
Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

BY ANDREW SELBY

**Patristic and medieval biblical interpreters can help us
relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation.**

**They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those
details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of
the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith.**

Imagine that a friend has asked you to lead a Bible study group that is working through the Gospel of Matthew, and your job is to explain the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). You know that teaching this difficult passage will require more than just a cursory explanation. Recognizing that the Sermon on the Mount is probably the most important of Jesus's discourses in the Gospels, and is often called the charter for Christian discipleship, the stakes are accordingly high. If you succeed, you could inspire your brothers and sisters in Christ to fuller love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, if you bungle Jesus' teaching, you may accidentally persuade the group that the Christian life is either impossible or dull. Will they find Christ's sketch of the "blessed" life compelling or just plain naïve?

You know that you need more than personal anecdotes to unpack the passage. After all, we are all on the way, not having attained to the vision of life cast in the Beatitudes. Humbly recognizing your individual limitations, you decide to consult some Bible study resources. But which ones?

If you have some training in biblical exegesis from a Christian college or seminary, you will probably reach for some standard modern commentaries published in the last few decades. But as you search them for insight into

the Beatitudes, you begin to suspect that their being “up-to-date” is not a virtue, but a liability. Surely these contemporary commentaries have some “blind spots” through no fault in their author’s scholarship or faithlessness in their devotion. Since human beings are limited in the scope of their understanding and hindered by the effects of sin, every exegete in every age necessarily has blind spots; but the particular scope of the restrictions is conditioned by the exegete’s time and culture. So here’s the rub: when we read commentaries from our own era, we may find them easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well – and for the same reasons.

Indeed, there is good reason to suspect that contemporary commentators have more than their fair share of blind spots. In the last few centuries biblical scholarship has been located almost exclusively in the university, and in the same period the university has largely rejected the authority of faith over reason. Abandoned is the basic approach of *fides quaerens intellectum*, or faith seeking understanding. One consequence has been the divorce of theology from biblical commentary. In other words, modern exegetes often adopt a method of interpreting Scripture that separates the narrative of faith from the “real” meaning of the text. The relation of a passage to the overarching story of creation, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation is ignored because the grand Christian narrative is no longer assumed to be true. The findings of supposedly “objective” historical research then eclipse theology as the truth about the biblical texts.

Of course, because the spell of the Enlightenment is lifting, many scholars within the guild of biblical studies recognize this problem. They understand that their work, generally favoring the historical-critical method of interpretation, has become disconnected from the life of the Church, which is founded on the overarching Christian narrative.

But while modern scholars wrestle with this problem and debate proposed solutions, you have a Bible study to lead! In conditions such as these, we need teachers to teach us how to teach. We need a model right now to show us a way forward in interpreting texts in light of God’s story of salvation.

Fortunately, the divorce of faith and scholarship has not always afflicted the Church. The Church of premodern times bears witness to a more integrated way of understanding the Bible. If patristic¹ and medieval² authors have a defining characteristic, it is that they emphasize the big picture over the details. They have eyes intent on the narrative of Scripture, especially on its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection – what they often called the “scope” or “mind” of Scripture. Because of this awareness of the cosmic story of the whole, they exemplify how to read particular passages of the Bible from the standpoint of faith. Furthermore, their blind spots will often appear glaringly obvious to us because of the perspective that the passing of time affords. So, they are less likely to lead us astray.

What difference, then, would a premodern approach make for our understanding of the Beatitudes? How can studying interpreters from an earlier time benefit us as we lead small groups or preach sermons or teach classes on the Bible? To answer these questions practically, let's consider the work of Christian of Stavelot, a ninth-century commentator on the Gospel of Matthew who can serve for us both as expositor of the Beatitudes and model for putting the tradition to good use.³

CHRISTIAN OF STAVELOT AS EXPOSITOR OF THE BEATITUDES

All that is known of Christian of Stavelot derives from the commentary he wrote on the Gospel of Matthew. Indeed it is not even certain that his name was "Christian."⁴ We do know that he composed his exposition for the benefit of young monks studying in the Abbey of Stavelot, located in modern Belgium.

Not unlike a contemporary Bible study leader, it fell to him to explain the Gospels to his young charges, as we discover from the introductory letter Christian attached. Initially, he tried using Jerome's *Commentary on Matthew*, written in 398, as his classroom text.⁵ But Christian's young pupils found Jerome too difficult to comprehend. Christian also reports to the monastery's elders with chagrin that his lectures were going in students' one ear and out the other. Christian's commentary would allow them to study and review what he had said—or so he hoped.

His commentary was also the product of a larger movement of reform in the ninth-century Frankish

Empire: the "Carolingian Renaissance." John J. Contreni explains the purpose of this renewal movement: "What the leaders of Carolingian society wanted to do was to prepare the clergy, 'the soldiers of the Church,' to lead 'the people of God to the pasture of eternal life.'"⁶ Charlemagne, the great ruler of the empire, and his advisor, Alcuin, were eager to raise the level of education among pastors and monks to attain this goal of improved

leading, preaching, and evangelizing. They proceeded by emphasizing study of the liberal arts (especially the *Trivium*: grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the Bible. Indeed, scrutinizing the Scriptures was one of the primary means to learning the liberal arts in the time period, which in turn fostered a deeper reading of Scripture.

Every exegete has blind spots conditioned by the time and culture. So here's the rub: commentaries from our era may be easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well—and for the same reasons.

An agent of this renaissance, Christian wished to impart such knowledge to his students. Some of the commentary is therefore rather pedantic, making notes of spelling and defining words. But this was part of Christian's task in educating young monks, who would grow up to exposit the Bible to their flocks and fill crucial leadership roles in their communities. Christian was not just teaching the text of Matthew: he was teaching his students to read well. In our contemporary situation, in which educational standards in the United States have been consistently slipping, pastors and lay leaders cannot assume their congregants know all the vocabulary in a biblical passage, much less the logical flow of the argument or narrative. Thus, we would do well, like Christian, not to neglect basic explication of the texts we teach.

As for the Beatitudes in particular, Christian's interpretation maintains a singular focus on Jesus. Never for a moment does he forget from whose mouth the Beatitudes flow. If every speech has three aspects – argument (*logos*), appeal to the listener (*pathos*), and the character of the speaker (*ethos*) – Christian attends to all three, especially emphasizing *ethos*.

For example, when the text mentions the detail that the Lord "sat down" on the mountain before the sermon commences (Matthew 5:1), Christian comments:

This means he was set apart from the crowds [as a teacher from pupils]. God's *sitting down* has the spiritual meaning that Jesus was made incarnate, because when he became incarnate it was as if he shrank: that is to say, he was not such as he is in his divinity.⁷

The first bit of this remark is a basic historical point: Jesus assumes an attitude of authority when he sits like a rabbi, with his audience gathered around him – a point frequently made in modern commentaries. But then Christian moves to a deeper level, invoking the theology of the Incarnation. Christian probably has in mind Psalm 110:1, "The LORD says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'" [emphasis mine]. New Testament writers frequently used this verse to identify Jesus, significantly in Matthew 22:41–46. Christian observes that when someone sits he seems to get smaller. Spiritually, this refers to Jesus becoming incarnate, taking on human flesh, in his humility. The Incarnation is the greatest possible act of humility, since Jesus always has reigned and always will reign with the Father and Holy Spirit in divine majesty.

But why highlight the doctrine of Jesus' divine and human natures here? Christian wants his students to know that the Lord of the universe, who inspired the prophets, has delivered the Sermon – not just a really nice man. This tallies with the closing of the Sermon, which tells of the crowd's astonished reaction to Jesus' teaching: "For he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29), about which Christian comments:

For the Pharisees were teaching as those who had learned from mortal men, and from the things they read in the law and the prophets, which they were not understanding thoroughly. But the Lord taught as the One who had given the law and had spoken through the prophets.⁸

This understanding of Jesus' divine and human natures reflects the great tradition of Christian interpretation through the ages. Sadly, the doctrine of the Incarnation is less emphasized in contemporary Bible teaching. It is even more difficult to find modern commentators that connect Jesus' identity as the Son of God, sharing the same substance as the Father, with the ethics of the Beatitudes.

But when we fail to consider the identity of the one uttering the Beatitudes, it becomes all too tempting to reduce them to abstract principles. Abstract principles are susceptible to manipulation for our self-justification. To illustrate, the declaration, "Doing fifty pushups would be a good idea," considered without reference to the speaker is one thing; indeed, it is a notion many of us would easily find excuses to ignore! However, if a drill sergeant bellowed the same sentence at a new recruit in the military, it takes on a whole new meaning. When we think of the Beatitudes as the fulfillment of the Law in and through God's Son himself (cf. Matthew 5:17), we are less likely to write them off as unattainable or too culturally different to be relevant. Accordingly, Christian highlights this doctrine at both the beginning and end of his treatment of the Sermon.

Christian's exposition of each Beatitude focuses first on the grammar of the text and theological definition of terms to ensure that his young audience understands the "plain sense" of the text. On 5:4, the "meek (*mites*)" are glossed as "humble ones (*mansueti*), i.e., the kind of person who does not despise

others but rather receives everyone, thereby loving their neighbors without pride or disdain."⁹ A little later, Christian explains that those who mourn are not blessed because they are grieved about the loss of their worldly possessions (a pertinent message for a group on the verge of taking vows of poverty!) but because they lament over their own sins, the sins of their neighbors, and the tarrying of the kingdom of God.¹⁰

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Christian saves his climactic comment on the Beatitudes for the end. It is not only that Jesus possesses divinity equal to God the Father, but also that he himself obeys and exemplifies every instruction he gives:

Christ fulfilled all of the beatitudes, because he taught nothing except what he had fulfilled himself beforehand. He was poor both in possessions and in spirit, saying, *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay down his head* (Matthew 8:20). He was meek, saying, *Learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart* (Matthew 11:29). He grieved over others' sins when he saw the city of Jerusalem and wept over it (Luke 19:41). He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, saying, *My food is to do the will of my Father* (John 4:34). He was merciful, saying, *I desire mercy and not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7). He was pure in heart, saying, *Be holy because I am holy* (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44). He was a peacemaker, saying, *I grant my peace to you* (John 14:27). He suffered persecution, saying, *If they persecuted me, they also will persecute you* (John 15:20).¹¹

It is widely agreed that the Sermon in general and the Beatitudes in particular encapsulate Jesus' program for discipleship. A great deal of modern scholarly discussion about the Sermon on the Mount has concentrated on whether or not it is practical to live it out. This question is not often found in the patristic or medieval tradition. While it is widely recognized that Jesus' program in the Sermon will be difficult, it does not seem to occur to earlier writers that it would be impossible to conform to it. This is due to their singular focus on Jesus himself, as Christian demonstrates here. Whatever faults writers in the early Christian tradition may exhibit, they do not abstract the Beatitudes away from Jesus and, therefore, they do not reason as if Jesus himself were irrelevant or extrinsic to carrying out the life of discipleship chartered in the Sermon. It is easy for us to forget that the blessed, flourishing life depicted in the Beatitudes only comes about *in* Christ. He himself lived it out. It is only a possibility for us to the extent that we are united to him by the work of the Holy Spirit in us as the Church. The greatest virtue of this lovely passage from Christian of Stavelot is to refocus us on Jesus himself even as we begin to embark on the kind of life Jesus' Beatitudes map out.

CHRISTIAN AS A MODEL OF LEARNING FROM THE TRADITION

It is not as if Christian discovered this wonderful insight through unique personal inspiration. No. He diligently listened to the great cloud of witnesses surrounding him, provided for him by God's providence in the tradition of the Church. The voice ringing most clearly for Christian is Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He wrote a discourse on the Sermon on the Mount early in his pastoral career, and referred to the Sermon, especially the Beatitudes, over and over again in his preaching and teaching.¹²

Augustine titles his treatise “The *Lord’s* Sermon on the Mount” to underscore the Preacher’s importance. Naturally, it is crucial to him that Jesus exists as fully God and fully man: only the Son of God himself could impart such lofty moral teaching because he had already set his people free by his love.¹³ The Beatitudes come from Christ and are about Christ who dwells *in* the Father. So Augustine reads the Beatitudes together with a verse that comes a little later, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This can only work, for Augustine, if we are sons of God by adoption and by participation in Christ who is the Son of God by nature.¹⁴

As Christian read Augustine and handed on the tradition of this teaching in a new way to his students at the monastery in Stavelot, so it would be of great benefit for us to once again attend the school of the church fathers. I have underscored one important way the medieval and early Christian tradition corrects our exegesis, showing us that a more theological reading of Christ’s teaching in the Beatitudes prevents us from making them abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.

It is not that we should ignore modern commentators on this passage or on others. They often provide biblical background that the church fathers would have loved to consult had it been available. Christian referred to Jerome’s detail-oriented *Commentary on Matthew* much the same way as we might utilize Craig Keener’s excellent New Testament background commentary.¹⁵ Additionally, modern scholarship often opens a window on the significance of the Old Testament foundations for the New Testament. N.T. Wright’s work exemplifies this, especially on the Beatitudes.¹⁶ Wright is among the few commentators who simultaneously views Jesus’ teachings from the past looking forward (the Old Testament background) and from the future looking back (in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection and later understanding of these events recorded in the creeds).

The world of early Christian commentary may feel foreign and forbidding at first. Fortunately, plenty of assistance is available. Two series – the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture¹⁷ and The Church’s Bible¹⁸ – provide excerpted comments on scriptural passages from a variety of church fathers. The Fathers of the Church series by Catholic University of

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America Press has translated many commentaries and theological works. The old Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translations are easily accessible for free online and still serviceable despite their nineteenth-century English.¹⁹ Additionally, two books by D. H. Williams argue that Protestants should (re-)engage with the church fathers and point to further resources.²⁰

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Christian did not mention his knowledge of Augustine and Jerome to his students. Instead, he made their insights his own while introducing students to the riches of the mysteries of faith. Bible studies should be about Scripture, not about sources.

of Augustine and Jerome to his students. Instead, he made the church fathers' insights his own as he introduced his students to the riches of the mysteries of faith. The point for Christian, as it is for those of us who teach the Bible, is to foster our students' ability to read Scripture well. Unless one's audience consists of folks with the inclination and time to actually read patristic and

medieval texts, we should not present premodern interpretation as a necessary gateway to true understanding. That is to say, Bible studies and sermons should be about Scripture, not about Augustine or Jerome. Christian again is an example for us as he deftly presents Augustine's acumen to his audience without referring to it explicitly. There will always be opportunities to direct interested students toward the sources.

The tradition of biblical interpretation from patristic and medieval Christian teachers can help us relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation—the grand narrative of creation, fall, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation. They can teach us to keep sight of the big picture. They instruct us not so much in good morality as obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit as Trinity. They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith.

From them, let us learn to read like a Christian.

NOTES

1 "Patristic" refers to the church fathers, Christian writers living (roughly) before the sixth century.

2 The Reformers should also be understood as "medieval" since they retained the principle of *fides quaerens intellectum* in their exegesis. See, for example, Richard A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: A View from the Middle Ages," in Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 3–17.

3 Christian's commentary came to my attention thanks to the generous patronage of the

Green Scholars' Initiative (GSI) that provided a team from Baylor, under the leadership of Daniel H. Williams, the opportunity to study a beautiful eleventh-century manuscript of Christian's ninth-century commentary. David L. Jeffrey encouraged my further study. I thank Drs. Williams and Jeffrey, as well as my colleague, Jesse Hoover, who helped puzzle out the text of the manuscript.

4 The editor of his Gospel commentary thinks the name accidentally ended up in the titles of manuscripts and eventually became associated with our author. See R. B. C. Huygens, "À propos de Christian dit de Stavelot et son explication de l'évangile selon Matthieu," *Sacris erudiri* 44 (2005), 247-273, at 248-250. The critical Latin edition that Huygens edited is Christianus dictus Stabulensis, *Expositio super librum generationis*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 224 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008). The GSI manuscript was not considered by Huygens, but does not differ significantly from the final text he edited. For further study of Christian, see M. L. W. Laistner, "A Ninth-Century Commentator on the Gospel According to Matthew," *Harvard Theological Review* 20.2 (1927), 129-149, and M. Ponesse, "The Instruction of Monks in Christian of Stavelot's Commentary on Matthew," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 18 (2008), 24-35.

5 A good English translation with introduction is Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church 117, translated by Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

6 John J. Contreni, "The Carolingian Renaissance: Education and Literary Culture," in Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 709-757, here citing 709, quoting Alcuin's *Admonitio generalis* of 789. I follow Contreni's understanding of the Carolingian Renaissance closely in this paragraph.

7 R. B. C. Huygens, ed., *Expositio super librum generationis*, 5.1 (p. 136, lines 16-19). Since this work has yet to be translated into a modern language, all translations here are my own.

8 *Ibid.*, 7.29 (pp. 177-178, lines 298-303).

9 *Ibid.*, 5.4 (p. 137, lines 33-37).

10 *Ibid.*, 5.5 (pp. 137-138, lines 45-58).

11 *Ibid.*, 5.12 (pp. 140-141, lines 119-129). Notice too that the principle of "Scripture interpreting Scripture" (*scriptura scripturam interpretans*) existed long before the Reformation!

12 For an excellent summary of Augustine's interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount throughout his life, followed closely here, see Robert Louis Wilken, "Augustine," in Jeffrey P. Greenman, et al., eds., *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 43-58.

13 Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 1.1.2, Fathers of the Church 11, translated by Denis J. Kavanagh (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 20-21.

14 *Ibid.*, 1.21.69 (pp. 95-96) and 1.23.78-80 (pp. 105-8). Cf. Wilken, "Augustine," 50-51.

15 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 55-57.

16 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, New Testament for Everyone, second edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 34-38. But an even more theologically rich interpretation of the Beatitudes can be found in the twentieth-century classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, by the theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 100-110.

17 Thomas C. Oden, series editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press). Volumes in this series cover every book of the Bible.

18 Robert Louis Wilken, series editor, *The Church's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans). Volumes on The Song of Songs, Isaiah, 1 Corinthians, and Romans are available, and a volume on Matthew is forthcoming.

19 The *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* project (www.ccel.org) provides free electronic versions of the Early Church Fathers series in many formats.

20 D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) and *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church*, *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005). In the latter series see his anthology of excerpts from early Christian sources: *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).



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