Reading the Sermon on the Mount

Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5–7

Charles H. Talbert

In *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, Charles H. Talbert explores the religious message put forth in the first large teaching section of the Gospel according to Matthew and finds it to have a relevance often overlooked in academic studies. Seeking to hear and understand the text of Matthew 5–7 as someone living in the Mediterranean about 100 c.e. would have encountered it, Talbert argues for a broader interpretation of the Sermon than scholars typically advance. He suggests that the Sermon cannot be reduced to a discussion of ethics but includes considerations of piety. He contends that it is a text about covenant fidelity to God and to other humans, in which Jesus seeks to affect perceptions, dispositions, and intentions. The text thus functions primarily as a catalyst for character formation rather than as a compendium of obligations.

To prepare readers for a thorough examination of the Sermon, Talbert investigates Matthew’s relation to Judaism and inquires into the composition of the audience who received Jesus’ charge. He also takes into account the order of Jesus’ discourse, the distinction between character formation and decision making, and the question of whether or not the Jesus who speaks in the Sermon is a legalist.

In his reading of the text, Talbert attends to the six large units of thought in Matthew 5–7, exploring the relationship of each to possible concerns of character formation and decision making. Section by section, he analyzes form and content, comparing Jesus’ directives with similar statements in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. Talbert concludes that only when the text is read in three contexts—the whole of Matthew, the whole of the New Testament, and the entire biblical plot—can the Sermon on the Mount make a contribution to decision making.

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CHARLES H. TALBERT is Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University. He is the author or editor of twenty books treating Luke-Acts, the Gospel of John, Romans, the Corinthian correspondence, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, the Johannine epistles, and Revelation. He has the distinction of being the only person to serve as president of both the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion and the Catholic Biblical Association. Talbert lives in Waco, Texas.
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Sermon on the Mount (KJV). Matthew 5. 1: And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, 3: Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4: Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. 5: Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. 6: Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. 7: Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. 8: Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.