

Our Way of Life: A Virtue-Based Approach to the Complete Art of Happiness

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“[It] has been a blockbuster bestseller. It spent more than two years on the New York Times bestseller list, including hitting #1, has sold more than 1.5 million copies, and has been published in more than thirty languages.”¹ So reads the blurb advertising a highly sought-after book. What is the subject matter that garners such interest? How to be happy. Gretchen Rubin titled her book, *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun*. That “reading Aristotle” bit in the subtitle was intentional on her part; Aristotle thought that learning what happiness is, and doing whatever it takes to find it, is the secret to the meaning of life.

Think of it as our “ultimate” goal—the endpoint of every road we intentionally choose to travel. Why do we go through the pain, the sweat, the tears? Why endure the years of pressure, experience the daily grind, or take the nervous leap? You may name some intermediate good (the perfect house, the perfect car, or the perfect job), but even those things are in pursuit of something less tangible but more important: a sense of happiness.

The problem is that no matter how hard we try, happiness seems to elude us. The wise and rich king Solomon spent years chasing after happiness, only to conclude that it cannot be found in wealth, fame, or legacy—the right job, the right spouse, the right retirement plan or the right vacation (Eccl 1:14; 2:3–11). I think we know—deep down inside—that happiness does not come pre-packaged with gadgets or glam. We know that happiness is more than just a

¹ <https://gretchenrubin.com/books/the-happiness-project/about-the-book>.

positive attitude, making lemonade out of the world's lemons. That is, of course, a nice way of thinking, but one that is made available to a truly happy person, not one that *makes* a truly happy person.

We also know that happiness is not the same thing as pleasure and shouldn't be confused with it. When given the choice to live in blissful ignorance, or to know the truth, we often opt for the latter. There are lots of things that appear to bring pleasure into our lives which we avoid for other, deeper reasons. Ask any body builder: they will go through intense pain and avoid what "feels good" in the moment in order to have long-lasting happiness. We sense that happiness is not a thing to be bought, or an event to attend; it is, as Rubel Shelly puts it, "a *quality of spirit* rather than a circumstance created by the right combination of gadgets, bucks, and glamor."² It refers to a quality of life—being and doing—that is not based on how much, or how little one has. Happiness is actively living in a state of blessedness.

Would it surprise you to learn that in the first century of the common era, a sermon began circulating containing the teachings of Jesus Christ, which offers a description of the "blessed," "fortunate," or, in some translations, "happy"? John Wesley told his audience that the whole point of Christ coming into the world was "to bless men; to make men happy." For this reason, Jesus preaches a sermon to begin "his Divine institution, which is *the complete art of happiness*, by laying down before all that have ears to hear, the true and only true method of acquiring it."³ Imagine that. A sermon given by the Lord himself describing "the complete art of happiness"? You would think such a sermon would be a best-seller and claim millions of disciples.

But experience tells us otherwise. Forty years ago, John Stott said, "The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed."⁴ Or as Daniel Doriani updates, "The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the most

² Rubel Shelly, *The Beatitudes: Jesus' Formula for Happiness* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1982; repr., 1984), 3.

³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1754; repr. Salem, OR: Schmull, n.d.), 19 (emphasis mine).

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7): Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 15.

beloved, the best known, the least understood, and the *hardest* to obey.”⁵ William Mattison, a virtue-ethicist and philosopher, claims the Sermon has long been neglected among Christian ethicists and moral theologians, is often skipped even by New Testament ethicists, and is missing not only as a text in ethics classes, but as a rule of parenting in most Christian homes.⁶

Why? The answer is quite simple: there is a yawning disconnect between what Jesus says and how we tend to experience the world. “Jesus’ idea of the blessed life and our idea of the blessed life have almost nothing in common,” writes Randy Harris.⁷ Christ connects the words “blessed,” “fortunate,” and “happy” not with the rich, powerful, satisfied, and well-fed, but with the poor and humble, the mourning and the hungry. Against the Hollywood trend of “love ’em and leave ’em,” Jesus calls for fidelity in marriage. Contrary to what many consider advertising genius and “good business sense,” Christ tells us never to engage in verbal manipulation, or make grand claims about mundane things in order to get people to do, buy, or believe something. Instead of offering “good political sense” about protecting oneself against one’s dreaded enemies, Christ calls the good life one in which anger, hatred, defensiveness, and retaliation give way to love, service, and generosity. In short, we are called to love the person more than the product, more than performance, and more than profitability. It seems so absurd.

As a result, Christians have notoriously found interpreting the Sermon enormously difficult. In the history of interpretation, few passages have spawned more theories and garnered less agreement than this. One commentator said the history of scholarship on the sermon might be called “Versions and Evasions of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁸ Is this a literal list meant to be literally kept? Is this metaphorical and hyperbolic, providing a nice wish list but never actually intended to be kept? Is this counsel for monks and nuns alone? Is this some sort of interim ethic for apostles, but not for lay people? Are

⁵ Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 1.

⁶ William C. Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 1, 4.

⁷ Randy Harris, *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2012), 31.

⁸ Harvey K. MacArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 19.

we to take one look at this sermon, find it unobtainable, and praise Jesus for doing what we could never do? The option list is so long, and so diverse, Luther memorably named the interpretive confusion “the devil’s masterpiece.”⁹

When I read the Sermon, I see how nearly every interpretive strategy has something going for it, and something missing. Yes, Jesus expects the Sermon to be obeyed. Yes, there seems to be hyperbole involved. Yes, there are elements that may be kept by degrees. Yes, attempting to follow the Sermon reminds me of my sinfulness and causes me to praise Jesus, the only sinless one. So, what is the right (or most helpful) interpretive strategy? Surely the answer is some sort of combination theory, one that expects us to live it out and to keep our eyes on the only one fully described by this text. What is needed is a way to interpret that is sensitive to the history of interpretation, but one that can chart a course using the best our Christian tradition has to offer to forge a consistent approach that combines both hope in God’s gift of grace and summons to an obedient life.

Let’s call it the “live into this” route—a holistic, virtue-based approach that weds the values of wisdom literature with the ethics of virtue, avoiding the misguided debates about “literal” versus “spiritual,” “faith” versus “works,” or “receiving” versus “achieving.” Reading Jesus in concert with ancient philosophers of happiness, and in light of the Jewish wisdom tradition, this route claims that virtuous habits (actions or duties) are integral to character formation, and the path to wisdom and happiness involves the invitation to participate in a way of life. Life in the kingdom—God’s own way of embodying heaven’s values in earthly relationships—can be taught in a variety of ways, including stating principles, giving rules, and offering hyperbolic pictures. The Sermon functions to highlight the invitation to let God shape one’s character. The call is so much more than a list of rules, but it includes the kind of life where such actions and habits not only are commonly *practiced* but are also *desired* from a renewed heart.

The earliest readings of the Sermon seem to place an emphasis on fulfilling our duties by obeying commands. For example, reading the Beatitudes, Clement of Alexandria spends much more time on the first half of each one—which he interprets as attitudes to adopt or duties to be performed—while

⁹ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Sermon on the Mount,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 1.

downplaying the second half, which are promised rewards. Morality, one might say, concerned obeying the right external rules and denying one's fleshly inclinations.

Yet a decided shift occurs in the late fourth century. In their book *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, Daniel Harrington and James Keenan claim that later patristic writers sought to bring body and soul, heart and life, inward reflection and outward expression under one umbrella of integrated spirituality. Just as ecumenical councils found theological significance in integrating the divinity and humanity of Christ, these writers found "practical significance" in integrating the Christian's interior and exterior life.¹⁰

The three best examples of this shift are Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo.¹¹ Gregory envisions the Beatitudes as steps of spiritual ascent in which the soul embodies the likeness of God, and revels in the bliss of virtuous transformation.¹² Instead of focusing on moral do's and don'ts, Gregory begins his first homily on the Beatitudes with an invitation "to go up ... to the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation" (*Hom.* 1.1). He conceives of the Beatitudes ascending like Jacob's ladder in such a way that "to participate in the Beatitudes is nothing less than sharing in deity, towards which the Lord leads us up by his words" (*Hom.* 5.1). Fellowship or kinship with God, according to Gregory, means sharing an ethical or moral likeness to him, which is "gained through virtue," and "which issues from a life of moral earnestness."¹³ According to Anthony Meredith, "For the gospel it is an ideal to be aimed at and at the same time a gift of God conceived of as a reward."¹⁴ For this reason, Gregory balances Clement by bringing emphasis to the second

¹⁰ Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 2.

¹¹ See *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano (Leiden: Brill, 2000); John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 15–25, at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2001.htm>; Augustine, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16011.htm>.

¹² "I think the arrangement of the Beatitudes is like a series of [ladder] rungs," writes Gregory, "and it makes it possible for the mind to ascend by climbing from one to another" (*Hom.* 2.1).

¹³ Anthony Meredith, "Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratorio I: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5,3)," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, 107.

¹⁴ Meredith, "Gregory of Nyssa," 99.

half of each Beatitude—the glorious future reward that awaits (and comes with) those growing in likeness of God. He emphasizes moderation, not denial, of our God-given passions, embracing a united vision of total transformation.

John Chrysostom also shows strong continuity with this united, whole-life, virtue-based transformation approach that seems to characterize the later patristics. Against the Gnostics, Chrysostom taught the essential goodness of creation (*Hom.* 19.10), and God as the source of our bodies (*Hom.* 15.1; 17.3; 16.8). It was not denial, but *integration* of body and soul that Chrysostom was after (*Hom.* 15). Augustine represents perhaps the pinnacle of the late patristic tradition, emphasizing the lived-out nature of the calling of the Sermon. “As a teacher of the church,” writes Wilken, “he wishes to present the Sermon not as a body of general moral principles but a workable guide to life.”¹⁵ The goal of following the Sermon involves the kind of virtuous total transformation characterizing this period. In Augustine’s own words, we seek for our hearts to rest in God “whose spiritual embrace ... makes [us] fertile with virtue” (*City of God*, 10.3).¹⁶

When we compare Gregory and Augustine as bookends, we begin to see a larger and deeper pattern emerge. In a penetrating article in *Nova et Vetera*, Michael Dauphinais claims Gregory and Augustine are steeped in the Roman and Hellenistic approach to philosophy as a *way of life*—reading the Sermon on the Mount as a Christian appropriation of the same.¹⁷ Dauphinais relies on Pierre Hadot, who notes that a “way of life” goes beyond ethical norms or doctrinal teachings: “Rather ... philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.”¹⁸ This is why Christianity, for some early church fathers, is described as a philosophy. A way of life learned through spiritual exercises with the goal of transforming the whole person is

¹⁵ Robert Louis Wilken, “Augustine,” in *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman, Timothy Larsen, and Stephen R. Spencer (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 49.

¹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 10.3, at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicene_and_Post-Nicene_Fathers:_Series_I/Volume_II/City_of_God/Book_X/Chapter_3.

¹⁷ Michael Dauphinais, “Languages of Ascent: Gregory of Nyssa’s and Augustine of Hippo’s Exegeses of the Beatitudes,” *Nova et Vetera* 1/1 (Spring 2003): 141–64.

¹⁸ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 265.

also an apt description of the teaching of Jesus. Gregory and Augustine, representing a late patristic model, saw this point and emphasized it clearly.

The interpretive tradition went in very different directions in the years after the patristic period, but an emphasis on combining virtue, ethics, and wisdom remained waiting in the wings. The dawn of the twentieth century brought with it a renewed appreciation for a synthesis among some Catholic moral theologians, which, in turn, inspired Protestant ethicists to join in a reconsideration of how their chosen profession could offer insight to help bridge the theological gap among the various traditions of biblical scholarship. James Keenan describes the shift:

To replace the manualist method, which had the long-standing, singular concern of knowing, describing, and parsing sin, twentieth-century moral theologians ... turned to Scripture, to renewed study of Thomas Aquinas, and ascetical theology to amplify the task of contemporary moral theology. They recognized the love of God as foundational to moral theology, [and] incorporated Scripture's many insights about virtue into a relational anthropological vision.¹⁹

Catholic virtue ethicists felt completely at home. "Matthew did not read Aristotle," writes Mattison, "but it is extraordinary how closely the text of the Sermon matches up with the conceptual resources of virtue ethics."²⁰ Chrysostom, after all, preached a series of influential sermons from Matthew 5–7, and used the word "virtue" 22 times in his first introductory sermon alone (*Hom.* 15)!

But a wide range of ethical theory came to be seen as helpful in interpreting the Sermon. While Mattison criticizes some Protestant New Testament ethicists for failing to emphasize the language of "virtue," it is worth noting that these same scholars prefer to label the Sermon as "a moral vision" rather than "legislation," offering precepts that resemble proverbs, and working out of a wisdom tradition which centered on habit and spiritual formation through

¹⁹ Harrington and Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, 7.

²⁰ Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.

emulating and imitating one's master.²¹ In this sense, writes Allison, Jesus becomes the "canon" of Christian morality.²²

This insight—call it, the "ethical perspective"—allows us to appreciate a text that seems to defy the categories of code, law, poetry, drama, analogy, hyperbole, and pictorial imaging. It also cautions us to be wary of using just one "ethical" approach (even virtue ethics) as the end-all-be-all way of capturing the real essence of the Sermon. The field of ethics offers a plethora of approaches, and, as McKnight rightly points out, the Sermon on the Mount doesn't fit neatly into any one of these *per se*.²³ He notes that elements of wisdom are not devoid of elements of divine command, and narrative ethics take place within a certain communal life with prophetic, eschatological expectations. This jumble is what allows ethicists to see virtue ethics (yes), but also a categorical imperative or two, some utilitarian thinking at times, and a "thus saith the Lord" thrown in for good measure. At the *same* time, however, the Sermon offers moral clarity; as Pope John Paul II noted, it is the "culmination" of the law and is an antidote to "any kind of relativism or utilitarianism."²⁴ This "jumbled truth" is only problematic if we are looking for "the right way to read this legislative decree so as to keep each rule in the list."

But what if the Sermon is calling for us to embody the character of Jesus Christ? To think as he thinks? To love what he loves? To discern, reason, consider, weigh options, all from a disposition that is bent toward the bright light of God's holy desire? Charles Talbert rightly challenges us to consider a shift: rather than read the Sermon primarily as a treatise on ethical decision-making (prompting us to ask, "What is the right analysis or method for deciding what to do?"), what if we read the Sermon primarily (though not exclusively) as a treatise on character formation (who we are, how we see the world, and what

²¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1996); Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad / Herder & Herder, 1999), 11–12, 24. For the criticism, see Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.

²² Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, 24.

²³ Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 13–14.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Dilecti Amici*, par 6, at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1985/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_31031985_dilecti-amici.html.

our intentions and motivations suggest we are truly seeking)?²⁵ We begin to read through the Sermon slowly, asking how each statement speaks to a larger moral vision of the wise person, who, having adopted the virtues, seeks to live out a way of life that is characterized by the same righteousness that characterized the life of Christ. It reads the Sermon as directing us toward a certain way of life (complete with habits and dispositions). “How can we experience true human flourishing?” asks Jonathan Pennington. “What is happiness, blessedness, shalom, and how does one obtain and sustain it? ... In short, Jesus provides in the Sermon a Christocentric, flourishing-oriented, kingdom-awaiting, eschatological wisdom exhortation.”²⁶ Pennington expounds on the complex matrix or web of traditions and trajectories which culminate in this “way of life” reading:

Jesus is stepping into the stream of the great universal question of how one can attain true happiness and flourishing. His answer is simultaneously Jewish in origin (rooted in divine revelation), Greek in context (the language and engine of virtue), and radically new in emphasis (eschatological kingdom orientation).²⁷

The Sermon, then, is intended to shape character. How does this approach help reinforce the early Christians’ penchant for “literal” readings? Precisely because what we do creates the habits we form, and the habits we form shape the manner of life we lead. Aristotle saw this perfectly: “We become just by doing just acts; temperate by doing temperate acts; brave by doing brave acts.”²⁸ Doriani summarizes Aristotle’s point:

In his view, character is a role we play until we gradually become that role. Character begins with a choice to behave in a certain way. An action repeated often enough becomes a habit, and habit, once sufficiently ingrained, becomes a virtue or a vice. Aristotle’s approach accents the outer life ... [and] emphasizes public virtues, such as civility and self-control.²⁹

²⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 27–31.

²⁶ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 14–15.

²⁷ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 150.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1.

²⁹ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 26.

Any parent, or any teacher, will prescribe specific actions to be performed, and habits to be adopted, if they wish for their students or children to develop in character. This is why society instantiates laws, families expect norms, and churches include customs and rituals which we ignore to our own peril. If character is the goal, we would expect some clear do's and 'don'ts that are consistent with our intended manner of life. And, says Doriani, there is great value in recognizing this.

Aside from hypocrites, our public behavior at least roughly reflects our true character. Furthermore, a good reputation is valuable. The book of Proverbs says that a good name is precious, more valuable than riches (Prov 22:1).³⁰

We must become people who show mercy, who bless when provoked, who remain faithful in our relationships, who give without hypocrisy, and who show love even to the meanest of enemies. For in practicing the Sermon, we learn what it means.

But is this *all there is to say* about character? Of course not. Doriani pinpoints the flaw in stopping here, in thinking that character is defined by one's outward persona:

Political leaders can be drawn to this concept. They adopt the practices that suggest a dignified and honorable persona. The concept is that they are what they do, at least in public. Private thoughts and traits matter little; the public's perception of character counts most. Character, then, is the role that one chooses to play. If we play a role well, we gain honor before our peers and a pride in our status. If we leave God out of the picture, the move from character to status—and pride in it—is complete ... [But] the strong interest in presentation and reputation does lead to pride and hypocrisy.... Humility, which is a biblical virtue ... has to be nurtured in private. Scripture certainly looks to the heart, the inner life, far more than it looks to the public presentation of character.³¹

As others have noted recently, echoing Augustine, “you are what you do” should be modified to “you are what you love.” And if there was ever a sermon

³⁰ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 26.

³¹ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 26–27.

that spoke to what we do *with even greater emphasis given* to what intentions, motivations, and loves cause us to act in the first place, it is the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon, then, can be viewed as a model for Christian ethics (regardless of the historical contingencies), precisely because it models the ethics of Christ, whom we intend to imitate. “[M]orality is not limited to narrow confines of obligations and commands,” notes Pinckaers, “but includes as its best part the study of happiness and the virtues.”³² As Augustine rightly said, ethics starts with questions about happiness, not obligation.³³ If ethics is only about our do’s and don’ts, writes Pinckaers, it can’t possibly help decipher a Sermon that penetrates the depths of human nature.

On the other hand the question of happiness gives rise to an ethical system based on the attraction to truth and goodness, which readily harmonizes with the promises of the Beatitudes and the paths traced out by the Gospel precepts. Linked with the desire for happiness, the teaching of the Sermon penetrates to our inmost souls and responds to our deepest aspirations, purifying them and directing them to God.³⁴

Call it, if you will, a “virtuous, grace-centered, habit-forming, ethical transformation of love” reading. Reading the Sermon in this way, we can avoid the major pitfalls to each “standard option” for reading the Sermon on the Mount, while accentuating the great strengths found in each one. Not only is this approach to the Sermon good for biblical studies, but for ethics as well! “By removing the study of grace and the gifts of the Spirit from moral theology,” writes Pinckaers, “today’s ethicists lose the specifically Christian principle that should enable them to answer the question about the practicability of the Sermon.”³⁵ He continues:

³² Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 164.

³³ Augustine begins his treatise on Christian ethics with these words: “There is no doubt about it. We all want to be happy. Everyone will agree with me, before the words are even out of my mouth. [...] So let us see if we can find the best way to achieve it.” Cited and translated by Servais Pinckaers, *The Pursuit of Happiness—God’s Way: Living the Beatitudes*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1998), vii.

³⁴ Pinckaers, *Sources*, 160.

³⁵ Pinckaers, *Sources*, 161.

The main lesson of the Sermon is about the works the Holy Spirit wishes to accomplish in us through the power of His grace, with our humble and docile cooperation, as described in the Beatitudes. The Sermon gives us the Spirit's promises and calls us to hope before telling us what we must do. Through the work of the Spirit, the precepts prompt us first to the inner obedience of love.³⁶

This shift does not remove the strong possibility that any one statement is a divinely commanded rule meant to be read literally. After all, there are 50 imperatives in the roughly 100 sentences contained in the sermon.³⁷ And Christ seems to model an ancient philosopher of happiness, in a tradition which emphasized specific habits, including do's and don'ts. Christ offers more than this, but certainly not less.³⁸

But there is joy in the "more." Doriani tells us those 50 imperatives are set alongside about 320 verbs that are not commands.³⁹ Jesus asks questions and stokes our theological imagination. "Even in passages that are filled with imperatives, Jesus does not simply tell us what to do; he invites us to see the world as he does."⁴⁰

It is time we adopted a method for reading the Sermon that can move past the binaries that have proven so unhelpful. Is the Sermon law or gospel? About faith or works? About morality or spirituality? Righteousness as proper conduct and behavior, or gift of standing through Christ alone? Hear the Sermon anew, as it draws upon our deepest desires, in line with our greatest hopes: to reflect the character found in the kingdom to which we have been called, to which we belong.

In the beautiful words of Pennington, "We create a self-inflicted dilemma that cannot make sense of the entirety of Scripture's witness when we pit grace and virtue against each other."⁴¹ This shift allows us to treat each statement as part of a grander vision, so that we can look for the most "beneficial" reading that will align our character with that of Christ. The Sermon moves beyond

³⁶ Pinckaers, *Sources*, 160–61.

³⁷ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 5, 8.

³⁸ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 144: "Through his authoritative and eschatological claims he is more than an ancient philosopher of happiness, but he is not less than this."

³⁹ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

⁴⁰ Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 9.

⁴¹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 159.

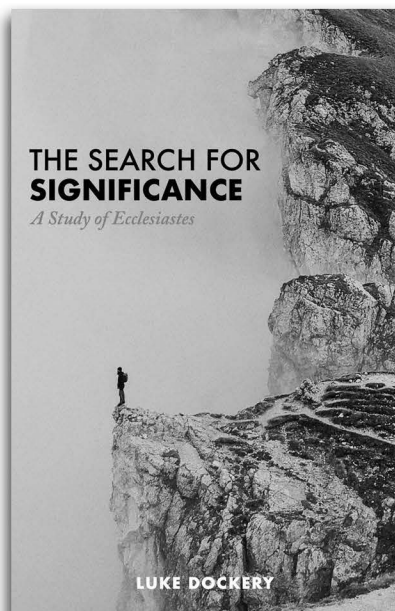
and above rules without ignoring or erasing them. It allows a “literal” reading to make sense within a larger vision of our spiritual goals. Thus, we can offer a “serious” reading of passages far removed from our own historical context, or that offer hyperbole, or that speak to matters of Mosaic law which are no longer in our conceptual world. The character of Christ speaks through all of this, and we do well to adopt his way of life. As Daniel Doriani concludes,

Matthew carefully locates the words of Christ to the disciples in the context of the work of Christ for the disciples.... Matthew invites his readers to see the demands of Christ in the context of the gifts of Christ.... We see, therefore, that the Sermon on the Mount is the word of King Jesus to his people. But Jesus’ main goal in the sermon is not to declare laws, even laws for disciples. Above all, he describes the disciples’ way of life under his authority.... So then, the Sermon on the Mount is law, but much more than law. It tells us what we should do, but it also describes who we are and should be. It probes our character and invites us to see the world in a new way, as Jesus sees it.⁴²

We do not have to fall for the binary trap often presented in the commentaries, due to various theological commitments. With the later church fathers, I believe we ought to read the Sermon through a virtue tradition that recognizes our goal to imitate our Master in pursuit of a new, total, transforming way of life. Thus, there are actions to perform and habits to keep, as wisdom directs and as the Spirit provides power and strength. The Sermon speaks not simply to what we must do, but what type of people, by God’s grace, we may become. This is not the art of suppressing our desires for the sake of duty, but the fulfillment of desire in becoming our true selves. What God is doing to and through us involves the transforming nature of discipleship, and Spirit-directed partnership, as we grow into the very likeness of God. In words attributed to Ambrose, “When we speak of wisdom, we are speaking about Christ. When we speak about virtue, we are speaking about Christ.”

⁴² Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 7, 9.

Why are we here? What is life all about?
Why is life filled with so much
frustration and futility?



These are the sorts of questions that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes examines as he tries to set forth what is truly significant in life. Set within the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, Ecclesiastes is an important and challenging book that deserves close examination.

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