

Interpretative strategies for Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5–7)

Geoff Broughton

Well-known or much-loved texts can be every bit as daunting for the preacher as the 'hard sayings of Jesus' or long and obscure genealogies. The 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5–7, 'the Sermon') – particularly the Beatitudes – is well known *and* much loved. Diligent preparation on Matthew 5 to 7 might induce 'analysis-paralysis' due to either the volume of commentary or the variety of conclusions drawn. Discouraged preachers might (erroneously) conclude there is nothing left to be said! Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching on the Mount, however, provides a glimpse of the earliest Christian interpretation of Jesus Christ. From the Apostle Paul to

Geoff Broughton is Deputy Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre and Lecturer in Practical Theology in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University.

the bishop-theologian Augustine; from the reformer Luther to the pacifist John Howard Yoder; and from the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the contemporary Baptist peacemaker Glenn Stassen; each generation has found Jesus' imaginative vision of God's kingdom utterly compelling. Each interpreter has suggested a different strategy, however, for applying Jesus' words for the life of Christian discipleship. This essay briefly identifies the strength in each approach and concludes that Jesus' 'enemy-love' best integrates Jesus' teaching and actions with Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Apostle Paul

The earliest evidence of Jesus' words known as the 'Sermon on the Mount' are recorded by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 12 beginning at verse 14 'bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.' Jesus' radically different relationship with his enemies – summarised by the command to 'love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) – is interpreted and applied by Paul in 12:14–21 with multiple direct quotes (for example, 'do good' and 'do not return evil for evil') plus many other allusions.¹ Evidently Paul's theology and mission were not only aware of, but made significant use of, the words spoken by the earthly Jesus.² The Apostle rightly understood enemy-love as a genuinely distinctive Christian way of life, with no existing parallel in Jewish, Greek or Roman teaching and custom. Enemy-love, as taught by Jesus in the Sermon, renounces self-interest, retaliation (the *lex talionis*), harsh words and violence and promotes humility, peace, blessing and human flourishing. Has familiarity with the Beatitudes blunted the force and effect of Jesus' alternative vision of God's kingdom? How have subsequent thinkers interpreted Jesus' Sermon?



Augustine of Hippo: Jesus as the teacher of the Christian life

The title of Augustine's commentary is *De sermone domini in monte* ('The Lord's Sermon on the Mount') because as Lord, Jesus addressed his followers, that is, Christians who were already 'set free by his love'.³ There is no 'universal ethic' in Jesus' words for Augustine because they can only be understood *Christianly*. Only through Jesus' own incarnation, death and resurrection – as confessed in a Trinitarian framework and the historic creeds – can the Sermon be fully understood. **Jesus is teaching a way of life for the faithful and not a set of principles for moral philosophy.** Augustine's linking of the seven Beatitudes with Isaiah's seven gifts of the Spirit highlights

his emphasis.⁴ Augustine's approach to the Sermon continues to exert its influence on writers such as Oswald Chambers:

The Sermon on the Mount is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us.⁵

Anglican evangelical John Stott also witnesses to the Sermon's enduring call to *radical* discipleship in his own preaching and scholarship.⁶

Luther the Reformer: Jesus' Gospel of grace (or the impossibility of the Law)

A kingdom vision of a radically Christian way of life is not the only interpretation of the Sermon. **The ethical implications of its teaching were severely criticised for eroding faith in God's grace and forgiveness by no less of a figure than the great reformer, Martin Luther.**

[the Gospel] is accompanied by the Holy Spirit and it creates a new heart. Man, driven into fear and anxiety by the preaching of the Law, hears this Gospel message, which, instead of reminding him of God's demands, tells him what God has done for him. It points not to man's works, but to the works of Christ, and bids him confidently believe that for the sake of his Son God will forgive his sins and accept him as his child.⁷

Luther insists God's gracious gift – not God's demanding law – is the heart of the Christian Gospel and therefore the foundation of the Christian way of life. **What role does Jesus' Sermon fulfill? Its impossible demands force the Christian to rely solely on God's free gift: *sola gratia*.** The great reformation concern that the grace of God-in-Christ might be displaced by the ethical demands of the Sermon (misinterpreted as works-righteousness) remains prominent in some preaching and teaching.⁸ The reformed interpretation of the Sermon correctly notes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon is introduced by the six antithesis (5:21–48), giving rise to a long and complex scholarly debate about Jesus' continuity (or, discontinuity) with the Law.⁹ Jesus' attitude to the Law (of Moses) provides important clues for how his words 'but I say to you ...' are best understood. While the debate shows no sign of



abating, Banks' insight of the proper relation between Jesus and the Law remains prescient:

This leads [Matthew] to emphasise the prophetic, and so provisional, function of the Mosaic legislation and to underline its realisation and fulfilment in Christ's ministry ... For Matthew, then, it is not the question of Jesus' relation to the Law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him!¹⁰

Augustine taught that the Sermon must be interpreted *Christianly*. Reformers, like Luther, qualified this by teaching that the Sermon must be taught *Christologically*. The wider context of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – indeed the entire arc of the biblical narrative – becomes the best context for interpreting the Sermon. The first of these, the earthly political life of Jesus, is the enduring contribution of John Howard Yoder.

Yoder's recovery of Jesus' nonviolent practice

Yoder derived important Christological insights for his nonviolent theological ethics from the Sermon. In his *The Original Revolution*, Yoder makes a convincing case for Christian pacifism where he simply and succinctly captures the teaching of Jesus as 'how a person behaves whose life has been transformed by meeting Jesus.' For Yoder, the 'deep nonconformity' of Jesus' words reveals a double standard in the world, not between 'discipleship and common-sense' but between 'obedience and rebellion'.¹¹ Yoder locates the discipleship practices of Jesus' followers within the Sermon and accomplishes this by constructing a sevenfold ethic: *repentance, discipleship, testimony, fulfillment, perfect love, excess and reconciliation*. The strength and limitation of Yoder's approach to the Sermon is evident here. For example, he correctly interprets Jesus' radical call to love the enemy (5:44) as the call to 'resemble God' because,

Jesus is saying that we should not love only our friends because God did not love only His friends. As the parallel statements in Luke 6 make clear, we are asked to 'resemble God' just at this one point: not in His omnipotence or His eternity or His impeccability, but simply in the indiscriminating or unconditional character of his love.¹²

Yoder argues that Jesus' followers must 'resemble God' by loving political, national and international enemies with (God's) limitless, indiscriminating, unconditional goodness.¹³ Yoder demonstrates that Matthew 5:39 ('Do not resist one who is evil ...') is the biblical origin of 'nonresistance'. Yoder argues 'nonresistance' is stronger and more precise than 'nonviolence' because it renounces 'a response in kind, returning evil for evil'.¹⁴ Yoder's understanding of the cross is limited because he sees Jesus' victory over the forces of evil through his suffering and Jesus' resurrection as the vindication of God's suffering love on the cross. Jesus' death and resurrection, in Yoder's view, makes the Sermon's discipleship of non-retaliation possible.¹⁵ In a curious footnote to *The Original Revolution* Yoder more adequately grounds the practice of non-retaliation in the Cross with the suggestion that Jesus' disciples are to 'foster reconciliation at [their] own expense'.¹⁶ While 'costly discipleship' remained under-developed in Yoder, it was profoundly expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *The Cost of Discipleship* (or simply in the original, *Nächfolge*). Bonhoeffer's sustained reflection on the Sermon – while analogous to Yoder's nonviolent ethics at key points – goes beyond him in some important respects.

Bonhoeffer's following the Crucified Jesus as costly discipleship

Bonhoeffer locates the enemy-to-be-loved within the practical and everyday orbit of the disciples' lives.¹⁷ Bonhoeffer identifies the active dimension and goal of loving one's enemies: hostility must be requited with love and enemies must become brothers. Following Jesus' words, Bonhoeffer explicitly describes the concrete activities of discipleship in terms of blessing, doing good and praying. The everyday context of Bonhoeffer's radical discipleship affords a remarkable insight into the eschatological nature of loving one's enemies: 'their persecution of us only serves to bring nearer to reconciliation with God and to further the triumphs of love'.¹⁸ From the eschatological vantage point of reconciliation with God, Bonhoeffer insists that 'the love for our enemies takes us along the way of the cross and into fellowship with the Crucified'.¹⁹ Bonhoeffer is therefore more faithful to God's revelation and action in Jesus Christ. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer develops his understanding of following the Crucified as enabling Jesus' disciples to take distance from their own 'immediacy', freeing them from pursuing their interests only and creating in them the space for the interests of others.²⁰ Following Jesus' life and teaching, suffering and death is the distinct way of

enemy-love and the cost of such discipleship 'itself is ceaseless suffering ... in it the disciple endures the suffering of Christ.'²¹ To avoid the interpretation of 'suffering' as abstracted from real pain and hardship, Bonhoeffer writes from the confines of his own prison cell:

this being caught up into the messianic sufferings of God in Jesus Christ takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table fellowship with sinners ... in the act of the woman who was sinner (Luke 7) ... in Jesus' acceptance of children.²²

In the book he never completed, Bonhoeffer outlined a Christology (Jesus the 'man for others') and discipleship ('being for others') where the Christian's unqualified love for an enemy was the test of authenticity, because 'we are disciples of Christ, or we are not Christians at all'. Suffering love is different from the 'passive endurance of evil' because of Jesus' specific injunctions to bless, do good and pray. Bonhoeffer goes beyond Yoder by articulating the triumph of love as manifested in the cross of Jesus Christ 'who for the sake of his enemies went to the cross and prayed for them as he hung there'. The cost of discipleship in the Sermon, according to Bonhoeffer, can only be interpreted by Jesus' death on the cross. Stanley Hauerwas argues that both Yoder and Bonhoeffer know the Gospel 'must be read Christologically from back to front, so you read the Sermon on the Mount from the perspective of the crucifixion'. Hauerwas emphasises that:

The eschatological character of the Sermon is nowhere more apparent than in Jesus' charge that we are not to retaliate against those that would seek to do us harm as well as his demand that we are to love our enemies. To so live requires the patience that is made possible through the cross.²³

Bonhoeffer, following the Apostle Paul and Augustine, interprets the Sermon as a distinctively Christian way of life. Like Yoder, Bonhoeffer understands the Christian's 'enemy-love' as resembling God. Following Luther, Bonhoeffer interprets the Christian life described in the Sermon *Christologically*, pre-eminently through the Cross.

Stassen's transforming enemy-love of Jesus

Bonhoeffer's approach holds continuing import for the just-peacemaking project of Glen Stassen who strives to integrate the biblical, theological and ethical dimensions of Jesus' Sermon in his theological ethics.²⁴ Three aspects of Stassen's work deserve mention. The first is his claim that the theological heart of 'the way of Jesus in the Sermon is *the way of deliverance based on grace*'.²⁵ The second distinctive contribution made by Stassen is his exegetical identification of a 'triadic structure' repeated fourteen times within the Matthean version of Jesus' Sermon:

My thesis is that each pericope in the central section, 5:21–7:12, has a carefully crafted triadic structure, consistent across the pericopes ... and this unites them all as members of one family. The main section of the sermon, from 5:21 through 7:12, is composed of fourteen triads. The first member of each triad is traditional righteousness. The second member is the diagnosis of a vicious cycle and its consequence. The third member is a transforming initiative that points the way to deliverance from the vicious cycle.²⁶

The third is Stassen's emphasis on 'transforming initiatives' as the ethical implication (so, Yoder and Bonhoeffer) contained within each of Jesus' instructions in the Sermon.²⁷ Stassen rightly observes that 'for too long, people have treated Jesus' teachings of peacemaking practices as if they were general principles. This diverts us from actually *doing* Jesus' words'.²⁸ This conclusion Augustine and the Apostle Paul would strongly endorse!

Conclusion

Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching (chapters 5–7) provides a dramatic glimpse of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in each approach but different implications for the life of Christian discipleship.²⁹ In conclusion, the love for the enemy as manifested in the cross of Jesus Christ 'who for the sake of his enemies went to the cross and prayed for them as he hung there' becomes the place where the follower of Jesus Christ also discovers the one in need of grace 'stands like himself beneath the cross of Christ'.³⁰ The way of life portrayed by Jesus in the Sermon, properly interpreted as participation in the Crucified Christ, means that 'the disciple can now perceive that even his enemy is the object of God's love'.³¹

Endnotes

1. John Piper, 'Love Your Enemies': *Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Parenesis – a History of the Tradition and Interpretation of Its Uses*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 63–5.
2. See further Seyoon Kim, 'Jesus, Sayings Of', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F Hawthorne, Ralph P Martin and Daniel G Reid (eds), IVP, Downers Grove, 1993, pp. 474–92.
3. Augustine, 'The Lord's Sermon on the Mount 1.1.1', in *Augustine, Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: With Seventeen Related Sermons*, Fathers of the Church, Catholic University of America, Washington, 1951, p. 20.
4. Robert Louis Wilken, 'Augustine', in *Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, Brazos, Grand Rapids, 2007, pp. 48–9.
5. Oswald Chambers quoted in Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1990, p. 8.
6. John RW Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7): Christian Counter-Culture*, The Bible Speaks Today, IVP, Downers Grove, 1985.
7. Martin Luther, 'The Twofold Use of the Law and Gospel' in *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, Volume VIII, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, p. 237.
8. DA Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1978.
9. Robert J Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series Book 28, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 175 and following.
10. Robert J Banks, 'Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17–20', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1975, p. 242.
11. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 175.
12. Banks, 'Matthew's Understanding of the Law', p. 47.
13. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 117, where he argues that 'the parallel in Matthew 5:45 and in Luke makes it clear that "perfect" here means "indiscriminate" or "unconditional" – a quite conceivable, even attainable imperative ... all side meanings distract from the simplicity of the gospel

demand, which is no more (and no less) than that because God does not discriminate, his disciples are called upon likewise not to discriminate in choosing the objects of their love.'

14. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, Herald Press, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 2003, p. 48.
15. John Howard Yoder, Preface to *Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, Brazos, Grand Rapids, 2002, pp. 75, 311–2.
16. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, p. 179, note 7.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 6th rev. and unabridged ed., SCM, London, 1959, p. 131.
18. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 134.
19. I am thinking here of the vision explicated by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, pp. 110–1, who asks 'what resources we need to live in peace in the absence of the final reconciliation ... non-final reconciliation in the midst of struggle against oppression is what a *responsible* theology must be designed to facilitate'.
20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge (ed.), Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997, p. 209.
21. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 138.
22. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 362.
23. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder', in *Sermon on the Mount Theology Conference*, iTunes U, Wheaton College, 2005.
24. Glen H Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2004.
25. Glen H Stassen, 'Grace as Participation in the Inbreaking of the Kingdom: Mountains of Grace Back Home', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 74, no. 4, 2000, p. 541.
26. Glen H Stassen, 'The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12)', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122, no. 2, 2003, p. 267–8.
27. Glen Harold Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 132–5. Also Glen Harold Stassen, 'Jesus' Way of Transforming Initiatives and Just Peacemaking Theory', in *Transforming the Powers*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 30 claims the phrase 'transforming initiative' as his own, while acknowledging the foundational work of Walter Wink.

28. Glen H Stassen, 'Applying the Practices of Just Peacemaking,' *Theology, News and Notes*, Spring, 2009, p. 3. See also Glen H Stassen, 'Note I Wrote to Myself on the Horsley-Wink Debate,' Geoff Broughton (ed.), Pasadena, 2010.
29. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 131 regards the word 'ἀγαπῶ (to love) as one that 'sums up the whole of its message'.
30. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 134–5.
31. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 135.