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Theological Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount

The Early Church

In the early church, the Sermon on the Mount was used apologetically to combat Marcionism and, polemically, to promote the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The notion of Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17) seemed to split the difference between two extremes that the church wanted to avoid: an utter rejection of the Jewish matrix for Christianity, on the one hand, and a wholesale embrace of what was regarded as Jewish legalism, on the other hand. In a similar vein, orthodox interpretation of the sermon served to refute teachings of the Manichaeans, who used the sermon to support ideas the church would deem heretical.

In all of these venues, however, the sermon was consistently read as an ethical document: Augustine and others assumed that its teaching was applicable to all Christians and that it provided believers with normative expectations for Christian behavior. It was not until the medieval period and, especially, the time of the Protestant Reformation that reading the sermon in this manner came to be regarded as problematic.

Theological Difficulties

The primary difficulties that arise from considering the Sermon on the Mount as a compendium of Christian ethics are twofold. The first and foremost is found in the relentlessly challenging character of the sermon's demands. Its commandments have struck many interpreters as impractical or, indeed, impossible, particularly in light of what the New Testament says elsewhere about human weakness and the inevitability of sin (including Matt. 26:41b). The second and related problem is that obedience to these demands appears to be closely linked to the attainment of eschatological salvation (Matt. 5:20, 22, 29–30; 6:15; 7:2, 14, 19, 21–23); thus the sermon appears to present a theology of “works righteousness” that conflicts with the Christian doctrine of grace. The history of interpretation from the Middle Ages to the present reveals multiple attempts at dealing with these concerns.

Does the Sermon Present an Impossible Ethic?

Thomas Aquinas was one of the first to call attention to these difficulties and also to attempt a resolution. Aquinas suggested that the ethic of the sermon includes not only mandates for all Christians but also optional counsels for those who would strive for perfection (such as clergy and others who pursue religious vocations). Though influential in Roman Catholic thought, this view has been largely rejected by Protestants; it has been critiqued in Catholic circles as well. Protestant polemic has tended to exaggerate Aquinas's view, such that it is often said that the “Catholic interpretation” of the

Sermon on the Mount does not view its demands as applicable to the ordinary Christian. In actual fact, the two-level principle of interpretation has been applied selectively and sparingly in Catholic interpretation, usually with limited reference to individual passages (e.g., those that would be interpreted as commending absolute poverty or chastity).

Martin Luther stressed a distinction between enactment of the sermon's demands in personal and religious life as opposed to application within the social, secular sphere. Thus a Christian might practice nonretaliation in personal relationships, but if he or she is a soldier or law officer, the active resistance to evil that is dictated by common sense must be allowed to prevail. Some consideration of the distinction between personal and social ethics became standard for most interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount from the Protestant Reformation to the present day.

Numerous critics, however, have noted problems with this approach: such a distinction can negate the sermon's ability to address individuals who excuse unethical behavior as a necessity of political life or, indeed, impede its effectiveness at challenging social systems designed to promote values at variance with those that the sermon encourages. Exegetical interpreters question whether Matthew intended to present Jesus's teaching as personal ethics rather than as the ethic of the community (cf. Matt. 18:15–18, which emphasizes personal subscription to a community ethic); theologians also

question on philosophical grounds whether any individual action is ever without social consequence.

John Calvin sought to resolve the issue of the sermon's impractical demands by an appeal to canon. In keeping with a hermeneutical method that he called *analogia fidei*, Calvin insisted that many dictates that seem absolute within the sermon itself may be recognized as situational or relative when considered within the broad context of Scripture. Thus the Sermon on the Mount appears to prohibit all oaths (Matt. 5:34), but this is mitigated by Hebrews 6:16 and by Paul's habit of calling on God as witness to ensure the truth of what he says (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:4). Calvin's general principle of "interpreting scripture in light of scripture" has been widely adopted in most confessional traditions, but again, many interpreters find its application problematic when it serves to dismiss the relevance of what the Matthean author (if not the historical Jesus) considered to be imperative concerns.

Radical Anabaptists rejected all attempts to domesticate the sermon's demands and insisted on literal obedience, even if that meant nonparticipation in a world that compromises Christ's ethic: a Christian cannot be a soldier (because of Matt. 5:39) or a judge (because of Matt. 7:1) or any official required to swear oaths of office (because of Matt. 5:34). This view always remained a minority position, but it has had prominent advocates such as Leo Tolstoy,

the Russian novelist, and Leonhard Ragaz, the father of Christian socialism. In the late nineteenth century, Tolstoy summarized the sermon's demands in a popular fashion as consisting of five key rules: be not angry, commit no adultery, swear not, go not to law, war not.

Ulrich Zwingli proposed a distinction between external and internal realms of application and emphasized that the sermon's main purpose was to form the "inner person." This idea did not attract significant support in the sixteenth century, but it was revived with considerable success three centuries later within the nineteenth-century movement called "Protestant liberalism." Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Herrmann, and others spoke of the kingdom of God as a present and inner reality, and so they read the Sermon on the Mount as more concerned with inculcating a certain disposition within believers than with prescribing literal behavior. Indeed, literal application of the sermon's demands is impossible and undesirable, but when read as a nonlegalistic "ethic of disposition" (to use Herrmann's term), the sermon bore witness to the transformed mental and spiritual orientation that marks people of godly character. This understanding was critiqued by Johannes Weiss as losing contact with the apocalyptic perspective of Jesus. Still, it influenced Rudolf Bultmann and other existentialist critics and continues to be expressed in modified or chastened terms to the present day.

Albert Schweitzer followed Weiss's lead and came to question the relevance of the sermon altogether. Schweitzer maintained that the radical demands of the sermon were supposed to have represented an "interim ethic": the sermon presupposes an imminent expectation of the end times and becomes impractical in contexts that have lost that sense of urgency. Martin Dibelius also couched the problem of interpretation in these terms and yet thought that the sermon could continue to provide some sort of eschatological stimulus for Christian ethics: even those whose vision of the future is not apocalyptic may be affected by knowledge of what a complete transformation of the world in accord with God's righteousness would bring.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the notion that the Sermon on the Mount was predicated in its entirety on imminent eschatology was questioned and all but discarded by theologians who considered the attribution of an exclusively future outlook to Jesus unsustainable. Rather, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as both still to come (perhaps, but not necessarily in the near future) and as already present (in mysterious but readily identifiable ways). This modified understanding of Jesus's eschatology yielded a stance toward the sermon's ethic that continues to draw significant support among modern interpreters: the sermon presents the ethic of God's kingdom, and Christians seek God's kingdom (and its righteousness) by striving to live in compliance with the sermon's demands (6:33). To the extent that the kingdom is already present, they will find some success—sufficient to be salt for the earth and light for the world.

Their failures serve as reminders that the kingdom is not yet fully present and that God's rule over their own lives remains incomplete. Thus the sermon presents an ethic that Christians are to live into, striving to live in the present as they are destined to live for eternity.

Does the Sermon's Legalism Conflict with a Doctrine of Grace?

Martin Luther was particularly bothered by the sermon's tendency toward "works righteousness," and he sought to interpret the moral expectations of the sermon as manifestations of grace: one does not behave as the sermon indicates in order to earn God's favor; rather, the Christian who has been put right with God by sheer grace will show the fruit of God's salvation in a life marked by good works, such as those that the sermon describes. This understanding, dependent on Augustine, became fairly standard for interpretations of the sermon in most confessional traditions.

Protestant Scholasticism (post-Reformation followers of Luther and Calvin) radicalized the tendency to interpret the sermon in this light. In both popular and scholarly treatments, the sermon was made to serve the evangelical function of preparing people for the gospel by making them aware of their need for grace: since no human can keep the sermon's demands, those who try will be brought to despair and left to trust in naught but the mercy of Christ. This manner of reading the sermon remained prominent in many Protestant circles for hundreds of years (twentieth-century advocates included Carl

Strange, Gerhard Kittel, and Helmut Thielecke), but it was sharply critiqued exegetically by Joachim Jeremias (in his 1963 work, *The Sermon on the Mount*) and theologically by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in his 1940 work, *The Cost of Discipleship*).

In the modern era, all attempts to read the Sermon on the Mount in a manner that would be compatible with a Pauline doctrine of justification have fallen on hard times. The critical era of biblical studies has allowed for more theological diversity within the canon, and many interpreters today would simply grant that the Sermon on the Mount assumes a soteriology that would not be acceptable from a Pauline perspective. This view has been bolstered by the work of numerous Jewish interpreters. The theological recommendation of Christian scholars is sometimes to value the sermon for its ethical teaching while regarding its understanding of soteriology as inadequate. To force any reading of the text from the perspective of what ultimately became orthodox Christian theology does not do justice to the theology of Matthew or the intentions of the historical Jesus.