



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Freedom of Obedience  
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 19-26)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Teaching Through Images  
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 48-50)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Freedom of Obedience

Are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount for all of us, or just the most religious? The Sermon calls us to be obedient to God's new revelation, Jesus himself, the now-risen Christ. It offers us the freedom of obedience to the Gentle and Humble One who invites us to himself, indeed, to be as he is.

## Prayer

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:17-19; 7:24-8:4**

**Responsive Reading (based on Matthew 11:28-30)**

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,

**and I will give you rest.**

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;

**for I am gentle and humble in heart,**

**and you will find rest for your souls.**

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

## Reflection

"How to interpret and apply the Sermon on the Mount is not, for Christians, a scholarly question.... When all is said and done, when we have studied and prayed our way through the Sermon, what are we to do?" asks Bonnie Thurston. "How do we obey Jesus' teaching in the Sermon because obedience is not optional."

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of Torah, the God-revealed way of life, salvation, and wholeness. Yet in the Sermon Jesus does not directly demand obedience. Why not? Perhaps such language would veer "toward the very legalism the Sermon seeks to dispel," Thurston suggests. "Legalism works from the outside in. Jesus wants people to live from the inside out.... Christianity is not conformity to externally imposed rules, but, as the Apostle Paul understood, being 'new creatures' (2 Corinthians 5:17)." We are to live and act out of transformed hearts.

Rather, Jesus warns us to *hear* his teaching (Matthew 7:24, 26). A tight connection between hearing and obeying runs throughout Israel's tradition. It's also clear in the Greek language, where "to obey" (*hupakouo*) comes from the two words—"to hear" (*akouo*) and "under" (*hupo*). To obey, then, is literally to "listen under." "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,'" says Thurston. "He is the Torah to which disciples are to be obedient." When we listen to the *person* of Jesus, we hear an unexpected song:

- ▶ *an invitation to rest and refreshment.* Jesus sets the requirement very high when he asks disciples to exceed the righteousness "of the scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20), who helped people understand and live by God's Law. Yet he promises that his 'inside out' discipleship will be an "easy yoke" and a "light burden" to bear (11:30), unlike the "heavy burdens, hard to bear" that the scribes and Pharisees "lay...on the shoulders of others" (23:4).



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- ▶ *a call to become like Jesus*. He is *gentle* (a trait prized by Greeks as a mark of culture and wisdom) and *humble* (a slave virtue suggesting servility) (Matthew 11:29). “The whole movement of Matthew’s Gospel 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,” writes Thurston. “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).”
- ▶ *an astonishing note of freedom*. “Christian humility requires a developed and actualized self that can then be freely offered or given. 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,” Thurston notes. “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.”

### Study Questions

1. Bonnie Thurston says Jesus calls us to obey “from the inside out.” What does she mean? How is this different from legalism, which is obeying God in order to win God’s favor?
2. How were hearing and doing (or obeying) closely related in the tradition of Israel?
3. Discuss how Jesus is portrayed in the Sermon and throughout the First Gospel as authoritative and thus to be obeyed.
4. How does Rosselli depict the hearers in *The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Leper*? How does he portray the story of authoritative healing that frames the Sermon?

### Departing Hymn: “Father Make Us Loving”

Father, make us loving, gentle, thoughtful, kind;  
fill us with your Spirit, make us of your mind.  
Help us love each other, more and more each day;  
help us follow Jesus, in the narrow way.

*We would learn of Jesus: help us here below  
follow in his footsteps, who has loved us so.*

Father, we would ever live as in your sight;  
you have known our longings after what is right.  
Fill our hearts with kindness as we onward go;  
teach us to be loving, you have loved us so.

*Refrain*

Help us to remember you are ever near;  
teach us lovingkindness, tenderness, and cheer.  
There is much of sorrow in this world below;  
Father, make us loving, you have loved us so.

*Refrain*

*Flora Kirkland (1901), alt.*

*Tune: FATHER MAKE US LOVING*

# The Freedom of Obedience

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 5:17-19; 7:24-28	Matthew 7:28-8:4
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading		Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss how Matthew shows Jesus is authoritative, to be obeyed	Distinguish obedience (listening to the person of Jesus) from legalism
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 2 and 3	Questions 1 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand how Jesus calls us to radical obedience in the Sermon on the Mount.
2. To consider how obedience is related to freedom in discipleship.
3. To contrast what Bonnie Thurston calls “obedience from the inside out” with legalism.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Father Make Us Loving” locate the familiar tune FATHER MAKE US LOVING in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

We are not prone to value authority today. Thus, Bonnie Thurston admits that obedience “may be the most difficult of the Gospel values to understand and appreciate, both because we bring so much baggage to it and because it has been so massively misunderstood and misapplied.”

It certainly does not seem like the path to freedom, because “women have been forced to be obedient to patriarchal structures. Men have been brutalized in the name of institutions and nation states. Obedience has been used to secure a mindless conformity in society and within the Church.... Sometimes this misuse of obedience was well intentioned and sometimes not, but the results are the same: wounded human beings who are less than what God made them to be, less than able to be the salt and light Christ expects them to be” (*Religious Vows, The Sermon on the Mount, and Christian Living*, p. 65).

To what sort of obedience does the Sermon on the Mount call us? And how could it be, as Thurston’s paradoxical title suggests, the path to freedom?

## 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 give the group discernment as you prayerfully examine the role of obedience in Christian discipleship.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:17-19; 7:24-8:4 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

This discussion begins with the concluding parable of the Sermon on the Mount—the ominous warning about the wise who build on rock and the foolish who build on sand (which, as Bonnie Thurston wryly notes, we

teach “children [to] cheerfully sing about, with hand motions, in vacation Bible school”). On the one hand, Thurston guides us to understand this passage—within the wider contexts of Matthew’s Gospel and the tradition of Israel—as a call to radical obedience to Jesus, who is the authoritative interpreter of Torah, or God’s instructions for life. On the other, she wisely responds to our aversion to obedience in discipleship—by clarifying obedience “from the inside out” as listening to the *person* of Jesus.

In a single study session, you might focus on just one of these topics. If you extend this discussion to two sessions, you can treat the topics separately and in more depth.

### **Study Questions**

1. Obeying “from the inside out” refers to following Jesus’ teachings from the desire of one’s heart. Thurston contrasts this to legalism, which “works from the outside in.... 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.”

She calls this “listening to the *person* of Jesus.” As God draws us to become more like Jesus in gentleness and humility, we learn to love ourselves, other people, and the world as Jesus does. His teachings are no longer (or are less) in conflict with our heart and will.

2. “The unspoken question [in Israel’s tradition] is ‘How could one *not* obey a God whose voice is audible?’” Thurston writes. “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).” Similarly, in the book of Deuteronomy keeping God’s commandments, ordinances, and statutes (8:11) is equivalent to obeying “the voice of the Lord” (8:20).

The identification of hearing God’s voice and doing (or obeying) God’s will is especially clear in the prophetic tradition. Invite small groups to study the language in Jeremiah 7:23-28 and 11:7-8. When Jeremiah calms King Zedekiah’s fears by saying, “Just obey the voice of the LORD in what I say to you, and it shall go well with you, and your life shall be spared” (38:20), he implies that God can speak to us in an authoritative way through prophets.

3. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew models Jesus 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.” Matthew records five major discourses (5:1-7:29, 10:5-42, 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 24:1-25:46) which parallel the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. Within the Sermon, the so-called “antitheses” (5:21-48) highlight Jesus’ authoritative interpretation of Scripture.

In an appendix to her article, Thurston lists passages in Matthew that depict the authoritative Jesus through his power over the created order, forgiveness of sins, and teachings about God’s law, as well as through the response of others (crowds who follow him and demons who fear him). Ask individuals to read these passages and report on their findings.

4. In the “Sermon” part of the composition, the apostles stand in rapt attention behind Jesus. Among the crowd in the foreground, “most of the figures are captivated by Christ’s words, but two prominent figures in the foreground (one of whom has his back to Christ) are in a conversation of their own.” Not everyone is “hearing” Jesus! The crowd spans the centuries, with some members dressed in garb from the artist’s fifteenth century. In the “healing” part of the composition, the twelve apostles follow and observe Jesus closely. They have learned to listen to the *person* of Jesus through his actions as well as his teachings.

### **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.