



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**  
Center for Christian Ethics  
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The Center thanks the  
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## Study Guides for

# Sermon on the Mount

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the Sermon as Jesus' startling invitation to see and inhabit God's Kingdom. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- God's Enabling Grace** 2  
The Sermon on the Mount seems filled with stringent laws and calls for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Where is God's enabling grace? The Sermon offers Jesus' sayings as verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life.
- The Freedom of Obedience** 4  
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.
- Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount in Context** 6  
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.
- With Ears to Hear** 8  
If we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a historical perspective, we will keep it at a distance from us and our communities. To be Scripture for the Church, it must be performed as a living word with voice and presence—both as we speak its words in the sanctuary and live its way in the fabric of human community.
- Beatitudes in the Desert** 10  
In our fast-paced world of wars and anti-war activism, seeking wisdom from the ancient Christian solitaries may seem counterintuitive (or just flat wrong). Yet how they received Jesus' blessing in the Sermon on the Mount reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.
- Jesus Is for Losers** 12  
We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers or by joining with broken sinners who cry out to God. Both of these are magnetic and contagious. Jesus warns, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God's grace.



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### Focus Article:

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

### What do you think?

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# God's Enabling Grace

The Sermon on the Mount seems filled with stringent laws and calls for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Where is God's enabling grace? The Sermon offers Jesus' sayings as verbal icons through which we may see into God's will and be empowered for the moral life.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

### Meditation<sup>†</sup>

Many in our culture (Christians and non-Christians) think of the Sermon on the Mount as high ideals or hard teachings. They admire it from a distance.... [Yet] the Christian life is not just hard human effort to live up to high ideals; nor is it just a bunch of duties. It is about God's grace. It is about living in the presence of God. It is the invitation of Jesus to participate in the new things God is doing all the time.

Glenn H. Stassen

### Reflection

Why does the Sermon on the Mount seem like *bad news* to many people today? Why don't we respond with delighted enthusiasm like the "astounded" listeners who followed Jesus "down from the mountain" in Galilee, believing his teaching was authoritative and liberating good news for their lives (Matthew 7:28ff.)? Our dour reaction, Charles Talbert suggests, comes from misinterpreting the Sermon as a list of divine rules to obey in order to *gain* God's love (this is the approach of *legalism*) or as demands we must follow out of gratitude if we are to *remain* in relation with God (this is *covenantal nomism*). Either way, we distort Jesus' teaching into very bad news indeed – into an unnerving call to scale moral peaks that are too high for anyone to climb.

Instead we should read the Sermon (and all of Matthew's Gospel) from the perspective of *new covenant piety* – the view that "God graciously enters into a relation with humans [and]...gives guidance about what pleases and displeases him," Talbert says. "When humans follow that guidance, it is because God graciously enables their obedience." Yes, the Sermon depicts a high ideal of discipleship, but it also promises that *God will empower us to follow it faithfully*. So why do we overlook this last part?

We easily read Paul's and John's writings from the perspective of new covenant piety because they describe God's enabling grace in terms of *spiritual indwelling*. Since "the Spirit of God dwells in you...[and] the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you" (Romans 8:9-11), Paul can urge disciples to "work out your own salvation...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12b-13). In a familiar Johannine text Jesus speaks of mutual indwelling: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do



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nothing.... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:4-5).

The First Gospel, however, does not use the language of spiritual indwelling. It expresses new covenant piety in another way: the divine transformation that enables faithful discipleship comes through a *vision of the deity*. Human hearts become tuned to follow Jesus when they are in his divine presence. "Being with Jesus is to be transformed by that vision that enables the conquest of evil passions and the acquisition of virtue," says Talbert.

Matthew wants readers to see Jesus and be transformed. "The sayings of Jesus in the Sermon function as verbal icons (windows into God's world) that enable readers to see into God's unconditioned will. This vision of the divine transforms our character by enabling us to see reality differently. Once we see reality differently, our dispositions, intentions, and motivations also change."

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the differences among *legalism*, *covenantal nomism*, and *new covenant piety* – three views of the relation between God's grace and human moral action. How would each view shape the way one hears the Sermon on the Mount?
2. Describe the transformation by vision model of God's enabling grace. How do Paul and John (e.g., in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 John 3:6) occasionally use this model?
3. How does Matthew deploy the transformation by vision model his description of Jesus' ministry (4:12-22) before the Sermon on the Mount?
4. What does Charles Talbert mean by "a verbal icon"? Review a major section of the Sermon – e.g., the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), the so-called antitheses (5:21-48), the teachings about giving alms, praying, and fasting (6:1-18), or the teachings on trust in God (6:25-34) – and discuss how it might function as a verbal icon.

### Departing Hymn: "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus" (vv. 1a, 2d, 3)

Sitting at the feet of Jesus,  
oh, what words we hear him say!  
While we from his fullness gather  
grace and comfort every day.

*May we have the mind of Jesus  
and be holy as he is;  
may we prove we've been with Jesus,  
who is all our righteousness.*

Bless us, O our Savior, bless us,  
as we sit low at your feet.  
Oh, look down in love upon us;  
let us see your face so sweet.

*Refrain*

J. H. (19th Century), alt.

*Suggested Tunes:* HERE IS LOVE or PLEADING SAVIOR

† Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 16.



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### 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)

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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*



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### 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)

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# 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."**

## Meditation<sup>1</sup>

Dorotheos of Gaza (6<sup>th</sup> 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:



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- ▶ *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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.



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### Focus Article:

📖 With Ears to Hear  
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 37-45)

### Suggested Article:

📖 The Universality of Christ and His Teachings  
(*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 46-47)

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## With Ears to Hear

If we hear the Sermon on the Mount with ears trained only by a his-torical perspective, we will keep it at a distance from us and from our communities. To be Scripture for the Church, it must be performed as a living word with voice and presence – both as we speak its words in the sanctuary and live its way in the fabric of human community.

### Prayer

O God, you have turned our world upside-down through the life and teaching of Jesus. Awaken us now to your blessing. Open our ears that we might hear. Stir our hearts that we might act to glorify you in all things, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:13-16

### Meditation†

Why must you be salt? Jesus says in effect: “You are accountable not only for your own life but also for that of the entire world. I am sending you not to one or two cities, nor to ten or twenty, nor even to one nation, as I sent the prophets”.... For this reason, you see, he requires from his disciples those character traits that are most necessary and useful for the benefit of all.

*John Chrysostom (347-407)*

### Reflection

We have strategies, don’t we, for “keeping the Sermon on the Mount safely ensconced as an artifact in a distant corner of history.” In our Bible study and worship we would prefer to examine “how this text might have been put together *back then*,” Richard Ward observes, rather than confront how it “should shape the life of the believing community *in the here and now*.”

As a first step toward hearing and responding to the Sermon as the living word of God in Scripture, he suggests, we should listen to the words of the text read aloud. When the Sermon in its entirety is “performed” in worship, “the inflection and interpretation afforded by human agency – voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence” – can bring Jesus’ teachings alive. The Sermon:

- ▶ *will sound strangely new*. Most of us grew up thinking of “biblical texts as silent things that are read and studied in solitude and privacy,” Ward notes. “When they are given voice, the preferred style of reading tends to flatten affect. In the sincere effort to regard the holy ‘otherness’ of sacred texts and to honor the values of the silent, individualized print culture of Protestantism, we have obscured Scripture’s capacity to speak more fully to our human predicament.” But the times are changing: as television, DVD players, and iPods begin to challenge books and other written media as the primary forms of communication, we are gaining a new appreciation for the spoken word in our culture. “Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are – the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.”





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▶ *will sound strangely old.* “When we are listeners and readers in our communications culture, we draw closer to the situation of our early Christian ancestors’ experience of Scripture,” says Ward. Performed interpretations were central to “early Christians’ experience of Scripture; they helped to shape the minds, hearts, and memories of believers in relation to Christ. Performance was the agency through which the early Church experienced the lively presence of its Living Lord.”

▶ *can be spoken with authority.* Whether performers read aloud the text with attention to the meaning and emotion of its language or “internalize” the words and speaks their meaning “by heart,” they can present it as “Word-bearing for the gathered assembly,” believing that “the text authorizes the performed interpretations they render, and...someone behind the text makes it to be authoritative Scripture.”

▶ *may be heard with fresh insight.* Passages “rendered silent and fixed by the print medium can be released into new horizons of meaning through the agency of the human voice and body,” says Ward. Consider Jesus’ instruction to “be perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “To the performer of any text, ‘perfection’ cannot be reduced to ‘getting it right’ by sounding all the words in their proper order.” A perfect performance is one that invites further reflection and interpretation.

In light of this meaning of “perfection,” he interprets Matthew 5:48 as “an invitation to imitate or ‘carry through to completion’ God’s own divine actions.... We who listen to the Sermon on the Mount are invited to perform a salty, light-bearing way of life that imitates God’s love. The final form of the performed interpretation of this text must be the work of an *ensemble*, the gathered community of God, and not the labor of a solo interpreter.”

### Study Questions

1. What changes in our culture, according to Richard Ward, are restoring appreciation for the spoken word? Do you agree?
2. What do we miss when in worship we listen to and study only short passages of Scripture?
3. In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, what extended passages of Scripture might be read with profit in worship?
4. Would your congregation willingly devote fifteen to twenty minutes to the reading of Scripture in worship? If not, why?
5. Discuss Ward’s view that the purpose of performing the Sermon on the Mount is not “to make the text more entertaining and our listening more enjoyable, [or] call attention to the work of the virtuoso performer,” but “to evoke performance of this Scripture as the life of the Church.”
6. In the painting *Sermon on the Mount* (cover art), Laura James depicts Jesus as a person of color. Discuss the value of this visual “performance” of the Sermon by the artist.

### Departing Hymn: “From Galilee He Preaches Still”

† John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 15.6.



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### Focus Article:

📖 The Beatitudes  
in the Desert  
(Sermon on the Mount,  
pp. 60-67)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Living the  
Beatitudes Today  
(Sermon on the Mount,  
pp. 84-89)

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# Beatitudes in the Desert

In our fast-paced world of wars and anti-war activism, seeking wisdom from the ancient Christian solitaries may seem counter-intuitive (or just flat wrong). Yet how they received Jesus' blessing in the Sermon on the Mount reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:23-5:12

## Meditation<sup>1</sup>

Each of the beatitudes has to do with dying to self. Poverty of spirit, the foundation of the beatitudes, is the ongoing process of dying to self, not out of self-hatred or a collapse of self-esteem, but because there is no other way to love God and neighbor.

*Jim Forest*

## Reflection

"The restoration of the church," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in 1935, "will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this."

The first monastics – fourth-century Christians who moved to the desert to escape the alluring distortions of their Empire and Church – found the Beatitudes to be windows into a new world where love of God and neighbor is possible. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who leads a new monastic movement – Christians who move into the decaying hearts of American cities to find God's love afresh in worship together and service to others – is inspired by the desert Christians' stories. "Their context was not the same as ours," he says, "but their faithfulness is a witness to us, and whether monastic or not, we all have a lot to learn from their wisdom about how to live faithfully in a broken world."

Through the Beatitudes, the desert Christians learned how

- ▶ *to mourn their sin.* Not through false humility or poor self-esteem, but in radical self-honesty the desert Christians developed "a way of prayer that brought one face-to-face with the obsessions and illusions which so often control our attitudes and behaviors." Confessing to an abba or amma (a respected man or woman) the thoughts that disturbed their minds during prayer, they "learned to tell the truth about themselves and mourn the sin that was real in their lives."

Wilson-Hartgrove reports that Rutba House members have "sharing time" on Sunday evening where they listen to and pray for one another. "We have to be pretty honest with one another," he says. "After all, we live together. When I am sad or frustrated, people tend to notice. By God's grace, they have helped me over time to name the thoughts and desires behind those feelings – and to mourn some of them."

- ▶ *to hunger for righteousness.* The desert Christians' fasts seem extreme to us, but they honored "the real needs of body and



## 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*.

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spirit for nourishment and rest," he notes. "These masters of the spiritual life also saw how easily we are deceived by our desires, hungering and thirsting for pleasures that distract us from God's good gifts that would fill us to overflowing."

Rutba House members "fast" from other good things "for the sake of receiving God's good gifts." For instance, they do not use the Internet in their houses. "We hope that we have more time and attention to focus on becoming more holy."

- ▶ *to be peacemakers.* Rutba House is named for a village in Iraq where just three days after the U.S. had bombed its hospital in 2003, a local doctor saved Wilson-Hartgrove's friends' lives after their auto accident. Refusing payment, the doctor said, "You do not owe us anything. Please just tell the world what has happened in Rutba." Peacemakers, Jesus teaches, receive God's adoption. "With it, they are given a new heart. In the desert tradition, the state of this new heart is called hesychasm. It is the deep peace that fills a monk's heart after she has lamented her sins, wrestled the demons, fasted faithfully, and given her whole self over into the hands of a loving God. This peace is the goal of the monastic life."

### Study Questions

1. In regard to three practices of mourning for one's sin, fasting, and peacemaking, compare the goals and methods of the desert Christians and the new monastics at Rutba House.
2. How is each of these three practices countercultural?
3. Discuss Arthur Boers' claim, "More important than examples of solitary 'heroes and saints' would be accounts of communities living out the Beatitudes" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 86).

### Departing Hymn: "Eternal God, May We Be Free"<sup>2</sup>

Eternal God, may we be free  
from false pretense and foolish pride;  
help us your perfect will to see,  
and cast unworthy thoughts aside.

From worship that is insincere,  
with shallow words and thoughtless prayer,  
may we be free, your voice to hear,  
and then respond with newfound care.

O God our Father, we confess  
an unconcern for those in need;  
break through our sinful selfishness,  
and reign as Lord of word and deed.

Renew our lives that they may be  
alive and vibrant to your call,  
with ears to hear and eyes to see  
new ways to crown you Lord of all.

Michael G. Dell  
Tune: CANONBURY

<sup>1</sup> Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 146.

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## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Jesus Is for Losers  
(*Sermon on the Mount*,  
pp. 68-76)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 You Are Blessed  
(*Sermon on the Mount*,  
pp. 51-55)

📖 Blessedness  
(*Sermon on the Mount*,  
pp. 56-59)

### 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).

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# Jesus Is for Losers

We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers or by joining with broken sinners who cry out to God. Both of these are magnetic and contagious. Jesus warns, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God's grace.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-5

### Meditation<sup>†</sup>

[Jesus] used the method of "show and tell" to make clear the extent to which the kingdom is "on hand" to us.... He could point out in the crowd now this individual, who was "blessed" because the Kingdom Among Us had just reached out and touch them with Jesus' hear and voice and hands. Perhaps this is why in the Gospels we only find him giving Beatitudes from the midst of a crowd of people he had touched.

And so he said, "Blessed are the spiritual zeros – the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of 'religion' – when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them."

*Dallas Willard*

### Reflection

"We live in an age that when people hear 'Christian,' they are much more likely to think of people who hate gays than people who love outcasts," Shane Claiborne laments. "Bumper stickers and buttons read 'Jesus, save me from your followers.'"

As Christians we rarely restrict our self-righteousness to condemning "outsiders"; we eagerly direct it toward our sisters and brothers in Christ as well. "Conservatives stand up and thank God they are not like the homosexuals, the Muslims, and the liberals. Liberals stand up and thank God they are not like the war-makers, the yuppies, and the conservatives."

Yet Claiborne is hopeful that "a new kind of Christianity emerging – a Christianity that is closer to the poor and broken people forsaken in the abandoned shadows of the empire." As we are guided by Jesus' teaching and empowered by God's Spirit, we may lay aside the idea that "it is our duty to rid the world of evildoers." There is a better way: "The more passionately we love those who do violence, the more evil will diminish. This was true of the Christian martyrs, whose self-sacrificial love for their enemies converted many to the Church."

In his instruction on judging others, Jesus calls us to see people differently – seeing *into* their lives as dwelling places of the holy God, rather than looking *at* them as objects. "Most of the time we look *at* people – good-looking women or men, beggars, pop stars, white folks, black folks, people with suits or dreadlocks," Claiborne admits. "But over time, we can develop new eyes and look *into* people. Rather than looking at people like sex objects or work tools, they become sacred. We can enter the Holiest of Holies through their eyes. They can become a 'Thou.'"



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At the very beginning of the Sermon, Jesus models this way of seeing others. The crowd that followed him up the mountain was “suffering not only from every sort of disease, but also from the deep suspicion that God does not like them and is making that apparent in their twisted bodies and disordered thoughts,” Burt Burleson observes. Yet to them Jesus says, “You have God’s blessing – what you need most, what is essential to live.” This is always where Jesus begins. “It has to begin here with God’s grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus. This teaching is amazing and exasperating. We can spend a lifetime hearing it.”

Claiborne concludes, “So many people are longing to be brought to life. They know all too well that they have done evil. They long to hear not only of a God who embraces evildoers but also of a Church that does the same.”

### Study Questions

1. What is the difference between making wise choices about good and bad ways of living (or faithfulness to Christ and unfaithfulness) and being judgmental toward others?
2. Why, according to Shane Claiborne, are we so drawn toward being judgmental? Do you agree?
3. Jesus teaches that if you want to *see* other people clearly, you must “first take the log out of you own eye” (Matthew 7:5). What does he mean by this?
4. “We need more prophets who laugh and dance,” Claiborne says. “Whenever people talk about injustice, there is usually a looming cloud of guilt. Joy and celebration usually do not mark progressive social justice circles, or conservative Christian circles for that matter. That is one thing many conservatives and liberals have in common: they lack joy. But the Jesus movement is a revolution that dances.” Do you agree?
5. “The Beatitudes that Jesus shared are his self portrait,” Burt Burleson notes. “They depict one blessed of God who lives a life of blessing in the world.” Discuss the implications of this.
6. In Fanny Crosby’s hymn, “More like Jesus Would I Be,” what attitudes and traits enable us to become “gentle as a dove” rather than judgmental when other people fail?

### Departing Hymn: “More like Jesus Would I Be” (verse 1)

More like Jesus would I be,  
let my Savior dwell with me;  
fill my soul with peace and love,  
make me gentle as a dove.  
More like Jesus, while I go,  
pilgrim in this world below;  
poor in spirit would I be;  
let my Savior dwell in me.

Fanny Crosby (1868)

Tune: MORE LIKE JESUS

† Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998), 100.

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# God's Enabling Grace

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish among legalism, covenantal nomism, and new covenant piety – three views of the relation between God and human beings.
2. To understand the concept of a verbal icon.
3. To hear the good news in the Sermon on the Mount (and the Gospel of Matthew generally) from the perspective of new covenant piety.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus" locate one of the familiar tunes [HERE IS LOVE](#) or [PLEADING SAVIOR](#) in your church's hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

"The more morally earnest among us may hear [in the Sermon on the Mount]...a judgmental tone as the imperatives come at us like one-two punches to the gut," writes Richard Ward. "The Sermon's high-minded moral code seems out of reach – way up on the pantry shelf that is nearest to heaven. This verse certainly does not help: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). The whole listening project may shut down right there. A high school friend of mine was an earnest young man, but his adolescent faith rested on a literal interpretation of the Bible. When he came to this verse, bereft of the benefit of critical studies, he threw up his hands and walked away from the Christian faith altogether!" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 31-32).

Let's be honest. What do we hear in the Sermon on the Mount – impossible moral demands or an invitation to live in a new way in God's kingdom through God's enabling grace?

## 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 tune our ears to hear and our hearts to sing God's grace.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 6:25-34 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

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

## Reflection

Let this discussion set the stage for your study of the Sermon on the Mount by clearing away a common misconception about the Sermon (and the First Gospel generally). Too often we misinterpret Jesus as teaching an impossible ideal of discipleship: Jesus lays out a strict and difficult moral agenda in the Sermon and expects individual disciples to accomplish it by themselves. There is no mention of God's enabling grace in our lives or of

the community of discipleship. Once we've misread the Sermon this way, we then ignore it—because either Jesus' teachings are too extreme for anyone to follow, or they are only directed to the moral saints among us.

The key to Charles Talbert's very different strategy for interpreting the Sermon, which highlights its win-some good news and call to all disciples, is this: a *vision* of God's perfect will in Jesus Christ transforms us and empowers us to be like Jesus. Matthew deploys this ancient way of depicting God's enabling grace throughout the Gospel and especially in the Sermon. Indeed, the passages of the Sermon function as "verbal icons" through which we glimpse God's kingdom.

### **Study Questions**

1. *Legalism, covenantal nomism, and new covenant piety* are three very different ways of thinking about how God relates to human beings. *Legalism* holds that God will have a relationship with us after we obey God's law; we must earn the relationship by our own moral goodness. From this perspective, the Sermon looks like a list of rules that we must follow in order to earn God's favor. (There is great irony in reading the Sermon on the Mount this way, because Jesus clearly critiques the legalist view throughout the Sermon.) *Covenantal nomism* is the view that God has graciously established a covenant relationship with human beings and given the law to disclose what pleases and displeases God. We should express our gratitude for the covenant by obeying God's law through our own efforts. From this perspective, the Sermon looks like God's demands that we must, out of gratitude, follow if we are to remain within the relation with God. *New covenant piety* says that God's gracious covenant is sustained by God working through our hearts, minds, and wills: when we follow God's guidance through the law, it is because God graciously enables our obedience. From this perspective the Sermon not only offers guidance, it also is an instrument through which God works in our lives to enable our faithful discipleship.
2. "In the Mediterranean world there was a general belief that being in the presence of a deity caused a transformation of the self," notes Talbert. He gives examples from Greek and Roman philosophies, the Jewish writings of the first century, and the New Testament.

Assign small groups to review 1 Corinthians 3:1-18 and 1 John 3:2-6. Paul uses the transformation by vision model to explain how God is changing our hearts and minds so that we may be "competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The "ministry of the Spirit" that enables this transformation works like this: God comes to us in Christ, "and all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another..." (3:18). The First Epistle of John deploys the model to explain how as "God's children now" we continue to grow in likeness to Jesus' purity: "we will be like him [Jesus], for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2); on the other hand, "no one who sins has either seen him or known him" (3:6).

3. Assign small groups to review Matthew 4:12-17 and 18-22. Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 to introduce Jesus' ministry: his presence and preaching will be for the people like *seeing* "a great light" that beckons them from their darkness. Two pairs of brothers (Simon and Andrew, James and John) meet Jesus and immediately leave their fishing businesses to follow him. "Jesus is depicted as the ideal king and the ideal teacher. He is, moreover, Emmanuel, God with us (1:23)," Talbert writes. "When we come to the Sermon on the Mount and hear Jesus call the disciples 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world,' the only thing that has come before in the plot of the Gospel is Jesus' call of disciples in 4:18-22 and their following him and being with him thereafter. Being with Jesus (which equals seeing him) transforms."
4. "Verbal icons" are passages that function as "windows through which we may see into the unconditioned will of God. Seeing God's will is seeing God." Invite small groups to summarize in a sentence or two what they see of God's will in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), antitheses (5:21-48), teachings about giving alms, praying, and fasting (6:1-18), and teachings on trust in God (6:25-34). Talbert briefly discusses each of these passages in his article.

### **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.



# 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.

# 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.

# With Ears to Hear

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the value of hearing the Sermon on the Mount (and other longer passages of Scripture) read aloud in worship.
2. To consider how “performance criticism” – the interpretation of Scripture based on our performance of the text – can lead to fresh insights into the meaning of Scripture.
3. To consider how the performance of Scripture passages (reading them aloud) can evoke the performance of Scripture as the life of the congregation (i.e., living out the teachings of Scripture in discipleship).

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage 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 an Observation

Hearing the Sermon on the Mount read aloud in its entirety can be a powerful form of worship today. On the one hand, it highlights the continuity of our worship with early Christians’ worship, where Scripture was presented through performed interpretations. We also glimpse what it means to follow Jesus’ teachings in our setting. As we listen to the Sermon performed, Richard Ward notes, “virtues practically forgotten in our imperial consciousness – humility, ‘good’ grief that arises out of empathy and compassion, devotion to God, and a passion for making things right – are singled out, honored, and affirmed in God’s commonwealth. Those who practice them are ‘salt’ and ‘light’ (5:13-14), people who live with serious attentiveness and regard for relationships, both human and divine” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 31).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading in unison the prayer printed in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:13-16 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

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

## Reflection

Richard Ward calls the Sermon on the Mount “the sermon we have never *heard*.” Though we commonly refer to it as a ‘sermon,’ “our experience of it bears little resemblance to listening to a sermon.” He knows, of course, that it may not be a recorded speech by Jesus, but an arrangement of his teachings. Ward’s point is that we would prefer to keep the Sermon at a distance, as a historical text we dissect in little pieces, rather than encounter it living and whole in our worship through performance in “voice, thought, gesture, and bodily presence.”

This study guide introduces “performance criticism” as a way of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. (The earlier study guides in this series feature what scholars call “literary criticism” and “canonical criticism,” which is interpreting the Sermon in its literary context in Matthew and as a part of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole.) Performance criticism highlights how the oral presentation of Scripture can communicate its immediacy and authority and give us new insight into its meaning. The “performance” evokes more performances by the members of the worshiping community as they live out the Sermon in their lives together.

### *Study Questions*

1. As “electronic and digital technologies...are decentering writing and print as the primary vehicles for communication...our standards for ‘good speech’ are changing. Who patiently listens to flat, uninflected, and unexpressive voices anymore when our ears are tuned for energy, conviction, and authenticity?” Ward asks. “Reading (aloud) and listening are being valued anew for the complex activities they are—the comprehension of a gestalt of oral, visual, and kinetic messages that move and flow through our consciousness.” Do you agree our expectations are changing? Are we *more discriminating* listeners? *Better* listeners?
2. We will miss the opportunity to experience Scripture as the early Christians did, may be tempted to focus on questions about a passage’s form and redaction (or editing and assemblage into its present format), and may interpret the passage out of its literary context. We will miss the biblical writers’ intentions—e.g., Paul’s writing a letter of instruction, Matthew’s (and other Gospel writers’) retelling the story of Jesus’ ministry and death, John the Revelator’s layering vision upon vision, and so on. Scripture may become for us more like a fact book or dictionary we use in debate rather than a narrative that shapes our character.
3. Invite small groups to canvas sections of Scripture (e.g., the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings, Paul’s epistles, the Gospels, and so on) for extended passages that could be read with profit in worship. Members might mention the stories of creation and the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph in Genesis; short stories like Ruth or Jonah or Daniel; a collection of prophecies of Isaiah, the visions of Ezekiel, or the book of Hosea; sections of Job or a collection of psalms; a series of Jesus’ parables, a discourse like Matthew 18, the prologue of John, the extended speeches at the Lord’s Supper in John’s Gospel, the account of one of Paul’s missionary journeys in Acts, Paul’s letter to Philemon, the book of James, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, and so on.
4. Worship leaders confess the greatest obstacle in planning worship is fitting all of the parts—hymns, music, readings, prayers, children’s sermon, sermon, offering, etc.—into sixty minutes. To make time for a “performance” of an extended passage of Scripture, would you leave something out or lengthen the worship service? Would children (and adults) become fidgety during the reading? Who in the congregation is capable as a reader and interpreter of Scripture to prepare the performance or train others to read Scripture aloud?
5. By a “performance” of Scripture, Ward does not mean that readers should call attention to their performance. Rather, their reading should help listeners encounter the text in a fresh way. “When a performed interpretation is done well, it is an effective bodying-forth of the thoughts, imagery, and actions found in the text,” he writes. “It restores for listeners a sense that the text is speaking directly to them, just as it spoke to its original audience.” The oral performance should evoke performances (living out) of the Scripture in the community.
6. Laura James’ *Sermon on the Mount* (cover) is her performance of the Sermon. Aspects (depicting Jesus as a person of color, drawing rounded figures, indicating distance by overlapping figures, etc.) were evoked by artwork in the Ethiopian Christian tradition. The artist also brings part of her story to the performance: recalling childhood experiences of thinking biblical figures were not like her, she desires all viewers to identify with the story of Jesus.

### *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.

# Beatitudes in the Desert

## Lesson Plans

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

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce how the desert Christians in the fourth century understood the countercultural message of the Beatitudes.
2. To consider how their reception of the Beatitudes reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage 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 “Eternal God, May We Be Free” locate the familiar tune CANONBURY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a cofounder of Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, writes, “In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* there are a number of stories about Abba Arsenius. He was a well-educated man of senatorial rank who had been appointed by the Roman emperor to tutor his sons. In something of a midlife crisis, Arsenius decided to sneak away to the Egyptian desert and learn from the monks there. One day someone noticed him consulting an old Egyptian monk. ‘Abba Arsenius,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?’ Abba Arsenius replied to him, ‘I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not even know the alphabet of this peasant.’

“For many of us new monastics,” Wilson-Hartgrove notes, “the wisdom of the desert has become real as we have apprenticed ourselves to poor and marginal Christians. Sure, we have learned some things from books and professors. But like Abba Arsenius, we realize that we have not even learned the spiritual alphabet of some of our neighbors. People who have lived on the under side of the American dream teach us how to hear the gospel anew and trust Jesus above all else. We inherit the Kingdom as we join them in day-to-day life and beg with them for God’s reign to come on earth as it is in heaven” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 62).

## 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 speak to the group through the Beatitudes about how to live faithfully in a broken world.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 4:23-5:12 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

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

## Reflection

This study brings together the insights of the *first monasticism* (a movement of Christian men and women into the Egyptian desert in the fourth century) and the *new monasticism* (a movement of Christian individuals and families into communities of service within American cities). Focus on the creative ways these intentional communities, separated by sixteen centuries, have taken the Sermon on the Mount seriously and lived out the character of the Beatitudes.

If members want to explore the lives of the first monastics, point them to Roberta Bondi's *To Love as God Loves* and John Chryssavgis' *In the Heart of Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. To learn more about the "new monasticism," see Bryan Hollon's "St. Benedict in the City" in *Cities and Towns*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 37-42, and *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House.

Your group may want to explore the Beatitudes further by reading James C. Howell's *The Beatitudes for Today*, Erik Kolbell's *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, or Jim Forest's *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*. Arthur Boers reviews these three books in "Living the Beatitudes Today" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 84-89).

## Study Questions

1. Assign three small groups to review Wilson-Hartgrove's discussions of the practices. Encourage them to look for the continuity of goals and methods between the new monastics and first monastics, as well as significant differences.

In each monastic movement, communal confession and encouragement allow members to become radically honest and insightful about their sin. The first monastics communities developed informal orders of spiritual leadership, with most members following the direction of an abba or amma. Rutba House members gather for a sharing time each Sunday evening. How can members of your congregation support one another in learning to lament?

The first monastics practiced fasting of food. While some went to extremes, many monks just limited their food to what a poor peasant of the day might eat. Rutba House members limit their use of the Internet. Discuss how this counts as a "fast." How could members of your congregation support one another in fasting?

The desert Christians monitored their anger and learned to forgive one another and seek reconciliation. Wilson-Hartgrove admits, "The truth is that we are, all of us, broken creatures who are helplessly addicted to violence." Rutba House members seek peace among themselves, but also among the people they serve in Durham, North Carolina, and among nations as they "tell the world what has happened at Rutba [Iraq]."

2. Encourage small groups to list the objections we might make and the obstacles we would face if we tried to follow each one of these practices. Our culture's excessive individualism, consumerist habits, and violent ways generally discourage these practices. Consider specific obstacles to each practice. In regard to lamenting our sin, for instance, to whom would we confess our thoughts and desires? What friend would be trustworthy enough, committed over time, and capable of responding in love? Can we form and maintain such friendships outside of an intentional community? In regard to fasting, who would help us establish and monitor a fast? Can we avoid becoming vain about it if we have no intentional community?
3. Arthur Boers has two concerns. First, he says we need to see examples of *living out* the Beatitudes. "Pretty words, compelling phrases, and even the most careful theology need to be fleshed out imaginatively with examples of those who experiment with living out God's truths." Second, we need to see examples of *communities* living out the Beatitudes. Forming the character of disciples and encouraging them to live out the radical claims of discipleship in an unwelcoming culture require a supportive, intentional community. He commends the Amish of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, as a remarkable example of a "community and its practices...where the seemingly unimaginable has become reality."

## 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.



# Jesus Is for Losers

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish between making wise choices about good and bad ways of living (or faithfulness to Christ and unfaithfulness) and being judgmental toward others.
2. To diagnose the spiritual temptation for Christians communities to be judgmental toward outsiders and toward one another.
3. To discuss how we can follow Jesus more faithfully in being gentle rather than judgmental.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “More Like Jesus Would I Be” locate the familiar tune MORE LIKE JESUS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

“I can remember talking with a homeless guy in an alley downtown and he started sharing with me about God,” Shane Claiborne writes. “He was familiar with the Bible, but kept talking about ‘those Christians’ in the third person and at a distance. A little confused, I finally asked him for clarity, ‘Are you not a Christian?’ ‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘I am far too messed up.’ I asked him what he thought a Christian was, and he said, ‘Someone who’s got their [you know what] together, and has things figured out.’ I confessed that I must not be a Christian either (and that I was not sure I had ever met one), and we laughed. We read together where Jesus tells the Pharisees (the ones who had things together): ‘It’s not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance’ (Luke 5:32, NIV<sup>†</sup>). My homeless friend nodded with a smile: ‘I like that verse’” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 68-69).

## 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 guide members to be discerning, but without being judgmental.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 7:1-5 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

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

## Reflection

Shane Claiborne does not advocate politically correct “tolerance” — a relativism that fails to practice discernment, that is, making wise judgments between the wise and faithful forms of life and the ways that lead to spiritual and social destruction. Yet he thinks Christians have failed to heed Jesus’ warning to not

be judgmental. We have a serious image problem – not because others think badly of us (we often deserve and can profit from their criticism), but because we misrepresent our Lord and obstruct the gospel. We may live on the “compost of Christendom,” but the good news is that forms of Christian community are emerging that share Jesus’ concern for “the poor and broken people forsaken in the abandoned shadows of the empire.”

### *Study Questions*

1. Shane Claiborne’s opening story suggests some important differences between judgmentalism and wise discernment. Judgmental persons are quick to evaluate and condemn others, relish the feeling of superiority (as though they have fully earned the higher status), and prefer to rebuke publicly rather than be friendly and welcoming to people of whom they disapprove. Their judgments are skewed toward the standards of their group. Wisdom, on the other hand, is modest and gentle in its evaluations, refuses to build self-esteem on the harsh criticism of others, and remains gracious and welcoming toward the sinner. The goal is to encourage healing and reconciliation with the other person, not isolation and prideful neglect of them.
2. Claiborne’s insight is that “isolating ourselves from evildoers” is both magnetic and contagious. How is it “magnetic”? We feel good about ourselves, and our communities, by being judgmental of others. Perhaps ‘playing the judge’ appeals to our vanity and envy. And what makes it so “contagious”? When our friends are judgmental, we may be drawn into their behavior for the fellowship or to avoid becoming their next targets.
3. “Taking the log out” cannot mean “healing ourselves,” for this would lead to more self-righteousness rather than less. Jesus calls us to realize our own brokenness and to acknowledge and embrace God’s gracious healing. This reading is suggested by the first four beatitudes that commend being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, and hungry for righteousness.
4. Do members agree that Christians, liberal and conservative, lack joy? If so, why are we so joyless? Claiborne suggests that many of us live under “a looming cloud of guilt” and have not fully embraced God’s gracious blessing. We may fear that we are responsible for fixing the world or may strive to keep up appearances of goodness. These are other ways of not fully trusting God’s grace. Recall the stories Claiborne tells of playful prophetic actions – of Don Miller and his friends dressing like monks and setting up ‘reverse’ confessional booths where they confessed their sins to anyone who was willing to listen and forgive, or of friends at the Camden House who dressed in sackcloth branded with the fruits of the Spirit and walked among both “the warmongers and Bush-bashers” at a war protest.
5. When we are confident of God’s gracious blessing and realize that we need not earn it, we are drawn to care for others like Jesus did. Discipleship follows grace, not the other way around. “The Beatitudes bounce around and challenge us to live like Jesus in our world, in our relationships,” Burleson says. “And having heard – core deep and deeper – that you are blessed of God, you will find yourself caring about everything else that Jesus said that day on the mountainside. What is more, you will seek it – meekness, peace, humility, mercy. Knowing that you have God’s blessing, you will live a life of blessing.”
6. Crosby says the indwelling of Jesus (or God’s Spirit – through an allusion to the “dove”) fills us with peace and love. Poverty of spirit – a deep awareness that we are unable to heal our own wounds of sin – is necessary to receive humbly this merciful indwelling. Encourage members to discuss how peace with ourselves and God, love, and poverty of spirit can make us less judgmental of one another.

### *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.

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