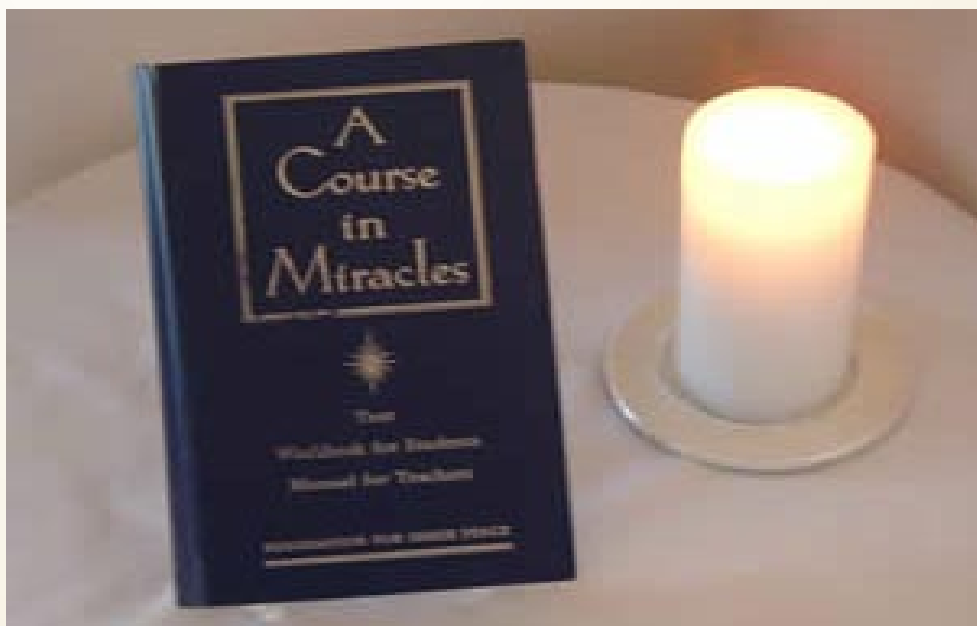
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WHAT IT IS AND

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I hear conventional Course wisdom. For instance, when I express disagreement with other views (as I'm doing now), some Course students will inevitably respond by telling me that expressing disagreement is contrary to the Course. When I hear this, the self-contradiction leaps out at me: If this is so, then the very response is self-contradictory, because of course the respondents are disagreeing with *me*. They are saying, in essence, "I disagree with disagreement." (Robert recently wrote an article about this phenomenon, entitled "[The Strange Taboo Against Disagreeing](#).") Not every incorrect Course interpretation contains such self-contradictions, but more than a few do. When you see something like this, a red flag ought to go up.

I see several self-contradictions in the standard interpretation of "seek not to change the world." First, the very act of saying that we must not do things to change the external world is—oops!—doing something that changes the external world. In my experience, those who insist we must seek not to change the world are often very passionate about declaring this view to the world in order to change the opinions of those who reside there. Second, the standard interpretation means that Jesus, the author of the Course, has contradicted himself in at least two ways: by doing so much to change the world in his life two thousand years ago, and by going to all that effort to dictate this world-changing Course to Helen. He never should have told her to "take notes," because that was doing something that would change the world. There's something fishy about this standard interpretation.

What does the line mean in its immediate context?

This step *is* the most important. Examining the immediate context is the single most effective means of clarifying the meaning of any line in the Course. We need to train ourselves to do this right away whenever a question about the interpretation of a particular line comes up. Here, then, is the immediate context of our line:

Projection makes perception. The world you see is what you gave it, nothing more than that. But though it is no more than that, it is not less. Therefore, to you it is important. It is the witness to your state of mind, the outside picture of an inward condition. As a man thinketh, so does he perceive. Therefore, seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world. Perception is a result and not a cause. And that is why order of difficulty in miracles is meaningless. Everything looked upon with vision is healed and holy. Nothing perceived without it means anything. And where there is no meaning, there is chaos.

Damnation is your judgment on yourself, and this you will project upon the world. See it as damned, and all you see is what you did to hurt the Son of God. If you behold disaster and catastrophe, you tried to crucify him. If you see holiness and hope, you joined the Will of God to set him free. There is no choice that lies between these two decisions. And you will see the witness to the choice you made, and learn from this to recognize which one you chose. The world you see but shows you how much joy you have allowed yourself to see in you, and to accept as yours. And, if this *is* its meaning, then the power to give it joy must lie within you. (T-21.In.1:1-2:8)

These paragraphs are a commentary on one of the most fundamental principles of the Course: "Projection makes perception" (1:1). This principle says that what we *perceive* in the world is a projection of what we *think* or believe—in this passage, what we believe about ourselves. Therefore, what we perceive in the world is a *witness* to our state of mind; it serves as evidence of what we believe about ourselves. If we see the world as a wicked place victimizing us with disaster and catastrophe, this is evidence of our damnation of ourselves. If instead we see the world as a place of holiness and hope, this is evidence of our decision to see ourselves as innocent.

This brings us to our line: "Therefore, seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world." This is an injunction; it is asking us to apply the teaching. But what exactly is it asking us to do? Given the context we've just examined, here is my answer:

Because what you see in the world is a projection of what you believe about yourself, you cannot turn the world of disaster and catastrophe into a place of holiness and hope merely by rearranging external things within it. Instead, the way to see a world of holiness and hope is to change your mind by choosing to look upon the world with the vision of Christ. This is a decision

to see your own holiness as well; because the world you see is a witness to what you believe about yourself, seeing a holy world will enable you to recognize your own holiness. Therefore, if you want all this to happen, seek not to change externals in the world, but choose instead to change your mind about the world.

Does this meaning require us to accept the standard interpretation?

If we answer this question quickly without thinking about it, we may be tempted to say yes. After all, the line does tell us that we shouldn't seek to change the world, right? But here again, we need to resist the urge to automatically slap the standard interpretation onto the line; instead, we need to look more closely at what it really says (and doesn't say). A closer examination reveals that the line is not a blanket rejection of doing things in the world to help others and bring about external changes. All the line says is that changing externals will not, in and of itself, lead to a new perception of the world; only our change of mind will do that. But this leaves open the possibility that the Course might want us to engage in external action for some *other* purpose. Thus, the meaning we've seen in our line doesn't require us to accept the standard interpretation of it. There are other possibilities, which leads to the next question.

Are there places in the Course that contradict the standard interpretation?

The short answer here is yes. The Course speaks in countless ways of the importance of extending behaviorally to the world. First, there are all the references to our function of saving the world. In lesson 63, we are asked to repeat, "I am the means God has appointed for the salvation of the world" (W-pI.63.3:5). Entire lessons are devoted to this idea, such as "Salvation of the world depends on me" (W-pI.186.Heading) and "I came for the salvation of the world" (W-pII.319.Heading). Now, it's true that the active ingredient behind our saving the world is changing our mind, but Jesus also tells us, "You are my voice, my eyes, my feet, my hands through which I save the world" (W-pI.rV.In.9:3). Clearly, there is an active component to this; Jesus needs our bodies as vehicles through which he can save the world. Communicating salvation through the body is crucial, because this form of communication is the easiest for people to understand and accept. A simple example: If you want to communicate love in a way another person will understand and accept, there's nothing like a kind word and a hug.

This theme of using behavior as a means to save the world can be seen again and again in the Course material. We are to use the body as a communication device, a means "to reach the minds of those who believe they are bodies, and teach them *through* the body that this is not so" (T-8.VII.3:2). Jesus says in the Urtext that "the real members of *my* party are *active* workers." We are told in the *Psychotherapy* supplement that "Nothing in the world is holier than helping one who asks for help" (P-2.V.4:2). We are even told in the Text that the change in external conditions that results from our extension of a miracle to a brother teaches us the saving truth that reality is changeless (see T-30.VIII.2).

All of this (and much more) clearly contradicts the idea that actively doing things to save the world has no place in the Course's system. The standard interpretation is now looking fishier than ever.

What are the options for resolving this apparent contradiction?

Now that we have this apparent contradiction, what do we do? I see two options. The first is to adhere to that standard interpretation, and use it to effectively erase all of those other passages. One way of doing this, preferred by Ken Wapnick, is to dismiss the other passages as "metaphor," not to be taken as literal instruction. In my opinion, however, this is not the way to go. There are numerous passages that speak of the positive role of external action, and there is nothing in the passages themselves that suggests Jesus doesn't mean them literally. Choosing to erase them on the basis of a dubious interpretation of one line (and similar lines elsewhere) amounts to massively rewriting the Course.

Fortunately, there is another option. Since we've already seen that the meaning of "seek not to change the world" doesn't require us to accept the standard interpretation, and there are lots of passages that contradict that standard interpretation, it is the standard interpretation that needs to be erased. What we need is an alternative interpretation of the whole picture presented by these apparently contradictory ideas, one that harmonizes our

line with the other passages we've seen.

What alternative interpretation would resolve this apparent contradiction?

There is indeed an alternative interpretation. The key to it is the answer to this question: *Why* is extending behaviorally to others in the world important? What role does it play in the Course's system? The short answer: It communicates your healed perception to others and thus reinforces it in you. The Course gives us a three-part formula: You *receive* healed perception from the Holy Spirit, then *give* that healed perception to others (which heals them), and as a result fully *recognize* the healed perception you received. This formula is repeated again and again. At one point, we are told that the idea that "we will not recognize what we receive until we give it" has been "said a hundred ways, a hundred times, and yet belief is lacking still" (W-pI.154.12:1-2). Here is another of those hundred ways, which ties this idea to the idea of saving the world:

Ideas must first belong to you, before you give them. If you are to save the world, you first accept salvation for yourself. But you will not believe that this is done until you see the miracles it brings to everyone you look upon. (W-pI.187.3:1-3)

Notice that same three-part formula: You *receive* salvation for yourself, then you *give* miracles to everyone you look upon, and as a result you come to fully *recognize* the salvation you received. And the giving in this process clearly includes giving behaviorally. Not only have we seen examples of that in some of the passages above, but the very lesson from which this passage is drawn says that the principle can be applied to giving forms, which can only be done behaviorally: When you give a form to someone, you are giving the thought behind it. "Things but represent the thoughts that make them" (W-pI.187.2:3). Whatever form our giving takes, it is through this process of receiving, giving, and recognizing that we save the world.

Now we have everything we need to come up with an alternative interpretation that is true to both the meaning of "seek not to change the world" in its immediate context, and all those passages which speak of acting to save the world. The key is realizing that while changing externals cannot change our mind, changing externals has a part to play in salvation *after* we have changed our mind: it communicates that change of mind to others, which heals them and thus reinforces our own healing. Here, then, is an alternative interpretation that harmonizes everything we've seen:

If you want a new perception of the world, the way to get it is not to change the world externally, but to change your mind about the world. However, once you *have* changed your mind and thus healed your perception, you must extend this healed perception to others—an extension which often includes behavior that changes the world externally. This extension will communicate your healed perception to others, heal them, and thus reinforce your healed perception. Through this process, you will save the world.

"To all the world we give the message that we have received"

The great benefit of the correct interpretation of this line is that it resolves the tension between our desire to make a positive difference in the world and the message we constantly get that this desire is contrary to our path. I see this tension in Course circles all the time. I've encountered Course students who have a real yearning to be of service to others. Every Course student I know admires people like Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and of course Jesus, people who actively extended loving perception to others and changed the world as a result. While the impulse to do this can be co-opted by the ego, the impulse itself is a holy thing—at one point, the Urtext even calls it the "miracle-drive." Yet my impression is that while Course students feel the pull to express that miracle-drive and do so to some extent, they often hold back because they hear that bit of Course lore whispering in their ear: "Seek not to change the world."

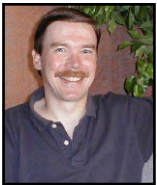
Now, however, I hope you've seen that this Course lore needn't hold us back at all. Yes, it is important to remember that merely rearranging externals isn't going to heal our perception of the world. This is a vitally important Course teaching. But once we have changed our minds and let healed perception in, even if only a little bit, it is equally important to go out into the world and share our healed perception in whatever way the

Holy Spirit directs. We need to extend it to others in thought, word, and deed, just like those amazing people we admire so much. We *must* do this if our healing is to be fully realized.

I'd like to conclude with an inspiring passage from Lesson 245. This passage would be erased by the standard interpretation of "seek not to change the world," but fits perfectly with our corrected interpretation. Its essence is that we receive the peace of God, give what we have received, and thus recognize all that God in His limitless Love has given us. Rather than standing above it all and heroically refraining from doing anything "out there" that might change the world, giving to all the world the message that we have received is the Course's pathway home:

Your peace surrounds me, Father. Where I go, Your peace goes there with me. It sheds its light on everyone I meet. I bring it to the desolate and lonely and afraid. I give Your peace to those who suffer pain, or grieve for loss, or think they are bereft of hope and happiness. Send them to me, my Father. Let me bring Your peace with me. For I would save Your Son, as is Your Will, that I may come to recognize my Self.

And so we go in peace. To all the world we give the message that we have received. And thus we come to hear the Voice for God, Who speaks to us as we relate His Word; Whose Love we recognize because we share the Word that He has given unto us. (W-pII.245.1:1-2:3)



E-mail your comments to the author at: greg@circleofa.org

Greg Mackie is the author of *How Can We Forgive Murderers? And Other Answers to Questions about 'A Course in Miracles.'* He has been a student of A Course in Miracles since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A's and a popular blog on the Circle of Atonement's website, and teaches the Circle's weekday Workbook class in Sedona, Arizona (along with Robert Perry). He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

WHAT WE'RE READING

Greg Mackie:

***Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* by John Hick**

John Hick is a highly regarded Christian theologian and philosopher of religion who, in the course of his career, has moved from Christian exclusivism (the belief that Christianity is the only valid path to God) to religious pluralism (the belief that all of the great traditions are equally valid paths to God). In this book he discusses a wide range of topics, from a fresh view of Christian doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation, to ways that Buddhism can illuminate Christianity, to a possible conception of life after death. I suspect most readers would find this book a bit academic and dry, but if you're an egghead like me, you may enjoy it as much as I have.

CIRCLE MAILBOX

Thank you very much for this ["What If Jesus Really Did Write This?" *A Better Way* #64]. Robert's presentation [at the San Francisco conference in February] was one of my favorites out of all the excellent ones given. I thoroughly enjoyed the conference (my first). As an academic, his style of reason and analysis really appeals to me. I am also reading his book *Return to the Heart of God*.

While I was not in doubt about the path I am on, the presentation really gave me a renewed commitment to just how powerful ACIM really is.

Love, peace and joy,
Walter E. Davis

RECENT WEB SITE POSTINGS

Many of you know this, but for those who don't, we post new material on the web site every week. Here are some of the articles we have recently posted:

Dialogs: Roger Walsh and Robert Perry are having a dialog about meditation and *A Course in Miracles*. Jim Marion and Robert Perry are having a dialog about *A Course in Miracles* and the perennial wisdom. Read more.

Open-Mindedness by *Robert Perry*. We all value open-mindedness, yet by that we mean being open-minded about particular facts or situations or issues. Could it be that there is a deeper open-mindedness, in which we are open to a whole different way of seeing reality? Read more.

Blog: *Greg Mackie's* most recent blog entry is "Take two aspirin and go help someone." Read more.

Course Meets World Commentary by *Greg Mackie*. This month Greg has posted the following commentaries relating *A Course in Miracles* to a topic "in the news": "Is Your Brain Really Necessary?"; "Hearing the Music"; "The Power of Negative Thinking"; and "What Can We Do Together?" Read more.

Questions and Answers by *Robert Perry* and *Greg Mackie*. Robert and Greg posted answers to several questions this month: "Should we turn off the mind, as Eckhart Tolle says?"; "If Jesus already saved the world, what are we still doing here?"; "Angels"; and "Should I take care of my body?" Read more.