



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Reading the Beatitudes
like a Christian
(*Scripture*, pp. 37-46)

Suggested Article:

📖 Reading with the Great
Cloud of Witnesses
(*Scripture*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

Patristic and medieval biblical interpreters can help us relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation. They do not disdain historical inquiry, but they integrate those details within a larger picture of reality.

Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.

You reprove our selfishness, you strip away our condescension,
and we know that not one of us has yet arrived.

**At times we have thought that we alone hold the key to
interpreting Scripture.**

We have disregarded the voices of others – though without
them we cannot hope to hear your Word in its fullness.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-11

Reflection

When we read the Bible, we have “blind spots” – things in the text we cannot see clearly or at all. These may occur by no fault of our own: our scholarship is not defective and our devotion is not lacking, but the blind spots are conditioned by our time and culture. “So here’s the rub,” Andrew Selby notes: “when we read commentaries from our own era, we may find them to be easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well – and for the same reasons.”

Most of us share a certain blind spot: a peculiarly modern notion of ‘objectivity’ leads us to bracket theological beliefs and read the Bible “just like any other book” of history or literature. We dissect it as we desire in our curiosity, but for this reason we miss things that theologically minded readers can see clearly. To help overcome this blind spot, Selby suggests that we add some pre-modern scripture commentaries to our reading list.

This makes sense, but we might still be skeptical. (That is another of our modern traits.) Can we really learn anything from patristic and medieval exegetes that we probably would not discover from our own careful study of Scripture? To find out, Selby reviews the work of Christian of Stavelot, a ninth-century commentator on the Gospel of Matthew. He discovers that Christian “can serve for us both as an *expositor* of the Beatitudes and as a *model* for putting the tradition to good use.”

- ▶ *Christian emphasizes who speaks the Beatitudes.* About the detail that Jesus “sat down” to teach, Christian says: “This means he was set apart from the crowds [as a teacher from pupils]. God’s *sitting down* has the spiritual meaning that Jesus was made incarnate, because when he became incarnate it was as if he shrank: that is to say, he was not such as he is in his divinity.” The first point is often made today. But then he relates Jesus’ divine and human natures to the ethics of the Beatitudes. Shelby observes, “Christian wants his students to know that the Lord of the universe, who inspired the prophets, has delivered the Sermon – not just a really nice man.”
- ▶ *Christian finds Jesus’ program of discipleship is possible.* Noting how Jesus himself obeys and exemplifies every instruction in the



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Beatitudes, Christian (unlike most modern commentators) does not debate whether or not it is practical to live them out. He does not “reason as if Jesus himself were irrelevant or extrinsic to carrying out the life of discipleship chartered in the Sermon,” Selby explains. “It is easy for us to forget that the blessed, flourishing life depicted in the Beatitudes only comes about *in Christ*. He himself lived it out. It is only a possibility for us to the extent that we are united to him by the work of the Holy Spirit in us as the Church.”

- ▶ *Christian hands on the tradition.* This wonderful insight comes from Augustine (354-430). Christian does not mention the source, because his main goal is to foster his students’ ability to read Scripture well. This is a model for our teaching, Selby suggests. “Unless one’s audience consists of folks with the inclination and time to actually read patristic and medieval texts, we should not present pre-modern interpretation as a necessary gateway to true understanding. Bible studies and sermons should be about Scripture, not about Augustine.”

Study Questions

1. Which modern cultural “blind spot” in reading Scripture does Andrew Selby identify? Why does he suggest that we read patristic and medieval commentators to counter it?
2. Briefly summarize the key insight that Christian of Stavelot offers for understanding the Beatitudes. How does it exemplify a theological interpretation of Scripture?
3. How is Christian a good model for using the tradition of biblical interpretation? Are there shortcomings to his approach?
4. Review what scholars know about Christian of Stavelot. How would you compare his teaching context to yours?

Departing Hymn: “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit, Claiming Nothing as Their Own” (vv. 1 and 2)

Blesséd are the poor in spirit,
claiming nothing as their own,
but as giv’n them by their Father
that his goodness may be shown.
Blest are they who share the sorrow
of their God’s unchanging love;
they shall know his presence with them
and his promised comfort prove.

Blesséd are the strong but gentle,
trained to serve a higher will,
wise to know the eternal purpose
which their Father shall fulfill.
Blest are they who with true passion
strive to make the right prevail,
for the earth is God’s possession
and his purpose will not fail.

Norman Elliot (1967)

Suggested Tunes: BEECHER or ABBOT’S LEIGH

Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize the “blind spots” we have as modern interpreters of Scripture, and consider how reading pre-modern commentaries might help us overcome them.
2. To appreciate the work of one medieval commentator, Christian of Stavelot, as an expositor of the Beatitudes and model for relying on the tradition of biblical interpretation.
3. To discuss some contemporary resources that draw upon the patristic and medieval tradition of biblical interpretation.

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 *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit, Claiming Nothing as Their Own” locate one of the familiar tunes BEECHER or ABBOT’S LEIGH in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Andrew Selby asks you to imagine that a friend has invited you to lead a Bible study – for instance, this one! – that is studying the Beatitudes, the opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount. “Recognizing that the Sermon on the Mount is probably the most important of Jesus’s discourses in the Gospels, and is often called the charter for Christian discipleship, the stakes are accordingly high,” Selby writes. “If you succeed, you could inspire your brothers and sisters in Christ to fuller love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, if you bungle Jesus’ teaching, you may accidentally persuade the group that the Christian life is either impossible or dull. Will they find Christ’s sketch of the ‘blessed’ life compelling or just plain naïve?

“You know that you need more than personal anecdotes to unpack the passage. After all, we are all on the way, not having attained to the vision of life cast in the Beatitudes. Humbly recognizing your individual limitations, you decide to consult some Bible study resources. But which ones?

“If you have some training in biblical exegesis from a Christian college or seminary, you will probably reach for some standard modern commentaries published in the last few decades. But as you search them for insight into the Beatitudes, you begin to suspect that their being ‘up-to-date’ is not a virtue, but a liability.” The writers may have the same modern blind spots regarding the Sermon as you and the study group members! So, where will you turn? (*Scripture*, 37-38)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:1-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Each of the previous three lessons in this series has urged us to revisit the wealth of pre-modern commentaries on Scripture. In this study we do that. Andrew Selby guides us to an insight in the ninth-century commentary on Matthew by Christian of Stavelot that can correct modern readings of the Beatitudes – namely “that a more theological reading of Christ’s teaching in the Beatitudes prevents us from making them abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.”

For another example of reading the Beatitudes in the company of pre-modern Christians, see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “The Beatitudes in the Desert,” *Sermon on the Mount*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 26 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2008), 60-67, and the accompanying study guide (www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=52200).

In “Reading with the Great Cloud of Witnesses,” Rachel Billings reviews accessible resources to help your group become acquainted with pre-modern Christian interpreters of Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Key aspects of Scripture will be noticed only by interpreters who assume the Triune God is at work in history, Andrew Selby argues. Often modern interpreters are ill prepared to read the Bible this way. “In the last few centuries biblical scholarship has been located almost exclusively in the university, and in the same period the university has largely rejected the authority of faith over reason,” he notes. Thus, “the relation of a passage to the overarching story of creation, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation is ignored because the grand Christian narrative is no longer assumed to be true.” Pre-modern commentators do not share this blind spot: “They emphasize the big picture over the details. They have eyes intent on the narrative of Scripture, especially on its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection – what they often called the ‘scope’ or ‘mind’ of Scripture. ... [T]hey exemplify how to read particular passages of the Bible from the standpoint of faith.”
2. Christian of Stavelot, following Augustine, offers a theological reading of the Beatitudes when he assumes that Jesus is God incarnate speaking to us. This assumption, Selby notes, “prevents us from making [the Beatitudes into] abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.”
3. Christian wears his scholarship very lightly. While he understands, embraces, and develops Augustine’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, Christian does not call attention to his source. “Instead, he made the church fathers’ insights his own as he introduced his students to the riches of the mysteries of faith,” Selby writes. “The point for Christian, as it is for those of us who teach the Bible, is to foster our students’ ability to read Scripture well.”

Is that the best way to use sources, or is it plagiarism? Perhaps it depends on the teaching context. For instance, one might teach differently when the point is to show listeners how to use and develop sources (e.g., in a college or seminary classroom) rather than urge them to respond to Christ’s call on their lives (in a discipleship class or worship service). Have you ever experienced a style of teaching or preaching that is inappropriate for the context?

4. “All that is known of Christian of Stavelot derives from the commentary he wrote on the Gospel of Matthew,” Selby explains. “Indeed it is not even certain that his name was ‘Christian.’ We do know that he composed his exposition for the benefit of young monks studying in the Abbey of Stavelot, located in modern Belgium.” When he discovered Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew* was too difficult for his students, Christian decided to write his own. Selby locates this commentary in the “Carolingian Renaissance,” a ninth-century reform movement to “raise the level of education among pastors and monks to attain this goal of improved leading, preaching, and evangelizing.” Thus, “Christian was not just teaching the text of Matthew: he was teaching his students to read well.”

To what extent do Bible study groups today share the goals of helping their members to read, think, write, and speak well, to become leaders and teachers in the congregation and community, to appreciate the Christian tradition of Scripture interpretation, and so on? Are these objectives in conflict with, or supportive of the goal of helping members to become committed disciples of Christ?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.