

The Sermon  
*on the*  
Mount  
— and —  
Human  
Flourishing

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

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# Introduction

## *An Overall Reading Strategy for the Sermon*

This book is a historical, literary, and theological exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). More specifically, I am providing a reading of the Sermon that situates it in the dual context of Jewish wisdom literature and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition, both of which are concerned with the great theological and existential question of human flourishing.

Many readers of this book will initially be interested only in the commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. This can be found in part 2, chapters 6–11. I hope that those expositional chapters will indeed serve as a help in interpreting the plain sense of the text of the Sermon and as a reference work to which readers can return.

However, I believe one’s reading of the Sermon (and of this book) will be impoverished if only those commentary sections are digested. This is because in the opening chapters of part 1 I lay out what I believe is the foundation for a good reading of the Sermon. The first five chapters are the guiding sketch by which the mosaic artist knows how to place each tessera to form the desired portrait the Sermon is painting. Or to change the metaphor, these initial chapters provide the map orientation for the complicated but scenic journey of ascending the mountain that is Matt. 5–7. To continue the analogy, the last chapter of this book, chapter 12 (part 3), then, will bring us safely back down from the Sermon’s mountain to the broad and spacious place of how the Sermon fits into the grand view of God’s redemptive work with a theological reflection on the topic of the book’s title, human flourishing.

All this to say, whether you are a pastor, scholar, student, or generalist, my point in writing this book is to provide not merely an expositional commentary but also an overall reading strategy and integrated theological interpretation of the Sermon. This book contains commentary with a different purpose: to provide an exposition of the message of the text as we have it in Matt. 5–7, sensitive to its historical setting, literary form, and theological point.

Before setting off on the journey, it will be beneficial to pause and take stock of how we got to this point and what the next leg of the trip should look like. We will do so by briefly considering several different readings of the Sermon throughout history.

## Readings of the Sermon in History

### *The Sermon on the Mount as Litmus Test*

Nearly every book on the Sermon begins with some discussion of the history of the interpretation of the Sermon. For some readers, the idea of studying the history of interpretation before looking at the Sermon itself may evoke the sentiments of Mark Twain: “The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”

Nevertheless, starting with the history of interpretation is indeed a worthwhile enterprise because understanding others’ thoughts before focusing on our own is an essential ingredient in the growth in knowledge and wisdom. As Hans-Georg Gadamer rightly states, “The recognition of the possibility that the other might be right is the heart of hermeneutics.”<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the study of the history of interpretation of the Sermon is not merely perfunctory nor the pickup game on the esoteric mental playground of the biblical scholar or historian. Quite the contrary, a discussion of how the Sermon has been read and applied over time is a fascinating and immediate window on many relevant theological issues. Because the Sermon has been the most commented upon portion of Scripture throughout the church’s history and because the Sermon contains so many weighty issues, it is both easy and informative to examine how the many different traditions of Christianity have read it.

Without exception, one’s reading of the Sermon says much about one’s understanding of Jesus and Christian theology. Indeed, in my years of studying

1. See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 124. Originally from Gadamer’s Heidelberg Colloquium on July 9, 1989.

the Sermon and its reception I have come to see that the Sermon serves as a great *litmus test* for any reader's broader theological commitments and understanding. The Sermon, standing as it does as the first teaching of the new-covenant documents, likewise reveals much about how one understands several issues of theology and Christian practice. Views on a wide range of issues are revealed in one's reaction to the Sermon, including the role of the law in the new covenant, what role virtue plays in one's ethical system (if any), the importance of acts of piety in the Christian life, the relationship between faith and works, one's eschatological orientation or lack thereof, the function of suffering in the Christian life, and the idea of God as Father, to name a few.

Because the Sermon has been so beloved and well used throughout church history, the different ways of reading the Sermon are legion.<sup>2</sup> The researcher knows he or she is in deep water when discovering that there is not only an unmanageable amount of secondary material on the Sermon but also a cottage industry of tertiary work that organizes and summarizes the secondary literature. That is, there is a felt need not only for scholarship on the Sermon but also scholarship on the works of various scholars/theologians on the Sermon. In fact, these taxonomical surveys of the history of the interpretation of the Sermon are of great value and well worth reading.<sup>3</sup> Shorter versions can be found in most commentaries on the Sermon as well.<sup>4</sup> I will offer a very brief summary here for the purpose of getting to my own suggested overall reading of the Sermon.

In his interesting book from 1960, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, Harvey K. MacArthur discusses twelve of the attempted answers to the question of how to apply and understand the Sermon, and he quips that these might be called "Versions and Evasions of the Sermon on the Mount." Ironically in light of how influential the Sermon has been throughout church

2. See further, H. K. MacArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 11. From the earliest days of the church, the Sermon has been the most commented upon and expositied portion of the Bible. In the indices to the fathers of the first three centuries one will find Matt. 5 is quoted far more frequently than any other, and chaps. 5-7 are quoted far more frequently than any other three consecutive chapters. The same trend continues in the modern period, with countless commentaries and sermons not only on Matthew but also specifically on the Sermon.

3. Jeffrey P. Greenman, Timothy Larsen, and Stephen R. Spencer, eds., *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). One of the beefiest is Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), in which he gives a detailed discussion of nineteen major interpretive views just spanning the period from Leo Tolstoy (late nineteenth century) to the 1970s.

4. See esp. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 177-81.

history, many today could be rightly charged with neglecting and avoiding the Sermon. As Glen Stassen and David Gushee argue in their book, *Kingdom Ethics*, Christians often evade Jesus, especially what he says in the Sermon. The result is not good: “This evasion of the concrete teachings of Jesus has seriously malformed Christian moral practices, moral beliefs and moral witness. Jesus taught that the test of our discipleship is whether we act on his teachings, whether we ‘put into practice’ his words. This is what it means to ‘build our house on rock’ (Mt. 7:24).”<sup>5</sup>

Part of the reason there are so many interpretations (or evasions) of the Sermon is that the Sermon itself *creates* problems for serious readers. There is the simple problem of its incredibly high demands and the apparent impossibility of doing what it says fully and consistently. Related to this is the question of legalism: If one were to take the Sermon seriously as the entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven, then is this not a kind of anti-gospel legalism, and is this not exactly what Paul labors so greatly against in his epistles? How does obeying Jesus’s teachings in the Sermon fit into the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith? Related to this, what does “righteousness” mean in the Sermon as compared to Paul’s usage in his writings? Another problem the Sermon raises is how we are to understand these teachings from the new Moses (Jesus) in relation to what the old Moses said in the Torah/the Law, given on that other mountain much earlier. This is an important question to ask regarding the relationship of the new covenant to the old in general, but it is made very pointed by the content of the Sermon itself, which explicitly says that Jesus has not come to abolish the Law (5:17), yet he clearly reinterprets it in significant ways.

So the point is again that a careful reading of the Sermon creates theological, pastoral, and practical problems. It is to these problems that the various interpretations speak, and to these we can now turn in brief.

### *Readings from the Patristic and Medieval Periods*

We must begin by noting that broadly speaking, in the patristic period, both in the East and West, the Sermon was *not* perceived as problematic. Quite the contrary, the Sermon was seen as paradigmatic and foundational to understanding Christianity itself, coming as it does as the first teaching in the First Gospel, in the fourfold Gospel book that served as the primary locus of understanding of the faith.<sup>6</sup> Representative of this dominant view is

5. Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 11.

6. For a number of arguments supporting the central role that the Gospels played in the earliest church, see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological*

John Chrysostom, who saw the Sermon as completely in accord with Paul's teachings and as providing the vision for the *politeia* or kingdom community that Christ is establishing in and through his people.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the great and influential Augustine wrote an entire commentary on the Sermon, seeing it as "the perfect measure of the Christian life."<sup>8</sup> Obviously the later Protestant wrestling with how Jesus's teaching might fit into (a Lutheran reading of) Paul had not yet been perceived as problematic. In general, the patristic interpretation of the Sermon can be summarized as a natural and comfortably consistent reading flowing out of the hellenized Jewish setting in which the Sermon was produced, one that focuses especially on the Sermon as casting a foundational vision for the virtuous Christian life.

As Christianity developed and became the official religion of a widespread area, a common reading strategy emerged and was practiced in many monastic traditions, especially in the West. This interpretation of the Sermon came from and perpetuated the widespread notion that there are two kinds of Christians—the monks and priests who have a special religious calling, and the average lay Christian people who make up the masses of baptized but otherwise minimally Christian churchgoers. In this understanding, the teachings of Jesus are divided up into "precepts" and "counsels," with the precepts being necessary for all people for salvation, while obedience to the counsels is necessary if one wants to achieve perfection and the higher calling. It is not difficult to see how this relates to the dominant Catholic tradition in the West, with its developing priestly class. This formalized distinction between the universal commandments applicable to all people (*praecepta*) and the *consilia evangelica*, which are relevant only to the clergy and certain spiritually qualified people, still exists in the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>9</sup> The most extreme form of this is found in the vigorous monastic reformer Rupert of Deutz, who argued that salvation by grace is for the laity and secular clergy

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*Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 229–58. One strong example of this view is Cyril of Alexandria, who argues that the Gospels are the most central part of Scripture because the Son speaks in an unmediated fashion. See chap. 4 of Matthew R. Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

7. See Margaret Mitchell, "John Chrysostom," in Greenman, Larsen, and Spencer, *Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, 19–42.

8. Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount* 1.1.1, trans. John J. Epton (London: Longman and Green, 1948). Augustine's reading of the Sermon will be influential throughout this book (even if not often quoted explicitly) because of the virtue ethic and human flourishing approach that he models.

9. This does not appear to be Augustine's position, nor even that of Thomas Aquinas, who remains a moderate Augustinian. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, questions 107–8, where he says that the Sermon is the *nova lex* for all Christians, in both its precepts and counsels, and he quotes Augustine to this effect.



while salvation through the works of the Sermon is for the zealous monks.<sup>10</sup> While certainly not all theologians of Roman Catholic tradition would draw the lines the same way as Rupert, the basic view of two levels of Christians can still be found pervasively in this tradition.

### *Readings from the Reformation Period*

In contrast to the Catholic idea of two levels of Christians, the Protestant Reformers emphasized the opposite—the priesthood of *all* believers and justification by faith for *all*.<sup>11</sup> And for Martin Luther the Sermon on the Mount was likewise the perfect battlefield for defining his understanding of the gospel over against his Roman contemporaries. For Luther, the Sermon does not present special teachings that some special people can obtain, but quite the opposite: it is the impossibly high demands of the Sermon that are meant to make all people aware of their sin and poverty before God and thereby turn to Christ in faith. Like the old-covenant law, the Sermon is a preparation for the gospel, the prime example of Luther’s ubiquitous law-gospel hermeneutical paradigm.<sup>12</sup> Dale Allison calls this reading of the Sermon “The Impossible Ideal” view.<sup>13</sup> The standard of the Sermon is set so high that it casts us back upon grace. Understandably, this reading of the Sermon does not result in a positive, constructive use for the Sermon, as it is viewed primarily in negative terms. Intended or not, this view, which stands in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic monastic interpretation, contributes to the neglect, evasion, or at least confusion regarding the Sermon in much of the Protestant tradition.<sup>14</sup>

10. Benedict Viviano, “The Sermon on the Mount in Recent Study,” in *Matthew and His World: The Gospel of the Open Jewish Christians; Studies in Biblical Theology* (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 53. See especially Brigitta Stoll’s major work, *De Virtute in virtutem: Zur Auslegungs- und Wirkungsgeschichte der Bergpredigt in Kommentaren, Predigten und hagiographischer Literatur von der Merowingerzeit bis um 1200* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988).

11. Related, as Servais Pinckaers observes, was the shift in the late medieval period from understanding ethics as about human flourishing to ethics as about law-abidingness (via the Manualists) that shaped Luther’s reaction. See Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001–3), 32–41.

12. As is typical with influential thinkers, Luther himself was a bit more nuanced on the positive use of the Sermon than the Lutheranism that followed him, though his bombastic and prophetic rhetoric on law versus gospel set the trajectory for this contrastive view of the Sermon. See Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); and the discussion in chap. 12 below.

13. Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 5.

14. One reading that relates to the Lutheran view, though its origins may not be directly from it, is that of classical dispensationalism, a primarily American, fundamentalist form of Christianity that had a widespread influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For

By way of comparison, we may note a couple of Protestant views contemporary with Luther that take a different tack. One is that of the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. The varied interpretations of the Sermon again provide great insight into an important difference between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions here, with the latter's emphasis on the "third use of the Law." That is, the Reformed tradition does not emphasize such a great law-gospel contrast but rather teaches that there is a productive use of law/covenantal instructions understood in the context of grace. This allows for a slightly different reading of the Sermon than Luther's. In Calvin's reading of the Sermon we see Jesus rescuing the law of God from the Pharisees, who emphasized its external acts instead of its heart. The Sermon is the compendium of the doctrine of Christ, the new-covenant law. Unlike Luther's negative reading, for Calvin the Sermon can be fulfilled by Christians not in the flesh but by the grace given through the Holy Spirit, through dependence on God alone. We are weak, but God grants us what we need to obey him.<sup>15</sup>

In their interpretation of the Sermon, both Luther and Calvin were interacting with and reacting to the other major early Protestant reading, that of the Anabaptists. By way of contrast to both the Roman Catholic tradition and the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, the Anabaptists (whence come the Amish and Mennonite traditions), emphasized the radical, literal reading of the Sermon. Key to the theological and practical outworking of this branch of Christianity is indeed an application of the Sermon with no exceptions. Thus, the Anabaptist tradition has typically advocated the rejection of oaths of any kind, encouraged the nonviolence of turning the other cheek, and applied other literalistic readings of the Sermon.<sup>16</sup>

Luther himself, as well as those in his tradition, was very aware of this Anabaptist reading and found it not only mistaken but even dangerous to

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classical dispensationalists, the Sermon is not applicable to Christians today because it comes from a pre-Christian "dispensation," during the period of the law (from Sinai to Calvary), not from the period of grace (Calvary to the parousia). Therefore, the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is speaking about in the Sermon was the offer of a millennial kingdom to Jews. As a result, its teachings do not apply to Christians at all, even as an impossibly high ideal.

15. I am in debt to Charles Quarles's helpful, brief summary of Calvin in his *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 8. See also Scott Spencer, "John Calvin," in Greenman, Larsen, and Spencer, *Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, 129–52.

16. A helpful and insightful understanding of this way of reading the Sermon can be found in Stanley Hauerwas's essay on John Howard Yoder and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Greenman, Larsen, and Spencer, *Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, 207–22. As an important aside, note that the Lutheran Bonhoeffer, as part of his emphasis on the "visible" church as opposed to an "inward" or pietistic view of Christianity, came to reject the private-public distinction that had developed in Lutheranism.

society. As a result, Luther provided another important way of reading the Sermon in addition to his “Impossible Ideal” reading. This may be called the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. Luther was concerned about a renunciation of society and withdrawal from the world, something he saw in both the Anabaptist tradition and monastic Roman Catholicism. His Two Kingdoms view sought to circumvent this while also recognizing how the Sermon applied to everyone. A distinction is made between the spiritual/private realm and the civil/public realm.<sup>17</sup> The Sermon speaks to the former, to individual morality; it does not prescribe public policy. One implication is that a Christian may do something as a member of society or officer of the public that one would not be allowed as an individual (e.g., capital punishment). That is, as a Christian one must not retaliate, but as a lawyer or prince or householder one can and indeed must uphold justice and order.<sup>18</sup> As pragmatically helpful as this view is in many ways, in effect Luther ended up with yet another version of the counsels-versus-precepts bifurcation, splitting not some people into each category but each person into both. Instead of the dualism of two kinds of people, the result is a two-realms dualism, splitting one’s attitudes from one’s actions.<sup>19</sup> This goes against the whole-person focus that we will see appear as the dominant theme in the Sermon.

The Roman Catholic tradition, by way of contrast, has tended to interpret the Sermon in terms of virtue formation (for some or for all), with numerous manifestations depending on the assorted branches within the Roman Catholic Church and their various theological and cultural influences. A Thomistic reading, which emphasizes a Christian understanding of virtue ethics and development, probably remains the most influential way to read the Sermon, tied closely as it always is to Catholic moral theology.

### *Readings from the Modern Period*

With all the countless ways the modern period has affected and shaped our present understanding of Christianity, contemporary Christians have also wrestled with the radical nature of the Sermon’s teachings. As a result, we

17. A recent attempt at revising this Two Kingdoms view from within a more Reformed perspective can be found in David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), though it is debated whether this is truly a Reformed view or not, especially in relation to Abraham Kuyper. See, e.g., John M. Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011).

18. For a deeper understanding of this influential understanding, see Susan Schreiner, “Martin Luther,” in Greenman, Larsen, and Spencer, *Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, 109–28.

19. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 130.

have a panoply of modern readings of the Sermon. These include what might be termed the “existential” reading, which focuses on one’s inner intentions. As Dale Allison describes this view, the Sermon doesn’t prescribe laws but “speaks instead to the individual about attitudes and internal dispositions.”<sup>20</sup> It is about what we should *be*, not what we should do. One helpful version of this is that of Søren Kierkegaard, who emphasized a way of reading Scripture that caused an awakening or existential crisis / honesty about one’s self before God.<sup>21</sup> Other modern readers, often moving away from traditional Christian views, have argued that the Sermon is the entirety of the gospel message. That is, rather than the traditional emphasis on sin and atonement, redemption, and supernatural new birth, the Sermon provides a vision for better humans and a better human society, with Jesus as the great misunderstood philosopher. This is the enduring value of the Sermon for many. Somewhere in between these readings are assorted ways in which readers have sought to take seriously the Sermon but modified its tone in a variety of ways—noting the hyperbolic nature of Jesus’s commands that need to be toned down in real life or seeing Jesus as teaching general moral principles through specific illustrations that are not to be taken literally or absolutely.<sup>22</sup>

Another reading from within the Dutch Reformed tradition is that of Herman Ridderbos. It is worth reviewing here not because it has been particularly influential but because it is insightful and shows the complexity of issues at hand, which many of the other views do not take into account. We may term this way of interpreting the Sermon the “fulfillment-complexity” reading. In Ridderbos’s essay “The Significance of the Sermon on the Mount,” he presents a sophisticated reading of the Sermon that involves a few steps of thought.<sup>23</sup>

First, Ridderbos points out the central importance of Matt. 5:17, where Jesus states that he came to “fulfill” the law. He understands this to mean that Jesus fulfills the law by his teaching; that is, he demonstrates the true content and purpose of the law. Next we must recognize that God’s law (in

20. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 6.

21. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Judge for Yourselves*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 21 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Kierkegaard’s favorite section of Scripture was the book of James, which is organically related and conceptually similar to the Sermon, calling us to look into the mirror of God’s revelation and not forget it when we walk away. See Richard Bauckham, *James* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–10. See also David Crump, *Encountering Jesus, Encountering Scripture: Reading the Bible Critically in Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

22. See Charles Talbert’s helpful summary of MacArthur in *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 29, 45.

23. Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 26–43.

the Old and New Testaments) is not just meant to be external, but that God has always also been concerned with the inner disposition, with the heart. Thus far Ridderbos is clearly following Calvin's lead. He goes on to note that we must also observe that the law is very complex, that righteousness calls for different applications of the law at different times. For example, we can consider the love of a father for his child. This love will be expressed differently at different times according to the need, sometimes firm, sometimes gracious. From an external perspective it may look inconsistent, but it is in fact all from the same love.

From this Ridderbos observes that Jesus did not exclude or overturn this many-sided character of the law. In his own life he modeled this true application of the law in different circumstances—sometimes not resisting evil (e.g., in his own crucifixion) while at other times violently resisting it, as seen in his conflicts with the Pharisees and scribes. He is both a lion and a lamb, and both spring from the same root, the Law and the Prophets, from the necessity of the one law looking different in different circumstances. Therefore, Ridderbos argues, we must not limit the extent of the validity of the Sermon in any way. The significance of the Sermon lies in the fact that the will of God, as it is revealed in his law, strives to be fulfilled in the full, rich sense that Jesus gave that word. “On the other hand, we should not give a priori and unrestricted validity to all the *concrete commandments* of Jesus, as if he meant to express the entire volume of the law in a few concise commandments.”<sup>24</sup> For example, the commandment not to swear is addressed against Pharisaical casuistry of his day but is not intended to overturn all pious oaths as are found in the Old Testament; all of Jesus's teachings must be understood truly and correctly as in full accordance with the Law and the Prophets because of Matt. 5:17. Ridderbos concludes by observing that only such an interpretation can rightly keep together the teachings of the kingdom and real life. Otherwise, these two are wrongly separated. In many ways Ridderbos's reading is a typical Reformed approach with a more robust sense of the need to contextualize ethics in an ongoing way. He does not use the language of “virtue” (nor its robust tradition of reflection), but there is some overlap.

### *Non-Western and Non-Caucasian Readings*

We should note that all of the readings above come from the European tradition of Christianity. This is understandable because of my own situatedness as an author as well as the massive influence that Christianity had

24. Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come*, 39.

on the West for nearly two thousand years. However, as the center of global Christianity continues to shift both south and east, we will be wise to hear from perspectives beyond those that are Western and Caucasian.

It is often not easy in the Anglophone world to get access to non-Western views, however, because there are still relatively few works written in English that reflect a more global perspective. Moreover, getting a full sense of non-Western perspectives on the Sermon proves difficult because our access to them typically only comes from Western-produced and Western-influenced modern commentaries.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in a variation on the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the very access that we have to these perspectives skews and changes them because the access point is usually only given through scholars who have been trained in the West (or under Western influence) writing in a very Western form and style. Nonetheless, we are beginning to make progress in hearing other voices. What follows are a few comments I have gleaned from various sources.

In a fascinating essay John Y. H. Yieh offers an analysis of how three different twentieth-century Chinese Christians read and appropriated the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>26</sup> Yieh thoughtfully sets each of these interpreters into their social context and shows that, while there are differences in their readings (based mostly on their different theological convictions), what is consistent among their readings of the Sermon is that “they treat the Sermon on the Mount first and foremost as a morality text and take it for granted that character formation of the reader is the very final goal of their biblical interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> Yieh points out that this focus on character formation is typical of the Chinese intellectual tradition, especially in the educational program of Confucianism.

From a South Korean perspective, the Sermon on the Mount is mostly read in the churches with a focus on the “blessings” of the Beatitudes. Specifically, with the massive growth of the church in South Korea has come a heavy influence of the health and wealth gospel. In this context the Sermon is read with a skewed emphasis on getting blessings from God: the “Eight Blessing” program

25. Some recent attempts at bringing a more global perspective on the Bible to the West, albeit in a modern, Western commentary genre are: Daniel Patte, ed., *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Brian K. Blount, ed., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Brian Wintle, ed., *South Asia Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

26. John Y. H. Yieh, “Reading the Sermon on the Mount in China: A Hermeneutical Inquiry into Its History of Reception,” in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chlöe Starr (London: T&T Clark, 2008): 143–62.

27. *Ibid.*, 157.

based on the Beatitudes read in a materialistic way. At the same time, due to the influence of the West on Korean churches and theology, there is a strong ethical and at times even Lutheran impossible-ideal reading.<sup>28</sup>

Moving farther south in Asia, it is difficult to quantify how distinct the readings of the Sermon are today. In the new *Southeast Asia Bible Commentary*, the notes on Matt. 5–7 are almost entirely typical commentary-style interpretations peppered with a few references to South Asian figures and ideas, including Gandhi, fatalism, and practices in Asian religions.<sup>29</sup> Much more penetrating in insight is a brief essay by R. S. Sugirtharajah on the reappropriation of the Sermon by two influential Indian thinkers, Raja Rammohun Roy and Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>30</sup> Sugirtharajah notes that the Sermon was very influential for both of these Hindu thinkers as they sought to understand true religion in the midst of colonial Christian influence and missions activity. They both found in the Sermon the ingredients of true religion, which was not about doctrines and beliefs but about ethical practices of truth and nonviolence. Neither had any interest in the historical Jesus or much else of the Bible (even the rest of Matthew), but instead they integrated their piecemeal reading of the Sermon into a broader view of ethics rooted in the Hindi Scriptures. In this way they could dialogue with (and even try to persuade) both British colonials and Indian Christians using this mutually cherished Sermon.

The *Africa Bible Commentary* is similar in form to the *South Asia Commentary* and likewise provides Western-style commentary. It does highlight several ways in which African peoples see different emphases in the Sermon. For example, the Beatitudes are more properly understood (at least by the particular commentator) as being macaristic statements about the state of happiness rather than divine blessings (see chap. 2 in this book). The idea of being a peacemaker (Matt. 5:9) plays a much larger and more tangible role in many countries that have been plagued by genocide and other forms of violence. Also, discussion of money and wealth (6:19–34) takes on a different sense in postcolonial nations that are influenced by Western consumption habits while lacking many of the natural resources and infrastructure of Western capitalism. Teachings on wealth and subsistence living sound very different to the African ear than to the Westerner today, probably much closer to how these teachings would have been understood in first-century Galilee.

28. This information comes to me from the analysis of the use of the Sermon in South Korean churches by my PhD student Choongjae Lee, a native Korean who has been educated both in South Korea and in the United States.

29. Wintle, *South Asia Bible Commentary*, 1230–37.

30. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Matthew 5–7: The Sermon on the Mount and India,” in Patte, *Global Bible Commentary*, 361–66.

Within the West another voice to be heard is that of the African American community. The edited volume *True to Our Native Land* provides an African American commentary on the New Testament.<sup>31</sup> The comments on the Sermon again reveal many similarities to other commentaries, yet certain emphases are distinct. For example, in the discussion of the first Beatitude there is a much more nuanced and sensitive discussion of what it means to experience poverty than is typical in modern commentaries. It is not just a matter of money or powerlessness. “Poverty was a social category and not just an economic one.”<sup>32</sup> Matthew 5:21–48 is likewise understood from a different perspective, as being instructions about how to overcome violence and evil not with retaliation but with repentance, reconciliation, and generosity.<sup>33</sup> In discussing the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the commentator notes that readers should be reminded that we need to assist God in creating a good society, not letting evil continue by sitting back and doing nothing, an important way in which the African American community has led the charge.<sup>34</sup> Taken together, these non-Western and non-Caucasian voices remind us that all readings of the Sermon (including those in the West) are contextualized readings, interpretations that are inevitably situated in particular cultures and times and worldviews. This review of how the Sermon has been read is brief and cannot explore the many nuances that comprise the ways Christians have wrestled with and applied the Sermon. I have painted here only with the broadest brush, though I trust the general contours can be identified. From the bird’s-eye perspective, the most important observation is that each of these views offers insight into the complexity of the Sermon. We cannot simply identify one of these readings as right and the others as all wrong. Each has a contribution to make to our understanding.

There are multiple ways we can and should approach the Sermon and, therefore, multiple beneficial readings to be offered. This is not to say, however, that each reading is equally beneficial or insightful. Some are indeed better than others. I will offer in this book my own reading, which I obviously believe has

31. Blount, *True to Our Native Land*.

32. Michael Joseph Brown, “Matthew,” in Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 91.

33. Brown’s comments on the Sermon are excellent and insightful overall, yet I am also perplexed by a passing comment that the reference to disciples having their own houses with prayer rooms reflects the “middle class attitude” of Matthew’s Gospel, which may account for “its historic lack of popularity among African Americans” (*ibid.*, 93). My lack of understanding of what Brown might mean is likely a function of my own lack of cultural contextualization.

34. It is not an accident that Bonhoeffer’s own conversion via reading the Sermon on the Mount and his decision to fight anti-Semitism in Germany was a direct result of his witnessing the racial tensions and work of African Americans for civil rights in New York in 1930–31. See Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Random House, 2014).



something to offer beyond—and sometimes in stark contrast to—what has already been said. Nonetheless, the best readings of the Sermon will remain sensitive to the voices and perspectives of others.

## An Overall Reading Strategy for the Sermon: Human Flourishing

Fundamentally, this entire book seeks to provide the answer to the question that has just been raised from our survey of the history of interpretation: *What is the Sermon really saying theologically and practically?* Acknowledging that there is much benefit in multiple ways of reading the Sermon, I want to suggest that there is a general reading strategy for the Sermon that both makes sense of its many parts *and* accomplishes the highest goal of reading, to be of benefit to the reader.

Because the entirety of this book is an incarnational unfolding of what I think this best-practices reading strategy is and because the point of the current chapter is introductory, I will only offer a sketch of what this overall reading is. Chapters 1–5 will unpack and articulate this vision with argumentation and clarification, and chapter 12 will round out the discussion more fully. Sandwiched in the middle in chapters 6–11 is the exposition of the text that will also point to the same questions.

The argument of this book is that the Sermon is Christianity's answer to the greatest metaphysical question that humanity has always faced—*How can we experience true human flourishing?* What is happiness, blessedness, *šālôm*, and how does one obtain and sustain it? The Sermon is not the only place in the New Testament or whole Bible that addresses this fundamental question. I would suggest that this question is at the core of the entire message of Scripture. But the Sermon is at the epicenter and, simultaneously, the forefront of Holy Scripture's answer.

Some readings of the Sermon in Christian history have touched on this in part, but none has provided an integrated reading of the parts and the whole of the Sermon from this perspective. The overall reading strategy I am suggesting, then, is twofold: (1) providing a thematic way to understand the Sermon as one integrated message, and (2) providing a vision for the whole purpose of reading the Sermon.

In the first instance, the argument of this book will be that the Sermon's answer to the human-flourishing question is that true human flourishing is only available through communion with the Father God through his revealed Son, Jesus, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. This flourishing is only experienced through faithful, heart-deep, whole-person discipleship, following

Jesus's teachings and life, which situate the disciple into God's community or kingdom. This flourishing will only be experienced fully in the eschaton, when God finally establishes his reign upon the earth. As followers of Jesus journey through their lives, they will experience suffering in this world, which in God's providence is in fact a means to true flourishing even now.

In short, Jesus provides in the Sermon a *Christocentric, flourishing-oriented, kingdom-awaiting, eschatological wisdom exhortation*. My aim in this book is not to force a virtue or human-flourishing reading onto the Sermon but instead to show that understanding these themes—particularly flourishing through wholeness—makes the most sense of the theology of the Sermon and gives us clear footholds to ascend its heights.

It is important to note that this dual emphasis on human flourishing/wisdom and God's coming kingdom is not merely coincidental. Rather, in accord with both the Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions (and more broadly in the ancient world), a king was understood to be the "living law," the leading sage/philosopher who rules and rules righteously *precisely because he* (or she in the case of a great queen) *is the epitome of wisdom and virtue*. Within the Jewish tradition one can immediately think of David and the original "son of David," Solomon, who are depicted as great kings (though ultimately flawed) precisely because they ruled and reigned with such *wisdom*. The Greek (and broader ancient) tradition is even more explicit along the lines of this necessity for a good king. "One role of the ideal king in antiquity is to embody the law internally and to produce good legislation that transforms the people and leads them in obedience to the law."<sup>35</sup> The ideal king is the virtuous one who himself imitates the gods, becoming an animate or living law, which then produces harmony for his subjects.<sup>36</sup>

My point is that these themes of virtue leading to human flourishing and the kingdom of God are mutually informing and deeply related. In the Sermon we meet a person who is simultaneously the fulfillment and incarnation of both; he is the complete and virtuous human and the true king. Thus, a human flourishing reading of the Sermon (which itself is indisputably about the kingdom) is not a foreign interpolation but in fact makes sense in the ancient world.

In the second case, and organically related to the first, I am suggesting that the best overall approach to the purpose of reading the Sermon is aretegenic and *pros ophelimon*. By "aretegenic" I mean "for the purpose of forming character or virtue (*aretē*)."<sup>37</sup> The reason teachers teach and preachers preach and

35. Josh Jipp, *Christ Is King: Paul's Royal Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 45.

36. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

37. Readers familiar with my *Reading the Gospels Wisely* may recall that I argue that a key aspect of the overall purpose of the Gospels is aretegenic, which I defined as "for the purpose

philosophers philosophize is so that their hearers will grow in understanding, affection, and orientation, and thereby change for the betterment of themselves and those around them. Thus, our reading of the Sermon, which is clearly focused on providing a vision for a way of being in the world, should naturally and rightly be focused on reading for the purpose of being transformed. All other readings, as beneficial as they can be—historical, literary, dogmatic, political, postcolonial, grammatical, linguistic, text-critical—are at best steps toward the highest form of reading, reading for personal transformation.<sup>38</sup>

By *pros ophelimon* I mean a reading strategy that focuses on what is most useful or *beneficial*. This Greek phrase comes by way of the excellent work of Margaret Mitchell on the practice of scriptural interpretation in earliest Christianity.<sup>39</sup> Mitchell argues that in the patristic period and beyond there was an awareness that good interpretation of Holy Scripture resided in “a carefully calibrated balance among three cardinal virtues of ancient textual interpretation.” These are *akribeia* (“precision,” “keen attention”), a close examination of what the text says in whole and in part; *ōpheleia* (benefit), an awareness of the *benefit* for present readers; and *epieikeia* (clemency), which seeks to keep the two in balance.<sup>40</sup> In the following exposition of the Sermon I seek this same approach: I will wrestle with details of the text large and small but always pull back to ask the big-purpose question regarding what is the most beneficial reading.

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of developing virtue.” My suggestion here is the same, though I am changing terms to one that better fits and that I gladly acquired from Ellen Charry—“aretegenic.” This word describes reading and study that generates or inculcates virtue (*aretē*) in the recipient. See Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16–19.

38. Markus Bockmuehl provides a helpful sketch of the characteristics of the “ideal reader” of the New Testament, one that we can assume the NT authors expect as the model. This ideal reader has a personal stake in the truth claims of the text, has undergone a religious, moral, and intellectual conversion, takes the NT as authoritative, is ecclesially situated, and is assumed to be inspired in the sense of filled with the Spirit (Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 68–74). This sketch accords well with the voice of the NT, and I think that it leads well into an understanding of reading for the purpose of personal transformation.

39. Margaret Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

40. *Ibid.*, 108.

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## The Encyclopedic Context of the Sermon

### **Base Camp: Understanding the Encyclopedic Context (with Help from Umberto Eco)**

Any wise mountain climber spends thoughtful time in preparation before beginning the ascent. This preparation involves many elements, including mental and physical training, analyzing the goal, collecting equipment, and finding a good guide. All of this ultimately comes together at the foot of the mountain in the base camp.

This chapter is the base camp for our ascent of the Sermon on the Mount. In this base camp I will provide a reconnaissance of the mount that lies before us and how best to approach it. This reconnaissance reveals that to reach the highest vistas of the Sermon we must become competent readers who understand the encyclopedic context in which the Sermon exists.

Everything is in a context. This sentence, this paragraph, this chapter, this book, and its title all exist in a printed context. This is literary context. There are other contexts as well. There is the original context of me sitting on my red couch early one Sunday morning, before anyone else in my house is awake, writing that sentence. There are several later contexts of me revising this paragraph, each with their own historical situatedness. There is the context of the now, a very different one: your context as a reader. Your place in time and space makes your context different from mine as the writer. My writing exists in the complex context of my whole life up to this point;

your reading does too, with your life. Today is shaped and formed by all the days that came before it, turtles stacked on top of each other from the foundation of the world until this moment. If you come back and read this paragraph again sometime in the future, while its compositional context and intent will not have changed, much else will have, resulting in a different contextual reading.

One of the most insightful thinkers who can help us understand the importance of these multiple contexts is Umberto Eco, especially in terms of his notions of the context of the cultural encyclopedia and the Model Reader. Eco, famous for his voluminous and influential output of everything from best-selling novels to technical works on translation theory, was a semiotician. Semiotics is a branch of literary and linguistic study that focuses on how signs and symbols function in human communication.<sup>1</sup> His academic work focuses on how language works to communicate meaning through cultural signs and phenomena.<sup>2</sup> This is where the idea of contexts becomes so important for reading and interpreting any text, such as the Sermon.

Eco is a heavyweight thinker who steps into the ring of a heated, long, and highly publicized fight between theorists on how to interpret literature and how meaning occurs. At the risk of oversimplification, in one corner are those who emphasize the role of the author who produced the original text. In the other corner are those who suggest that the reader plays the determinative role in meaning production. Again, with some unfortunate but necessary oversimplification, this could be called the difference between objectivism and subjectivism or modernism and postmodernism, between authorial intent and reader response, when these categories are applied to the interpretation of texts (hermeneutics).

Eco's position, which comes to greater clarity and strength over the course of his long career, is unique and provides a helpful way forward on these complicated debates. In short, Eco recognizes the complexity of the experience

1. For further study on semiotics, see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); and Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

2. The following summary is heavily dependent on the fine work of Leroy Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), with some additional thoughts from Ross Wagner, *Reading the Sealed Book: Old Greek Isaiah and the Problem of Septuagint Hermeneutics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Another helpful and somewhat different appropriation of Eco in biblical studies can be found in Heath Thomas, *Poetry and Theology in Lamentations: The Aesthetics of an Open Text*, Hebrew Bible Monographs (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013). Further exploration can also be found in Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy A. Huizenga, eds., *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), esp. chaps. 1 and 14.

of reading and how different cultural contexts and traditions affect what one discerns in a text and what resonances it evokes. Yet in contrast to much of literary theory today, Eco insists on the importance of *intention* in the creation of a text and on the historical situatedness of the author, who exists in a particular time and place. This puts Eco at odds with much of postmodern literary theory, including that of the poststructuralists and even other semi-oticians.<sup>3</sup> One cannot simply use a text to say whatever one wants—well, of course, one can do that, but this is not a good theory for literature or a good practice if one wants to *interpret* texts. One cannot ignore the author as if he or she has no role in the meaning: the “words brought by the author are a rather embarrassing bunch of material evidences [if one is trying to ignore them] that the reader cannot pass over in silence, or in noise.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, “interpreting texts involves discerning the nature of the text, the very intent of the text, composed of words and strings of words that have conventional meanings and functions.”<sup>5</sup>

Eco’s unique contribution is that he provides a model for how this text-focused reading relates to the complexity of the enculturated nature of language and communication and the experience of readers. The key to understanding what Eco is saying here is his idea of “encyclopedic competence.” Eco argues that the meaning of words and phrases should not be approached with a *dictionary* model, where understanding of the language is stored in the dictionary while knowledge of the real world—its culture, history, beliefs—is stored separately, in the *encyclopedia*. On the contrary, Eco shows that we can never “sever language from its location and function within a cultural framework.” Language is a social phenomenon and thus *real*, not abstract and ideal.<sup>6</sup> Communication and texts come from real people in real situations, complete with cultural assumptions and evocations; communication does not exist outside of these historical realities. A dictionary approach to language relates facts in a discursive, point-to-point way; but “the idea of encyclopedia attempts to take into account a process of interpretation which takes the

3. As Huizenga notes, “In Eco’s view, the poststructuralists are not correct, and critical deconstruction is not true; the kind of passionate play advocated by the later [Roland] Barthes and his associates ignores the real nature of cultural conventions concerning language” (*New Isaac*, 54).

4. Eco, “Interpretation and History,” in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24, quoted in Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 55.

5. Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 55. Kevin Vanhoozer has provided much help in wrestling with the abiding role of the author and textual intent in light of deep reflections on the nature of literature and language. See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

6. Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 26.

form of an inference.”<sup>7</sup> Or, in the words of John Haiman, “Dictionaries relate words to other words. Encyclopedias, in more or less sharp contradistinction, relate words to extralinguistic facts,”<sup>8</sup> or cultural realities. By way of example, Stefan Alkier notes that in the encyclopedia of cultural understanding of the Roman Empire there would have been an entry for “love spell,” even though in most modern Western cultures there would not.<sup>9</sup> This difference speaks to the fact that our reading entails understanding not only the words but also the cultural differences between us and the text before us.

Thus, rather than thinking about language and texts in terms of a dictionary, we must consider language and texts as products of a certain cultural phenomenon, something that can only be understood and described with a massive encyclopedic understanding. For Eco, the “encyclopedia” is the totality of the collection of all possible cultural interpretations and phenomena in which a text is created; it is the “grand universe of semiosis” or signs.<sup>10</sup> The encyclopedia is “the cultural framework in which the text is situated and from which the gaps of the text are filled.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the encyclopedia is never finished and exists only as a regulative idea; the potential associations of meanings are endless as culture continues to develop.

But here is the key idea and what separates Eco from the poststructuralists. For poststructuralism (and much of current literary theory and discussions of intertextuality), reading is completely open as one explores the infinite process of semiosis, where meaning is never really found and certainly not in any authorial intention in the text. For Eco, by contrast, texts are particular instantiations of encyclopedic materials and thus arrest the infinite play of semiosis that one might engage in as a reader.<sup>12</sup> Every text is not just language but is also an actualization of some aspects of the cultural encyclopedia in which it was created. And because texts are created in real situations and have an intention, through historical, cultural, and literary analysis a good reader can actually “isolate a given portion of the social encyclopedia so far as it appears useful in order to interpret certain portions of actual discourses (and texts).”<sup>13</sup> Or to

7. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 164.

8. John Haiman, “Dictionaries and Encyclopedias,” *Lingua* 50 (1980): 332. For more on the distinction between dictionary and encyclopedic contexts, see Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (New York: Harcourt, 1997), 224–79.

9. Stefan Alkier, “New Testament Studies on the Basis of Categorical Semiotics,” in Hays, Alkier, and Huizenga, *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, 235.

10. Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 26.

11. Stefan Alkier, “Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts,” in Hays, Alkier, and Huizenga, *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, 8.

12. Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 56.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

say it more simply, because words come from and evoke cultural resonances (not simply denote dictionary meanings) we must interpret texts sensitive to those cultural evocations.

The Model Reader then, for Eco, is the one who sits at the juncture where the particular text connects with the cultural encyclopedia in the most coherent and economic way possible.<sup>14</sup> The best readings of a text will seek to approximate the position of the Model Reader through an ever-increasing competence in encyclopedic understanding (imperfect though it must be). The Model Reader is one who reads sympathetically and “with the grain” of the text.<sup>15</sup> Good reading involves an “interpretive cooperation” by which the reader of a text, “through successive abductive inferences, proposes topics, ways of reading, and hypotheses of coherence, on the basis of suitable encyclopedic competence.”<sup>16</sup> The event of reading is much more complex than perceiving the words or syntax before us. Rather, “the work of reading (or hearing, for that matter) demands, in addition, the activation or anesthetizing of cultural encyclopedic knowledge, which permits that which is deciphered or heard to become a meaningful whole.”<sup>17</sup> Texts have an intention (*intentio operis*) and a good reader will seek to understand this. The internal coherence of the text is what guides us to discern which readings are out of bounds and which are best.<sup>18</sup> For example, one can attempt to read Thomas á Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* as if it were written by the French novelist Céline. This game might be amusing and produce some intellectual fruit. However, while some lines of the *Imitation of Christ* can be read through this grid, the overall coherence of the text speaks against this. On the contrary, when one reads the *Imitation of Christ* according to the Christian medieval encyclopedia, each part of it appears coherent.<sup>19</sup>

## Bringing Eco to the Sermon

There is a point to this excursus into the understanding of Umberto Eco. It is this: *Eco’s model helps us see that the best readings of the Sermon will be*

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. As noted above, Markus Bockmuehl takes this further and provides some insightful reflections on the character and profile of the implied reader of the New Testament. See Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 68–74.

16. Umberto Eco, “Two Problems in Textual Interpretation,” in *Reading Eco: An Anthology*, ed. Rocco Capozzi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 44.

17. Stefan Alkier, “New Testament Studies on the Basis of Categorical Semiotics,” 235.

18. See Huizenga, *New Isaac*, 29n42.

19. Umberto Eco, “Overinterpreting Texts,” in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 65, discussed in Wagner, *Reading the Sealed Book*, 43.



*sensitive to its encyclopedic context while seeking to approximate the experience of the Model Reader.*

More specifically, I will argue that the form, material, and verbiage of the Sermon reveal that it lies at the nexus of two seemingly opposed but providentially coordinated contexts—the Second Temple Jewish tradition and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition. Any reading of the New Testament that is seeking to understand it in its encyclopedic context requires attention to both its Greek and Jewish origins.<sup>20</sup> As Paul Johannes Du Plessis observes, ignoring either the Greek or Jewish background of the New Testament “would be as futile an attempt at theology as playing on a one-stringed violin is a poor assay at music.”<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, both of these contexts ultimately point to the same meta-idea—human flourishing. To read the Sermon in the best and most beneficial way is to read it as the Model Reader, aware of how these overlapping encyclopedic contexts and their shared emphasis on human flourishing form the Sermon.

I should note as well that I am not suggesting here merely a fancier-sounding way of doing historical and cultural backgrounds, even a discussion of the “worldview” of first-century Christians. This kind of historical, cultural, social-scientific, and conceptual background work is very good and beneficial and will indeed appear throughout the following arguments. But with Eco I am suggesting that more is needed than this, an approach that is sensitive to how texts communicate and how language functions at the evocative or connotative level, not merely the denotative. We need an understanding of the social and linguistic encyclopedic context in which the Sermon was uttered so that we might hear it in a model way.<sup>22</sup> To these contexts (which together make up the encyclopedic context of the New Testament) we can now turn.

20. While recognizing the essential importance of the canonical context and tradition of Matthew, Huizenga likewise offers a reading of Matthew (in his case, concerning the figure of Isaac and the Akedah) that also takes into account the broader cultural encyclopedia of Second Temple Jewish texts beyond the Old Testament.

21. Paul Johannes Du Plessis, *Teleios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 35.

22. Kavin Rowe’s recent and significant monograph *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) highlights how Christianity is situated in the Greco-Roman world, which was rich in philosophical reflections about what true life is and how to live it, by exploring the thought of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius alongside that of Paul, Luke, and Justin Martyr. Rowe’s project is different from my argument here, however, in that Rowe (following MacIntyre) emphasizes the incommensurability/untranslatability of different traditions/ways of life, such that a simple comparison of texts and concepts is not possible. While I acknowledge the danger of a modernist version of “encyclopedic” textual comparison (see Rowe chapter 7), there is still value in understanding the ways in which the Greek and Jewish traditions overlap and mutually inform each other and how Christianity offers an alternative to both, drawn from both conceptual worlds.

## Context 1: The Story of Israel and Second Temple Jewish Wisdom Literature

The survey of this context must necessarily be brief and in the nature of a précis because we are addressing a topic as large as Scripture itself and involving many complex streams, rivers, and eddies. But in short, to understand the Sermon well in its encyclopedic context we must start with the most fundamental observation—namely, that the Sermon comes to us historically, literarily, and theologically in the context of Israel’s story and self-understanding. Jesus, Christianity, and the New Testament documents are birthed directly out of Judaism, and so whatever else we understand about their meaning must be grounded in this reality. Any reading that ignores this is a decontextualized reading that may bear some fruit but cannot be described as sensitive to the intention of the text.

Specifically, Jesus and the authors of the New Testament see themselves as part of the grand story of God’s creation and redeeming work in the world, a world that had a beginning and will have an end, or at least a renewed beginning. The foundational orientation to this story occurs in Gen. 1–11, where we learn that God, who is the sole creator of all that is, has set his especial love upon humanity as the apex of his creation. The tension of the story is that humanity fails in both its love for him and love for one another, resulting in a darkening of mind and heart and ultimately death, rather than flourishing life. God then sets in motion the mysterious, arduous, and long-term plan for the reversal of this state, beginning with Abraham and flowing through his descendants.

The theology of the Old Testament, to whatever extent we can talk in this somewhat anachronistic way, is *the biblical story* of the working out of this redemption and restoration through its many twists and turns. Consistent throughout this long story is God’s trustworthy and loving character and humanity’s perpetual and cyclical untrustworthiness and unloving actions. The great hope that is woven throughout the accounts of Israel’s history and the prophetic writings that accompany it is that God is going to finally bring about the restoration of the Edenic state, with humanity restored, redeemed, in proper relationship to God and one another, and experiencing the flourishing life that was lost.<sup>23</sup> The *šālôm* or peace that was known in relationship with God at creation will come again when God restores his *šālôm* on the earth.<sup>24</sup> This can also be described as creation entering into

23. See Exod. 15:1–18; Isa. 51:3; 65:17–25; Ezek. 36:35.

24. Isa. 51:11; 52:7; 54:10; 55:12–13; 66:12; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26.

its final Sabbath rest.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation of the world and this hope for the future are the backdrop and props of the stage on which the dramatic story of Jesus, Christianity, and the New Testament writings are played out.

Even more specifically, Jesus, Christianity, and the New Testament documents come from what is called the era of Second Temple Judaism, the time between the return from exile and rededication of the temple in the sixth century BCE and its second destruction in CE 70. Even though no Jews living, worshiping, hoping, and writing during this time thought of themselves as living in “the Second Temple period,” this is a helpful category for us looking back on this time period because there are certain distinctive characteristics and developments that affect the shape and content of earliest Christianity.

Many other studies have documented and pondered these effects.<sup>26</sup> What is particularly relevant for our understanding of the Sermon is the role of wisdom literature in the Second Temple period and how it interacts with eschatological and apocalyptic writings. We will see that this wisdom-apocalyptic thread of Jewish literature provides a particularly important encyclopedic context for understanding the Sermon. The Jewish Scriptures, understood at the broadest level, are telling this redemption story as worked out in history. Yet there is also an earthy profundity through which the Scriptures deal with real life and human experience in all its depth. That is, the Bible does not present its understanding of the world as a set of abstract ideals and universal truths but rather as life being lived out imperfectly with all its messiness, by real people stumbling through this world. As a result, much of the writings deal with nitty-gritty details of how to live life in a way that will result in peace and happiness—with instructions as diverse as how to handle money, to the approach young men should take regarding young women, to how to deal with foolish people in society. All of this and more is found in what we call the Wisdom literature of the Bible.<sup>27</sup>

25. See Gordon Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11: Gateway to the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

26. A classic work is Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (1974; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1981). See also N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Recently Robert S. Kinney has argued persuasively in *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) that the hellenistic aspects of Matthew’s Gospel need to be recognized, not only the Jewish background.

27. While there are forms and themes of wisdom throughout various portions of the Bible (including some “wisdom psalms,” such as Pss. 37, 49, and 73), the Wisdom literature is typically

The Wisdom literature consists of proverbs, memorable sayings (aphorisms), parables, stories, and ethical instruction. It also includes reflections on existence, divine justice, and life's meaning, especially in the confusing complexity of human experience when things do not work out as planned.<sup>28</sup> In this the Bible is consistent with the wide variety of other ancient literature that also wrestles with human wisdom and what makes for the virtuous and flourishing life.

What makes the Scriptures distinct is that the radical monotheism of the biblical understanding means that “at the center of wisdom literature was the idea that religious devotion, the fear of the Lord, preceded all knowledge, indeed was its final destination as well.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the approach to ethics, or virtuous living, in the Old Testament is rooted in God's nature as the model for virtue—not humanity's ideals for virtue. This begins in the context of Adam and Eve's relationship with God. Virtue in the Bible finds its meaning in the context of this story framed through the issue of relationship between God and humanity and between one human and another. Therefore, as Jacob Neusner observes, in the Jewish Scriptures “all virtuous traits then find their place within that encompassing vision that explains who we are by telling the story of creation culminating in Adam, Eve, and Eden.” The meaning of virtue is found in the context of the Torah's “story of humanity's life from creation through Sinai to redemption at the end of time, and from birth to the grave and ultimate resurrection.”<sup>30</sup>

As this story of redemption and virtue unfolds, a series of crises occur, which begin to make clear that God's restoration to *šālôm*-full Edenic flourishing will only come fully at the eschaton, or the end of this age of human experience. The prophets increasingly promise and paint a picture of this coming age, accompanied usually by the exhortation to order one's life around the virtues of this final state. Increasingly this eschatological literature becomes also apocalyptic in form and worldview. This means that the vision for this future, eschatological state is given by divine revelation to a limited number, those who are faithful to God in the midst of a world ignorant of and opposed to God. This vision is *revealed* by God, hence its apocalyptic (which means “revealed”) nature. An influential part of Second Temple

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identified as Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible, plus Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon from the Second Temple period.

28. “Wisdom Literature,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, ed. Jacob Neusner and William S. Green, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 672.

29. *Ibid.*, 672.

30. Jacob Neusner, “Virtue in Formative Judaism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William S. Green, vol. 3 (London: Continuum, 1999), 1466.

Jewish literature manifests the form and worldview of such an apocalyptic eschatological understanding.

And here is where it gets very interesting. Much of this apocalyptic eschatological literature is deeply interwoven with wisdom themes and writings. At first glance these would seem to be opposite and unrelated topics and approaches, but further reflection reveals that this is a natural, inevitable, and important connection. Because the virtues or ethics of the Bible are tied to the story of redemption and God's relationship with humanity—with wisdom providing the practical reflections on how to experience this flourishing—it is appropriate that the literature that looks to the final time of restoration will also focus on practical virtue as well. This is in fact what we find in much of the Second Temple literature.

“Apocalyptic [literature] was essentially ethical,” as R. H. Charles observed.<sup>31</sup> This connection between ethical wisdom literature and apocalyptic eschatology is manifested through what Grant Macaskill describes as inaugurated eschatology, “within which the revealing of wisdom to an elect group—set apart from unfaithful Israel—plays a key role.”<sup>32</sup> There are many examples of this kind of wisdom-giving, inaugurated eschatology in Second Temple literature, including 1 Enoch, various documents from Qumran, and the New Testament itself.

Indeed, the New Testament manifests this understanding in many ways, both reinforcing Jewish morality and molding and shaping it in a distinctly eschatological and Christian way. As Dale Allison points out, belief in imminent, eschatological judgment—something Jesus emphasizes—tends to result in the reinforcement of moral traditions, but at times it also revises certain elements within a moral tradition. This is because:

The expectation of a new world entails the end of the present world and of its conventional customs and social arrangements; and if those customs and arrangements are soon to go, one's present way of life can hardly continue as ever. One rather is strongly encouraged to become, in anticipation, less tied to the present state of the world.<sup>33</sup>

This is precisely what we find in the apocalyptic and eschatologically urgent perspective of the New Testament. Based on the imminent return of

31. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 2:ix.

32. Grant Macaskill, *Revealed Wisdom and Inaugurated Eschatology in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, JSJSup 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 297.

33. Dale C. Allison Jr., “Apocalyptic Ethics and Behavior,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 297.

the kingdom of God, John the Baptist calls people to repentance (Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:5); Jesus enlists disciples to abandon their livelihoods and follow him (Mark 1:16–20); and the moral instruction throughout the New Testament is rife with such radical, end-of-the-age views on money, possessions, celibacy, and missional urgency (Matt. 6:24; 19:16–26; 28:18–20; Luke 12:33; 1 Cor. 7:8; 1 Tim. 3:3; 6:10; Heb. 13:5).

To reorient us to the larger point: all of this discussion is providing a key for understanding the encyclopedic context in which the Sermon sits. Understanding the story and worldview that is up and running before Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount gives great insight into the shape and flavor of its teachings. As we will see, the Sermon manifests a genetic relationship to the perspective of this Second Temple apocalyptic wisdom (or inaugurated, apocalyptic eschatology), providing a vision for virtue that is oriented to God's coming restorative kingdom, and is given to those who have ears to hear and build their lives wisely upon Jesus's teaching (Matt. 7:24–27). All of this talk of wisdom and virtue leads us naturally to discuss that other key encyclopedic context at work within the Sermon, the Greco-Roman virtue tradition.

## Context 2: The Greco-Roman Virtue Tradition

If seeking to summarize Jewish history in a few pages is a daunting task, so too is attempting to survey the history of the Greco-Roman virtue tradition. As all ancient philosophy was primarily moral philosophy, with virtue the great thread tying it all together, to speak of the Greco-Roman virtue tradition is to evoke the entirety of the history of ancient Western philosophy. But for our discussion here, this must be only an evocation.

The goal in this section is to provide a brief overview of the issue of virtue in Greek philosophy so as to fill in the picture of this aspect of the Sermon's encyclopedic context. The reason this is important, as we will see, is that much of the language and concepts of the Sermon show evidence of a connection to and perspective overlapping with the realm of Greek moral philosophy. Jesus is more than a sage or philosopher according to Matthew's high Christology, it is true, but he's not less.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in many ways Jesus is depicted like an ancient

34. Studies of how Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher are surprisingly not many, but one may consult John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism, and the Matthean Community* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); John Yueh-Han Yieh, *One Teacher: Jesus' Teaching Role in Matthew's Gospel Report* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (London: T&T Clark, 2013) and also *Jesus against the*

philosopher or sage in the Gospels.<sup>35</sup> Charles Talbert surveys the different kinds of teachers in the ancient world and asks how readers of Matthew would perceive Jesus based on his depiction. He concludes that “for a Mediterranean auditor of this Gospel, the closest analogy would have been a philosopher and his disciples.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, even though he sees the Sermon as being somewhat distinct from the historical Jesus and even Matthew himself, Hans Dieter Betz’s analysis of the Sermon leads him to conclude that its form and function are closest to Hellenistic moral philosophical works in epitome form, such as that of Epictetus and Plutarch.<sup>37</sup> Wayne Meeks also sets the New Testament into the context of the ethical approaches of the ancient world, showing how Christianity inherits much of its grammar from Israel, Greece, and Rome. This includes Matthew, who produces a “messianic biography” for the purpose of helping shape the morality, beliefs, and attitudes of the Christian community.<sup>38</sup> Thus,

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*Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014). For works on Jesus as a sage or wisdom teacher, see Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (1994; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Macaskill, *Revealed Wisdom and Inaugurated Eschatology*; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Celia Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah and Discipleship in Matthew 11:25–30* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

35. Yieh, *One Teacher*, provides a helpful analysis of how Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher in comparison with contemporary Judaism (the Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran) and Greek philosophy (Epictetus), showing both similarities and differences. See also Keith, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite*, 15–66, and Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew*, especially chap. 7.

36. Talbert, citing Vernon Robbins, notes four ways in which Jesus and his followers in Matthew’s Gospel would have been seen as like ancient philosophers: (1) philosophers gathered disciples by summons; (2) a philosopher’s disciples followed him; (3) the disciples are with him and memorize his teachings; (4) the disciples receive benefit from being with the philosopher (Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia: Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010], 20–21).

37. Hans Dieter Betz, “The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3–7:27): Its Literary Genre and Function,” in *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (1985; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1–16. He states most succinctly, “The literary genre of the SM [Sermon on the Mount] is that of an epitome presenting the theology of Jesus in a systematic fashion,” enabling the disciple to become a “Jesus theologian” (15). This is a helpful insight. I disagree with Betz, however, that the Sermon is independent of and indeed in conflict with the rest of Matthew. See the hearty critique of Betz on this point in Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 310–25. Robert Kinney also argues that the Sermon is an epitome, noting the potential critiques of Betz but showing that one can adopt this interpretation of the literary function of the Sermon without agreeing with Betz’s conclusions about textual sources. See Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew*, 172.

38. Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986). Meeks discusses the social setting of first-century Christianity and the traditions of Greece and Rome on the one hand and Israel on the other. His discussion of Matthew is found on pp. 136–43.

there is historical grounding in the Gospels' depiction to consider how Jesus's teaching might relate to the philosophies of the day.

Returning to our overview of Greek philosophy, we must start with the search for happiness, the great quest and focus of all ancient moral philosophy. Whether it be Stoicism, Epicureanism, Aristotelianism, or hedonism, philosophers in the Greco-Roman tradition were consciously and explicitly driven to answer the question of what makes people truly happy.<sup>39</sup> In this sense Greco-Roman philosophy was at once practical and moral. Notably, in contrast to today's ideas of happiness, this moral-philosophical notion of happiness does not mean merely a temporary, subjective state of mind but an overall life that is satisfied and meaningful. This is summed up often with the Greek word *eudaimonia*, best translated now with the gloss "human flourishing."<sup>40</sup>

In the following chapter we will explore more what this idea means and its relationship to the key biblical word *makarios*. For now the point to be made is that there is a consistent thread in the Greco-Roman tradition that rested the goal of human flourishing on the pursuit of virtue. In conscious contrast to hedonism, which suggests that mere pleasure is the only goal and the only *eudaimonia* worth having, the ancient philosophers sought to persuade their hearers that it was only through the lifelong, intentional pursuit of virtue (practiced moral character) that one could find true flourishing. The different philosophies debated a number of issues within this idea, such as what role fortune or circumstances play in our flourishing and what the role of emotions are. But they all agreed that the only hope for the flourishing that all humans long for is to pursue virtue—practiced and developed wisdom—learned over time.<sup>41</sup>

39. The same can be said for non-Western philosophical and religious approaches. For example, see the articles on Buddhism in Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). At the same time, Charles Taylor points out that the pursuit of happiness/human flourishing in Buddhism is substantively different from that in the Western traditions (especially Christianity) in that the conditions of bliss in Buddhism are "so 'revisionist' that it amounts to a departure from what we normally understand as human flourishing" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], 17). My focus is on the Greco-Roman tradition because it is more directly relevant as a historical, linguistic, and theological context for the Sermon.

40. The older English rendering of this important word as "happiness" has now been replaced in philosophical discussion with "human flourishing," dating back at least to the work of G. E. M. Anscombe in 1958. John M. Cooper notes that "human flourishing" is a better translation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* because it reflects more fully the idea that *eudaimonia* is not a subjective mental state over a short period of time but "the possession and use of one's mature powers," during which the future looks bright and one experiences "the fulfillment of the natural capacities of the human species" (*Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986], 89n1).

41. Darrin McMahan, "The Pursuit of Happiness in History," in David, Boniwell, and Ayers, *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, 254. See also McMahan's fuller treatment, *Happiness: A*



Consistent among these philosophers was the idea that what is truly ethical or “the good” is defined not in terms of mere actions or choices but rather in terms of the moral agent himself or herself. Ethics is about who we are as people and who we can and should become. In contrast to Kantian ethical approaches, as Daniel Harrington and James Keenan observe, a virtue-ethics approach is concerned with these three basic questions: Who are we? Who ought we to become? How do we get there?<sup>42</sup> The virtues (or vices) of the person are “the disposition to act in certain ways and to do so reliably—characteristically—over time.”<sup>43</sup> Stephen Fowl describes virtues as “those habits of seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting that, when exercised in the right ways and at the right times, will enhance one’s prospects of both recognizing, moving toward and attaining one’s proper end.”<sup>44</sup> The reason that ethics must focus on the agent before the action is summed up in the old adage *actio sequitur esse*, “action follows essence.” What we do morally is the fruit of who we are. This is the genius of the virtue-ethics understanding, or to put it in Greco-Roman terms, philosophy.

Aristotle (382–322 BC) is not alone in this “virtue ethics” understanding of life, but his version in many ways sits at the apex of this tradition; he is certainly its most abidingly influential progenitor. Aristotle’s views can be found particularly clearly in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, written as an aid to his son to spell out the steps to a good life (cf. Prov. 1–9). The “good life” (human flourishing) contains what is morally, prudentially, and intellectually good altogether. As noted above, for Aristotle it is virtue as the orientation of life that leads to *eudaimonia*.<sup>45</sup> This virtue is not only moral choices, as we tend to think of in ethics today, but learned practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Practical wisdom is what enables a moral agent to figure out how to act well in any circumstance that will arise. “A man of practical wisdom is he who has the ability to deliberate . . . it is a truthful characteristic of acting rationally in matters good and bad for man.”<sup>46</sup>

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*History* (New York: Grove, 2006). The classic work that reintroduced discussion of virtue into moral philosophy today is Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

42. Daniel Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 207. Glen Stassen and David Gushee have also provided an excellent resource that builds a Christian ethical view based on a virtue reading of the Sermon—Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).

43. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 92.

44. *Ibid.*, 92, quoting Fowl in *DTIB*, 838.

45. Julia Driver, *Ethics: The Fundamentals* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 138.

46. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 152–53, quoted in Driver, *Ethics*, 138.

Also, for Aristotle the virtuous person is the one who functions in the “mean” or balanced state, able to control and regulate his or her feelings and emotions as well as to act rightly. “Aristotle’s picture, then, of the virtuous person is the person who functions harmoniously—his desires and emotions do not conflict with what he knows to be right. They go together. . . . the excellent human being is not conflicted; he does not suffer inner turmoil and the struggle between reason and passion.”<sup>47</sup> Or as Paula Gottlieb describes it, the “good Aristotelian human being enjoys acting virtuously, his thinking and feelings are in sync.”<sup>48</sup>

Aristotle taught that a virtuous person is the one who exhibits harmonious psychological functioning—that is, both the *desiring* and *judging* parts of the soul must be in harmony. It is less virtuous to know and do the right thing if we don’t also desire it than to both desire and do the right thing.<sup>49</sup>

The implication as this is developed for Aristotle is that doing good by accident or intuition is not truly virtuous, but virtue comes from deliberating and learning what is good and then both desiring and acting upon it. In shooting an arrow at a target an unskilled person may occasionally get lucky and hit the bull’s-eye (and a skilled person may also occasionally miss), but the goal is to learn the practical skills of archery so as to generally succeed. This is *phronēsis*, or the practical wisdom that we should pursue over time. There is both a trained vision and action. Virtue entails or necessitates an intentional wholeness of person (*teleios*). We cannot be virtuous accidentally or in part. A virtuous action is one that includes all of who we are as humans—reasoning, affections, and embodied actions—our whole person.

These ideas of the necessity of wholeness of person (*teleios*) and the end goal (*telos*) of virtue as human flourishing will prove to have profound conceptual overlap with the Sermon. But raising and discussing these ideas here is not merely conceptual. There is a strong historical-contextual reason for seeing a connection. The reason is that in the centuries leading up to Jesus’s time, Second Temple Judaism had become deeply hellenized—that is, influenced by Greek ideas and culture. This hellenization or Greek (and Greco-Roman) influence ranged on the spectrum from full adoption to open rejection, but in

47. Driver, *Ethics*, 141.

48. Paula Gottlieb, “Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

49. Driver, *Ethics*, 83–84. Plato also discussed lack of psychological harmony as an obstacle to happiness with his analogy of the human soul as a charioteer who must control two horses simultaneously. One is reason and the other is our emotions and appetites. Unless these are properly trained and brought into unity with each other, a person can never be happy. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a–254e.

every case Second Temple Jewish understanding was forever changed by its interactions with Greek and Roman culture.<sup>50</sup> How much more is this true of the first-century sect of Judaism that would become orthodox Christianity, which, note well, presents its canonical documents not in Hebrew or Aramaic but in Greek and which defines itself as creating one new human race out of both Jew and Greek. Christianity is born within and enters into dialogue with Greco-Roman culture.<sup>51</sup> As Betz notes in reflecting on the similarities between hellenistic philosophy and the Sermon (“SM”): “As a matter of fact, large sections of the ancient world at the time of the SM seem to have shared many of these concepts and methods, differing only in philosophical school terminology and in the cultural and religious milieu.”<sup>52</sup> Kinney likewise notes the similarities between the Sermon and contemporary hellenistic philosophy regarding rhetorical style, similar topics of discussion, and possibly direct influence of Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>53</sup>

There are a number of ways in which Second Temple Judaism and Greek moral philosophy overlap, showing the great influence of these Greek notions and also providing us with insight into the context in which the Sermon was situated. Luke Timothy Johnson points out that one very viable way to be Jewish in the Second Temple period was indeed to understand one’s Jewish faith in terms of moral transformation, very much along the lines of Greek moral philosophy.<sup>54</sup> For example, in Josephus’s well-known depiction of the various first-century Jewish sects as “schools” (*haireseis*), he describes their convictions and practices in terms familiar to Greek philosophy. He also clearly shades his portrait of the Essenes in the direction

50. See Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*; Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). See especially Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew*. Kinney notes that while the Jewish background to Matthew is obviously important, Matthean scholarship in recent decades has been imbalanced in only considering this aspect of Matthew’s cultural context and has not taken into consideration the deeply hellenistic nature of Second Temple Judaism. Distinguished professor David Daube argues in “Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric” (*Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 [1949]: 239–64) that even classical rabbinic methods of interpretation can be traced to the influence of Hellenistic rhetorical techniques.

51. Recent decades of NT scholarship have produced much good scholarship on the ways in which early Christianity was interacting with its Roman imperial setting. As with all things, this can be overdone and the Roman imperial backdrop can mistakenly become the sole lens through which the NT is read. For a balanced view, see Scot McKnight and Joseph A. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire Studies Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

52. Betz, “Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3–7:27),” 9.

53. Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew*, 214–15.

54. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, 123–25.

of the Pythagoreans, the Pharisees in that of the Stoics, and the Sadducees in that of the Epicureans.<sup>55</sup> In Jewish wisdom literature there are possible connections between Qoheleth in its final form and Epicureanism. But more certainly, there is the indisputable influence of Platonism on the influential book *Wisdom of Solomon*. Other examples include the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which weaves together both wisdom and apocalyptic, treating the standard Aristotelian virtues and vices in the respective twelve “testaments,” and 4 Maccabees, which functions as an encomium on the virtue of courage. Above all we have the extensive and complex writings of Philo of Alexandria, who “interprets the biblical narrative and laws in terms of Greek philosophy and, in particular, Greek moral discourse.”<sup>56</sup> Philo is interested in presenting Judaism and its writings not as barbaric and absurd but as sophisticated moral lessons and laws that are meant to cultivate virtue and moral transformation.<sup>57</sup> Summing up, Johnson observes that many faithful Jews during the Second Temple period were not seeking to turn away from their ancestral religion or its practices but desired to understand and explain it in terms of virtue or moral transformation. “They sought as well to shape a character in conformity with God’s will at the level of internal dispositions and of the curing of the passions, and in pursuit of this goal, they employed the language and insights of Greco-Roman philosophy.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Human Flourishing and Wholeness: The Nexus of These Two Contexts in Matthew’s Cultural Encyclopedia**

The point of the preceding exploration is to offer insight into two of the largest and most influential aspects of the culture in which the Sermon was created, the Second Temple Jewish wisdom and the Greco-Roman virtue traditions. The Sermon was birthed from the union of two parents who had themselves already been joined together in the Second Temple period. Thorough understanding of these contexts is not required for any person desiring to pick up and read the Sermon and apply it to their lives. Yet, the best readings will come from seeing how the text of the Sermon draws from and activates these dominant parts of the cultural encyclopedia in which it was born. The best readers will seek to approximate the Model Reader, who

55. *Ibid.*, 123.

56. *Ibid.*, 124.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 125.

perceives the aspects of his or her culture that are being activated through the words of the Sermon.

Just describing the context of the Second Temple period with its Greco-Roman flavor would be beneficial and provide insight at various points into the Sermon's workings. But what is most striking and relevant is this: *These two contexts overlap conceptually in a very significant way in that both are addressing the great topic of wholeness and human flourishing.* That is, there is a thick nexus, or band of interconnectivity, that exists between these two seemingly unrelated or even opposed aspects of early Christianity's birth-place—Second Temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition. But it is precisely at the nexus point that the Sermon's main thrust can be found. Namely, *the Sermon is offering Jesus's answer to the great question of human flourishing, the topic at the core of both the Jewish wisdom literature and that of the Greco-Roman virtue perspective, while presenting Jesus as the true Philosopher-King.* Understanding this will provide a powerful gestalt, or interpretive paradigm, for reading and interpreting the Sermon.

Even as the spouses in a strong marriage will have ways in which they overlap in view and other ways in which they are individuals, so too the union of these two traditions has both overlap and distinction. Both traditions share the question, How is true happiness or flourishing found? And at the basic level both will answer this question with the notion that human flourishing will only be realized through a person's virtue or wholeness, experienced both individually and communally. Both traditions emphasize that the person or the agent is the most important focus for morality and flourishing; mere circumstance or fortune is not determinative, but rather whether the agent orients his or her life virtuously. This is the ethics of virtue, focusing on the good as a way of being in the world that will result in the goal (*telos*) of flourishing and happiness.

Yet each of these contexts also provides its own genetic contribution to the child that is the Sermon. The Greco-Roman tradition provides a well-explored territory of philosophical discussion and debate about virtue, what it looks like, and how to achieve it. The back and forth sparring of the great philosophical traditions on this issue provided ample opportunity for insights to be gained. And it is of course the very language of Greek coming from this conceptual world that will form and frame early Christianity, including the final form of the Sermon. This great tradition, with its emphasis on ethics as virtue, a way of being in the world aiming at flourishing, bequeaths to all in its wake a robust vision for society's flourishing as achieved through *paideia*. For society to flourish, its leaders must embark on a virtue-developing program of *paideia*, or whole-person education. This *paideia* approach to education and instruction is driven by the goal of shaping people into the beautiful Ideal. The

forming of individuals through a vision for flourishing and models of virtue is one of the greatest gifts of the Greco-Roman tradition to early Christianity.<sup>59</sup>

One of the important ways the Greco-Roman virtue tradition can be discerned in the Sermon is through Matthew's employment of several key Greek words whose evocations would be clear in first-century hellenized Judaism. Terms such as *makarios* (flourishing), *teleios* (whole, complete), *phronimos* (wise one), *mōros* (fool), *dikaiosynē* (righteousness, justice), *misthos* (reward),<sup>60</sup> and *ta agatha* (the good) are all important Matthean terms that cannot be fully appreciated apart from the Greco-Roman encyclopedia.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the Sermon and Matthew as a whole manifest deep connections with the hellenistic tradition in the use of education vocabulary, the rhetorical forms, and even resonances of Plato and Homer.<sup>62</sup>

The Second Temple wisdom literature tradition, coming itself from the broader history of Israel, passes on to the Sermon this same vision for whole-person flourishing, but with some distinct characteristics. Particularly, the DNA of this tradition encodes the understanding that true flourishing can be found only in the context of “the fear of the Lord” and a covenantal relationship with the one and only creator God. The radical—at its root—theocentricity of this tradition affects and modifies its understanding of flourishing. The great human-flourishing question is answered by way of the need for covenantal relationship with the true God of the universe and the necessity of a future orientation to the coming time of restoration, in which flourishing will truly occur for those who live virtuously in alignment with God.<sup>63</sup> This time and space of restoration can be described as God's

59. See the helpful discussion in Jason A. Whitlark, “Cosmology and the Perfection of Humanity in Hebrews,” in *Interpretation and the Claims of the Text: Resourcing New Testament Theology; Essays in Honor of Charles H. Talbert*, ed. Jason A. Whitlark, Bruce W. Longenecker, Lidija Novakovic, and Mikeal C. Parsons (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 117–28.

60. On the Aristotelian backdrop to *dikaiosynē* and *misthos*, see Johan C. Thom, “Justice in the Sermon on the Mount: An Aristotelian Reading,” *NovT* 51 (2009): 319–26.

61. An excellent example of recognizing the conceptual overlap of virtue ideas—along with necessary worldview differences—in the Greco-Roman tradition and early Christianity is Kyriakoula Papademetriou, “From the *Arete* of the Ancient World to the *Arete* of the New Testament: A Semantic Investigation,” in *Septuagint Vocabulary: Pre-History, Usage, Reception*, ed. Jan Joosten and Eberhard Bons (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 45–63. Papademetriou points out that for Plato and Aristotle *aretē* consisted of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, of which wisdom (*phronēsis*) and justice/righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) were considered central and characteristic (48).

62. All of this is argued persuasively in Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew*.

63. Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age* that Christianity (and God himself) is certainly positive on humans flourishing but that “Thy will be done” is not equivalent to “Let humans flourish”—loving and worshiping God is the ultimate end (17).

reign/kingdom. Holiness in this understanding is a wholeness that is aligned not only with culturally conditioned reflections on flourishing discovered in philosophical speculation but also with divine revelation and command. Additionally, the vision is more expansive than the individual person and even communal flourishing; it looks forward to an age when God spreads this flourishing to all of his creation, with *šālôm* transforming the earth that is now in full-blown rebellion against him. All of creation is looking forward to its final Sabbath rest, when *šālôm* is everywhere. Between now and then human flourishing is a possibility but never fully or completely. This theistic and eschatological flavor of the Second Temple understanding of virtue is dominant and unmistakable as coming from the Jewish side of the marriage. Indeed, in this mixed marriage of Jewish and Greco-Roman parents, the Sermon-son definitely favors his Jewish mother and is being raised in the religion of the former, not the latter.

Thus, to conclude this discussion we can arrive at an important point and depict this dual context intentionally. The point is that both of these contexts overlap in their goal of and emphasis on whole-person human flourishing, but the basic orientation of the Sermon is first and foremost that of the eschatological story of Israel, the coming of God's reign/kingdom with Jesus as the King. This redemptive-historical perspective greatly shapes and modifies the virtue vision of the Sermon relative to its otherwise similar approach in Greco-Roman philosophy.

The Sermon still lies precisely at the nexus of these two traditions, and this means that understanding something of both of them will provide great insight into how the Sermon speaks and what vision it is casting. It is best to depict this nexus-point relationship in terms of the flowing story of Israel that has an injection of the Greco-Roman tradition at the crucial point of the birth of Christianity. The intersection of the two traditions occurs at this juncture in history and produces a vision for human flourishing that uses categories and concepts from the Greco-Roman tradition, but is framed by and aiming toward the broader and deeper God-centered, eschatologically oriented Jewish tradition.



## The Sermon in the Context of Moral Theories and Ethics

To conclude this base-camp orientation to the Sermon we need finally to locate the Sermon in one other context. This time we are dealing not with the contexts operative at the origin of the text but an important context throughout the history of its interpretation: the context of various moral theories.

The Sermon's content has always required the reader to wrestle with its moral and ethical claims. Indeed, the high ethical stance and focus of the Sermon has been one of the main reasons it has been such a perennial focus of interpretation not only for the church but even for those outside who are seeking to understand Christianity. There is no other place in Scripture where we find such a concentrated paraenesis, or ethical exhortation manual.

This can be seen when studying the history of interpretation of the Sermon, which we surveyed briefly in the previous chapter. This history is not only a history of doctrinal interpretation or theological application of the Sermon, but as much or even more, it is a history of moral theories derived from or placed upon the Sermon. Thus, even as the Sermon has a revealing litmus test function for different theological views, so too does it for the sundry theories of morality and ethics that philosophers and religious leaders have continually debated.

There are other surveys of the moral or ethical interpretation available, often mixed in with histories of interpretation, but Scot McKnight provides one of the most succinct and beneficial ones in his short commentary on the Sermon.<sup>64</sup> For his survey of the history of interpretation, rather than the typical approach of tracing readings of the Sermon through historical periods, McKnight introduces the Sermon by noting different ways it has been read ethically. With great deftness and clarity he surveys deontological, utilitarian, and virtue-ethics approaches, noting that each has some truth but none completely aligns with Jesus's teaching. McKnight offers an insightful threefold taxonomy of different moral theories, each of which finds support in Scripture:

- Ethics from Above—morality based on commands, as seen in the Law
- Ethics from Beyond—morality based on the eschaton, as seen in the Prophets
- Ethics from Below—morality based on wisdom, as seen in the Wisdom literature

64. Scot McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 1–17.



McKnight notes that all of these approaches are helpful and are biblically based. Each is needed to understand the grand vision of the ethics of the Sermon.

These categories and analysis are very helpful and perceptive. He is right that most readings of the Sermon focus on only one approach—ethics from above, below, or beyond; deontological, utilitarian, or virtue ethics—and thereby ultimately misunderstand Jesus’s teaching. In what follows in this book I will present an ethical way of reading that is grounded in an understanding of morality that likewise does not fit neatly into any of these categories but seeks a hybrid.

Thus, I agree with McKnight. However, I will suggest that this same data needs to be framed differently. We need to put the *em-pha-sis* on a different *syl-la-ble*, which affects how one understands the whole. Specifically, I will argue that the virtue-ethics approach is not merely one of three beneficial approaches but is the core biblical and human ideal that organizes the others. The virtue-ethics approach (McKnight’s ethics from below) focuses on being a certain kind of person, on learning practical wisdom and a way of being in the world that will result in one’s flourishing. This approach makes sense of why this inner-person focus is such a consistent theme throughout Scripture and why it is also found in refracted form in so much of philosophy and culture. Ethics/morality is fundamentally and ultimately about us becoming a certain kind of person.

Therefore, flattening all three categories—above, beyond, below—into a nondescript “Jesus has all three approaches” way does not take sufficient account of how the Scriptures themselves (including the Sermon) present morality, nor does it provide enough explanation for how people change and grow. McKnight is right to recognize that the Scriptures teach all three, but I would suggest more strongly that we should understand the structure of the three in a more hierarchical relationship, with virtue ethics as the foundation. Or better, it is best to see these different approaches to ethics as organically related, with the virtue-ethics approach as the core.

What makes the biblical view of ethics different from other virtue-ethics approaches outside of Scripture is that biblical virtue ethics is also “from above” (based on divine revelation) and “from beyond” (based on the hope of the coming eschaton). Thus, McKnight’s threefold understanding is essential, while we also need to recognize that there is a structure to how these three aspects of the Scripture’s moral teachings fit together. In the remainder of the book I will seek to show that this virtue-ethics approach—framed and modified by these other biblical categories—is the key to understanding Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon.