



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Grace in the Sermon on the Mount
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 11-18)

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

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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God's Enabling Grace

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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

Meditation[†]

Many in our culture (Christians and non-Christians) think of the Sermon on the Mount as high ideals or hard teachings. They admire it from a distance.... [Yet] the Christian life is not just hard human effort to live up to high ideals; nor is it just a bunch of duties. It is about God's grace. It is about living in the presence of God. It is the invitation of Jesus to participate in the new things God is doing all the time.

Glenn H. Stassen

Reflection

Why does the Sermon on the Mount seem like *bad news* to many people today? Why don't we respond with delighted enthusiasm like the "astounded" listeners who followed Jesus "down from the mountain" in Galilee, believing his teaching was authoritative and liberating good news for their lives (Matthew 7:28ff.)? Our dour reaction, Charles Talbert suggests, comes from misinterpreting the Sermon as a list of divine rules to obey in order to *gain* God's love (this is the approach of *legalism*) or as demands we must follow out of gratitude if we are to *remain* in relation with God (this is *covenantal nomism*). Either way, we distort Jesus' teaching into very bad news indeed – into an unnerving call to scale moral peaks that are too high for anyone to climb.

Instead we should read the Sermon (and all of Matthew's Gospel) from the perspective of *new covenant piety* – the view that "God graciously enters into a relation with humans [and]...gives guidance about what pleases and displeases him," Talbert says. "When humans follow that guidance, it is because God graciously enables their obedience." Yes, the Sermon depicts a high ideal of discipleship, but it also promises that *God will empower us to follow it faithfully*. So why do we overlook this last part?

We easily read Paul's and John's writings from the perspective of new covenant piety because they describe God's enabling grace in terms of *spiritual indwelling*. Since "the Spirit of God dwells in you...[and] the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you" (Romans 8:9-11), Paul can urge disciples to "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" (Philippians 2:12b-13). In a familiar Johannine text Jesus speaks of mutual indwelling: "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



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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nothing.... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:4-5).

The First Gospel, however, does not use the language of spiritual indwelling. It expresses new covenant piety in another way: the divine transformation that enables faithful discipleship comes through a *vision of the deity*. Human hearts become tuned to follow Jesus when they are in his divine presence. "Being with Jesus is to be transformed by that vision that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue," says Talbert.

Matthew wants readers to see Jesus and be transformed. "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."

Study Questions

1. Discuss the differences among *legalism*, *covenantal nomism*, and *new covenant piety* – three views of the relation between God's grace and human moral action. How would each view shape the way one hears the Sermon on the Mount?
2. Describe the transformation by vision model of God's enabling grace. How do Paul and John (e.g., in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 John 3:6) occasionally use this model?
3. How does Matthew deploy the transformation by vision model his description of Jesus' ministry (4:12-22) before the Sermon on the Mount?
4. What does Charles Talbert mean by "a verbal icon"? Review a major section of the Sermon – e.g., the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), the so-called antitheses (5:21-48), the teachings about giving alms, praying, and fasting (6:1-18), or the teachings on trust in God (6:25-34) – and discuss how it might function as a verbal icon.

Departing Hymn: "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus" (vv. 1a, 2d, 3)

Sitting at the feet of Jesus,
oh, what words we hear him say!
While we from his fullness gather
grace and comfort every day.

*May we have the mind of Jesus
and be holy as he is;
may we prove we've been with Jesus,
who is all our righteousness.*

Bless us, O our Savior, bless us,
as we sit low at your feet.
Oh, look down in love upon us;
let us see your face so sweet.

Refrain

J. H. (19th Century), alt.

Suggested Tunes: HERE IS LOVE or PLEADING SAVIOR

† Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 16.

God's Enabling Grace

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 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish among legalism, covenantal nomism, and new covenant piety – three views of the relation between God and human beings.
2. To understand the concept of a verbal icon.
3. To hear the good news in the Sermon on the Mount (and the Gospel of Matthew generally) from the perspective of new covenant piety.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sermon on the Mount (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus" locate one of the familiar tunes *HERE IS LOVE* or *PLEADING SAVIOR* in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

"The more morally earnest among us may hear [in the Sermon on the Mount]...a judgmental tone as the imperatives come at us like one-two punches to the gut," writes Richard Ward. "The Sermon's high-minded moral code seems out of reach – way up on the pantry shelf that is nearest to heaven. This verse certainly does not help: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). The whole listening project may shut down right there. A high school friend of mine was an earnest young man, but his adolescent faith rested on a literal interpretation of the Bible. When he came to this verse, bereft of the benefit of critical studies, he threw up his hands and walked away from the Christian faith altogether!" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 31-32).

Let's be honest. What do we hear in the Sermon on the Mount – impossible moral demands or an invitation to live in a new way in God's kingdom through God's enabling grace?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to tune our ears to hear and our hearts to sing God's grace.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 6:25-34 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Let this discussion set the stage for your study of the Sermon on the Mount by clearing away a common misconception about the Sermon (and the First Gospel generally). Too often we misinterpret Jesus as teaching an impossible ideal of discipleship: Jesus lays out a strict and difficult moral agenda in the Sermon and expects individual disciples to accomplish it by themselves. There is no mention of God's enabling grace in our lives or of

the community of discipleship. Once we've misread the Sermon this way, we then ignore it—because either Jesus' teachings are too extreme for anyone to follow, or they are only directed to the moral saints among us.

The key to Charles Talbert's very different strategy for interpreting the Sermon, which highlights its win-some good news and call to all disciples, is this: a *vision* of God's perfect will in Jesus Christ transforms us and empowers us to be like Jesus. Matthew deploys this ancient way of depicting God's enabling grace throughout the Gospel and especially in the Sermon. Indeed, the passages of the Sermon function as "verbal icons" through which we glimpse God's kingdom.

Study Questions

1. *Legalism, covenantal nomism, and new covenant piety* are three very different ways of thinking about how God relates to human beings. *Legalism* holds that God will have a relationship with us after we obey God's law; we must earn the relationship by our own moral goodness. From this perspective, the Sermon looks like a list of rules that we must follow in order to earn God's favor. (There is great irony in reading the Sermon on the Mount this way, because Jesus clearly critiques the legalist view throughout the Sermon.) *Covenantal nomism* is the view that God has graciously established a covenant relationship with human beings and given the law to disclose what pleases and displeases God. We should express our gratitude for the covenant by obeying God's law through our own efforts. From this perspective, the Sermon looks like God's demands that we must, out of gratitude, follow if we are to remain within the relation with God. *New covenant piety* says that God's gracious covenant is sustained by God working through our hearts, minds, and wills: when we follow God's guidance through the law, it is because God graciously enables our obedience. From this perspective the Sermon not only offers guidance, it also is an instrument through which God works in our lives to enable our faithful discipleship.
2. "In the Mediterranean world there was a general belief that being in the presence of a deity caused a transformation of the self," notes Talbert. He gives examples from Greek and Roman philosophies, the Jewish writings of the first century, and the New Testament.

Assign small groups to review 1 Corinthians 3:1-18 and 1 John 3:2-6. Paul uses the transformation by vision model to explain how God is changing our hearts and minds so that we may be "competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The "ministry of the Spirit" that enables this transformation works like this: God comes to us in Christ, "and all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another..." (3:18). The First Epistle of John deploys the model to explain how as "God's children now" we continue to grow in likeness to Jesus' purity: "we will be like him [Jesus], for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2); on the other hand, "no one who sins has either seen him or known him" (3:6).

3. Assign small groups to review Matthew 4:12-17 and 18-22. Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 to introduce Jesus' ministry: his presence and preaching will be for the people like *seeing* "a great light" that beckons them from their darkness. Two pairs of brothers (Simon and Andrew, James and John) meet Jesus and immediately leave their fishing businesses to follow him. "Jesus is depicted as the ideal king and the ideal teacher. He is, moreover, Emmanuel, God with us (1:23)," Talbert writes. "When we come to the Sermon on the Mount 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."
4. "Verbal icons" are passages that function as "windows through which we may see into the unconditioned will of God. Seeing God's will is seeing God." Invite small groups to summarize in a sentence or two what they see of God's will in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), antitheses (5:21-48), teachings about giving alms, praying, and fasting (6:1-18), and teachings on trust in God (6:25-34). Talbert briefly discusses each of these passages in his article.

Departing Hymn

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