



# THE MOST OFTEN ABUSED VERSES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## *And How to Treat Them Right*

**Craig L. Blomberg**

Distinguished Professor of New Testament  
Denver Theological Seminary  
Littleton, Colorado

At least once a year, students who have been reading for another class Dallas Willard's influential spiritual formation primer, *The Divine Conspiracy*, come to me asking if I agree with his perspective on the beatitudes. If they have already had me for our introduction and survey of the NT, of course, then they will know that I do not. Willard, rightly concerned that people may misunderstand the beatitudes as entrance requirements for the kingdom or hopeless idealism for Christian living, argues that Jesus is rather pronouncing God's blessing on "spiritual zeros"—"those without a wisp of 'religion'—when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them."<sup>1</sup> Each beatitude is thus taken as referring to people who in the world's estimation are nobodies. Even as seemingly positive a character trait as the "pure in heart" is redefined negatively—"as the ones for whom nothing is good enough, not even themselves . . . the perfectionists [who] are a pain to everyone, themselves most of all!"<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the "poor in spirit," "those who mourn," and the "meek"—the subjects of the first three beatitudes—can be and have been taken as embodying character traits often deemed undesirable. But

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1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 100.
  2. *Ibid.*, 118. All scripture references follow the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

ancient moralists, Jewish and Greco-Roman alike, regularly approved of the next five: “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure in heart,” “the peacemakers,” and even those “persecuted because of righteousness.” Willard also ignores the *positive* OT background to the first three beatitudes in Isa. 61:1-2 and Ps. 37:11, in which these traits characterize those who are explicitly serving Yahweh—scarcely lacking even a “wisp of religion.” Thus Willard’s approach proves highly implausible, and I know of no contemporary NT scholar who agrees with his overall synthesis.

This illustration is just one of many that demonstrate the frequent disconnect between popular religious authors or preachers and defensible biblical scholarship on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup> Precisely because of its perennial popularity, and not merely among Christians, it has been subjected to a greater number of distinct approaches to interpretation than any other comparably-sized portion of scripture.<sup>4</sup> Disagreement among scholars obviously remains, too, though usually within a narrower range of options. Warren Kissinger’s thorough history of interpretation covers approaches through the mid-seventies, while Warren Carter’s smaller overview updates the situation through the mid-nineties.<sup>5</sup> My documentation, therefore, will disproportionately emphasize the last decade of research. In most cases, I will not attempt to cite popular books or sermons that illustrate the mistakes I hope to correct, lest the footnotes overwhelm the text itself!

Of course, this exercise presupposes in the first place that the original meaning of the Sermon on the Mount, at least in its Matthean form,<sup>6</sup> can be reasonably well discerned. That, in turn, is linked to the larger

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3. Excellent recent scholarly treatments include Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word, 1982); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *All Things Are Possible to Believers: Reflections on the Lord’s Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); and Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999). At the popular level, cf. esp. John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978); D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978); and David S. Dockery and David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom: The Sermon on the Mount Made Practical for Today* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1992).
  4. Clarence Bauman (*The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* [Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985]) discusses thirty-six main approaches.
  5. Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1975); Warren Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount?* (New York: Paulist, 1994). Betz’s massive 1995 Hermeneia commentary (see n. 21) likewise surveys large swaths of earlier secondary literature.
  6. My focus will be exclusively on the finished form of the text in Matthew. “Jesus” will mean the Jesus that Matthew presents. I have argued extensively elsewhere for the substantial reliability of the Gospel tradition on historical grounds, even apart from presupposing Christian faith—cf. my *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987)—but I do not enter into debates about the tradition history of my text here.

assumption that any author's meaning can be captured by his or her readers. Radical deconstructionists will deny this claim, but in doing so undermine their own position by wishing for their own claims to be understood. It does not seem too presumptuous, with Umberto Eco, scarcely a friend of conservative hermeneutics, to argue that biblical interpreters can at least rule out numerous improbabilities even if they do not always agree on the most correct reading.<sup>7</sup> More optimistically, with N. T. Wright, a critical realism (or hermeneutical spiral<sup>8</sup>) can successively approximate the meaning of most texts through a careful attention to historical, theological and literary contexts.<sup>9</sup> To that end, it is significant that while one can still find supporters of the most influential approaches to the sermon throughout church history—the older Catholic “two tiers of Christians,” the Lutheran “law to prepare for the Gospel,” the Calvinist “mandate for the state,” the nineteenth-century liberal “social optimism,” Schweitzer’s “interim ethic,” and old-line dispensationalism—even various contemporary representatives of these movements, along with much of mainstream biblical scholarship, have achieved a broad consensus that the sermon is to be understood as part of Jesus’ “already but not yet” ethic and inaugurated kingdom eschatology that characterized his teaching more generally.<sup>10</sup> The rest of our paper will assume that this interpretive grid is the most accurate one.

Matt. 5:1-2 immediately reinforces this conviction as the stage is set for Christ’s sermon. While crowds surrounded Jesus, “his disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” His words form instruction for those already committed to him at some level as his followers, and they are addressed to his followers *in community*. In other words, Jesus’ ethic is not first of all for the state or society as a whole (though applications can be made there), but neither is it limited to what today would be called individual Christians’ private lives. It is a manifesto for what would become known as the church.<sup>11</sup>

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7. Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Over-Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991).

9. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 32-38.

10. Particularly thanks to the writings of Werner G. Kümmel (*Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1957]); and George E. Ladd (*The Presence of the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974]). Most recently, cf. Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

11. Cf. Robert A. Guelich, “The Matthean Beatitudes: ‘Entrance Requirements’ or Eschatological Blessings?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 415-34; Lisa S. Cahill, “The Ethical Implications of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 144-56; James L. Bailey, “Sermon on the Mount: Model for Community,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 20 (1993): 85-94.

The beatitudes (5:3-12) form the first part of the sermon's introduction.<sup>12</sup> Despite attempts to imagine forms of subjective happiness here, the concept of blessedness is rather "the condition or state of an individual who has been favorably accepted by God and has received his divine approval."<sup>13</sup> The mystery surrounding the "poor in spirit" in the first beatitude, like the apparent contradiction with Luke's reference to the economically destitute (Luke 6:20), can be solved once the OT background of the עניים, prevalent in the Psalms, Proverbs and Prophets, and particularly in Isa. 61:1, is recognized. These are those who turn to God to depend wholly on him in the midst of physical poverty. As Thomas Long puts it, "this beatitude indicates that those who have come to the end of their own resources, who know that they cannot sustain hope and purpose out of their own strength, and who have thrown themselves on the mercy of God will not be abandoned."<sup>14</sup>

The same "spiritual plus physical" approach applies to all of the beatitudes. Mourners may be repenting from sin or grieving over injustice. The meek are humble but also in humiliating circumstances. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness in Luke are literally hungry and thirsty themselves (Luke 6:21), but they also desire justice for all people, and so on.<sup>15</sup> *Contra* Willard, however, nothing says that all eight beatitudes must be interpreted identically in every dimension. Ancient writers in general, like the Sermon on the Mount itself elsewhere (cf. Matt. 5:21-48 and 6:9-13), often divided lists into halves, with each half a little different from the other. Hebrew parallelism seldom extended beyond four lines. Mark Powell builds on these observations to suggest that we should understand the first four beatitudes as describing the "eschatological reversals for the unfortunate" and the second four depicting the "eschatological rewards for the virtuous." The juxtaposition creates an ironic identification of the unfortunate with the virtuous. The beatitudes overall are united as the intrinsic effects of the establishment of God's rule.<sup>16</sup> They also praise all that is not "macho," to borrow a term from Hispanic culture. This approach seems better than those that would

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12. The outline adopted here closely follows Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 423-45; and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 84. An intriguing, chiasmic, but ultimately less persuasive outline appears in Jonathan A. Draper, "The Genesis and Narrative Thrust of the Paraenesis in the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 75 (1999): 25-48.
  13. David P. Scaer, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 76.
  14. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 48. Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 47; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 91; and Samuel Pagán, "Bienaventurados los pobres en espíritu: Jesús y los Manuscritos del Mar Muerto," *Apuntes* 19 (1999): 42-50.
  15. An excellent treatment of the beatitudes from this "both-and" perspective is still Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First-WORLD Christians* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

divide up the beatitudes into less obvious or symmetrical sections.<sup>17</sup> The repetition and expansion of the final beatitude—“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (5:11)—makes it clear that these blessings do not come apart from Christian discipleship.<sup>18</sup>

The second part of the sermon's introduction presents the little metaphors about salt and light (5:13-16). Lest people imagine that Jesus' countercultural community should retreat into the wilderness, here he stresses that they must live their virtuous lives in full view of others—“that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (5:16). The illuminating function of light remains clear enough; more opaque is the analogy with salt. Davies and Allison list no less than eleven functions of salt in the biblical worlds—accompanying sacrifice, part of a covenant, purifying water, a condiment for food, a preservative, a necessity for life, a sign of loyalty, peace, gracious speech, wisdom, and beloved of the gods!<sup>19</sup> The biggest danger here is assuming that many, or even all, of these meanings were intended at once—the exegetical fallacy James Barr dubbed an “illegitimate totality transfer.”<sup>20</sup> Many commentators, perhaps still recalling the KJV's “but if the salt has lost its savour” (5:13), assume the primary meaning has to do with disciples giving flavor to society.<sup>21</sup> But this is a misleading translation; the Greek verb is  $\mu\omega\rho\alpha\nu\theta\eta$ —“[if] it be defiled,” that is, “corrupted.” Besides, in a

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16. Mark A. Powell, “Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996): 460-79. See also Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 103.

17. E.g., Michael Gourgues, “Sur l'articulation des béatitudes matthéenes (Mt 5, 3-12): une proposition,” *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 340-56; H. Benedict Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beatitudes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 37-38.

18. Rightly, Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 79. *Contra*, e.g., Erik Kolbell (*What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003]), who seems to believe that serving God and working for social justice from any religious perspective is adequate. Even more general and universalizing in her interpretations are Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

19. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 472-73.

20. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218.

21. See Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 173; Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 80; and Hans D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 160. V. George Shillington (“Salt of the Earth? [Mt 5:13/Luke 14:34f],” *Expository Times* 112 [2001]: 120-21) believes that because true salt cannot lose its flavor this is a product that is good for literal earth—“perhaps potash, phosphate or ammonia” found in abundance around the Dead Sea. Thus the reference would be to life-bringing fertilizer, but virtually all commentators agree that what passed for salt in the ancient world was often already an impure mixture of elements which therefore could lose its flavor. Thus even if flavor is what is in view with the metaphor, one would not need to substitute a separate product for salt.

world without refrigeration, salt, particularly on meat, had to be used in such quantities as a preservative that it probably did not enhance the flavor the way we think of it doing today. It is precisely salt's role as a preservative—arresting corruption so long as it itself is not corrupted—which we should therefore think of first when interpreting this metaphor.<sup>22</sup> That several of the earliest Patristic commentators on the sermon point this out as well suggests that we are on the right track (cf. Origen, *Fragment 91*; Hilary, *On Matthew 4.10*; Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 15.6).<sup>23</sup>

The body of the sermon begins with 5:17; verses 17-20 may be viewed as its thesis statement. While popular (Gentile) Christianity probably plays down the Jewishness of Christ's words too much and forgets the amount of continuity that exists between his ethic and the Judaism into which he was born,<sup>24</sup> contemporary *scholarship* seems to have swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction, not always acknowledging the radical ways in which Jesus broke from his heritage. Thus, while it is right to stress that Jesus was not abolishing the Law (5:17a, 18a), what he was doing—fulfilling it (5:17b)—is not the natural opposite of abolishing (like “preserving unchanged” or “keeping intact” would be). True, no one can set aside a single commandment (5:19), but neither can one rightly understand how the OT applies in the kingdom era Jesus inaugurated without understanding his sovereign interpretation of the Law (the feature that unites the antitheses of 5:21-48).<sup>25</sup> To take the most obvious example, his followers have consistently believed it is no longer appropriate to sacrifice animals for the forgiveness of sins, because of their conviction that his death was a once-for-all atonement for the sins of humanity. Thus, while no portion of Torah may be changed “until everything is accomplished” (5:18b), all that certain laws pointed to—in this example, the sacrifices—was fulfilled or accomplished with his death and resurrection.<sup>26</sup> I cannot understand, therefore, how Andrew Overman can call this exegesis “hermeneutical gymnastics” that “seem excessive, if not tortured.”<sup>27</sup> What is tortured is his attempt to deny the obvious contrasts present in the antitheses of verses 21-48, simply on the basis that **δέ** is not always a clear adversative.<sup>28</sup> Rather, with

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22. Cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 94.

23. All quoted in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1-13* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 92.

24. Cf. Dennis Stoutenburg, *With One Voice/B'Qol Echad: The Sermon on the Mount and Rabbinic Literature* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996).

25. Douglas J. Moo, “Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (1984): 3-49.

26. Cf. John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976); Robert Banks, “Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 226-42.

27. J. Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 77. Even more puzzling is how the evangelical commentary by Keener (*Matthew*, 178) can endorse Overman's comments here.

Donald Hagner, we should recognize that Jesus is presented as neither abolishing nor preserving the Law but *fulfilling* it, “not in the sense of simply establishing the law as is, nor of supplementing it, but in the sense of bringing it to its intended meaning in connection with the messianic fulfillment . . . brought by Jesus.” Again, “in Matthew’s view, the teaching of Jesus by definition amounts to the true meaning of the Torah and is hence paradoxically an affirmation of Jesus’ loyalty to the OT.”<sup>29</sup> The “greater righteousness” demanded of Jesus’ followers (5:20) is thus not a quantitatively better obedience to the Torah but the qualitatively different responsibility to follow Christ—a more stringent demand but one which comes with greater empowerment (thus the twin oxymorons in 11:30 of an easy yoke and a light burden).<sup>30</sup>

The antitheses then offer representative illustrations. Again, they appear to break into two halves: the first three reflect an internalization or intensification of the Law (5:21-32), while the second three seem to revoke certain aspects of Torah. The debate over whether Jesus is actually superseding written scripture or simply criticizing oral interpretations of it may well pose a false dichotomy. Elements of both appear present.<sup>31</sup> The first antithesis—expanding the definition of murder to include unrighteous anger (5:21-26)—is perhaps the least misunderstood of the six, though if Christians ever took seriously the command to leave their gifts at the altar and go to be reconciled with their sisters and brothers before continuing in worship, our churches might be temporarily emptied! The antithesis likening lust to adultery in the heart (5:27-30) is also little heeded in our sex-crazed society, though the grammatical observation of Klaus Haacker still remains intriguing: since *ἐπιθυμέω* normally takes its object in the genitive, the accusative *αὐτήν* more likely is the subject of the infinitive *ἐπιθυμῆσαι*, so that the translation perhaps should read, “the one looking at a woman for the purpose of getting her to lust after him.”<sup>32</sup> That would not thereby make other forms of lust acceptable (!), but it would point out that there is a difference between a mental fantasy that never affects another person and a desire

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28. Overman, *Church and Community*, 81. Cf. the entire approach of R. H. Worth, *The Sermon on the Mount: Its Old Testament Roots* (New York: Paulist, 1997).

29. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 106. Cf. idem, “Balancing the Old and the New: The Law of Moses in Matthew and Paul,” *Interpretation* 51 (1997): 20-30. Cf. Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 102-3.

30. Cf. Long, *Matthew*, 54: “Jesus is not calling his hearers to determine how righteous the scribes and Pharisees are and then to do them one better. . . . No, the followers of Jesus are called to a different *kind* of righteousness that seeks to be ever expressive of the merciful, forgiving, reconciling will of God that lies at the center of the law.”

31. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 54-55.

32. Klaus Haacker, “Der Rechtsatz Jesu zum Thema Ehebruch,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 21 (1977): 113-16.

to act in a relationship with someone else in a way calculated to lead to infidelity.<sup>33</sup>

Definite exegetical progress has been made in recent years on the antithesis about divorce (5:31-32). Little-used definitions of **πορνεία** are no longer commonly proposed; a consensus is emerging that Christ spoke here of sexual infidelity in the broad sense of intercourse with anyone other than a lawfully wedded spouse.<sup>34</sup> It is also increasingly acknowledged that divorce and remarriage in this case are legitimate options, though never the ideal.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, our culture, including many segments of Christian culture, has permitted divorce in so many additional situations, going well beyond even Paul's second exception (desertion by an unbeliever—I Cor. 7:15-16), that pastorally it becomes very difficult to remain faithful to biblical teachings and at the same time be truly forgiving of those who have contravened them but then sincerely repented. Interestingly, while taking an even more conservative perspective exegetically (no remarriage after divorce), Andrew Cornes's work devotes a full half of his volume to very helpful, pastorally sensitive guidelines for contemporary application.<sup>36</sup>

Antitheses four through six now set aside elements either permitted or prescribed in Mosaic legislation concerning oaths and retaliation<sup>37</sup> against enemies. In each case, misunderstanding appears if we lose sight of their original contexts in Galilean village life. These commands have

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33. Even if one accepts the more traditional translation, "it is crucial to observe that Matthew's construction (*pros to epithymasai* [sic]) implies that the sin lies not in the entrance of a thought but in letting it incite to wrongful passion (cf. the use of the related expressions in 6:1 and 23:5). One could translate: 'Everyone looking upon a woman *in order to* lust after her. . . .' Jesus is talking not about feelings but about intentions, and so the sin he condemns lies not in the entrance of desire but in what one does with that desire" (Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 74).

34. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 58. Exceptions include D. Janzen, "The Meaning of *Porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9: An Approach From the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000): 66-80; and J. M. Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark on Divorce," *Trinity Journal* 22 (2001): 219-35.

35. Craig S. Keener (. . . *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991]) is still excellent here. Pride of place, today, however, must go to David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Cambridge, 2002). For a significant change-of-mind to this perspective by one who once vigorously advocated a "no-remarriage" view, cf. William A. Heth, "Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002): 4-29. For my earlier treatment of the full-set of exegetical questions surrounding Matthew's later expanded treatment of the topic in 19:1-12, cf. Craig L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 161-96. A. R. Guenther ("The Exception Phrases: Except *Porneia*, Including *Porneia* or Excluding *Porneia*? [Matthew 5:32; 19:9]," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 [2002]: 83-96) presents some important nuancing on the grammar of the "exception" part of the exception clause.

36. Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 313, 494.

been well categorized as “focal instances” of key ethical issues—extreme applications which attract and focus our attention on the broader principles they embody that must be variously applied in different settings.<sup>38</sup> Or as I have put it in chart form in my *Jesus and the Gospels*, one can find examples in the life of Jesus or elsewhere in scripture of each of the seven main commands of verses 33-47 being “violated,” suggesting that their literal applications are limited to specific contexts.<sup>39</sup>

Doubtless, one of the worst misunderstandings of these antitheses involves instruction to victims of physical abuse to continue to put themselves in harm’s way, because of Jesus’ injunction to “turn the other cheek.”<sup>40</sup> A slap on the right cheek (5:39b) by characteristically right-handed people would not be the blow of an aggressor but the back-handed slap of a superior—a characteristically Jewish form of insulting someone deemed to be inferior.<sup>41</sup> Jesus’ command in essence declares, “Don’t trade insults,” not “submit yourself to physical abuse”! Similar historical background enables us to understand non-resistance to evil (5:38-39a) as not seeking the legal redress afforded by lawsuits (cf. the context of 5:40), going the extra mile as voluntarily doing more than Roman conscription could require, and giving to those who ask of you as not withholding loans because the sabbatical year is near.<sup>42</sup> Each of these must be applied today to sufficiently analogous situations and not taken out of their historical or literary contexts.

In this light, the ethical studies of Walter Wink, Glen Stassen and David Gushee prove particularly helpful. Without arguing that a doctrine of full-fledged pacifism can be derived from these texts, these ethicists point out that most Christians could go much further down the road

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37. Cf. Don Garlington, “Oath-taking in the Community of the New Age (Matthew 5:33-37),” *Trinity Journal* 16 (1995): 139-70. Cf. also Jo-Ann A. Brant, “Insolent Odes in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Journal for the Study of New Testament* 63 (1996): 3-20; B. Kollmann, “Das Schwurverbot Mt 5, 33-37/Jak 5, 12 im Spiegel antiker Eidkritik,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 40 (1996): 179-93.

38. Robert C. Tannehill, “The ‘Focal Instance’ as a Form of New Testament Speech: A Study of Matthew 5:39b-42,” *Journal of Religion* 50 (1970): 372-85; cf. Senior, *Matthew*, 110; Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54. Keener (*Matthew*, 195) calls it a “rhetorical overstatement.” See A. E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands: The Ethics of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) for a similar approach to Jesus’ ethics more generally. For the most relevant historical background, cf. Richard A. Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis: ‘Love Your Enemies’ and the Doctrine of Non-Violence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 3-31.

39. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 252.

40. Cf. the very helpful and sensitive treatment of this problem among husbands and wives by Catherine C. Kroeger and James R. Beck, eds., *Women, Abuse and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

41. Cf. Keener, *Matthew*, 197.

42. On all of these points, cf. further Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) briefly; and in detail, Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*.

of promoting “just peacemaking” (borrowing language from the concept of a “just war”).<sup>43</sup> Stassen observes that five of the six antitheses actually contain not just two but three parts—what Jesus’ audience had heard “of old,” what he says to them that they should not do, and then positive, remedial overtures to make a bad situation better.<sup>44</sup> Wink calls attention to the surprising amounts of injustice that were done away with by the largely non-violent revolutions of Gandhi’s India, Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement, Cory Aquino’s Philippines, and East Germany’s Christian protests and prayer meetings before the Berlin Wall fell.<sup>45</sup> Stassen and Gushee point to studies that show both in international relations and in trying to reduce homicides in the U.S. that “conflict resolution, preventive initiatives more than violent retaliation, nonviolent action strategies, economic justice, community organization, reduction in weapons and the development of groups that give spiritual support, are the effective way to prevent violence.”<sup>46</sup>

All this fleshes out a realistic application of Jesus’ final and seemingly most radical antithesis of all, involving enemy love (5:43-47). While partial precedents exist in the OT, Samuel Sandmel remains correct in observing that “there is nothing in Jewish writings that advocates nonresistance,” as in the immediate context of this command to love one’s enemies.<sup>47</sup> With this challenging injunction, verse 48 follows naturally, though “perfect” as a translation of **τέλειος** too easily suggests the notion of sinlessness. Jesus, however, probably had in view “completeness” or “maturity,” especially given the meaning of the probable underlying Aramaic **ܕܡܝܢܐ**. In one sense, even this kind of “perfection” may be an

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43. Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

44. Cf. also Glen H. Stassen, “Grace and Deliverance in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Review & Expositor* 89 (1992): 234-35. In a recent article, Stassen (“The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5:21-7:12],” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 [2003]: 267-308) sees fourteen triads of traditional piety, a vicious cycle, and transforming initiatives encompassing almost the entire body of the sermon, but not all are equally convincing—particularly not 7:6 as a traditional foil to verses 7-11. One additional exegetical observation well worth considering, however, is the possibility of taking **τῷ πονηρῷ** in 5:39 as an instrumental dative rather than a direct object, yielding the command, “do not resist evil by evil,” especially when this is precisely what Rom. 12:17-21 teaches, a text often thought to allude to this teaching of Jesus (281).

45. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Cf. idem, “Jesus and the Nonviolent Struggle of Our Time,” *Louvain Studies* 18 (1993): 3-20. For a critique of Wink, see Jan Lambrecht, “Is Active Nonviolent Resistance Jesus’ Third Way? An Answer to Walter Wink,” *Louvain Studies* 19 (1994) 350-51. D. Bivin (“Jesus’ Attitude Toward Pacifism,” *Jerusalem Perspective* 45 [1994]: 3-6) believes that verse 39a condemns revenge but not self-defense.

46. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 169-70.

47. Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 357; cf. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 62; Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 101; and Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 309-11.

impossible ideal, but Jesus envisioned his followers making substantial progress along the path toward it, even in this life.<sup>48</sup>

Such progress could produce misplaced pride, though. The next section of the sermon thus precludes this move. In 6:1-18, Jesus gives three examples of how not to parade one's piety in public.<sup>49</sup> 6:1 does not contradict 5:16 on letting one's light shine before others, because the motive here is entirely different (to be praised by people rather than to have people glorify God).<sup>50</sup> Nor does not letting one's left hand know what one's right hand is doing (6:3) mean that Christians should not be open and scrupulously accountable in their giving. As David Scaer explains, disciples simply "do not concentrate on their own past acts of charity or the righteousness which motivates them. They become oblivious to what they have done. Their doing good becomes so much a part of their nature that they are unaware of it."<sup>51</sup>

The so-called Lord's Prayer continues to generate a large body of commentary.<sup>52</sup> The introductory verse, 6:7 ("don't keep on babbling like the pagans"), does not proscribe liturgical repetition of the prayer but mindless, even magical use—as if its mere recitation could force God's hand.<sup>53</sup> The eschatological approach popular a generation ago that relegated all of this to final judgment has rightly waned today,<sup>54</sup> especially as lexicographers recognize that **ἐπιούσιος** ("daily") in verse 11 probably means either "necessary for existence" or "for the next day,"<sup>55</sup> and that **πειρασμός** in verse 13 probably means "temptation" rather than "trial" or "test." But why pray that God not lead us into temptation when he tempts no one anyway (James 1:13), a concept Matthew also believes in since he explicitly attributes the temptations of Jesus to the devil

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48. Cf. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 135; Keener, *Matthew*, 215; and Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 105.

49. For important possible historical background, see Peter Wick, "Der historische Ort von Mt 6, 1-18," *Revue biblique* 105 (1998): 332-58. Expanding this background to cover the entire sermon is idem, "Die Bergpredigt: Synagogale Toraeslegung in Vollmacht," *European Journal of Theology* 5 (1996): 9-13. For an analysis of the two contrasting types of honor reflected here, see Louise J. Lawrence, "'For Truly, I Tell You, They Have Received Their Reward' (Matt 6:2): Investigating Honor Precedents and Honor Virtue," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 687-702.

50. Cf. Long, *Matthew*, 66.

51. Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 147.

52. Most useful probably is Jan M. Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

53. Cf. Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 152-53.

54. See Jeffrey D. Gibson, "Matthew 6:9-13/Luke 11:2-4: An Eschatological Prayer?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31 (2001): 96-105.

55. See, respectively, Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 68 or Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 398-99; and Colin Hemer, "Epiousios," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984): 81-94 or Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 125.

rather than to God's Spirit (Matt. 4:1)?<sup>56</sup> Probably the sense is "do not let us succumb to temptation."<sup>57</sup>

Once again we have a section of the sermon that divides symmetrically in half—petitions about God and his will (6:9-10), followed by requests for his people's needs (6:11-13). Praying for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth commits us to working, already in this age, by his Spirit, for whatever measure of inaugurated kingdom life he chooses to supply.<sup>58</sup> "Give us this day our daily bread" (6:11) forms the pivot and may reflect the most central petition.<sup>59</sup> Reminiscent of Agur's prayer in Prov. 30:7-9 to be given neither poverty nor riches,<sup>60</sup> we are clearly called upon to pray for our needs not our greeds. Matt. 6:12, 14-15 still pack a needed punch. Arland Hultgren notes three inadequate options for interpreting "as" in the clause "as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12)—'as' meaning "like" or "in the same manner," 'as' meaning "because," and 'as' implying God's conditional forgiveness. Rather, borrowing from speech-act theory, the very statement "as we forgive" represents a performative utterance by which we begin the process of restoring broken relationships. Asking God for forgiveness and knowing it is being given simply puts one all the more in God's debt.<sup>61</sup>

Christ's teaching on fasting (6:16-18) presupposes that his followers will at times fast, *contra* those who find no place for it in new covenant behavior. But there are only two secure references to the practice in the NT after Pentecost, both in the context of the Christians in Antioch choosing whom they will send out as their missionaries (Acts 13:2-3).<sup>62</sup> So it does not appear that fasting played a central role in the life of the earliest church, and Paul will later note the danger that such ascetic practices can mask, at times leading to even greater cravings and subsequent indulgence (Col. 2:23).<sup>63</sup>

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56. *Contra* Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 411, who thinks the sermon flatly contradicts these texts. Much better are the insights of Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 187-88.

57. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, 612-13, citing *b. Ber.* 60b: "Bring me . . . not into the power of temptation." Cf. E. Moore, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation," *Expository Times* 102 (1991): 171-72. For slightly different nuances, see Kenneth Grayston, "The Decline of Temptation—And the Lord's Prayer," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), 294; and W. Montgomery Watt, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation," *Expository Times* 110 (1999): 80. Keener (*Matthew*, 223, 225) makes this sense work even with the translation for **πειρασμός** of "testing."

58. Balanced and helpful applications appear in Long, *Matthew*, 70.

59. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 67.

60. For this and other possible allusions to this text in Proverbs, see Rick W. Byargeon, "Echoes of Wisdom in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 353-65. For a book-length study of the theme, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999).

61. Arland J. Hultgren, "Forgive Us, As We Forgive (Matthew 6:12)," *Word and World* 16 (1996): 284-90.

62. The best manuscripts suggest that the original text of Acts 10:30 probably did not contain the reference to fasting that the KJV includes.

The next main section of the sermon (Matt. 6:19-34) turns to money matters. Little is often misinterpreted here, but neither are these instructions much followed. 6:19-24 are unified by the theme of single-mindedness.<sup>64</sup> Either one serves God or one is enslaved to material possessions (“mammon”—6:24, KJV; broader than just “money”—NIV). That possessions are given this particular name suggests they are being treated as a deity.<sup>65</sup> Of course, in a capitalist world, some accumulation of possessions can actually create greater wealth to be used for God’s kingdom. What is forbidden is the hoarding of treasures, when “they are prized for their own sake, not put to work to create jobs and produce goods.”<sup>66</sup>

The central theme of 6:25-34, however, is that one should take each day as it comes, not worrying about God’s provision, because he cares deeply for his people. The petition about daily bread from the Lord’s Prayer is in essence unpacked here. One verse in this paragraph stands out as frequently misinterpreted: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33). Either commentators relegate this promise entirely to the eschaton or they have to admit that millions of Christians throughout history have not been given adequate food, clothing and shelter through no necessary fault of their own. Mark 10:29 makes it clear, however, that Jesus did promise houses and fields to his followers a hundredfold, even in this present age, and the context there makes it clear how they receive them. Just as they get numerous new family members in the Lord, so too God’s people share with one another when there are physical needs.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, just two verses after Luke’s parallel saying, “seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well” (Luke 12:31), we read, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (12:33a). Thus we must take the plural terms in Matt. 6:33 seriously (“you [all] seek . . . given to you [all]”). When God’s people truly seek his righteous standards collectively, that will include helping the poor and needy in their midst.<sup>68</sup>

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63. For a full-length treatment, see Joseph Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1982).

64. Kari Syreeni, “A Single Eye: Aspects of the Symbolic World of Matt 6:22-23,” *Studia Theologica* 53 (1999): 97-118.

65. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 458.

66. F. W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 182.

67. Cf. Dan O. Via, Jr., *The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel: In the Middle of Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 142; David M. May, “Leaving and Receiving: A Social-Scientific Exegesis of Mark 10:29-31,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 17 (1990): 141-51.

68. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 373. For additional detail on verses 25-34 overall, see Craig L. Blomberg, “On Wealth and Worry: Matt. 6:19-34—Meaning and Significance,” *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (1992): 73-89; and Odar Wischmeyer, “Matthäus 6, 25-34, par—Die Spruchreihe vom Sorgen,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1994): 1-22.

The final segment of the body of the Sermon on the Mount (7:1-12) combines teaching on judging people's behavior (7:1-6), asking God for good things (7:7-11), and treating others as one would want to be treated (7:12). Matthew 7:1 may have surpassed John 3:16 as the Bible verse most well-known by modern unbelievers. Whether or not that is the case, it is probably the verse most abused by them! Often cited as if Christians had no right ever to pronounce any kind of behavior morally repugnant, however wicked or grotesque it might be, verse 1 ("Do not judge, or you too will be judged") is thus violently ripped from its immediate context. Verses 1-2 do indeed warn that believers will be judged in the same way that they judge others, and verses 3-4 enjoin rigorous self-judgment before judgment of others. But once one has taken the "plank" out of one's own eye, one "will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (7:5), a process that certainly involves analysis of good or bad. More dramatically, holy things are not to be repeatedly offered to those who continually reject and even profane them (7:6),<sup>69</sup> an injunction that requires further insight as to what is good or bad.

Thus 7:1 cannot mean that disciples may never pronounce specific actions of other people as sinful, but rather that they must not do so in an overly condemning or censorious way (an equally legitimate rendering of the verb κρίνω). With Overman, "what Matthew is promoting in the prayer, and elsewhere in the Gospel, is circumspect, very thoughtful judgments," a process that "must first begin with thorough, and probably rather agonizing, self-assessment."<sup>70</sup> 7:6 then balances out 7:1-5 to a certain extent. The latter "commanded that there not be too much severity"; the former "follows up by saying that there should not be too much laxity."<sup>71</sup>

A fundamental hermeneutical axiom comes into play in 7:7-11. Matthew assumes that interpreters of these promises that God will give what petitioners ask have already read the Lord's Prayer one chapter earlier! Thus they know that one must ask for God's will to be done (6:10). The "ask, seek, and knock" clauses are not a blank check, but leave room for God's desires to override ours. Such prayer "supposes a heart of piety" and "submission to God's will."<sup>72</sup> At the same time, James 4:2

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69. This verse, of course, has long puzzled readers. Reference to the eucharist is anachronistic; imagining apostates is too limited. For this broader understanding, see Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 169; and Keener, *Matthew*, 240.

70. Overman, *Church and Community*, 99.

71. Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 155.

72. Keener, *Matthew*, 246. Schnackenburg (*Matthew*, 75) notes the unmistakable kinship between Matt. 6:9-13 and 7:7-11, a link even clearer in Luke, since the two parallels are combined in the same context (Luke 11:1-4, 9-13). Nevertheless, there is a confidence present here not often found in pagan parallels; cf. C. G. Müller, "Bitten und Beten im NT und seiner Umwelt: Martial und Matthäus im Vergleich," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 1-21.

teaches that there are some things we do not have because we have not asked, a possible allusion to this portion of the sermon (Matt. 7:7-8). From a pedagogical point of view, Murray and Meyers helpfully explore the rationale behind this arrangement, observing that God's choice to distribute certain (but only certain) blessings if and only if his people ask for them keeps them both from idolatry—thinking they can automatically manipulate God—and from merely presuming on his grace for everything to be given unconditionally. Good human parents do exactly the same thing with their children, which is Jesus' precise point in 7:9-11!<sup>73</sup>

The Golden Rule (7:12), which brings the body of the sermon to a close, is perhaps more often parodied (“Do unto others before they do unto you . . .” and the like) than obeyed. Students of comparative religion often try to downplay the uniqueness of Jesus' words or deny that the positive form (“Do to others what you would have them do to you”) is any different from the negative form found in various extrabiblical sources (i.e., “don't treat others as you wouldn't want to be treated”). Some even argue that Jesus' meaning is self-serving, telling us to treat others in certain ways so *that* they will treat us similarly.<sup>74</sup> Against all of these points, John Topel's recent study shows that the Golden Rule is “a moral maxim of general altruism, expressed by mutuality between a doer and others,” reflecting a greater “extent and benevolence evoked” than by the so-called Silver Rule or negative form of the principle.<sup>75</sup>

The rest of Jesus' sermon (7:13-27) concludes by presenting in three different ways the stark choice facing his listeners—either to follow him or to reject him. The metaphor of the narrow vs. the broad road (7:13-14) does not specifically disclose the numbers that form the “few” vs. the “many” that travel these roads—obviously millions of people have become Christians throughout church history, though never close to the majority of the world's population. The main point of the metaphor is the difficulty of journeying along the road that leads to life—‘narrow’ (τεθλιμμένη) can also mean “rough” or “full of trouble or tribulation.”<sup>76</sup>

The second part of the conclusion contrasts true and false prophets (7:15-23). The two paragraphs within this part (7:15-20, 21-23) must not be separated from each other. Good trees do bear good fruit, but “fruit inspection” (7:15-20) is not the only criterion for distinguishing the true from the counterfeit. There is also a Christological criterion (7:21-23). Those who will survive Judgment Day must be able to have

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73. Michael J. Murray and Kurt Meyers, “Ask and It Will Be Given to You,” *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 311-30.

74. E.g., Paul Ricouer, “The Golden Rule: Exegetical and Theological Perplexities,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 392-97.

75. John Topel, “The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31): The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 478-85.

76. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 77; and Long, *Matthew*, 83.

Jesus say that he knows them, that they are his, rather than hearing the damning words of verse 23 (“I never knew you”). And it is important to notice that it is *Jesus’* agreement that such a relationship exists that counts, not what the individuals themselves say. Many in fact will claim to have known him as Lord and even been active in what we would call ministry, leadership in ministry, even charismatic leadership in ministry (7:21-22), but it will all have been a sham. As Betz stresses, every one of the signs of verse 22—prophecy, exorcism and miracles—were common in pagan religions as well.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, we recognize that the emphasis in this context (unlike certain other scriptures) is not on the false doctrine of these counterfeit Christians but on their misbehavior (perhaps already mirrored in the Matthean community), because of the metaphor of wolves in sheep’s clothing ravaging the flock.<sup>78</sup>

The final comparison—the parable of the two builders (7:24-27)—is probably the least misunderstood. Hearing Jesus’ words and not obeying them risks the catastrophe of eternal judgment, just like the house built on the sand that is washed away in a torrential storm. Only following Jesus can be likened to a house built on an adequate foundation. As R. T. France succinctly summarizes, “The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not meant to be admired but to be obeyed.”<sup>79</sup>

Matthew’s closing words, after Jesus has stopped teaching, can be misleading. The amazement of the crowds concerning Jesus’ authority, not like that of “their teachers of the law” (7:28-29), does not mean that the scribes or Pharisees had no authority. But the later codification of the oral Torah in the Mishnah makes it clear that their authority rested on regularly being able to quote either scripture or previous rabbis for support. Jesus never does the latter, and, in the sermon at least, does the former only to reinterpret the Law in radical fashion. While most turn to the sermon to understand Jesus’ *ethical* teachings, at least as presented by Matthew, we must recognize an implicit *Christological* claim here as well. More specifically, with D. A. Carson,

Jesus’ entire approach in the Sermon on the Mount is not only ethical but messianic—i.e., christological and eschatological. Jesus is not an ordinary prophet who says, “Thus says the Lord!” Rather, he speaks in the first person and claims that his teaching fulfills the OT; that he determines who enters the messianic kingdom; that as the Divine Judge he pronounces banishment; that the true heirs of the kingdom would be persecuted for their allegiance to him; and that he alone fully knows the will of his Father. . . . Jesus’ authority is unique, and the crowds recognized it even if they did not always understand it.<sup>80</sup>

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77. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 550-51.

78. Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 166-67.

79. R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 146.

80. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984): 195-96.

The question that Jesus would later explicitly raise—“Who do you say I am?” (16:15)—presses itself on us already here, even if only implicitly. It is Matthew’s conviction that our answer to that question and the concomitant life of discipleship that the right answer requires is the most important issue for humanity to address in any era, with eternal implications. To stop short of this application with mere analysis might well be the ultimate abuse of the sermon!