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# Grace in the Sermon on the Mount

BY CHARLES H. TALBERT

The Sermon on the Mount seems filled with stringent laws and calls for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Where is God's enabling grace? The Sermon offers Jesus' sayings as verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life.

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Christians usually regard Paul and the author of the Gospel of John as theologians of grace. No fair-minded reader would disagree. The Gospel of Matthew is another matter. The First Gospel generally and the Sermon on the Mount specifically seem filled with stringent laws and calls for readers to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Where in Matthew is the grace in general and the enabling grace in the moral life in particular?

In order to clarify the issue further, it is necessary to understand three different views of how the relation between God and humans operates. These three perspectives are usually called *legalism*, *covenantal nomism*, and *new covenant piety*. In the first, God gives the law. If human beings obey the law, God responds to their obedience by entering into a relationship with them. Here human obedience is the means by which a relation to God is gained. This is *legalism*.

In the second perspective, God graciously enters into a relation with humans. In the context of a relationship already established, God gives the law as a guide to humans about what pleases and displeases him. If humans follow the guidance (that is, obey), they do so out of gratitude for what God has already done for them. This is *covenantal nomism*.

In the third, God graciously enters into a relation with humans. In the context of a relation already established God gives guidance about what

pleases and displeases him. When humans follow that guidance, it is because God graciously enables their obedience. This is *new covenant piety*.

Christians usually place Paul and John within new covenant piety. Matthew's view normally is identified either as legalism or as covenantal nomism. When this is done the Sermon on the Mount is read either as God's law that must be obeyed if we are to gain a relation to God (legalism) or as God's demands that must, out of gratitude, be followed if we are to remain within the relation with God (covenantal nomism). Neither of these readings would locate Matthew's Sermon on the Mount within the new covenant piety represented by Paul and the Fourth Gospel. My aim is to show how the Sermon should and can fit within the new covenant piety characterized by Paul and John. How is that possible?

## **TWO MODELS OF GOD'S ENABLING GRACE**

Ancient Mediterranean peoples talked about God's enabling grace in two different ways. One way of speaking about God's enabling action is the language of indwelling. This is how Christians have normally read Paul and John. Consider Philippians 2:12b-13, "work out your own salvation...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure," or Galatians 2:19b-20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," or Romans 8:9-11, "the Spirit of God dwells in you...Christ is in you...the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," or Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The Pauline letters emphasize the indwelling of God, the Spirit, and the risen Christ in believers. This indwelling enables believers both to desire and to do God's will. This is new covenant piety. Consider also:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.... (John 15:4-6)

This Johannine text shows clearly that the Evangelist understood the ongoing relation between God and disciples as enabled by a mutual indwelling. This is new covenant piety. The absence of the language of indwelling in Matthew has been largely responsible for Christians' inability to see the enabling grace of new covenant piety in this Gospel in general and in the Sermon on the Mount in particular.

The other model to consider is that of transformation by vision. In the Mediterranean world there was a general belief that being in the presence of a deity caused a transformation of the self. Pythagoras, for example, declared that "our souls experience a change when we enter a temple and

behold the images of the gods face to face" (Seneca, *Epistle* 94.42).<sup>1</sup> This conviction was widespread. In the non-Jewish world, for example, the vision of the gods changes one's whole person; the vision of deity transforms one's character – it is being born again (*Corpus Hermeticum* 10.6 and 13.3). In the Jewish world, for example, Philo of Alexandria teaches that seeing God yields virtue and nobility of conduct (*On the Embassy to Gaius* 1.5); the Therapeutae (the "physicians of the soul," a community of philosophers whom Philo admires) desire a vision of God, a vision which results in changes for the better in their behavior (*On the Contemplative Life* 2.11); Moses preferred the better food of contemplation, through whose inspiration he grew in grace (*On the Life of Moses* 2.69); and in the mind that has the vision of God, God enables the acquisition of virtue (*On the Preliminary Studies* 56). The model is found also in early Christian sources. Paul says that Christians who behold the face of the Lord are being changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). In 1 John 3:6, we are told that no one who sins habitually has seen God, who has no sin. In these selected examples the model of divine enablement is transformation by vision.

The model came to be used for the effects of association with philosophers and kings. For example, Xenophon says of Socrates that nothing was more useful than being with him and spending time with him in any place or circumstances (*Memorabilia* or *Memoirs of Socrates* 4.1.1); for as long as they were with him, Socrates enabled his disciples to conquer their evil passions (1.2.24-28). Seneca agrees that association with good men is an aid to virtue (*Epistle* 94.40-42). To be with a philosopher and to see him would transform his associates. The same effect was believed to result from seeing a good king. In the Pythagorean Diotegenes's *On Kingship*, fragment two, we hear that as the king has righteousness in himself, he is able to infuse it into the entire state when citizens see him live. To look upon the good king affects the souls of those who see him.

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In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples are with Jesus. They see him live and hear his words. He is depicted as the ideal king and the ideal teacher. He is, moreover, Emmanuel, God with us (1:23). Being with Jesus is to be transformed by that vision that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue. This model is at work in the First Gospel generally. When we come to the Sermon and hear Jesus call the disciples "salt of the earth" and "light of the

world,” the only thing that has come before in the plot of the Gospel is Jesus’ call of disciples in 4:18-22 and their following him and being with him thereafter. Being with Jesus (which equals seeing him) transforms.

### **TRANSFORMATION BY VISION**

What about Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount? How do they fit into the model of a disciple being transformed by vision? In the Sermon, the sayings of Jesus function as verbal icons, windows through which we may see into the unconditioned will of God. Seeing God’s will is seeing God. The vision does more than communicate information. It effects changes in those who see. By enabling a new way of seeing reality, the language changes their perspective, disposition, intention, and motivation. This is what is meant by character formation. The sayings in the Sermon perform this function. They effect change. This is Matthew’s way of understanding God’s enablement of human ethical transformation.

We can illustrate this model with many examples from the Sermon. Let us begin with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12). The first four beatitudes deal with the disciple’s vertical relationship (before God); the last five focus on horizontal relationships (with others)—three with relationships in which disciples have the initiative, followed by two with relationships in which disciples are acted upon. They offer a portrait of disciples and give promises to them. The first eight beatitudes are stated in the third person—“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and so on. They sketch the outlines of a good person, a person of piety toward God and right behavior toward other humans. Such a portrait of the ideal disciple, when held up before the auditors to see, would have a transforming effect. Plutarch tells how: when one is confronted with the vision of a good person it “creates a craving all but to merge his own identity in that of the good person” (*On Advancing in Virtue* 84D). In his *Pericles* 1-2, Plutarch says the vision of the Good implants in those who see it, a great and zealous eagerness to be good. The Good “creates a stir of activity towards itself, and implants at once in the spectator an active impulse” to become what is contemplated. The ninth beatitude shifts to second person—“Blessed are *you*”—thereby drawing listeners into an identification with the portrait given. This is who they are. A new way of seeing themselves occurs with the shift from third to second person. Participation in the dispositions and intentions reflected in the portrait is effected. This really is who we are! Jesus sees us this way. In its portrait of disciples, the poem functions to form the character of the auditors in their vertical and horizontal relationships. The Beatitudes (5:3-12) are not demands to acquire these virtues, but are a verbal portrait of the good into which we are drawn and by which we are transformed by a vision of the Good.

The so-called antitheses (5:21-48) of the Sermon contain six examples of Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures. They begin with “You have heard” and continue with “But I say.” This formula indicates what is happening.

Jesus quotes Scripture, often with a current interpretation either attached or implied, and then gives his own interpretation that embodies God's unconditioned will, the higher righteousness (5:20). For example, 5:21-26 begins with "You have heard... 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" That is, if you murder you will face judgment. Jesus continues, "But I say... if you are angry with a brother or sister... if you insult a brother or sister... if you say, 'You fool,'" you will face judgment. That is, the divine intent in the Law's prohibition against murder is that there be no broken relationships among God's people, either that I cause (5:22) or that I fail to restore when I have been at fault (5:23-24, 25-26). Rather than functioning as a law against anger and insults, the antithesis aims to shape the disciple's character in the direction of a total concern for the health and wholeness of relationships among God's people. The material functions as a verbal icon through which one sees into the divine will. Like the painted icon, the verbal icon provides a window into divine reality, making possible the perception of the spiritual world. In this case, it is the divine will behind the particular command in Scripture. To be enabled to see differently, moreover, is to be transformed. Character includes one's perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and motivations. To see differently is to have our perceptions altered. From that come changes in our dispositions, intentions, and motivations. Like the Beatitudes, the antitheses function to shape character by enabling a new way of seeing God's will.

In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus speaks about giving alms, praying, and fasting. Note that the language is very specific. For example, in verses 2-4 only two possibilities of action are mentioned: sounding a trumpet and not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing; in verses 5-6 only two possibilities are mentioned: standing in synagogues or on street corners and hiding in a closed room; in verses 16-18 only two possibilities are mentioned: disfiguring one's face on the one hand and putting oil on one's head

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and washing one's face on the other. The language is extreme and striking. Sounding a trumpet to announce one's gift, doing one's praying on street corners, and disfiguring one's face to announce one's fasting are hyperbole; they are caricatures revealing a tendency in human nature. In a caricature an inclination is magnified so that we may see it in its most blatant and ridiculous form. This specific and extreme language belongs to a pattern.

The repetition makes the forcefulness of the words increase. This unit is not case law. It is rather a verbal icon that shapes the character of the readers by enabling us to see differently.

Matthew 6:25-34, which begins “do not worry about your life,” is not an ethical text with a horizontal focus. It focuses rather on the vertical dimension, the relation of disciples with God. It functions not to offer concrete counsels on what to do with wealth but to reassure believers about God’s trustworthiness. Moreover, the text does not simply give a command. We do not stop worrying or avoid debilitating anxiety by obeying a command to do so. It takes more than a rule or law to deal with human anxiety. Only divine enablement makes trust in God possible. A change can only take place if we see the world in a fundamentally new and different way. If 6:25-34 is taken as moral exhortation, it sounds in its agricultural context like an obligation to abandon all farming and storage of products and in our context like an obligation to burn all our insurance and retirement policies. Then all sorts of stratagems must be employed to try to make sense of the material. As moral exhortation, 6:25-34 does not make sense. As a catalyst for the formation of the character of disciples in the direction of trust in God’s providential goodness by enabling them to see a different kind of world, it makes very good sense. It is a verbal icon that lets us see into the divine providence behind our world and our lives. With a different perception of reality, dispositions, intentions, and motivations change.

### **HEARING THE SERMON TODAY**

If the Sermon on the Mount functions primarily as a verbal icon that enables us to see into divine reality and by this vision shapes our character (our perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and motivations), does it have anything to do with guiding our behavior? Let us return to 5:21-26. If this antithesis aims not to give a law prohibiting the emotion of anger and insulting acts but to shape the character of a disciple by enabling a new way of seeing the divine intent, what does the material in this paragraph have to do with the formulation of a normative Christian stance about anger? In order for 5:21-26 to function as part of a normative guide for Christian decision making, the pericope on anger must be read in context. There are three contexts that are a required part of this reading: in the context of Matthew as a whole, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, in the context of the biblical plot as a whole.

We begin with the First Gospel as a whole. In doing so, we must consider the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17) which assumes anger on Jesus’ part and 23:17 which has Jesus call the scribes and Pharisees “blind fools.” Since Jesus is regarded as the one who fulfills all righteousness (3:15) and the one with the highest status in the kingdom (28:18), he cannot be judged deficient in these two cases. How do these passages shape how we read 5:21-26?

The second context is the whole of the New Testament. Reading Matthew 5:21-26 in the context of the whole New Testament confronts us with texts such as Mark 1:43 and 3:5 where Jesus is angry (in dismissing with a stern warning the man healed of leprosy and in confronting people who would prevent him from healing on the Sabbath). We must consider the instruction, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27), in which verse 26a echoes Psalm 4:4a, verse 26b explains what 26a means, and verse 27 provides a basis for the action: do not hold onto anger.<sup>2</sup> We are also confronted with Luke 11:40 where Jesus says, “You fools”; Luke 12:20 that has God say, “You fool”; 1 Corinthians 15:36 where Paul calls his opponent “Fool!”; and Galatians 3:1 where the apostle addresses his readers as “O foolish Galatians.”

Finally, reading in the context of the Bible as a whole enables us to see that there are two foci in its reflections on anger. The first focus is on anger for a righteous cause—for instance, God’s anger (Exodus 4:14; Numbers 11:10; 12:9; 22:22; 25:3; Deuteronomy 4:25; 6:15; 7:4; 9:18; 29:20; Joshua 23:16, etc.), Moses’ anger (Exodus 32:19), and Jeremiah’s anger (Jeremiah 6:11) are for righteous causes; and Sirach warns that *unrighteous* anger cannot be justified (1:22). The second focus is that we should refrain from anger that is held onto (that issues in revenge, etc.)—for example, “Refrain from anger and forsake wrath” (Psalm 37:8) and “Anger and wrath, these are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them” (Sirach 27:30).

In no place in the threefold context (of Matthew, the New Testament, and the Bible) is the emotion of anger prohibited in an absolute way. What is prohibited is the holding on to anger and the expression of anger in negative ways. Does this mean that Matthew 5:22 stands alone in prohibiting absolutely the emotion of anger? A close reading of the verse shows that the Greek present participle yields the meaning “everyone who is angry in an ongoing way,” that is, who holds on to his or her anger and expresses it in acts of insult toward a brother or sister. In this case, Matthew 5:22 fits into the larger biblical stream of prohibition against holding on to one’s anger and expressing it in harmful ways towards others. At this point, but not until this point, are we ready to use Matthew 5:21-26 in Christian ethical decision making.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Sermon on the Mount functions not as law to be obeyed either as a means of gaining a relationship to God (legalism) or out of gratitude for what God has already done for us in order to remain in that relationship with God (covenantal nomism). The sayings of Jesus in the Sermon function as verbal icons (windows into God’s world) that enable readers to see into God’s unconditioned will. This vision of the divine transforms our character by enabling us to see reality differently. Once we see reality differently, our

dispositions, intentions, and motivations also change. Our character is thereby being formed. Read in this way, the Sermon fits comfortably within new covenant piety in which God enables the Christian's character formation between entry into discipleship and departure from this world. If we then want to determine how the Sermon affects Christian decision making, it is necessary to read each individual paragraph in three contexts: the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, the New Testament as a whole, and the Old Testament as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 All quotations from ancient Greek and Roman sources come from the Loeb Classical Library.

2 Compare "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32), where "put away anger" means do not hold onto anger (cf. Colossians 3:8 and 1 Timothy 2:8 where the meaning is the same).

3 Appreciation is expressed to the University of South Carolina Press for permission to use material from my book *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

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