



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 With Ears to Hear
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 37-45)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Universality of Christ and His Teachings
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 46-47)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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With Ears to Hear

If we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a his-torical perspective, we will keep it at a distance from us and from our communities. To be Scripture for the Church, it must be performed as a living word with voice and presence – both as we speak its words in the sanctuary and live its way in the fabric of human community.

Prayer

O God, you have turned our world upside-down through the life and teaching of Jesus. Awaken us now to your blessing. Open our ears that we might hear. Stir our hearts that we might act to glorify you in all things, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:13-16

Meditation†

Why must you be salt? Jesus says in effect: “You are accountable not only for your own life but also for that of the entire world. I am sending you not to one or two cities, nor to ten or twenty, nor even to one nation, as I sent the prophets”.... For this reason, you see, he requires from his disciples those character traits that are most necessary and useful for the benefit of all.

John Chrysostom (347-407)

Reflection

We have strategies, don’t we, for “keeping the Sermon on the Mount safely ensconced as an artifact in a distant corner of history.” In our Bible study and worship we would prefer to examine “how this text might have been put together *back then*,” Richard Ward observes, rather than confront how it “should shape the life of the believing community *in the here and now*.”

As a first step toward hearing and responding to the Sermon as the living word of God in Scripture, he suggests, we should listen to the words of the text read aloud. When the Sermon in its entirety is “performed” in worship, “the inflection and interpretation afforded by human agency – voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence” – can bring Jesus’ teachings alive. The Sermon:

- ▶ *will sound strangely new*. Most of us grew up thinking of “biblical texts as silent things that are read and studied in solitude and privacy,” Ward notes. “When they are given voice, the preferred style of reading tends to flatten affect. In the sincere effort to regard the holy ‘otherness’ of sacred texts and to honor the values of the silent, individualized print culture of Protestantism, we have obscured Scripture’s capacity to speak more fully to our human predicament.” But the times are changing: as television, DVD players, and iPods begin to challenge books and other written media as the primary forms of communication, we are gaining a new appreciation for the spoken word in our culture. “Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are – the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.”



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▶ *will sound strangely old.* “When we are listeners and readers in our communications culture, we draw closer to the situation of our early Christian ancestors’ experience of Scripture,” says Ward. Performed interpretations were central to “early Christians’ experience of Scripture; they helped to shape the minds, hearts, and memories of believers in relation to Christ. Performance was the agency through which the early Church experienced the lively presence of its Living Lord.”

▶ *can be spoken with authority.* Whether performers read aloud the text with attention to the meaning and emotion of its language or “internalize” the words and speaks their meaning “by heart,” they can present it as “Word-bearing for the gathered assembly,” believing that “the text authorizes the performed interpretations they render, and...someone behind the text makes it to be authoritative Scripture.”

▶ *may be heard with fresh insight.* Passages “rendered silent and fixed by the print medium can be released into new horizons of meaning through the agency of the human voice and body,” says Ward. Consider Jesus’ instruction to “be perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “To the performer of any text, ‘perfection’ cannot be reduced to ‘getting it right’ by sounding all the words in their proper order.” A perfect performance is one that invites further reflection and interpretation.

In light of this meaning of “perfection,” he interprets Matthew 5:48 as “an invitation to imitate or ‘carry through to completion’ God’s own divine actions.... We who listen to the Sermon on the Mount are invited to perform a salty, light-bearing way of life that imitates God’s love. The final form of the performed interpretation of this text must be the work of an *ensemble*, the gathered community of God, and not the labor of a solo interpreter.”

Study Questions

1. What changes in our culture, according to Richard Ward, are restoring appreciation for the spoken word? Do you agree?
2. What do we miss when in worship we listen to and study only short passages of Scripture?
3. In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, what extended passages of Scripture might be read with profit in worship?
4. Would your congregation willingly devote fifteen to twenty minutes to the reading of Scripture in worship? If not, why?
5. Discuss Ward’s view that the purpose of performing the Sermon on the Mount is not “to make the text more entertaining and our listening more enjoyable, [or] call attention to the work of the virtuoso performer,” but “to evoke performance of this Scripture as the life of the Church.”
6. In the painting *Sermon on the Mount* (cover art), Laura James depicts Jesus as a person of color. Discuss the value of this visual “performance” of the Sermon by the artist.

Departing Hymn: “From Galilee He Preaches Still”

† John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 15.6.

With Ears to Hear

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the value of hearing the Sermon on the Mount (and other longer passages of Scripture) read aloud in worship.
2. To consider how “performance criticism” – the interpretation of Scripture based on our performance of the text – can lead to fresh insights into the meaning of Scripture.
3. To consider how the performance of Scripture passages (reading them aloud) can evoke the performance of Scripture as the life of the congregation (i.e., living out the teachings of Scripture in discipleship).

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Sermon on the Mount (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Hearing the Sermon on the Mount read aloud in its entirety can be a powerful form of worship today. On the one hand, it highlights the continuity of our worship with early Christians’ worship, where Scripture was presented through performed interpretations. We also glimpse what it means to follow Jesus’ teachings in our setting. As we listen to the Sermon performed, Richard Ward notes, “virtues practically forgotten in our imperial consciousness – humility, ‘good’ grief that arises out of empathy and compassion, devotion to God, and a passion for making things right – are singled out, honored, and affirmed in God’s commonwealth. Those who practice them are ‘salt’ and ‘light’ (5:13-14), people who live with serious attentiveness and regard for relationships, both human and divine” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 31).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading in unison the prayer printed in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:13-16 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Richard Ward calls the Sermon on the Mount “the sermon we have never *heard*.” Though we commonly refer to it as a ‘sermon,’ “our experience of it bears little resemblance to listening to a sermon.” He knows, of course, that it may not be a recorded speech by Jesus, but an arrangement of his teachings. Ward’s point is that we would prefer to keep the Sermon at a distance, as a historical text we dissect in little pieces, rather than encounter it living and whole in our worship through performance in “voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence.”

This study guide introduces “performance criticism” as a way of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. (The earlier study guides in this series feature what scholars call “literary criticism” and “canonical criticism,” which is interpreting the Sermon in its literary context in Matthew and as a part of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole.) Performance criticism highlights how the oral presentation of Scripture can communicate its immediacy and authority and give us new insight into its meaning. The “performance” evokes more performances by the members of the worshiping community as they live out the Sermon in their lives together.

Study Questions

1. As “electronic and digital technologies...are decentering writing and print as the primary vehicles for communication...our standards for ‘good speech’ are changing. Who patiently listens to flat, uninflected, and unexpressive voices anymore when our ears are tuned for energy, conviction, and authenticity?” Ward asks. “Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are—the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.” Do you agree our expectations are changing? Are we *more discriminating* listeners? *Better* listeners?
2. We will miss the opportunity to experience Scripture as the early Christians did, may be tempted to focus on questions about a passage’s form and redaction (or editing and assemblage into its present format), and may interpret the passage out of its literary context. We will miss the biblical writers’ intentions—e.g., Paul’s writing a letter of instruction, Matthew’s (and other Gospel writers’) retelling the story of Jesus’ ministry and death, John the Revelator’s layering vision upon vision, and so on. Scripture may become for us more like a fact book or dictionary we use in debate rather than a narrative that shapes our character.
3. Invite small groups to canvas sections of Scripture (e.g., the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings, Paul’s epistles, the Gospels, and so on) for extended passages that could be read with profit in worship. Members might mention the stories of creation and the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph in Genesis; short stories like Ruth or Jonah or Daniel; a collection of prophecies of Isaiah, the visions of Ezekiel, or the book of Hosea; sections of Job or a collection of psalms; a series of Jesus’ parables, a discourse like Matthew 18, the prologue of John, the extended speeches at the Lord’s Supper in John’s Gospel, the account of one of Paul’s missionary journeys in Acts, Paul’s letter to Philemon, the book of James, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, and so on.
4. Worship leaders confess the greatest obstacle in planning worship is fitting all of the parts—hymns, music, readings, prayers, children’s sermon, sermon, offering, etc.—into sixty minutes. To make time for a “performance” of an extended passage of Scripture, would you leave something out or lengthen the worship service? Would children (and adults) become fidgety during the reading? Who in the congregation is capable as a reader and interpreter of Scripture to prepare the performance or train others to read Scripture aloud?
5. By a “performance” of Scripture, Ward does not mean that readers should call attention to their performance. Rather, their reading should help listeners encounter the text in a fresh way. “When a performed interpretation is done well, it is an effective bodying-forth of the thoughts, imagery, and actions found in the text,” he writes. “It restores for listeners a sense that the text is speaking directly to them, just as it spoke to its original audience.” The oral performance should evoke performances (living out) of the Scripture in the community.
6. Laura James’ *Sermon on the Mount* (cover) is her performance of the Sermon. Aspects (depicting Jesus as a person of color, drawing rounded figures, indicating distance by overlapping figures, etc.) were evoked by artwork in the Ethiopian Christian tradition. The artist also brings part of her story to the performance: recalling childhood experiences of thinking biblical figures were not like her, she desires all viewers to identify with the story of Jesus.

Departing Hymn

“From Galilee He Preaches Still” is on pp. 35-37 of *The Sermon on the Mount*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.