

# APPLYING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: ONCE YOU HAVE READ IT WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

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## Introduction

Christians, indeed scholars of all sorts, never seem to tire of studying the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>1</sup> The wealth of literature dealing with these three chapters in Matthew's gospel is overwhelming. J. Carmignac's study on the Lord's Prayer concludes with an 84 page bibliography on that part of the Sermon alone.<sup>2</sup> W. S. Kissinger lists nearly 150 pages of bibliography on the Sermon.<sup>3</sup>

The interested Bible student can easily feel himself crushed beneath this avalanche of material, not all of it necessarily helpful, for once all of the critical investigations are finished, one still has to reach

<sup>1</sup> The reader will notice that this article lacks the extensive notation found in others in this issue. The reason for this is the comparative lack of literature directly addressing the issues involved in the practical, contemporary application of the Sermon on the Mount. cursory comments are sometimes made in the better commentaries, R Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) is a good example of this. But, as one would expect, the space constraints and exegetical emphasis of such works prevent any principal analysis and thorough outworking of the details of real application. More popular treatments offer more extensive practical discussions but seldom, if ever, reflect upon or justify their own presuppositions or method; for example, see D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1960); E. Arnold, *Salt and Light*, (Rifton, NY: Plough Publ, 1967); J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *Recherches sur le "Notre Pere"* (Paris: Letouzey & Ane, 1969),

<sup>3</sup> *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1975).

some conclusions about what you *do* with the Sermon on the Mount. At least, this should be the important question for those followers of Jesus who believe his teaching continues to make demands upon their lifestyle today. How is the Sermon to be applied now, not just in vague generalities, but specifically? Does it really demand nonresistance of all disciples in all situations? Should I actually be willing to surrender all my belongings to anyone who wants to sue me?

This article will attempt to offer some suggestions for answering these sorts of questions, indicating how Christians can continue to take the ethics of the Sermon seriously while avoiding the two most common extremes of: 1) absolutizing isolated sayings of Jesus by ignoring their broader canonical context, or; 2) flatly ignoring or explaining away Jesus' teaching as being unrealistic.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "There is nothing new under the sun." Modern approaches to the Sermon's application can best be understood by briefly looking at the history of its interpretation. Space limitations require focusing only on major trends, but this will be adequate for our purposes.

### *History of Interpretation*

#### *The Church Fathers*

Prior to the medieval period it is clear that the Sermon on the Mount was viewed as a straightforward presentation of Christian ethics. Beginning with the Didache through the apostolic and post-apostolic fathers, this teaching was held to represent the Lord's expectations of his disciples. Much of the discussion focused upon Jesus' relationship to the OT law, but regardless of how one might answer that question, and irrespective of the exegetical method used (whether Chrysostom's Antiochene straightforwardness, or Origen's Alexandrian allegory), there was no suggestion that Jesus' teaching was unrealistic, or that it might relate only to some future era of the coming kingdom. Origen's youthful castration, by his own hand, performed in obedience to Matt 5:27-30, shows how seriously Jesus' teaching could be applied by some (though later in life Origen regretted his spontaneity, and would have interpreted this passage differently).

#### *The Middle Ages*

The medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, introduced a major development in the popular interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount through his great treatise, the *Summa Theologica*. Here Aquinas claimed that there were two levels of significance to Jesus' teaching: one which was relevant for all Christians; and a second

which applied only to a few. This was his distinction between commandments (also called precepts) and counsels (also called evangelical counsels or counsels of perfection). Jesus' commandments must be obeyed by anyone who hoped to inherit eternal life. But the precepts were additional, optional instructions which brought the disciple closer to perfection and facilitated the true imitation of Christ. These precepts covered three areas: poverty; chastity; and obedience. Consequently, there were now two "types" of Christians (generally, the laity and those involved in the various priestly/monastic movements), and the Sermon was believed to teach some things which were too difficult for the average believer.

### *The Reformation*

The Reformation saw three basic trains of thought develop among those who shared in the reawakened understanding of salvation by grace alone. Martin Luther developed a view of Christian ethics defined by the presence of "two kingdoms" in this life, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.<sup>4</sup> Christians must live in both. Behavior must be determined not only by personal convictions, which for the Christian are largely shaped by the presence of God's kingdom, but also by public obligations and responsibility, shaped by the laws of the land.

In forging this ethical system Luther was interacting with two different "opponents." First, Luther was rejecting the works righteousness approach to Christian living fostered by Aquinas' theology of the counsels of perfection. For Luther, all of the Sermon on the Mount was relevant to all believers. No one could escape its radical demands because it was Christ's word to his church, but neither should anyone feel the need to escape this part of Jesus' teaching; there was no hierarchy of salvation because all were saved by grace.

Secondly, Luther was also rejecting the enthusiasm (as it was called) of the various Anabaptist groups who insisted upon a very strict, literal application of all facets of the Sermon's teaching (see below). Luther saw the Anabaptist rejection of any Christian participation in society as an abdication of Christian responsibility, as well as a misunderstanding of Jesus' intention. In Luther's mind, life in the kingdom of God demanded a straightforward application of the Sermon's demands in the personal life of every believer. This required behavior which was simply the overflow of a heart filled with the love of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> For a good introduction to Luther's view of the two kingdoms, see P. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

On the other hand, a Christian's responsibilities in the world may at times demand behavior which, on the surface, appears to be in conflict with the ethics of God's kingdom. But such apparent conflicts are only superficial. As long as the Christian maintains a heart of love, he can fulfill his outward duty to society while inwardly conforming to the expectations of Christ. For example, when a Christian judge punishes some wrongdoer, outwardly he may not be "turning the other cheek" (Matt 5:39), but if he loves the criminal with the love of God, he is being a faithful citizen of both the heavenly and earthly kingdoms.

The second stream of Reformation interpretation was found in the Anabaptist movement. The Anabaptists read the Sermon on the Mount as the central piece of biblical teaching for all believers. It was to be interpreted and applied literally. As citizens of the new Kingdom of God, the Anabaptists withdrew from participation in civil government and rejected all notions of a state church. Consequently, Christian ethics were for Christians alone; not only could they not be applied to society at large, but it would be damaging for any Christian to attempt such an application. You cannot successfully participate in civil government and live according to the principles of "loving your enemies," "judging not lest you be judged," etc. Therefore, since all aspects of Jesus' teaching were to be strictly followed, the Christian had no choice but to withdraw from any participation in this world order. The Kingdom of God could only be realized among the saints as they related to one another.

The third approach to applying the Sermon among the Reformers was articulated by such leaders as Huldreich Zwingli and John Calvin. These men sought to establish Christian, theocratic states in the Swiss cities of Zurich and Geneva, respectively. They were the architects of a reformed world-view which strived to see all aspects of life brought under the domain of Christ, including the state and civil authority. They rejected both the two-kingdom ethic of Luther, as well as the isolationist conclusions of the Anabaptists. For these men there was only one realm of existence, the kingdom of Christ, and Christians were obligated to apply this perspective to all aspects of life in this world, including business and government.

However, Zwingli and Calvin were not naive. They realized that, at certain points, strict, literal application of some facets of the Sermon's teaching were incompatible with the successful enforcement of civil law. The Sermon's teachings on nonviolence, nonresistance, passing judgment and swearing oaths were particularly troublesome issues; hotly debated among all branches of the growing Reformation leadership. Though Zwingli and Calvin had slightly different methods of arriving at their conclusions, they both, in effect, made the

needs of civil order an overriding presumption in their method of interpretation. Consequently, those features of the Sermon's teaching which appeared incompatible with effective government were moderated in one way or another.

### *Reformed Scholasticism*

The post-reformation Protestants began a process of codifying the various tenets of the different branches of reformed thought which came to be known as reformed orthodoxy or scholasticism. The Puritans would be the progenitors of the long term influence of this theology in the English speaking world. The important development, as far as the present study is concerned, is what Kissinger has called "the Paulinizing" of the Sermon on the Mount.

It had long been suggested (beginning with the Church Fathers) that Jesus originally preached this Sermon as a New Moses bringing a New Law to God's people. Since reformed orthodoxy understood the primary purpose of the law to be the conviction of the sinner's conscience, preparing him for the forgiveness of the gospel, the Sermon on the Mount was naturally interpreted in this light as well. Jesus' teaching presented such an unrealizable ethic that anyone who took his words seriously could only find himself broken by the conviction of sin and driven to the acceptance of Christ. Just as the grace of salvation offered through Christ in the New Covenant was greater than that of the Old, so too was this new implement of the sinner's conviction and repentance. This explained why the New Law of the Sermon was typically interpreted as an intensification of mosaic legislation.

This view of the Sermon continues to be reiterated in different quarters today, modern representatives being found in men such as Carl Stange ("Zur Ethik der Bergpredigt," 1924) and Gerhard Kittel ("Die Bergpredigt und die Ethik des Judentums," 1925).

### *Protestant Liberalism*

Numerous forces converged in the 19th century to give rise to a new theological movement known as Liberalism. Without going into all the details, the primary articulation of this new school was put forward by Adolf von Harnack in his book *What is Christianity?* According to Harnack, when we scratch the surface of the church's teachings about Jesus in order to discover the actual teachings of Jesus, we find an ethic summarized in the tenets of the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, most succinctly presented in the Sermon on the Mount. According to most spokesmen for this new liberalism (although, as in all things, there is some variety in approach, the goal of interpretation is not to turn the Sermon into a

new legalism by stringent application of all the details, but the discovery of a new, radicalized love for both God and neighbor blooming in each person's heart.

Individualized decisions are to be guided by this new heart of indiscriminate love; and this new love is to guide all decisions in life, whether private or public. In this sense, the concerns of 19th century liberalism were somewhat similar to the goals of the theocratic reformers, in that the ethic of Jesus was to be applied to all of life. Each was an attempt to forge a wholistic worldview, even though the outworking of that perspective was radically different in the two movements.

### *Traditional Dispensationalism*

The final approach to interpreting and applying the Sermon to be reviewed in this study is that of traditional dispensationalism. We use the modifier "traditional" in recognition of the ongoing evolutionary character of contemporary dispensational thought.

Traditional dispensationalism begins its study of the Sermon by sharing an important assumption with protestant orthodoxy: the teaching in this Sermon knows nothing of God's grace; it is entirely a new law. Therefore, to apply its teaching to the church, which lives under grace, is a major mistake. The Sermon on the Mount is not church teaching but kingdom teaching, and is strictly relevant only to the Jews who will reign with Christ in the coming kingdom age on this earth. Although some would insist upon an exemplary aspect of the Sermon's love ethic which does offer a model for Christian living today, this simply points the believer towards God's perfect expectations for the future; one cannot hope to fully realize such obedience today.

### *Summary*

This is hardly an exhaustive review of the history of the Sermon's interpretation. There are many other movements and individuals which might be discussed. But, as R. Guelich has pointed out, a detailed history of the Sermon's interpretation has yet to be written, and there is no need to attempt such a work here.<sup>5</sup> This brief survey has revealed enough of the major issues and the basic contours of the debate to ensure that new attempts at answering questions of application will be reasonably well informed about the pitfalls and obstacles that await and how others have dealt with them. This may help us to avoid old "mistakes" (although, admittedly, one person's mistake is another's solution--something the reader may feel more strongly before

<sup>5</sup> *The Sermon on the Mount*, 14.

the end of this article). And if we choose to occupy an old pitfall, we should at least know the company we keep.

We should now be able to recognize the major issues which must be addressed by any attempt to apply the Sermon on the Mount to modern living:

1. Does the Sermon offer "entrance requirements" for the Kingdom? Is it addressed to disciples who are being given instructions for Christian living, or does it address the seeker who finds in the Sermon a means of gaining salvation?

2. What is the Sermon's relationship to grace? Is it entirely "law" (whether old or new), or is there some element of forgiveness to be found?

3. More particularly, is the Sermon's sole purpose to drive the sinner to repentance? Is it Jesus' articulation of the Pauline view of law found by some interpreters in Gal. 4:1-7?

4. Perhaps the Sermon has no relevance to this present era at all?

5. Depending upon one's answer to the preceding questions, we might still want to ask whether the Sermon is to be applied to society at large? If so, is obeying this ethic incumbent upon unbelievers? How would that be enforced? Or does it simply regulate the Christian's behavior? In which case, is the Christian to make any distinction between private and public applications of the Sermon's ethic?

### *How Do We Apply the Sermon Today?*

To fully document all the argumentation offered below would require more space than is available in this article. Therefore, we will only briefly sketch proposed answers to the questions raised and offer one example from the Sermon (Matt 5:38-42) to illustrate its current application.

#### *Basic Principles*

The starting point for any proper reading of the Sermon on the Mount is the understanding that it is instruction given to disciples who have already made the commitment to follow Jesus. Its teaching is not for "outsiders" (which is not to deny that everyone would benefit if they followed its teaching, whether they believed in Jesus or not). This is Kingdom teaching in the sense that it outlines the obedient lifestyle expected of anyone who has entered the Kingdom of God by submitting to Christ. This is the general consensus of scholarly opinion today, and a quick survey of various features on the Sermon will make it clear:

a) Matt 5:1 demonstrates that the primary audience of this teaching was Jesus' disciples. Though the surrounding crowds benefit as well, Jesus was speaking directly to those who had already left everything to follow him. He is not telling people how to get into the Kingdom, but instructing them in how they should live once they are inside it.

b) The beatitudes (5:3-10) describe the process of entering this Kingdom, what heart attitudes are necessary, and the blessings that one gains as a result of such repentance. A clearer description of acceptance by grace could not be found anywhere. Jesus' teaching is offered to those who know that they do not deserve anything from God; they are in the Kingdom only because they have humbled themselves, acknowledged that they are spiritually bankrupt, and have accepted salvation as God's gift.

c) Various present tense promises illustrate the current benefits of discipleship: the Kingdom is already theirs (5:3, 10); they are the salt and the light of the world (5:13f); God has already made himself their Father (5:16). This list could be greatly expanded, but the point is plain. Jesus is talking to those who are already members of his family.

With this fundamental principle established, the remainder of the questions raised above begin to answer themselves.

1. The question of whether the Sermon offers a new law is something of a red herring, at least as far as questions of practical application are concerned (which is not to deny that deciding whether or not Jesus presents himself as a New Moses bringing a New Torah is a significant issue). It is clear that, however we answer this question, the Sermon does not present a way of earning salvation. Aquinas' "counsels of perfection" must go.

But, aside from that obvious conclusion, it is also clear that the Sermon points us to a new way of living; it is not simply condemnatory, as reformed orthodoxy would have us believe. Even in the Old Testament, the law was offered as God's instructions for godly living to his people *who had already* entered into his covenant of grace, e.g., Israel stood at the base of Mt. Sinai *after* being delivered from Egypt, not before. E. P. Sanders' lengthy studies into "covenantal nomism" have explained this traditional Jewish--and biblical--understanding of the law at length.<sup>6</sup> Of course, to say this is not to deny that such kingdom instruction can also convict the disciple's conscience, nor is it to assert that any disciple will ever experience a day when he or she will obey the Lord's teaching completely. But these things are true of any ethical teaching found in either testament. The Christian's struggle in

<sup>6</sup> For example, see *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); *Jesus and Judaism*, (London: SCM, 1985).

sanctification is the result of the "already/not yet" tension inherent in the Kingdom's coming: it has come in part, but not completely. This is the true explanation of the disciple's ambiguous relationship to Jesus' expectations in Matthew 5-7. Arguments concerning grace vs. law in the Sermon set up a false dichotomy and avoid the real issues pertinent to the Sermon's application.

2. Obviously, if the Sermon on the Mount is addressed to disciples, then it must be taken seriously now; it offers neither a future ethic that can be deferred, nor an unreasonable ethic that can be avoided or watered down. The demand of present obedience is made clear in the Sermon's conclusion (7:21-27).

3. Finally, if this Sermon is Jesus' teaching for his followers, then it is not to be applied as a universal ethic to society at large. This is not a blueprint for social, political and economic reform. It does not provide a new code for civil law or the guidelines for how we can inaugurate a utopian culture in this world. Admittedly, any individual can experience this breathtakingly radical ethic of love and find his or her own private part of the world amazingly transformed as a result. And there is no doubt about the fact that our society can be (and, in the past, has been) radically reformed when enough of its members experience this life changing gift of God's grace. But such private renovation happens only through a personal encounter with Jesus. It is a change from the inside out. It cannot be legislated. It cannot be imposed. Perhaps this is the greatest weakness of any interpretation which would view the Sermon on the Mount as a new law. Laws cannot legislate attitudes or dispositions. No human court can prosecute a man for lust, or sentence a woman for failure to love.

Let's not be confused about this issue. To argue for the "privitization" of the Sermon as described here is not to side with Anabaptist isolationism. To say that the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount cannot successfully be applied indiscriminately to society at large is not to say that individual Christians are excused from applying these ethics to all areas of their own lives within that society. It is, however, to suggest that movements which seek to establish modern "theocratic states"--whether the architects are Zwingli, Calvin or current reconstructionists--misunderstand the nature of the Kingdom of God, and thus the force of the Sermon's personalized ethic. Any attempt at the universal imposition of the ethics of the Kingdom will inevitably be unfair to both the unbelieving citizen and the Sermon's true meaning, for invariably the cutting edge of Jesus' expectations will be compromised (as we saw in Calvin), and the expectations of Kingdom living will be gutted of their true import as the responsibilities of individual conscience are transferred to the state.

*One Example*

Before illustrating these principles by looking at Matt 5:38-42, one more matter of interpretation needs to be clarified. *The Sermon on the Mount is not the only piece of ethical teaching in the Bible.* This would seem to be a fairly obvious point, and one may wonder why we even bother stating it. However, many of the debates reviewed above stem from the failure to remember this simple fact. For example, early Anabaptist radicalism was admirable in that they wanted to take their Lord's teaching seriously, whatever the personal cost. But their attachment to the Sermon on the Mount was misguided insofar as they transformed these three chapters of Matthew into a "canon within the canon"; that is, in practice they behaved as if this Sermon nullified all other ethical teaching in the Bible. This is a serious mistake.

Matt 5:38-42 is a key passage in any debate concerning the Sermon's applicability; it is probably the most important text for anyone who is looking for a biblical justification of pacifism, nonviolence and nonretaliation. The teaching seems clear: disciples are not to engage in violence, including self-defense. Even unjust oppressors are not to be resisted. When taken at face value it is not difficult to see how the Anabaptists might conclude that withdrawal is the only course open to Christians in this world. But when we remember that the Bible also offers other bits of instruction, covering other circumstances, the picture begins to change.

People are social beings. We live in a context of relationships defined by various degrees of interdependence. Individuals are not only accountable for themselves, but heads of families are accountable for (and to) other family members; neighbors are accountable for (and to) others in their communities; community accountability is not only personal, i.e., friend to friend, but can also be public, such as "office holder to constituency." The Bible has something to say about all of these aspects of our relationships, but they are not all found in the Sermon on the Mount.

For example, the Bible has a great deal to say about the care of the more defenseless members of society: widows; orphans; and the dispossessed. Widows are to be cared for (Deut 14:28; 16:11; 24:29f; 26:12f; 27:19). Judges are to execute their responsibilities with fairness; the rich should not be able to buy their judgments against the defenseless (Deut 27:19; Isa 1:23; Jer 7:6; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; all concerning widows). Both private and public righteousness requires care for these members of our community (Isa 1:17).

Consequently, how one responds to any given situation is determined by the nature of the inter-relationships between the various

parties involved, and one's own role as a private or public figure. An illustration will help. Imagine you are walking down a city street alone after dark (never mind how you got yourself into this predicament). A man walks up to you, hits you over the head and begins to take your wallet. You may well begin to yell for help; you may even try to run away if you can, or defend yourself in some reasonable manner, but you do not begin to plan how you are going to track this man down, have him arrested and seek legal redress by having him prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. The teaching of the Sermon strictly forbids such retaliation. "Turning the other cheek" means that the disciple surrenders his or her rights to legal compensation.<sup>7</sup> This is where Jesus' teaching applies to your own personal decision making concerning your own private person. Jesus says, "turn the other cheek. . . let him take your cloak as well." These are non-negotiable expectations for individual, Christian behavior. When it comes to personal application, we must all be Anabaptists. To compromise this level of application, as some reformed interpretation has done for example, is to eviscerate Jesus' teaching of all real significance. The Sermon would simply become a wax nose, to be reshaped any way we like; and when push comes to shove most of us do not like the personal demands of Christian discipleship.

But imagine that the very next evening you notice the same man breaking into your neighbor's house. This neighbor is a good friend of yours; she is an elderly widow who lives alone. What do you do? Do you sit back and think, "I hope she turns her other cheek as easily as I did, and surrenders her cloak as well"? No. You call the police and do what you can to aid in the burglar's arrest in defense of your neighbor. This is also God's command. How the neighbor lady responds to this thief is another matter altogether; Jesus would ask her to be free of all vengeful interests. But Jesus' instruction is that each individual turn his or her own cheek when struck, not that we all turn our heads when our neighbor's cheek is being struck. There is a big difference between the two. You can defend your neighbor without disobeying the Sermon.

Now imagine again that you are a judge. Several days later this very same criminal is brought before your bench charged with burglary. What do you do? Do you free the man without even hearing the case because the Sermon on the Mount forbids legal retaliation? No. You hear the case and give him the proscribed punishment once he is proven guilty. Why? Because as a public figure you also have the responsibility before God to see that justice is exercised in society. This too is God's command.

<sup>7</sup> See Guelich, 251.

Initially, this may look like the reintroduction of Luther's two kingdom theology, but this would be a misunderstanding. Luther had an important insight in recognizing the difference between private and public roles in society and the tension created within any Christian who tries to apply the same ethic across the board in all situations. The dilemma has been resolved here, not by recourse to two different kingdoms, but by simply applying the full range of biblical teaching to the diversified situations of life. Different responses are required depending upon the shifting dynamics of each new set of relationships. The Sermon on the Mount is only one part of the equation. This is not a new way of watering down Jesus' demands. Quite the opposite! It is the way of ensuring that his expectations are applied as straightforwardly as possible.

Obviously, this is only one of many possible examples. The key to applying the Sermon on the Mount to real life is not reading an article which catalogues every possible response to every possible permutation of life. Lifetime, obedient application consists of first knowing Jesus as the Lord of your own poor spirit who has replaced your old heart with his new heart of love, and then measuring your response to life by the whole counsel of God.

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