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# The Freedom of Obedience

BY BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON

**Are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount for all of us, or just the most religious among us? The Sermon calls us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. In free obedience to the Gentle and Humble One, we become as he is.**

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**H**ow to interpret and apply the Sermon on the Mount is not, for Christians, a scholarly question.<sup>1</sup> It meets us where, and how, we live. When all is said and done, when we have studied and prayed our way through the Sermon, what are we to do? Are its teachings for all of us or some of us? Are we to take it literally and live it as the “letter of Jesus’ law”? Or is it, as Krister Stendahl suggested, something more like “messianic license,” Jesus’ permission to act in ways that will undercut social structures, knowing we must face the consequences of our actions?<sup>2</sup> In short, how do we obey Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon because obedience is not optional.

Curiously, “obedience” and “obey” are not words that we hear on the lips of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), they represent the response of others (for example, the unclean spirits in Mark 1:27 or the winds and sea in Matthew 8:27) to Jesus who is presented as authoritative and thus to be obeyed. Indeed, Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount concludes with the editorial comment that Jesus “taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:29). That comment is a key to Matthew’s Christology, to one of the primary tensions in his Gospel, and to the matter of obedience in the Sermon on the Mount.

## **THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS**

Matthew presents Jesus as the one who has ultimate authority. His is a very Jewish Jesus modeled on the greatest of Hebrew authority figures, Moses, who went up on a mountain to receive the Law. The reader is expected to remember this when, at the outset of the Sermon, Jesus goes up

the mountain, sits down (the posture of an authoritative teacher), and begins to teach, implying more teaching will follow.

The public ministry of Jesus opens as he delivers a new, authoritative interpretation of Torah. Many New Testament scholars note that the Sermon on the Mount seems structured according to a rabbinic proverb: “By three things is the world sustained: by Law, by Temple service, and by deeds of loving kindness.” This first of Jesus’ five discourses in Matthew (5:1-7:29, 10:5-42, 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 24:1-25:46) – which parallel the Pentateuch, Moses’ five books – presents a summary of his teaching on Law (5:17-48), Temple service – a euphemism for piety (6:1-21) – and proper attitudes and behavior (6:24-7:23). As he records events in the life of Jesus, Matthew highlights his authority by demonstrating how he fulfills scripture and prophecy. “This took place to fulfill...,” Matthew notes. Importantly, at the outset of the section on law in the Sermon on the Mount (5:17-48) Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). God’s law is eternal (5:18), but human understanding of it is both temporal and partial.

Matthew presents Jesus’ interpretation of Torah in what scholars call “antitheses.” The literary pattern is “you have heard/but I say” which presumes the authority to correct a previous interpretation. That Jesus is an authoritative teacher is one of Matthew’s fundamental assumptions. (See, for example, 12:1-8 or chapter 23. In an appendix below I list Matthew’s “Jesus as authoritative” passages.) Similarly the beginning of the section on piety (6:1-21) presumes that Jesus has the authority to correct the conduct of religious practices.

Jesus’ authoritative reinterpretations bring him into conflict with the Pharisees. His encounters with them are a primary source of tension in this Gospel. Because we so often see Jesus confronting them, Christians have a tendency to view the Pharisees as the “bad guys,” but in fact, they were positive figures who helped people understand and live (be obedient to) Torah. Jesus knew this, which is why his suggestion that one’s righteousness must exceed “that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20) was so shocking to the original hearers. But according to Matthew even Pharisees, perhaps especially Pharisees, do not have Jesus’ understanding. Sometimes religious scholars and the clergy get it all wrong.

### **OBEYING ‘FROM THE INSIDE OUT’**

If, as Matthew asserts, Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Torah, why doesn’t he explicitly demand obedience? It might be because that tends toward the very legalism the Sermon seeks to dispel. Legalism works from the outside in. Jesus wants people to live from the inside out. At an early stage of development children obey rules because they fear punishment, a primitive motivation to be outgrown. Mature persons live from the inside, from transformed hearts. Christianity is not conformity to externally

imposed rules, but, as the Apostle Paul understood, being “new creatures” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians are to live from their heart center, from the transformation represented by the “Golden Rule,” the principle and summary of the ethical demands of the Sermon.

This move from outside to inside characterizes Jesus’ antitheses that focus on internal motivation. He quotes a commandment – for example, “You shall not murder” (5:21) or “You shall not commit adultery” (5:27) – then highlights the internal attitude from which that action arises (5:22, 28). The antitheses strengthen the law, but, more pointedly, redirect it. As Hans Dieter Betz has written, “The Sermon on the Mount is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be intellectually appropriated and internalized, in order then to be creatively developed and implemented in concrete situations of life.”<sup>3</sup> The Sermon is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be internalized. How? By *hearing*, an idea connected both traditionally and etymologically with obedience, one which the conclusion of the Sermon itself suggests.

Matthew assumes Jesus is authoritative, so Jesus has the right to judge. One characteristic of Matthew’s Gospel is his interest in judgment (see, for example, 10:14-15; 11:22-24; 12:36-42; 13:47-50; 18:34; 21:44; 22:1-14; 23; 25). Thus it is not surprising that the Sermon on the Mount closes with passages which hint at judgment. Take the “interstate,” end up at destruction (7:13-14). Bear bad fruit, be destroyed (7:15-20; cf. 12:33 and 21:43). With regard to the Kingdom of Heaven, don’t assume you’re “in” (7:21-23). These ominous teachings are followed by the summary parable (which children cheerfully sing about, with hand motions, in vacation Bible school) about the wise who build on rock and the foolish who build on sand (7:24-27). Both parts of that parable are introduced

“everyone who *hears* these words of mine” (7:24, 26, italics mine). Those who hear are drawn in, implicated. Once Jesus’ teaching is “heard,” encountered, it sits in judgment on the hearer. Hearing and acting are apparently the point.

Proper hearing is very important, literally foundational (that which is “built

upon”) or grounding, in the Sermon on the Mount. This is consistent with Matthew’s Jesus who commands listening and hearing (11:15; 13:3, 9, 13), blesses ears (13:16-17), interprets the Parable of the Sower in terms of hearing (13:18-23), and commends careful listening to one another (18:15-16). Hearing “refers not only to the physiological act...but also to the wide range of notions describing the understanding of what one has heard,” Betz notes.

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**Those who hear the Sermon on the Mount are drawn in, implicated. Once the teaching of Jesus is “heard,” encountered, it sits in judgment on the hearer. Hearing and acting are apparently the point.**

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“In the Sermon on the Mount ‘hearing’ designates the appropriation of tradition....”<sup>4</sup>

In the tradition of Israel, hearing and obeying were practically the same thing. To hear *was* to obey. In Genesis, Abraham gains blessing because he has obeyed God’s voice (22:18). In many Old Testament passages “obey” and “hear” are used synonymously. For examples of hearing and obeying commandments, see Deuteronomy 4:30; 8:20; 15:5; and 28:1-2. The notion that obeying is responding to God’s voice is also clear in the prophets. In the Book of Jeremiah, for instance, to obey and to incline the ear are synonymous (11:8; cf. 3:10, 13, 25; 7:23-24, 28; 11:7; 38:20; and 42:6, 21). The unspoken question is “How could one *not* obey a God whose voice is audible?” This is the premise behind the dramatic first giving of law on Mount Sinai recorded in Exodus 19. There “the Lord called to [Moses] from the mountain,” commanding “obey my voice and keep my covenant” (19:3, 5).

The connection between hearing and obeying was evident to Matthew not only in the tradition of Israel, but in the etymology of the Greek in which most scholars assume he wrote his Gospel. (Although there is discussion of an Aramaic original of Matthew, evidence for it is far from conclusive.) The Greek verb “to hear” is *akouo* and “to obey” is *hupakouo*, a compound of the preposition, *hupo*, meaning basically “under” and the verb “to hear.” To obey is to “listen under.” When I see forms of the word “obey” in Greek, my mind drifts to a picture in the children’s Sunday school department of my home church in West Virginia in which the disciples were at the feet of the teaching Jesus, “listening under” him. “Listening discipleship” is confirmed by definitions in the classic Greek lexicon by Walter Bauer which notes that *hupakouo* suggests following, becoming subject to something or someone, and fully surrendering to it / him or her.

Matthew depicts Jesus as the authoritative teacher. But, even in the section of the Sermon on law, Matthew’s Jesus does not directly demand obedience. Instead, in concluding the Sermon, he prescribes hearing. Obedience in the Sermon on the Mount boils down to this: *to what do you listen?* or *to whom do you attend?* Because Matthew has so carefully depicted Jesus as the Authoritative One, the Gospel narrative itself says “listen to Jesus.” And so, apparently, did the voice of God in the account of Jesus’ Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8).

Like the Sermon, the Transfiguration is a difficult text to interpret and has received much scholarly commentary. But, for our purposes, note that Matthew places it near the middle of the public ministry of Jesus, on another of Scripture’s revelatory mountains (in Matthew alone see 4:8; 5:1; 15:29; 17:1; 21:1; 24:3; and 28:16). Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah (who represent the law and prophets that Jesus has come definitively to interpret and fulfill) to Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of his disciples. Lest Jesus’ radiant appearance or central place with Moses and Elijah be misunderstood by the never-very-acute disciples, the Voice from the cloud (another allusion

to Sinai in Exodus 19) says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; *listen to him!*" (17:5, italics mine). The point cannot be made more clearly: the Voice of Ultimate Authority commands, "Listen to Jesus." He is the Torah to which disciples are to be obedient.

### **LISTENING TO JESUS HIMSELF**

But what do we hear when we "listen under" or "listen to" Jesus? Although Matthew provides five of Jesus' discourses, it may not be primarily the spoken words of Jesus that he thinks require obedience. The danger of being obedient to words, any words, is the danger of legalism which Jesus addresses in the Sermon (5:17-48) and which concerns him throughout his ministry (see 9:14-17; 12:1-8; 15:1-20; 16:5-6; 19:1-12; and the "woes" in chapter 23). In the Transfiguration story, before the Voice speaks, Jesus himself has said nothing, suggesting that "listen to him" means "listen to his *person*," "listen to Jesus, himself," "listen to the Word-made-flesh." When we listen to the person of Jesus, we hear an unexpected song.

Writers in the Hellenistic world did not have the modern preoccupation with personal psychology. Characters in their narratives do not speak at length about themselves, their feelings and motivations. The "I am's" of Jesus characterize the Gospel of John, but are fundamentally metaphorical statements. One of the very few places in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus speaks of himself is in the context of prayer in Matthew 11:25-30, which has been called both the Johannine Thunderbolt and the Gospel of John in miniature. The text is another interesting one, and the history of its interpretation is fascinating.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that when we listen to the *person* of Jesus in Matthew 11:25-30, what we hear is an invitation to refreshment ("rest" in the NRSV translation of 11:28-29) and a call to gentleness and humility. Many scholars suggest the rest which Jesus offers is to be understood in contrast to the burden of the Pharisees' interpretation of Torah. The Pharisees "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others" (23:4); their yoke is neither easy nor light. Whether 11:28-30 is Matthew's depiction of Jesus as Divine Wisdom (as in Proverbs 1:20ff or 8:1ff) or a Hellenistic "revelation word," whether Matthew echoes Isaiah 49 or 52 or Jeremiah 6:16 or Ecclesiasticus 51, the invitation is to listen and be obedient to Jesus, "gentle and humble." From him one learns what is hidden from "the wise and the intelligent" (the Pharisees?) but revealed to infants (the poor and meek?) (Matthew 11:25; cf. Psalm 37:11).

Of the Synoptic writers, Matthew alone uses the Greek word *praus* for "gentle." It occurs both here in 11:29 and in the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (5:5). It describes the meek, or tame (as an animal), or unassuming. As a human characteristic the Greeks prized it as a mark of culture and wisdom. It was used of Moses. St. Paul, who says very little explicitly about the person of Jesus, refers in 2 Corinthians 10:1 to

his “meekness and gentleness.” In contrast, the word for “humble” in Matthew 11:29 had negative connotations. It was a slave virtue suggesting servility. No Greco-Roman would aspire to be humble, lowly or poor, of reduced circumstances, undistinguished, even insignificant. In 2 Corinthians 7:6 Paul uses the term for the utterly downcast, downhearted whom God consoles. “Gentle and humble” characterize Jesus in the core of his

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being, his “heart,” the center of the person in biblical anthropology, the locus of thought and, interestingly for a discussion of ethics, of volition or will. This is not only a different sort of person; it is a different sort of God, a picture of what Robert Gundry calls “divine gentleness.”<sup>6</sup>

The whole movement of Matthew is toward not only hearing the words of Jesus the authoritative teacher and acting on them, but hearing him, his person, who he is, and responding by becoming like him. To hear Jesus in this way is to offer one’s self to be transfigured. To be obedient to the person of Jesus is to be transformed into what he is: gentle and humble in heart. “It is enough,” Jesus says, “for the disciple to be like the teacher” (10:25).

### **RECEIVING AN ASTONISHING FREEDOM**

Jesus is not antinomian, one who rejects Torah and authority. He said as much in 5:17-19 and reiterates the point in Matthew 23:2-3a: “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it....” In fact, “the torah of Jesus is more radical than that of the Pharisees....”<sup>7</sup> It calls not for conformity to legitimate external rules, which is difficult enough, but for the total transformation of a person “from the inside out.” To be obedient to Jesus is to become as he is, humble and gentle. And who wants *that*? Perhaps the very same people whom Jesus’ Beatitudes (5:3-12) bless: the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for all that will “put them right with God” (righteousness), the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, in short those who are like Jesus as Matthew understands him.

The Sermon on the Mount calls for radical obedience. No wonder “when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching” (Matthew 7:28). The teaching requires that those who hear Jesus be people of a different order. “Countercultural” only scratches the surface of what is intimated.

The assumption is that a fully mature person has emerged whose carefully developed ego is then deconstructed. “Yet before we can surrender

ourselves," writes Thomas Merton, "we must become ourselves. For no one can give up what he does not possess."<sup>8</sup> Christian humility requires a developed and actualized self that can then be freely offered or given.<sup>9</sup> Enforced humility is abuse. Freely chosen humility liberates, and especially liberates for service since one is no longer the focus of his or her own concern.

From chosen self-giving which mirrors Jesus' own life (see Philippians 2:6-11) comes the service that fulfills the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount. There is enormous relief in being off the center stage of first person singular. An astonishing freedom is offered to those who seek to "hear Jesus" in this way. But for most of us the process involves crucifixion.

The chapter on Matthew's Gospel in Norman Perrin's *The New Testament: An Introduction* is subtitled "Christianity as Obedience to the New Revelation."<sup>10</sup> Exactly so. Obedience is not optional precisely because Matthew's Gospel and Jesus' Sermon call us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. Writing on Matthew 11:25-30 Eduard Schweizer noted that our real problem is the distance of the invisible God to which Jesus brings the solution.<sup>11</sup> Finally, then, the Sermon on the Mount offers us the freedom of obedience to the Gentle and Humble One who invites us to himself, indeed, to be as he is. Obedience is not optional because Jesus is not.

## **APPENDIX: MATTHEW DEPICTS THE AUTHORITATIVE JESUS**

- 4:3      The tempter assumes Jesus' authority to change stones to bread
- 4:18-22 Jesus calls men and they follow (cf. 9:9)
- 5:1      Jesus sits down to teach
- 5:21ff. Jesus assumes authority to reinterpret the Law
- 6:1ff.   Jesus assumes authority to teach correct religious practice
- 7:21ff. Assumes connection between Jesus and entry into Kingdom of Heaven
- 8:1      Crowds follow Jesus
- 8:27     Winds and sea obey Jesus
- 9:6      Jesus says the Son of Man has authority to forgive sin
- 9:8      Crowd recognizes authority given to Jesus
- 10:1     Jesus bestows authority on others
- 11:4-5   Jesus is associated with the messianic age of Isaiah 35:4-6; 61:1 (cf. Matthew 15:31 and 21:14)
- 11:27    All things given to the Son by the Father
- 12:8     The Son of Man is the lord of the Sabbath
- 12:16    Jesus assumes authority to order others (cf. 17:9)
- 15:1ff.  Jesus reinterprets the Law
- 16:6-12 Jesus warns against false interpretation of the Law
- 19:3ff.  Jesus' ability to interpret the Law is tested by Pharisees
- 21:6     Disciples are obedient to Jesus' orders

- 21:13 Jesus intimates the Temple is his house  
21:23 “By what authority...?” is the crucial question for the Passion narrative  
22:15-46 Jesus exhibits authority over Pharisees and Sadducees in the Temple  
23:1-3 Question of true authority

## NOTES

1 Two accessible summaries of approaches to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount are Amos N. Wilder, “The Sermon on the Mount” (especially Part II, “Interpretation and Relevance”) in *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951) 7:155-164; and Harvey K. McArthur, “The Sermon and Ethics,” in *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

2 Krister Stendahl, “Messianic License,” in Paul Peachey, ed., *Biblical Realism Confronts the Nation* (Scottsdale, PA: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1963), 139-152.

3 Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 15-16.

4 Betz, *Essays*, 4.

5 A summary of classic interpretations of the text occurs in Hans Dieter Betz, “The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt. 11:28-30),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86:1 (March 1967), 10-24. Although of the New Testament evangelists only Matthew records these words of Jesus, forms of them are found in other early Christian documents—for example: “Jesus said, ‘Come to me, for my yoke is comfortable and my lordship is gentle, and you will find rest for yourselves’” (*Gospel of Thomas* 90); and “I have said to you aforetime: ‘All ye who are heavy under your burden, come hither unto me, and I will quicken you. For my burden is easy and my yoke is soft’” (95<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Pistis Sophia*).

6 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 215.

7 Betz, “The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt. 11:28-30),” 23.

8 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1958), 29.

9 For more on this idea see chapter 4, “The Kingdom Calls for Humility,” in Bonnie Thurston, *Religious Vows, the Sermon on the Mount, and Christian Living* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

10 Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974).

11 Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 270.



### **BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON**

*was formerly the William F. Orr Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She now lives in Wheeling, West Virginia, and gives retreats and spiritual direction.*