Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: Christian *Halakhah* Ethic

Catherine Cory

Perhaps more than any other part of the New Testament, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount has been regarded over the centuries as the standard of Christian living. However, what Christians sometimes fail to understand about this text is that it represents a Christian reinterpretation or refinement of *Halakhah*—that is, Jewish Law. This article begins with some brief background on the Gospel of Matthew and its portrayal of Jesus as the messianic king of the Jews and the new Moses. Then attention shifts to the Sermon on the Mount as instruction on how the disciple of Jesus should observe *Halakhah*. Brief commentary on the lesser-known Sermon on the Plain from Luke's Gospel provides a way to better appreciate the distinctive features of Matthew's version. The article concludes with some comments on the significance of the Sermon on the Mount for today's Christian believers.

Matthew: A Jewish Christian Gospel

Traditionally the Gospel of Matthew was associated with an Apostle named Matthew, a tax collector (see Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15, Acts of the Apostles 1:13), also known as Levi (see Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27). Today most biblical scholars would say that this Gospel derives from the apostolic tradition but was written anonymously. It is believed to have been written in approximately AD 85 by a Christian Jew—that is, a Jewish person who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, also identified as a Jewish Christian. Likewise, most scholars of Matthew's Gospel think the intended audience consisted of Christian Jews, though perhaps not exclusively. Perhaps from Antioch or another city in Syria, this community viewed themselves as a minority community, and they may have recently separated from a synagogue. However, we do not know exactly why they separated, nor do we know much about their social status.

Like all the New Testament Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew was never intended to be a documentary history of the life of Jesus. Rather, it is a narrative proclamation of faith concerning Jesus, the Christ, which was intended to inspire faith among its hearers. Evidence of its Jewish Christian origins is apparent throughout. It opens with a genealogy of Jesus' family, beginning with Abraham and extending through David, considered to be the greatest king of Israel, and the Babylonian Exile, its greatest national tragedy at the time (see 1:1–17). This genealogy is followed by stories of Jesus' birth, which present him as the messianic king of the Jews and the new Moses (see 1:18—2:23). Most notable is the slaughter of the male children of Bethlehem (see 2:16–18, Exodus 1:15–22, Jeremiah 31:15) and the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt so that the Scriptures could be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15, Hosea 11:1).

Continuing the Moses and Exodus motifs, Matthew later describes how Jesus was forced into the wilderness just prior to the beginning of his public ministry (see 4:1). Like the Israelites, Jesus is tested in the wilderness, but unlike the Israelites who grumbled against Moses and abandoned God for their worship of a golden calf, Jesus passes the test of loyalty—depending only on God for food, not challenging God's trustworthiness in keeping him safe, and worshiping no one but God (see 4:2–11). Such is the literary context for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is presented as the new Moses and a true Israelite, who depends on God alone and who is perfectly obedient to God's will.

Overview of the Sermon on the Mount

The geographical setting that Matthew assigns to the Sermon on the Mount is an unnamed mountain, presumably in the Galilee (see 5:1–2). The astute reader will likely conclude that this mountain is a symbol for Sinai, the place where Moses first received God's Law on behalf of God's People (see Exodus 19:3). With the crowds gathered around him, Jesus sits down—the traditional position of a teacher—and speaks to his disciples. They are about to receive the word of God's Covenant.

This is the first and the longest of several speeches in Matthew's Gospel. Scholars believe that the author of this Gospel crafted the speech from oral traditions and collections of short sayings attributed to Jesus. In its final form, the Sermon on the Mount appears to have been organized into the following units:

1. Beatitudes (5:3–12)
2. Discipleship sayings (5:13–16)
3. Teachings about the Law (5:17–48)
4. Teachings about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1–18)
5. Sayings about worldly possessions and dependence on God (6:19–34)
6. Sayings about proper human behavior and God's response to it (7:1–27)

As you investigate each of these units of the Sermon on the Mount, pay special attention to the ways Matthew has shaped the Jesus tradition to create for us an ethic that is both deeply rooted in Jewish *Halakhah* and distinctively Christian.

The Beatitudes and Discipleship Sayings

A beatitude is a saying that begins with the phrase "Blessed are" or "Blessed is." Although many people have heard of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, most are surprised to learn that these sayings can be found elsewhere in the Bible, mostly in the Wisdom literature (see Sirach 25:7–9, 48:1–11; Psalms 1, 2, 32), prophetic literature (see Isaiah 30:18, 32:20; Jeremiah 17:7), and the Book of Revelation (see 1:3, 14:13, 16:15). Beatitudes usually describe a behavior or disposition that God approves or looks favorably upon. Each of Matthew's Beatitudes has a promise of future reward or well-being attached to it, which makes them a call to obedience and an invitation to faith. The implication is that those who are obedient to God's call will receive their reward when God's Reign is finally made manifest and God's salvation is realized through the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

When we first hear the phrase "Blessed are," we might be tempted to feel warm and fuzzy, but when we look beyond the opening phrase of Matthew's Beatitudes, we soon realize that this is serious business. These Beatitudes demand personal sacrifice, involve exposing oneself to shame or harm, and require total dependence on God. For example, the person who is "poor in spirit" (5:3) needs to be detached from his wealth and the security it brings so that he can care for the poor. This is a traditional theme in the Law and the prophets (see Exodus 22:25–27, 23:11; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; Isaiah 61:1), but the Matthean Jesus has extended the concept to include taking on the spirit of the poor, those who depend on the graciousness of God for their very survival.

Likewise, those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6) must be committed and passionate in every way about obeying God's will—even to the point of allowing themselves to be persecuted (see 5:10). In Matthew's Gospel, *righteousness* means obedience to God's will as articulated in the Law (see, for example, 3:14–15; 5:20; 6:1,33; 7:21). Those who mourn must allow themselves to suffer loss (see 5:4). Those who are meek must have a humble spirit that is dependent on God alone (see 5:5). Those who are merciful must reject the inclination toward vengeance or retribution when they are harmed (see 5:7). The clean of heart must possess the single-heartedness of those who love God without fail and thus are worthy to stand in God's presence on the holy mountain (see Psalm 24:3–6).

Matthew follows his Beatitudes with some sayings that liken the disciples to salt and light (see 5:13–16). These sayings are, in a sense, the culmination of the message of the Beatitudes. Jesus tells his disciples that their calling requires that they stand out like salt that flavors food or like light that makes a city shine on a mountaintop. If they wish to be Jesus' disciples, they cannot hide. Their good works must manifest to everyone the coming Reign of God.

Teachings about the Law

This next section of the Sermon on the Mount is an exposition on what some Matthean scholars have called the "greater righteousness" of the Law. It begins with Jesus' declaration that he has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (see 5:17). In this context the word *fulfill* carries the connotation of completion or satisfaction. Christians and nonobservant Jews sometimes assume that fulfillment of the Law refers to some kind of legalism—adherence to the letter of the Law—but that is far from the truth. The Jewish Law, called *Halakhah*, is best understood as "the path one walks." It represents Israel's obligation to the Sinai Covenant. It is a comprehensive way of life that involves each individual's freely choosing to observe the Jewish Law as completely as possible as an expression of the community's desire to be in relationship with God.

What is at stake for the disciples? The Matthean Jesus says that those who observe every detail of the Law will get the highest place in God's Kingdom, when God's Reign is fully manifest (see 5:19–20). However, those who are lax in observing even the smallest of the requirements of Jewish Law will get the lowest place in the Kingdom (see 5:19). But why do the little details matter so much? Jewish rabbinic sayings that are roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament might provide some insight. *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* identifies three things that are necessary for the proper transmission of the Torah, meaning the totality of the Law, from generation to generation. The third is to make a fence around the Torah:

> Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.[1]

The "fence around the Torah" is the network of small and seemingly insignificant rules that surround the major precepts of Torah Law. For example, the Sabbath rest is a major precept of Jewish Law. In making a "fence around the Torah," a rabbi might advise an observant Jew not to carry matches on the

[1] *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 1.1. Translation at www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html.

Sabbath, because he might forget and accidentally strike the match, thereby doing work and breaking Sabbath. Again here is *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* on making a fence around the Torah:

> Rabbi Akiva said: Jesting and frivolity lead a man towards promiscuity. Tradition is a safeguarding fence around the Torah. Tithes are a fence to wealth. Vows a fence to abstinence. Silence is a fence to wisdom.[2]

Although the lesser ordinances can be burdensome at times, the person who seeks to obey them fully eventually embraces an ethical way of life that is all encompassing and that continually orients the person toward the subject of his or her obedience, namely, God.

Whether or not Matthew knew of the concept of "making a fence around the Torah," he portrays Jesus' doing just that in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:21–48, Jesus gives his disciples six examples of greater righteousness that are for all intents and purposes a reinterpretation of the commandments, and in so doing has built a fence around the Torah. The "fence" may seem impossibly high, but it represents a comprehensive way of life that orients the disciples toward God. And Matthew shows, through the stories he has included in his Gospel, that Jesus has already shown them the "path" to walk.

Let us briefly survey these six examples of greater righteousness of the Law. Concerning the commandment, "Do not kill," the Matthean Jesus erects a fence around the Torah, saying that his disciples not only must not kill but also must not even harbor anger in their hearts against a family member or a neighbor or call him a "blockhead." Anger, after all, leads to murder. Instead they should quickly seek reconciliation with their enemies. It is the only way, he says, to avoid judgment in the coming Reign of God (see Matthew 5:21–26).

Likewise, concerning the commandment, "Do not commit adultery," Jesus tells his disciples they must learn to restrain their passions, because allowing oneself to look lustfully at another can lead to adultery and ultimately to judgment in fiery Gehenna (see Matthew 5:27–30). Closely related to the commandment on adultery is the commandment on divorce. Jesus says that any man who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery as well as anyone who might marry her in the future (see 5:31–32). The scholarly literature on this verse is extensive and not particularly relevant to this discussion except to say that the disciples are morally responsible for the consequences of their actions for the well-being of others.

The pattern set by the first three examples of greater righteousness continues with a commentary on the taking of oaths. Out of respect for the Divine Name, people were apparently referring to Heaven or earth or Jerusalem in their oath formularies. The Matthean Jesus tells the disciples not to swear oaths at all. Instead their speech should be honest and direct at all times. If their words are always truthful, then they have no need for oaths (see 5:33–37).

Like the second and third examples, the fifth and sixth examples are related. Expanding on the "eye for an eye" commandment, Jesus tells the disciples that they must not retaliate in *any* way (see 5:38–39). Moreover, they should not respond with violence to anyone who unfairly demands things of them (see 5:40–41). Instead generosity should be the norm. Perhaps Matthew also believes that Christians' passivist response might cause their persecutors to reflect on their bad behavior and undergo a conversion of heart (see Proverbs 25:21–22, Romans 12:19–21). And finally as commentary on the

---

[2] *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 1.17. Translation at www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html.

commandment "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy," Jesus tells the disciples they must love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (see Matthew 5:43–47).

Through his commentary on important Torah laws, Jesus has constructed a *very* high fence around the Torah. Early Christians hearing the words of this Gospel must have wondered how they could possibly come close to full observance of the Law as Jesus, their new Moses, had interpreted it. But then they would have heard, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But what is perfection in this context? Is it a strict adherence to the letter of the law? No, the disciples are to look to God the Father as their model of right behavior and disposition of heart. The Matthean Jesus says of God, "He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (5:45). What must the Christian believer do in turn? Act with generosity and love toward everyone (see 5:46–47).

These six examples of greater righteousness and the Law focus on the disciples' relationships with other human beings, but what follows are three teachings on piety, which focus on the disciples' relationship to God. Though in reverse order, the commandments of the Sinai Covenant are likewise clustered into two categories: right relation with God and right relationship with God's creatures (see Exodus 20:1–17, Deuteronomy 5:6–21). So also is the Matthean Jesus' twofold summary of the commandments: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). Again the definitive attribute or disposition of the disciple should be Christian love.

Teachings about Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting

Immediately following the six examples of greater righteousness and the Law, the Matthean Jesus warns about doing righteous deeds simply so others will see them (see Matthew 6:1). In this context he talks about three of the most important aspects of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. By the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, almsgiving was already a well-established and highly valued practice in early Judaism. This teaching does not reject the practice of almsgiving. Instead Jesus teaches that if you give alms only so that others will see you, then you already have your reward (see 6:2–4). Christian believers' righteous deeds must be done with proper motivation and disposition of heart.

Jesus says much the same thing about prayer and fasting (see Matthew 6:5–8,16–18). Both are highly valued religious practices within Judaism and in Matthew's community, but the disciples are taught that neither should be done for the sake of securing praise or glory for oneself. What matters is one's relationship with God the Father, Jesus says, and the disciples need not be concerned that their efforts are in vain, because God sees their intention and knows their need even before they do. Still today, within Judaism and subsequently for Christians as well, fasting is about humbling oneself before God, mourning over loss and failure, and strengthening one's desire for prayer.

Situated between the teachings on prayer and fasting, Matthew gives an accounting of how one ought to pray (see 6:9–13). This prayer, known as the Our Father or the Lord's Prayer, is familiar to most Christians today, but perhaps few know that it is patterned after typical Jewish prayers of the time—except for the address of God as Father—and that Matthew's community was probably already using it in common prayer long before the Gospel was written. It consists of seven brief petitions followed by a statement about the necessity of forgiveness. The first three petitions focus on asking God to make known God's holy name and manifest his Kingdom here on earth just as it already is manifest in Heaven (see 6:9–10). The last four petitions acknowledge humanity's total dependence on God for its sustenance, forgiveness from sin, and protection from evil (see 6:11–13). The concluding statement

reflects a principle of Jewish Law seen elsewhere in the Bible: human action will be repaid by a comparable action from God. Simply stated, the closing statement of this prayer acknowledges that God will forgive us if we forgive others, but God will not forgive us if we refuse to forgive others (see 6:14).

More Jesus Sayings

The remainder of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount consists of collections of sayings attributed to Jesus. On the surface there seems to be little order to the collections, but on closer examination one can group them into two categories. The first collection focuses on not worrying about worldly possessions and instead depending on God alone (see 6:19–34). Of course, this theme is not new to the sermon. We saw it already in the Beatitudes and in the six examples of greater righteousness as well as in the second half of the Lord's Prayer. The second collection of Jesus sayings focuses on proper human behavior and God's response to it (see 7:1–27). This theme is not new either. In fact, it dominates every segment of the sermon, from the Beatitudes through the sayings on salt and light and the six examples of greater righteousness as well as the teachings on piety and the concluding statement of the Lord's Prayer.

Most of these sayings are in the imperative form and tersely written, creating a cascading effect of one command following rapidly on another until finally we arrive at the conclusion of the sermon, perhaps exhausted from the realization of how much discipleship demands of the Christian believer. Then Jesus issues two warnings—one against false prophets and another against disciples who are not true disciples—and a brief parable (see 7:15–27). All three concluding units have as their central message the necessary connection between the disciple's disposition of heart and right behavior. This is the greater righteousness to which the Matthean Jesus, the new Moses, calls each of his disciples, then and now.

A Note on Luke's Sermon on the Plain

Luke's Gospel has a counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It is usually called the Sermon on the Plain because its setting is described as "a stretch of level ground" (Luke 6:17). Again Jesus is speaking to his disciples with a large crowd gathered around them, but this time his eyes are raised to the sky as if receiving God's Word from Heaven (see 6:19–20).

Like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Luke's Sermon on the Plain begins with a series of Beatitudes. However, these Beatitudes are followed by a parallel series of woes, which are patterned after the prophetic oracles of disaster that we find in the Old Testament, and are concerned with the socio-economic conditions of the disadvantaged. This is not surprising if one recognizes that, throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the prophet *par excellence*. Luke has introduced his Sermon on the Plain as a word of prophecy.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain does not contain the sayings that liken the disciples to salt and light, nor does it contain Jesus' words about his teaching being a fulfillment of Jewish Law. It does not contain the six examples of greater righteousness, and it does not contain the teachings on piety. Perhaps Luke was not aware of these teachings, or he deliberately chose to omit them from his version of the sermon. In view of the latter possibility, scholars of Luke's Gospel have concluded that Luke's Christian community probably was not Jewish. However, much of the remainder of his Sermon on the Plain is shared with Matthew's Gospel (see Matthew 5:39–48; 7:1–5,16–20,24–27).

Yet, because Luke's setting is different and the interpretational framework of Jewish *Halakhah* is absent, the Sermon on the Plain has a different theology from the Sermon on the Mount. It is an important message nonetheless. As the prophet par excellence, the Lukan Jesus calls the Christian believer to conversion of heart and mercy for God's little ones. You are encouraged to explore his Sermon on the Plain further on your own.

The Message of the Sermon on the Mount for Today's Christian Believers

As Christians today we are often not cognizant of our Jewish roots and the extent to which both our piety and our praxis (faith-based action) are shaped by Jewish practice. However, even without the lived experience of the meaning and significance of Jewish *Halakhah* as the "path one walks," hopefully we can still glean much from Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses who interprets for his disciples the "greater righteousness" of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount.

In summary, what is Matthew's *Halakhah* ethic? It is a recognition that those who embrace Christian discipleship must be willing to care for the poor and disenfranchised and stand in complete dependence on the graciousness of God as the poor do. Christian discipleship demands of us personal sacrifice, a humble spirit, and single-heartedness as we strive to obey God's will completely in our daily lives. Christian discipleship means not being satisfied with the minimum requirements of Christian living but committing oneself to walking the path of Christian *Halakhah* that Jesus set out for us in his own complete obedience to the will of his Father. It means restraining our passions, not harboring bad feelings toward others, and seeking reconciliation as a way of life. It means acting in generosity and love toward everyone. It requires that our words match our deeds and that we listen to Jesus and live accordingly.

This is the "greater righteousness" or the "fence around the Torah" of which the Matthean Jesus speaks. It requires embracing an ethical way of life that is all-encompassing and that continually orients us toward God and the manifestation of God's Kingdom now and in the future. The challenge is enormous, but Matthew is careful to note in subtle and not so subtle ways that it requires only one thing—that we give ourselves over to God.