



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

📖 The World Is Thus
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 77-83)

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

© 2008 The Center for Christian Ethics

Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount in Context

For the verbal icons in the Sermon on the Mount to mold our character and guide our decisions, they must be interpreted in three contexts: in the Gospel of Matthew, the New Testament, and the biblical plot as a whole.

Prayer

Responsive Reading: Matthew 5:21-26

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

"Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Meditation¹

Dorotheos of Gaza (6th century) recommended this prayer when we are angry with a brother or sister: "O Merciful God and lover of souls who created us out of nothing to communicate your own goodness to us and, when we fled away from your commandments, called us back through the bloody sacrifice of your Son, our Savior, come now to the help of our weakness, and as you once calmed the waves of the sea, so now put an end to the rage in our hearts. Do not at one time do away with two of your sons, condemned to death by sin, and do not say, 'What use is there in my blood, in my going down to death?' or, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you,' because our lamps are gone out for want of oil."

Reflection

Jesus' teachings in the Sermon may seem harsh, one-sided, and paradoxical. Charles Talbert suggests we interpret them as "verbal icons" in which we glimpse the divine intent for our lives so that this vision shapes our moral character—our dispositions, motivations, and ways of seeing the world. Consider, for instance, Jesus' instruction on anger (Matthew 5:21-26): it does not absolutely prohibit us from feeling angry or give us rules to follow on every occasion of offense. Instead it offers a vision of Jesus' character, which is "gentle and humble in heart" (11:29).

Let's continue with this example. How can this verbal icon shape our character and guide our behavior in concrete ways? Talbert recommends that we interpret Jesus' words in light of a threefold biblical context:



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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*.

© 2008 The Center for Christian Ethics

- ▶ *the Gospel of Matthew*, where Jesus is angry as he cleanses the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17) and calls the scribes and Pharisees “blind fools” (23:17). “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),” Talbert notes, “he cannot be judged deficient in these two cases.”
- ▶ *the New Testament*, where Jesus is angry in dismissing the man healed of leprosy (Mark 1:43) and confronting people who stop him from healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5). In Luke 11:40, Jesus says “You fools”; Luke 12:20 has God say, “You fool”; and in 1 Corinthians 15:36 and Galatians 3:1 Paul calls his opponents foolish. Once again, these passages suggest a role for anger. A clarifying teaching is found in Ephesians 4:26-27, which says we should not hold onto our anger.
- ▶ *the biblical plot as a whole*, which has two emphases in its teachings on anger. Sometimes anger is for a righteous cause—as in these cases of 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). Second, we should not hold onto our anger (e.g., Psalm 37:8 and 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,” Talbert concludes. “What is prohibited is the holding on to anger and the expression of anger in negative ways.” Matthew 5:22 refers (in Greek) to “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.”

Study Questions

1. Describe in a few sentences the glimpse into God’s Kingdom that you see in Matthew 5:21-26, this “verbal icon” which is Jesus’ teaching on anger.
2. Under what circumstances are angry feelings (and actions) proper and righteous? When are they wrong and dangerous?
3. Discuss Glen Stassen’s suggestion that Jesus’ teaching on anger “is like a doctor’s diagnosis of a tumor that will lead to death if it is not removed.” Everyone gets angry from time to time. “We know that stewing in it, continuing to live in anger, is a mechanism of temptation that leads to alienation from God and neighbor, to a desire to insult and dominate or even be violent, and therefore to destruction and judgment.”² What practical guidance does Jesus give for breaking the cycle of anger and retaliation?
4. In the meditation above, how does Dorotheos of Gaza frame Jesus’ teaching on anger in the context of the biblical story?

Departing Hymn: “From Galilee He Preaches Still”

1 Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses & Sayings*, translated by Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 238.

2 Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 66.

Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount in Context

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' teaching on anger in the Sermon as a "verbal icon."
2. To exemplify how Jesus' teachings in the Sermon should be interpreted in the threefold context of the book of Matthew, the New Testament, and the biblical story as a whole.
3. To discuss Jesus' practical guidance for breaking the cycle of anger and retaliation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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.

Begin with Ancient Reflections

Dealing with irritation without becoming angry was a major concern for the fourth-century Christians who moved to the desert. They were trying to obey the Sermon more perfectly and escape from the alluring distortions of their Empire and Church. Yet when these Christians (isolated from cities and towns) became acutely dependent on one another, they soon discovered "the company of one's fellows was the hardest trial of all to endure," Peter Brown has noted.

No wonder, then, they believed that nurturing angry thoughts (not to mention acting out of them) was dangerous to their fellowship. Abba Poemen taught, "Anyone who gives evil for evil is not a monk. An irritable man is not a monk" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 10:53), and Abba Agatho said, "If an angry man were to raise the dead, God would still be displeased with his anger" (*Sayings*, 10.13). Yet they were loath to ban all anger. Commenting on Matthew 5:22, Poemen said, "If you are angry with your brother for any kind of trouble that he gives you, that is anger without a cause, and it is better to pluck out your right eye and cast it from you. But if anyone wants to separate you from God, then you must be angry with him" (*Sayings*, 10.47).

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 help members see their own frustration and anger in the context of God's patience and grace.

Responsive Reading

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

Meditation

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

Reflection

This study continues our reflection on Charles Talbert's article, "Grace in the Sermon on the Mount." In an earlier study guide, "God's Enabling Grace," we examined Talbert's suggestion that Jesus' teachings in the Sermon function as "verbal icons" through which we glimpse God's perfect will and God's kingdom. This

vision in turn shapes our character and enables us to live a moral life in accordance with God's will. This study discusses a follow-up question: how can these verbal icons shape our character and guide our behavior in concrete ways?

Jesus' teachings in the Sermon can seem too extreme, if not impossible, when we interpret them literally. Using Jesus' instruction on anger, Talbert illustrates how to interpret Jesus' teachings more carefully in the threefold literary context of Matthew's Gospel, the New Testament, and the biblical story as a whole. To explore this form of literary interpretation for other parts of the Sermon, see Talbert's *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, Glen H. Stassen's *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, and Dale Allison's *The Sermon on the Mount*. Gregory Clark reviews these three books in "The World Is Thus" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 77-83).

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to reflect for a few minutes on each part of Matthew 5:21-26 before they answer. Perhaps they see a Kingdom in which people still have disputes, suffer personal slights, and experience frustration with one another, but they govern their anger and seek reconciliation with an offender. Despite their disagreements, they respect one another and do not denigrate anyone to take revenge or gain a personal advantage. They deal with disputes directly. They understand that their relationships with one another (even with those who offend them) are bound together intimately with their relationship to God.
2. Distinguish the thoughts and perceptions that constitute our anger from the bodily responses—a flushed face, adrenaline rush, tense muscles, etc.—that accompany it. We become angry when we believe someone intentionally has wronged us in a significant way; our body reacts with tension and heightened sensitivities to threat. We can evaluate both of these. The thoughts and perceptions that constitute our anger may be accurate, fair and unbiased, based on the relevant information, etc. Anger is proper when we are angry for good reason, at the right time, toward the right persons, and in the right amount. God's wrath and some instances of human anger (e.g., the angry responses of Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul in the scripture passages) are righteous. We evaluate the bodily disturbance that follows from anger according to whether it galvanizes us to persevere in responding to wrongdoing or distorts our judgment and carries us toward unjust actions and thoughts.

Scripture consistently warns against holding on to anger. Encourage members to discuss how harboring anger changes the way we perceive ourselves, others, and God.

3. Jesus probes deeply to reveal a disease—the harboring of anger toward an offender—that leads ultimately, in extreme cases, to murder. More common symptoms of this disease are denigrating and insulting the offender, dismissing the person from the community, and acting as though the person is irrelevant to God.

Jesus teaches us to see offenders as brothers and sisters before God, seek reconciliation with them, and deal directly with them (rather than insulting them or acting as though they are worthless). We should read this passage in the context of Matthew 18—the movement toward reconciliation is a communal, rather than individual responsibility. Arthur Boers develops this point in "Living the Beatitudes Today" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 84-89) when he discusses the reconciliation that an Amish community sought with the murderer's family after the elementary-school shooting in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

4. Dorotheos desires to be reconciled with the offender. He takes a first step toward reconciliation (through this act of prayer) by changing his attitude toward the offender. This desire and practical action reflect his transformation to be "gentle and humble in heart" like Jesus. Dorotheos locates the offense and his response in the biblical story of God's purposes in creation, redemption, and enabling spiritual presence. Appealing to two stories in Matthew's Gospel, he sees Jesus' calming of the sea (Matthew 8:23-27; cf. Mark 4:35-41) as an archetype of God's spirit calming our angry thoughts, and the bridegroom's judgment of the five maids' unfaithfulness (Matthew 25:1-13) as a warning against our careless refusal to seek reconciliation with an offender. To forgive others is to welcome (and to become more like) Jesus. In the Greek language, "Dorotheos" means either "God's gift" or "a gift to God."

Departing Hymn

"From Galilee He Preaches Still" is on pp. 35-37 of *The Sermon on the Mount*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.