

*The Sermon on the Mount does not generate an ethic of nonviolence. Instead, it reveals that a community of nonviolence is necessary if the Sermon is rightly to be read and lived.*

# Living the Proclaimed Reign of God

*A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount*

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**THE RELATIONSHIP** between eschatology and ethics has been a frequent topic for discussion by biblical critics as well as by theologians and ethicists. Many suggestive moves have been made about how to resolve the tension between “the reign of God” and “ethics.” Although I have learned much from these suggestions, I offer this sermon as an attempt to challenge the very assumptions that created the assumed tension. This tension was created by divorcing the discourse of the Bible, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, from the practice of the church. One of these practices is, of course, preaching; and therefore I use a sermon to try to sketch the kind of life that God has made possible for Christians to live within the sphere of God’s reign.

## A Modest Proposal for Peace: Let the Christians of the World Agree That They Will Not Kill Each Other

So reads the poster and postcards distributed by the Mennonite Central Committee. I have the poster on my office door at the Divinity School. Occasionally, I have notes slipped under my door that say, “How dare you—why should Christians only refrain from killing other Christians? This is just another

example of Christian self-centeredness.” Sometimes someone will even knock and challenge me with the same set of thoughts. My response is always the same: “I agree that it would certainly be a good thing for Christians to stop killing anyone, but you have to start somewhere.”

After all, that is why this is a modest proposal. Just think, for example, if we had taken it seriously in Iraq. There are many Christians in Iraq. Could Christians who fled the bombers have accomplished their missions as readily if they had to think about where the Christians in Iraq were living?

However, before we get too involved with these questions, I need to say why I begin with the Mennonite proposal in what is supposed to be a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. I do so because I want to maintain that unless we are a people formed by a practice suggested by the proposal, we lack the resources properly to understand, much less live, the Sermon—which, by the way, ought to be the same thing.

In short, I want to maintain that the Sermon on the Mount presupposes the existence of a community constituted by the practice of nonviolence and that it is unintelligible divorced from such a community. Or, to put it as contentiously as I can, you cannot rightly read the Sermon on the Mount unless you are a pacifist. Now I know that this sounds threatening to many of you who think of yourselves as generally nonviolent—except (the except is then filled in in terms of defense of such things as, say, family or nation). I assume that means you are already a pacifist and we are just in an argument about exceptions, since you assume that those who use violence bear the burden of proof. “Just war” theory is, in this sense, a theory of exception for testing the small range of cases when violence might be tragically necessary.

By raising the issue of pacifism, I mean to suggest quite a different set of considerations. For example, I call myself a pacifist in public because I am obviously so violent. Hopefully, by creating expectations in you about me, you will help keep me faithful to what I know is true. In like manner, I want to suggest that the Sermon on the Mount constitutes and is constituted by a community that has learned that to live in this manner requires learning to trust in others to help me so live. In other words, the object of the Sermon on the Mount is to create dependence: It is to force us to need one another.

This means that the Sermon on the Mount obviously makes no sense to those not formed into that body called “church.” This is particularly the case in our society where we are told that what it means to be human is to be independent, to be able to take care of ourselves. So to interpret the Sermon on the Mount properly means that we must already be a people who are formed by community habits that those who do not worship Jesus Christ cannot be expected to have.

This way of approaching the Sermon is, of course, quite different from

many of the approaches to it in the Christian tradition. Those approaches are generally about helping us see why the Sermon is not meant to be taken literally. For example, some have said that the demands of the Sermon, particularly those associated with “You have heard, but I say to you . . .,” are only for the select few, the religious and the celibate, for instance. But there is no indication that Jesus so limited what he was saying. To accept it results in a two-tiered ethics that defies our understanding that the whole church is called to be holy.

A more common interpretation is that the Sermon is a law that presents an impossibly high ideal to drive us to a recognition of our sin. It is meant to drive us to grace. In other words, it is not really meant to tell us what to do but rather to remind us that Christian moral life is about love. This internalizes the Christian life so that what it means to be a Christian is to do whatever we do from the motive of love. “Love and do what you will”—bad advice if I have ever heard it! It has an even worse effect on christology; why would anyone ever have put Jesus to death if it is all just a matter of being loving?

Indeed, when we approach the Sermon primarily with the attitude, “Do we have to take this literally?” we lose sight of the fact that this is a sermon preached by Jesus. It makes all the difference who the proclaimer is, namely, Jesus, the Jesus who proclaimed the inauguration of a new age. And he does not just proclaim it, he is the inauguration of that age. The message of the Sermon cannot be separated, abstracted out, from the messenger. If Jesus is the eschatological Messiah, then he has made it possible, through his death and resurrection, for us to live in accordance with the life envisioned in the Sermon. The Sermon is but the form of his life, and his life is the prism through which the Sermon is refracted. In short, the Sermon does not appear impossible to a people who have been called to a life of discipleship that requires them to contemplate their death in the light of the cross.

Gene Davenport, in his wonderful book on the Sermon on the Mount, *Into the Darkness*, reminds us that

when the first hearers of Matthew’s Gospel heard Jesus’ call to suffer rather than to inflict suffering, to accept death rather than to inflict death, to reject all efforts to save themselves from their plight by military action and to leave their deliverance to God, they knew that the one who gave such scandalous instruction had himself lived and died in accord with that call.<sup>1</sup>

The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount is not one who extols an esoteric or naive or idealistic ethic—a way of life never tested or tried—but is one whose instruction sets forth the way of life that he himself embodied, the way of life that manifests God’s own life.

The Sermon was, as Davenport’s exposition makes clear, the wisdom of the new age, the wisdom of Light, which undercuts the wisdom of common society. Jesus is not teaching an “interim ethic” but is instead imparting a new ordering

for his followers. Such an ordering provides the skills for survival for those whose lives reflect the new age but who will continue to live amid the structural realities of the old age. Their living at once manifests the reality of the Light of the new age that illumines the darkness in which they must live.

Situated eschatologically as the Sermon is, the question of whether it is meant to be “taken literally” loses its power. The Sermon is the constitution of God’s kingdom people for their journey between the ages. They are a people who have learned to live without vengeance, seeing as they do that revenge is darkness. As Davenport observes,

The oppressed who show mercy on their oppressors do not know what effect their mercy will have. The result may be martyrdom. The Reign of God is still a hidden reign. On the other hand since God still opens the eyes of the blind, the result may be conversion. Either result holds out the possibility that at least some people, seeing, will recognize the good works and glorify God.<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us back to the relevance of the Mennonite proposal. The Mennonites are often, like Calvinists, accused of being legalistic because they assume that the Sermon is meant to be followed. Still, it is their contention that the Sermon is not a “law-like” code to be applied casuistically; instead, it is a description of the virtues of a community that embodies the peace that Christ has made possible among those who have been baptized into his death and resurrection. For example, they assume that, in relation to fault, the Sermon works in a community as determined by Matthew 18:15–20:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

In other words, the Mennonites assume the Sermon only makes sense in the context of a people committed to the process necessary for reconciliation to one another. In this regard, it is crucial here to remember that this is a body of people who have been trained to be forgiven. When we hear these passages, we always think of ourselves as the forgiver. But, remember, the Christian community is constituted by the forgiven. Only communities of people so formed are ca-

pable of supporting one another in the demanding task of forgiving the enemy, who too often turns out to be ourselves.

Moreover, it must be remembered that such forgiveness is a *practice* of reconciliation. "You are accepted" ("I'm O.K.; you're O.K.") may be good pop theology and/or psychology, but it is not the gritty reality of actual reconciliation characteristic of Christian repentance. As the awkward Reverend Emmett, of the Church of the Second Chance in Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe* tells Ian Bledsoe, who has asked to be forgiven for contributing to the possible suicide of his brother, "You can't just say, 'I'm sorry, God.' Why anyone could do that much! You have to offer reparation—concrete, practical reparation, according to the rules of our church."<sup>3</sup>

Ian resists, but submits by dropping out of college, taking responsibility for his brother's three orphaned children, and becoming a member of the Church of the Second Chance. His brother's death cannot be undone; but in the practice of living a reconciled life with others, he discovers he is made more than he otherwise would be. Forgiveness and reconciliation name the practice through which the church acquires a history that makes it be God's alternative to the hatred of self and others fueled by our fear of the acknowledgment of our sin.

When the Sermon is divorced from such ecclesial context, it cannot help but appear as an abstract law that comes from nowhere and is to be applied to equally anonymous individuals. But that is contrary to the fundamental presupposition of the Sermon, which is that individuals divorced from this community of the new age made possible by Christ are, of course, incapable of living the life the Sermon depicts. All the so-called "hard" sayings of the Sermon are designed to remind us that we cannot live without depending on the support and trust of others. We are told not to lay up treasure for ourselves, so we must learn to share. We are told not to be anxious, not to try to ensure our future, thus making it necessary to rely on one another for our food, our clothing, and our housing. We are told not to judge, thereby requiring that we live honestly and truthfully with one another. Such a people have no need to parade their piety because they know in a fundamental sense it is not theirs. Rather, the piety of the community capable of hearing and living by the Sermon is that which knows the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is possible only when a people have learned that their righteousness is a gift that God gives them through making them learn to serve one another.

Surely this is also the necessary presupposition for understanding the antitheses in Matthew 5. To be capable of living chastely, to marry without recourse to divorce, to live without the necessity of oaths, to refrain from returning evil with evil, to learn to love the enemy is surely impossible for isolated individuals. As individuals we can no more act in these ways than we can will not to be anxious. For the very attempt to will not to be anxious only creates anxiety. To be free of anxiety is possible only when we find ourselves part of a community that is con-

stituted by such a compelling adventure that we forget our fears in the joy of the new age. Richard Lischer puts it this way: “. . . the Sermon portrays a dynamic constellation of relationships—a kind of radicalized Canterbury Tales—within the pilgrim community. Because the pilgrims have experienced by faith the assurance of their destination, they are encouraged by its promise and guided by its rubrics.”<sup>4</sup>

The attempt to turn the Sermon into an ethic abstracted from the eschatological community cannot help but breed self-righteousness as well as ultimately make the gospel appear ridiculous. As Lischer puts it:

Our only hope of living as the community of the Sermon is to acknowledge that we do not retaliate, hate, curse, lust, divorce, swear, brag, preen, worry, or back-bite because it is not in the nature of our God or our destination that we should be such people. When we as individuals fail in these instances, we do not snatch up cheap forgiveness, but we do remember that the *ekklēsia* is larger than the sum of our individual failures and that it is pointed in a direction that will carry us away from them.<sup>5</sup>

The Sermon’s ecclesial presuppositions are nowhere more clearly confirmed than in the Beatitudes. There we see that the gospel is just the proclamation of a new set of relations made possible by a people being drawn into a new movement. The temptation is to read the Beatitudes as a list of virtues that good people ought to have or as deeds they ought to do. We thus think we ought to try to be meek, or poor, or hungry, or merciful, or peacemakers, or persecuted. Yet we know it is hard to try to be meek: One either is or is not. It is even more difficult to have all the characteristics of the Beatitudes at once!

Yet, that is not what it means to be blessed. Rather, the Beatitudes assume that there are already people in the community who find themselves in these postures. To be blessed does not mean that “if you are this way, you will be rewarded” but that happy are they who find that they are so constituted within the community. Moreover, the Beatitudes assume that we are part of a community with a diversity of gifts, a diversity that creates not envy but cooperation and love.

It is only against a background like this that we can begin to understand the illegitimacy of questions such as, “Does the Sermon on the Mount require me to be a pacifist?” The Christians that remembered the Sermon did not know they were pacifists. Rather, they knew, as a community, that they were part of a new way of resolving disputes, namely, through confrontation, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Peacemaking is not an abstract principle; instead, it is the practice of a community made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

There is nothing optimistic about such a practice. The Sermon does not promise that if we just love our enemies, they will no longer be our enemies. The Sermon does not promise that if we turn our right cheek, we will not be hit. The Sermon does not promise that if we simply act in accordance with its dic-

tates, the world will be free of war. But the Christian does not renounce war because he or she can expect intelligent citizens to rally around. They usually will not. The believer takes that stand because the defenseless death of the Messiah has been revealed for all time as the victory of faith that overcomes the world.

The Sermon does not generate an ethic of nonviolence; rather, it shows that a community of nonviolence is necessary if the Sermon is to be read rightly. Without such a community, the world literally has no way of knowing that all God's creation was meant to live in peace. There is, therefore, literally nothing more important that we can do for the world as Christians than to resolve not to kill one another. When we so live, the world will be able to see the Sermon on the Mount not as just another example of repressive law but as gospel. In short, as Christians, we will be called blessed.

#### NOTES

1 *Into the Darkness: Discipleship and the Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 15.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

3 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), p. 122.

4 *INTERP* 41 (April 1987), 161–62.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 163.



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