

Customizing Your Study of the Sermon

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is a basic text for understanding Christian discipleship. Even though not all of Jesus' moral teachings are collected there and not all of it is ethical instruction, the Sermon holds the key to our grasping what it means to follow Jesus. It is a moment of moral clarity that orders Jesus' teachings and illuminates his deeds as well. "In the history of Christian thought – indeed in the history of those observing Christianity," Luke Timothy Johnson has rightly observed, "the Sermon on the Mount has been considered an epitome of the teaching of Jesus and therefore, for many, the essence of Christianity."[†]

Of course, many parts of the Sermon – like the Beatitudes (5:3-12), the so-called antitheses where Jesus interprets the Law (5:21-48), or the Lord's Model Prayer (6:9-16) – are multifaceted gems that our contributors cannot fully explore in these pages. Fortunately, the Sermon is the scripture passage which is most often cited and carefully examined by others in the twenty-five previous issues of *Christian Reflection*. Therefore, I invite you to draw on those resources to expand or tailor your reflection on the Sermon. They are available for free download in PDF format in the "Ethics Library" on the Web site of Center for Christian Ethics, www.ChristianEthics.ws, or you may contact the Center to order printed copies of back issues of *Christian Reflection* as these are available.

As you plan a small group study of the Sermon, feel free to mix the articles (and associated study guides) in this issue with various ones from previous issues of *Christian Reflection*. Here are my suggestions of past articles that are helpful. To make them convenient to find on the Web site, they are posted as "further reading" with this issue in the Ethics Library.

Repeatedly the Sermon calls us to imitate Jesus' peacemaking ways. George Mason's *Making Peace with Our Enemies* (in the *Peace and War* issue, 64-68) applies the instruction to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) in very personal situations. He urges us to be "pitiful peacemakers" rather than righteous warriors in dealing with personal enemies. "I mean the word *pitiful* in its noblest sense. To have pity is not to look down on someone, but rather to look up at what that person might be if it weren't for the evil

that has taken hold in the soul," Mason writes. "This is, after all, the kind of pity God has for you and me in Christ Jesus." In *Just Peacemaking in an Age of Terrorism (Peace and War, 36-43)*, Glenn Stassen considers how nations can pursue "just peacemaking practices" that advance democracy and human rights and foster just and sustainable economic development.

For the Sermon on the Mount "to function as part of a normative guide for Christian decision making," Charles Talbert reminds us in this issue, we must interpret passages like these on peacemaking in their scriptural contexts—"in the context of Matthew as a whole, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, in the context of the biblical plot as a whole." In *Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables (Parables, 27-36)*, Barbara Reid explores the difficulty that in the First Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Harry Maier's *The War of the Lamb (Peace and War, 18-26)* tackles a difficulty within the New Testament context—that in the apocalyptic "militaristic visions of divine judgment and violent subjugation of enemies" in the Book of Revelation, Jesus becomes a general! And in *War in the Old Testament (Peace and War, 11-17)*, John Wood discusses a pacifist tradition that survives within Israel's often-violent history. In interesting ways these three writers allow the Sermon to guide their interpretation of the wider scriptural contexts, even as those contexts inform their reading of Jesus' call to peacemaking.

Jesus' warning in the Sermon that we cannot serve two masters, God and mammon (or, material wealth), is another important theme examined in past issues of *Christian Reflection*. Craig Blomberg's *Mastering Mammon (Consumerism, 19-26)* is not only a wonderful overview of Jesus' teachings on money and concern for the poor, but also an inspiring case for Christians to practice a "graduated tithe" of their income. In *Hazmats or Good Gifts? (Parables, 37-43)*, Dorothy Jean Weaver illuminates three striking parables of Jesus concerning money and possessions in the Gospel of Luke: the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Arthur Simon warns in *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth (Consumerism, 65-70)*, "We affluent Christians accept our comparative luxury and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular culture, but also within the church and within us." He helpfully contrasts the meekness Jesus commends in the third beatitude—which is our humble obedience to and trusting in the gracious God—to the grasping attitude that characterizes human greed to seize the material wealth of the earth.

NOTE

† Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Sermon on the Mount," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 654.