

## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND MORAL THEOLOGY: A DEONTOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHIC OF RESPONSE APPROACH

CHARLES NATHAN RIDLEHOOVER\*

**Abstract:** *In The Sermon the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective, William Mattison has recently called for a renaissance in two areas of Sermon studies. First, the Sermon should be returned to a central place in ethical discussions of the New Testament. Second, a virtue theory best explains the nature of the Sermon's teachings. Along with Mattison's proposal, Jonathan Pennington's The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary has argued similarly for a virtue reading of the Sermon. While agreeing with their arguments in principle, I will suggest that the Sermon's complex matrix of ethical principles is best understood as a deontological virtue ethic of response. The Sermon teaches its kingdom righteousness by instructing the would-be follower to emulate Christ by obedience to the divine will (deontology), character development (virtue theory), and response to the Father while bearing the concerns of others (ethics of response). I will focus on four key passages that are representative of the Sermon's ethical teachings: Matthew 5:3–12; 6:7–15; 7:12; and 7:24–27. These texts are at structurally significant points and function in a summative fashion for the Sermon's ethic.*

**Key words:** *Sermon on the Mount, Lord's Prayer, ethics, human flourishing, virtue theory, moral theology*

### I. INTRODUCTION

An important and ongoing question among Matthean scholars concerns the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. What exactly is Jesus commanding his would-be disciple *to do* and/or *to be* in Matthew 5–7? The most recent books on the Sermon on the Mount and moral theology have resoundingly answered the question with an appeal to virtue theory.<sup>1</sup> Consider Jonathan Pennington's newest commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*. In Pennington's words, "Jesus provides in the Sermon a *Christocentric, flourishing-oriented, kingdom-awaiting, eschatological wisdom exhortation*."<sup>2</sup> He continues, "I will seek to show

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\* Charles Nathan Ridlehoover holds a Ph.D. in NT from the University of Bristol, Trinity College and resides in North Carolina. He may be contacted at cnridlehoover@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> The most recent treatments on the Sermon's ethic have come from the pens of Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017); William Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Scot McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount, Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). Pennington and Mattison have argued extensively for a virtue model to understand the Sermon's teaching, while McKnight includes it among his explanation of the Sermon's ethic but not as the Sermon's primary ethical leaning. McKnight's model will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 15 (emphasis original).

that a virtue-ethics approach—framed and modified by these other biblical categories—is the key to understanding Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon.”<sup>3</sup> Pennington’s reading of the sermon does not force a virtue reading onto the Sermon but contends rather that a proper understanding of the Sermon leads to the aforementioned conclusion to the great question, What is human flourishing? William Mattison is even more pronounced in his assessment of the Sermon’s ethic. He states in his thesis,

The Sermon on the Mount is fruitfully read with the questions and concerns of virtue ethics in mind. In other words, a virtue-centered approach to moral theology helps us to understand better the ethical guidance in the Sermon on the Mount. . . . The complementary thesis of this book is that the Sermon on the Mount specifies and illuminates a virtue-centered approach to morality.<sup>4</sup>

Yet can all of the Sermon’s ethic be summarized as an exercise in virtue theory? The following essay will examine the conclusions of these recent commentaries, particularly the assertion that the Sermon is chiefly an exercise in virtue theory. I will argue that the Sermon’s complex matrix of ethical principles is best summarized as a deontological virtue ethic of response.<sup>5</sup> The Sermon teaches *kingdom righteousness* by instructing the would-be follower to emulate Christ by obedience to the divine will (deontology), developing character (virtue theory), and responding to the Father while carrying the concerns of others (ethics of response). To accomplish this task, I will first examine the work of William Mattison as well as Jonathan Pennington’s interaction with Scot McKnight’s new commentary. Second, I will define the contours of a deontological virtue ethic of response. Lastly, I will consider four passages in the Sermon which are structurally significant and summarize the Sermon’s ethic: Matt 5:3–12; 6:7–15; 7:12; and 7:24–27.<sup>6</sup>

Before considering these recent approaches to the Sermon and my subsequent proposal, it is important to establish several basic presuppositions. First, while I recognize the difficulty in deriving an “ought” from an “is,” the Sermon and Matthew’s recording of the Sermon presuppose Jesus’s authority. Subsequently, followers of Jesus are *obligated* to follow his teaching because he *is* their Lord. Second, the following essay is an exercise in both descriptive and normative ethics. I will analyze the Sermon in an effort to describe Jesus’s emphases but will also pre-

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Mark Liederbach for the wording, “deontological virtue ethic of response” and for reading a revised version of this article. Other tri-perspectival approaches, but with differing nomenclature, include the work of John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 33–36, 72–125; David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); and C. S. Lewis, “The Three Parts of Morality,” in *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 69–75.

<sup>6</sup> One might object to the chosen passages, yet most exegetes will agree that the introduction and conclusions of a particular passage are significant to its meaning.

In addition, the center of a piece of writing is often determinative of its meaning. In this regard, I have chosen the beatitudes (5:3–12), Lord’s Prayer (6:7–15), and the final “two-ways” passage in the Sermon’s conclusion (7:24–27). Matthew 7:12 is important for the Sermon’s structure and meaning because it summarizes and forms the conclusion to the Sermon’s body (5:3–7:12).

suppose that those teachings are being prescribed to those who are disciples of Christ. Third, the terms “ethics” and “morality” are used interchangeably throughout this essay. In typical parlance, morality refers to “*what* you do,” while ethics refers to “*why* you do what you do.” Because my interlocutors do not differentiate the terms, I will also avoid such distinctions. Fourth and finally, I will approach the text through a close reading of its final form. The following exegesis will assume that structure and themes effect the meaning of a particular passage and those meanings are intended by the author.

## II. A VIRTUE PERSPECTIVE ON THE SERMON’S ETHIC

William Mattison has recently called for a renaissance in two areas of Sermon studies. First, the Sermon should be returned to a central place in ethical discussions of the NT. I agree. Second, a virtue theory best explains the nature of the Sermon’s teachings.<sup>7</sup> In concert with these desires, Mattison advances his proposal in *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective*. To understand Mattison’s argument, one must understand the contextualization of his book. Mattison sees his work at the cross-section of historical Sermon scholarship (i.e. Augustine and Aquinas), the rise of interest in virtue ethics, and the relationship between Scripture and ethics.<sup>8</sup> Within these spheres, Mattison argues that there is a reciprocal relationship between the Sermon on the Mount and virtue ethics—they are fruitful when read in conjunction with each other and the Sermon illuminates a virtue theory.<sup>9</sup> Mattison’s particular type of virtue theory is a Thomistic *ressourcement* virtue approach to morality.<sup>10</sup> This approach is concerned with the following topics: (1) the singularity and function of the last end; (2) the role of intentionality in human actions; and (3) the distinctive role of prudence in relation to the other virtues.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when Mattison approaches the Sermon text, he is seeking to answer questions such as: What is happiness? What is the role of human action and

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<sup>7</sup> As Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 1, notes, two of the most important twentieth-century books on Scripture and ethics almost completely neglect virtue ethics. Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), and Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis original). “*Ressourcement*” refers to being in continuity with the early Church Fathers.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Close readers of Pennington will see much overlap in both author’s emphasis on prudence/wisdom/human flourishing, although Pennington never explicitly quotes from Mattison and prefers “human flourishing” to encapsulate his discussion of virtue. Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 259, defines prudence as “the virtue that enables one to see things truthfully so as to act well in worldly matters.” Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 66, defines human flourishing as “the goal of God’s redeeming work . . . and result of pursuing and practicing virtue/practical wisdom.” Evidence of these shared emphases is particularly apparent in both authors’ alignment of the *macarisms* with happiness and the subsequent explanations. See Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 18–22, and Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 41–67, for full accounts.

happiness? How are virtues formed? Why and how is prudence so central to the virtuous life, and how does it relate to other virtues?<sup>12</sup>

To these ends, Mattison's commentary on the Sermon aligns the biblical text with particular topics in virtue theory.<sup>13</sup> For example, in dealing with the beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12), Mattison provides exegetical commentary alongside a discussion of happiness, qualifying conditions/rewards, and intrinsic relations and eschatology.<sup>14</sup> In the final chapter of the book, Mattison provides a virtue ethics approach to the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:7–15). Mattison aligns each of the petitions with the seven foundational virtues of the Christian life (i.e. faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude). Hallowing the Name is aligned with faith; thy kingdom come, with hope; thy will be done, with love; and so forth.

The second recent treatment of the Sermon's ethic from a virtue perspective is *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* by Jonathan Pennington. Pennington discusses the morality of the Sermon in his introduction and the concluding "theses" of his new Sermon book.<sup>15</sup> To understand this aspect of Pennington's argument, it is also important to consider the work of his primary interlocuter, Scot McKnight. McKnight's analysis of the Sermon's ethic is built on a threefold taxonomy:<sup>16</sup>

Ethics from Above—morality based on commands, as seen in the *Torah*

Ethics from Beyond—morality based on the *eschaton*, as seen in the Prophets

Ethics from Below—morality based on wisdom, as seen in the Wisdom literature

McKnight argues that Jesus's ethic must take into account an emphasis on following God's law (ethic from above) in God's way (ethic from below) in God's world. God's way is the way of wisdom. The second element of McKnight's proposal is the eschatology of Jesus's teaching. Jesus's arrival to earth inaugurates God's king-

<sup>12</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> The sections follow a generally agreed-upon structure among Sermon scholars with the exception of the Lord's Prayer being last, and in Mattison's argument, central to the Sermon. Mattison follows the structural proposals of Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 39; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 50–66; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 212; and W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1: *Matthew 1–7* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 16–52.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that the following survey does not attempt to consider all of Pennington's arguments. I am only considering his claim that the Sermon presents a virtue ethic and examining his analysis of my chosen Sermon passages. Pennington's analysis of the Sermon is a welcome addition to Sermon studies and should be considered in total. Even in those places where I disagree with his analysis, I have learned greatly from his work. It is also important to note that Pennington's work is trying to swing the pendulum of moral assessments of the Sermon away from a heavy deontological reading to a more virtue-based reading. I agree with the need to see more emphasis on virtues when reading the Sermon.

<sup>16</sup> McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1–17.

dom inbreaking into reality (Mark 1:15). Yet, this reality looks towards its final consummation in which the kingdom of God comes (see Matt 6:10) in its fullness. In this regard, the ethic from beyond is consequentialist (i.e. looking to the end), but with the robust vision of Israel's prophets towards the establishment of the kingdom in this world.<sup>17</sup>

Pennington initially agrees with McKnight's assessment of the Sermon's ethic.<sup>18</sup> While commentators often focus on one aspect of the Sermon over the other, McKnight reminds the reader that the Sermon is much more complex than any one theory can account for. Readings of the Sermon's ethic often opt for a one-size-fits-all approach which shuns other emphases.

Although Pennington agrees with McKnight initially, he argues that McKnight's model misplaces the emphasis of the Sermon's message. The Sermon's ethic should be seen in a hierarchical manner.<sup>19</sup> As Pennington states, "The virtue-ethics approach is not merely one of three beneficial approaches but is the core biblical and human ideal that organizes the others."<sup>20</sup> The primary evidence for this assertion is the inner-person focus which is found throughout the Sermon. In addition, Pennington critiques McKnight, stating, "Flattening all three categories—above, beyond, below—into a nondescript 'Jesus has all three approaches' way does not take sufficient account of how the Scriptures themselves (including the Sermon) present morality, nor does it provide enough explanation for how people change and grow."<sup>21</sup> Lastly, Pennington notes that his virtue ethic "is rooted in, shaped by, and encircled by divine revelation."<sup>22</sup> This assertion refers to Jesus's divine authority to invite his followers into a world that needs "teleios-ity (5:48; 6:1–21) ... and [a] final arbiter of God's covenantal instructions (5:17–48; 7:28–29)."<sup>23</sup>

Mattison's and Pennington's proposals are helpful analyses of the Sermon's moral teachings. Both display a sensitivity to the final form of the text which is a welcome hermeneutical strategy to Sermon studies.<sup>24</sup> By reading both volumes, one is exposed to differing but complementary aspects of the Sermon's teachings. In detailing the Sermon's ethic, Mattison speaks from the vantage point of a moral theologian, while Pennington contributes the insights of a biblical scholar. In particular, Pennington gives the reader a bird's eye view before explaining the details of the text. His "conceptual rails," as he calls them, of happiness (i.e. *makarios*) and wholeness (i.e. *teleios*) are welcome additions to the already-recognized emphases of

<sup>17</sup> It is often noted that pure consequentialism is non-religious. One does not have to appeal to an external authority to establish the rightness of a decision.

<sup>18</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 39. See also his interaction on pp. 298–301.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* "Teleios-ity" refers to the concept of perfection or completeness.

<sup>24</sup> A similar reading strategy to the Sermon on the Mount can be found in Jack Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount within Matthew," *Int* 41 (1987): 131–43.

the Sermon (i.e. righteousness and the kingdom).<sup>25</sup> Yet, despite these strengths, there are shortcomings to an exclusive virtue reading of the Sermon. This problem can occur on two different levels.

Theoretically, a virtue theory will often tell one what to *be* but does not specify what sort of actions accomplish the task.<sup>26</sup> Scott Rae summarizes the differences between virtue ethics and act-oriented ethical approaches:

Some of the main differences between virtue ethics and act-oriented ethics are an emphasis on being rather than doing, an emphasis on who a person should become more than what a person should do, the importance of following people with exemplary behavior instead of following moral rules, an emphasis on a person's motive in place of action, and a stress on developing character more than simply obeying rules.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, *be* “perfect,” *be* “righteous,” *be* “whole-hearted.” But, by what course? The Sermon addresses this concern and in great detail. Both authors offer guidance on the inclusion of activity into a virtue reading of the Sermon, but only in a manner that subsumes this activity to virtue. Pennington helpfully clarifies his approach with an appeal to a “revelatory” virtue ethic.<sup>28</sup> He states that the Sermon is an “exhortational wisdom that is *based in and shaped by divine revelation.*”<sup>29</sup> If by revelation Pennington is referring to how we decide which virtues to follow or how to develop virtues, he has delved into the realm of metaethics. Metaethics concerns the source of authority and philosophy behind ethical decisions as opposed to the decision-making itself. If by revelation he is referring to God's moral command or principles as a way of guiding virtue formation, then he appears to be introducing deontic elements into his virtue reading. Pennington ultimately agrees with Jonathan Wilson that virtue must be paired with God's divine commands.<sup>30</sup> I agree with his conclusion, but in his concluding theses he argues that virtue ethics is superior to other ethical approaches and therefore the whole enterprise of the Sermon is a virtue ethic. Mattison provides a helpful discussion of habit formation on the issue of how to become virtuous.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, he raises the perennial quandary in virtue ethics: “If prudence is needed to obtain the moral virtues, but the moral virtues are needed to obtain prudence, how can I ever become virtuous?” Mattison follows Aquinas who follows Aristotle—start acting that way before becoming that sort of

<sup>25</sup> I have argued elsewhere that a key concept within the Sermon is prayer. This emphasis is supported by the centrality of the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13) and the closing of the Sermon's body with the instruction to “ask, seek, and find” (7:7–11). See my volume, *The Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> For more on this point as it relates specifically to the Sermon, see Oliver O'Donovan, “Prayer and Morality in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22 (2000): 21–33.

<sup>27</sup> Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 62.

<sup>28</sup> See Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 298–301.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 299 (emphasis original).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 301. Jonathan R. Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope, and Love in Uncertain Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 145–49.

person.<sup>32</sup> This explanation answers the “how” question, but in terms which makes those actions a duty. This appeal to duty opens the door to deontic elements.

Second, and closely related to the theoretical issue, is the emphasis on virtue in sections of the Sermon where other emphases are equally prevalent. This problem is more apparent in Mattison.<sup>33</sup> For example, Mattison assigns hope to the kingdom petition and justice to the forgiveness petition.<sup>34</sup> Many would argue that the kingdom is just as much about justice as it is about hope. Given the Isaiah 61 background to the Sermon, the Lord’s Prayer echoes the prophet’s cry in regard to his coming kingdom, “For I, the Lord, love justice.” It is also interesting that the fifth petition concerning forgiveness makes human action so prominent. In conjunction with the petitioner’s request to be forgiven, the one praying makes known his own desire to forgive others in accordance with God’s commands. In what follows, I will propose an alternative model for the Sermon’s ethic which includes virtue alongside deontology and response. I will start at a broad level before giving a detailed analysis of key Sermon passages.

### III. DEONTOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHIC OF RESPONSE DEFINED

Before considering specific exegesis, it is important to clarify some of the terms that will be used throughout the rest of this essay. At the broadest level, decision-making has four interrelated aspects: the act, the agent (i.e. virtue/character), the consequence, and the agent’s motivation. The following are ethical systems and their respective emphases:

- Deontology: emphasizes principles/rules and their accompanying action

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>33</sup> More broadly, Pennington argues that *makarios* and *teleios* are the “conceptual rails” for understanding other virtue emphases throughout the Sermon. In *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 87, he estates, “The preceding two chapters, on *makarios* and *teleios*, are lengthy and detailed because I am arguing that these two overlapping concepts are simultaneously two of the most important ideas for understanding the Sermon and the most misunderstood elements of the Sermon.” Other recognized themes, such as righteousness, kingdom, and Father in heaven are assigned to a chapter titled, “Seven More Key Terms and Concepts in the Sermon.” My argument will proceed along the basis that *makarios* and *teleios* as virtues should be read as equals to kingdom conduct (i.e. righteousness) and response to the Father and others.

As readers will see as they read Pennington (esp. pp. 14–16), he argues that not only does the Sermon teach character and virtue formation, but so also do the Gospels in general. Pennington argues that the Gospels should be understood as “aretegenic,” as in “for the purpose of forming character or virtue.” He continues, “All other readers, as beneficial as they can be—historical, literary, dogmatic, political, postcolonial, grammatical, linguistic, text-critical—are at best steps toward the highest form of reading, reading for personal transformation.” Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 57–59, has recently argued that one must be careful when reading the Gospels in comparison to ancient aretalogies. This point is minor and should not be misread to say that we should not follow Jesus’s teachings, but rather, the Gospels have purposes that ultimately go beyond virtue formation. In other words, all forms of reading the Gospels do not necessarily become subsumed under reading for virtue. Of course, this argument presupposes that function is linked to genre and that the genre of the Gospels is fundamentally that of biography.

<sup>34</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 269.

- Virtue Theory: emphasizes the character of the agent and individual virtues
- Consequentialism: emphasizes the ends/consequences
- Egoism/Emotivism: emphasizes the agent's motivation

These aspects of a decision can be categorized as “ethics of being” and “ethics of doing.”<sup>35</sup> Ethics of being refer to those aspects of the decision which occur or exist within the agent (i.e. motivation and virtue/character). Ethics of doing refer to those parts of the decision which occur in the world outside the agent (i.e. the action in accordance with obedience and its respective consequence). Ethicists have long debated which system is superior. McKnight and Pennington wisely acknowledge this problem and denounce a “one-size-fits-all” model. Like McKnight and Pennington, my model attempts to avoid the obvious weaknesses of lone systems, but I will also avoid a hierarchical shape. Contrary to McKnight, the following proposal is organized around the inner and outer shape of the individual. This reorganization takes into account Pennington’s critique that McKnight’s “flattened” approach does not recognize how people grow. A deontological virtue ethic avoids the legalism of typical deontological approaches (i.e. the categorical imperative) but also attempts to give direction and objectivity to virtue theories. As stated earlier, a virtue theory tells one what to *be*, but not what to *do*.<sup>36</sup> Or, as Stassen and Gushee comment, “An ethic of virtues alone is a one-legged stool.”<sup>37</sup> Conversely, a system fixated only on “rules” falls prey to Jesus’s criticism that you serve God with your outward “righteousness” but inwardly are wicked.<sup>38</sup> Duty and virtue are interrelated and necessary to address each other’s weaknesses. One is not superior to the other but rather both are necessary and must be integrated.

Another aspect of decision-making that does not neatly fit into a system is the category of “response.” Response refers to how one relates to another. As God’s people, we are intricately drawn together as a “people” and Jesus makes clear that we have responsibilities to friends and enemies as our “neighbors” (Matt 5:43–47; 22:39; Luke 10:25–37). In addition, our interpersonal responses are linked to our response to God. These responses are defined by the type of person responding and the response itself, therefore not falling into a strict virtue theory or deontology

<sup>35</sup> This distinction of ethics of being and ethics of doing is helpfully taken from Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 40–44.

<sup>36</sup> As mentioned above, one may object at this point that virtue theorists do not dispose of obligations and their respective actions. In fact, virtue theorists will typically note that rules/actions are important for their system in terms of habit formation but are secondary within the ethical life. Examples include the extensive discussions in Mattison, 144–54, and action/moral conduct language throughout Pennington. My point is not that virtue theorists ignore rules and their respective actions. Rather, the secondary role which rules/actions fulfill is problematic. In reading the Sermon, one will notice the obligation to love one’s enemy. It is telling that the author distinguishes between the enemy and the neighbor. Despite one’s disposition and reservations towards loving the enemy, the disciple must do it anyway. They may not be at a place where their heart is ready to regard the person as anything other than their enemy or see the end result of the enemy becoming a neighbor, but the obligation still stands.

<sup>37</sup> Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 71.

<sup>38</sup> See Matt 23:1–36.



respectively. Moreover, the element of response gives each decision an “already/not yet” (i.e. eschatological) element. Those who respond appropriately to the world around them enjoy the status of “children” to the Father now and in the world to come.

#### IV. THE SERMON’S ETHIC

In this section, I will begin with a summary of a virtue reading before considering alternative aspects of each passage. I will be considering Matt 5:3–12; 6:5–15; 7:12; and 7:24–27 because of their structurally significant placement throughout the Sermon.<sup>39</sup> To reiterate, I affirm the virtue aspects of the passages under discussion—emphases that Mattison and Pennington masterfully draw out of the Sermon’s teaching—but will argue that obedience to God’s commands and response are as readily present.

1. *Matthew 5:3–12 (the macarisms)*. I begin my study with Pennington’s analysis of *macarisms*. Arguably, this analysis is the most detailed feature of his commentary and quite helpful. Not only does he devote an entire chapter to the concept (i.e. chap. 2), but also extensively develops this emphasis in the exegesis of Matt 5:3–12. Pennington’s analysis alerts us to the difficulty of English translation and the error of conflating “blessings” from God as a gift (“Blessed are the ...”) and happiness/human flourishing as a state of being.<sup>40</sup> Pennington prefers the latter understanding and argues that the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12) are an invitation into the “way of being in the world that will result in [...] true and full flourishing now and in the age to come.”<sup>41</sup> Pennington reads the Beatitudes as a thematic and functional whole instead of focusing on each respective saying.<sup>42</sup>

There is little doubt that the function of the Beatitudes as an invitation to the kingdom of God is correct. Yet Matthew appears to connect a “way of being” with obedience to God’s commands in the kingdom’s coming. This observation does not diminish Pennington’s insights but seeks to acknowledge the importance of this particular type of action in the Beatitudes’ teachings. Isaiah 61 is important to understanding the *macarisms* and their relationship to the kingdom. A brief examina-

<sup>39</sup> Of course, there are other places throughout the Sermon that would reinforce my intended thesis. Jesus’s teaching on the Ten Commandments (5:21–48) is one such place in which the text presupposes obedience to eternal commands and thus possess “deontic” elements alongside a call to be “perfect” (5:48).

<sup>40</sup> For a helpful diagram, see Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 144. On the topic of “flourishing” in Pennington’s work, see Steve Bryan, “A Discourse on Human Flourishing? The Sermon in New Testament Perspective,” *TEDS Sapientia (blog)*, Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, 23 August 2018, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2018/08/a-discourse-on-human-flourishing/>, and Pennington’s response: “Response to the Symposium,” *TEDS Sapientia (blog)*, Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding (blog), 28 August 2018, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2018/08/response-to-the-symposium-3>.

<sup>42</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 145, states, “More could be said about the content of each of the individual Beatitudes, but I have chosen to treat them thematically and according to their function as a whole—providing Jesus’s vision for what true human flourishing in God’s coming kingdom looks like.” For Pennington’s explanation of this statement, see pp. 145–61. See also Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 16–59.

tion of Isaiah 61 shows the progression of righteousness coming to the earth. The chapter begins with several linguistic parallels to the *macarisms*. Isaiah 61 promises that the “poor” will be given good news and those who mourn will be “oaks of righteousness” (vv. 1–4). Similarly, Matt 5:3–10 promises blessings to the “poor in spirit,” comfort for “those who mourn,” and the kingdom of heaven to those who pursue righteousness. The metaphors of “hungering and thirsting” emphasize a spiritual longing for doing God’s will (i.e. pursuing righteousness). This is similarly anticipated in the final verses of Isaiah 61 where the prophet proclaims,

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. (vv. 10–11)

Wenham helpfully summarizes, “This focus on restored righteousness and justice especially in the second half of Isa 61 makes perfect sense, as an integral part of the joyous salvation which Yahweh’s anointed one has been announcing.” God’s people are ushering in this righteousness and justice (i.e. hungering and thirsting, showing mercy, and making peace) by way of obedience to God’s way.<sup>43</sup>

The element of response is also present in Matt 5:3–12. The first line of each *macarism* addresses the current state of a disciple, while the second line addresses the future. For example, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” “Those who mourn” is a present active participle referring to the ongoing activity of mourning. “They will be comforted” is a future passive verb referring to God’s comfort in the future. These isocolons connect the current state of the agent with the eternal benefits of life with the Father. As verse 9 notes, disciples will be called “children of God.” The acknowledgement of the eschatological now and eschatological future aspects in the Beatitudes are not new insights but important nonetheless because of the glue which holds them together—responding to one another and to God.

2. *Matthew 6:7–15 (On Prayer/Lord’s Prayer)*. Matthew 6:7–15 is the central section of the Sermon on the Mount and records Jesus’s teaching on prayer. This teaching on prayer continues the recurrent theme of chapter 6—perform your righteousness for your Father in secret. Matthew 6:7–15 is prefaced by a general statement regarding the proper practice of prayer (vv. 5–6). It is before the heavenly Father that one petitions and not for the approval of others. The Lord’s Prayer is offered as an alternative to the hypocritical prayers of the Pharisees and serves as a model for the Father’s children. The prayer is brief and highlights some of the main

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<sup>43</sup> David Wenham, “How do the Beatitudes Work? Some Observations on the Structure of the Beatitudes in Matthew,” in Aaron White, David Wenham, and Craig A. Evans, eds., *The Earliest Perceptions of Jesus in Context: Essays in Honour of John Nolland* (LNTS 566; London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 211. This conclusion is also consistent with the Sermon’s centerpiece, the Lord’s Prayer. As I will examine in more detail below, the performance of God’s will is appended to Jesus’s prayer for the “kingdom to come” (Matt 6:10).

themes of Jesus's teaching found elsewhere. The section ends with a reiteration of the forgiveness petition (vv. 14–15).

Mattison examines this section with thorough explanations of intentionality, Thomistic action theory, and character formation.<sup>44</sup> In a slightly different manner and with an exegetical grammar, Pennington notes the passage's focus on the heart's disposition. Representative of his view is his summary on p. 228: "The introduction [6:7–8] emphasizes the heart disposition related to the first half of the Prayer—the divine—and the conclusion highlights the heart disposition of the second half of the Prayer—the human."<sup>45</sup> He later notes three themes of virtue and human flourishing which are found in the entirety of 6:1–21.<sup>46</sup> The first flourishing concept concerns *reward*. Jesus encourages a particular type of prayer, which includes the whole person. The motivation and result of such prayer is the reward of not only the promise of heaven but also the pronouncement of "well done" righteousness.<sup>47</sup> The second flourishing concept is the reception of glory and honor.<sup>48</sup> Pennington's point is that improper prayer seeks glory and honor from other people and not from the heavenly Father. Seeking praise for external displays of righteousness evidences hypocrisy. The connection with hypocrisy relates to the third flourishing concept. Pennington defines hypocrisy as a divided being, or rather, someone who does not operate from a whole heart.<sup>49</sup> This division relates to Jesus's and thus Pennington's commendation to seek wholehearted virtue.

Although much could be said about this section of the Sermon, I will reserve my comments to two very specific points. First, the addition of the third petition ("Your will be done on earth as in heaven") in the Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer highlights the role of moral conduct in obedience to God's kingdom mandates.<sup>50</sup> A study of the phrase "will of God/Father" reveals that the wording is closely related to performance of the Torah.<sup>51</sup> This additional petition emphasizes Matthew's call to righteousness.<sup>52</sup> Righteousness in Matthew refers to right conduct

<sup>44</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 119–60.

<sup>45</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 228.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–36. For Pennington's argument for including 6:19–21 with 6:1–18 instead of 6:19–7:11, see pp. 123–24; *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). See also J. C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries; London: Penguin, 1963), 103.

<sup>47</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 234.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>50</sup> Although my focus here is on the third petition, it is also interesting that Matthew retains the language of "debts" in his forgiveness petition. As I have argued elsewhere, the "debt" language in the Prayer is the language of obligation. This emphasis on obligation often overshadows intentions and focuses more on the duty itself. This assertion is not to insist that obligation becomes legalism, but rather, members of a household were to perform certain activities regardless of intention and heart disposition. For an overview of wealth ethics and obligations with its restrictions, see Timothy J. Murray, *Restricted Generosity in the New Testament* (WUNT 2.480; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Brad Young, *The Jewish Background to the Lord's Prayer* (Austin: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1984), 20. See Ps 40:8 ("I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart") and Rabban Gamaliel (*Anot* 2:4— "Do His will as if it were your will").

<sup>52</sup> See Matt 7:21; 12:50; 18:14; 21:31; and 26:42.

in accordance with law-keeping, a definition synonymous with the “will of God.”<sup>53</sup> For example, Jesus’s obedience to John’s baptism is a means of fulfilling “righteousness.” In being baptized, Jesus fulfils the messianic expectation that he will obediently execute God’s will.<sup>54</sup>

Second, the composition of Matt 6:5–15 highlights the aspect of response, particularly the verses surrounding the Lord’s Prayer (vv. 9–13). The three main sections in chapter 6 begin with a comparison between hypocrites and proper piety (6:1–2, 5–6, 16–17) followed by the promise of the Father’s reward (6:4, 6, 18). Verses 14–15 appear to break the pattern prevalent throughout chapter 6 (Matt 6:2–4; 5–6, 16–18), and it may seem odd that these verses form an extended teaching of a petition. The key is to look at its relationship with verses 7–8. The most obvious link is the appeal to the Father’s involvement in the life of the petitioner. Verses 7–8 assure us that the Father knows our prayers (v. 8), while verses 14–15 assure the Father’s forgiveness. Also, both sets of verses present a contrast. In the first case (vv. 7–8), the prayers of the Gentile are contrasted with righteous prayers. In the second case (vv. 14–15), there is a contrast between those who give forgiveness and those who do not. The juxtaposition of verses 7–8 and 14–15 insinuates that proper prayer is made impossible without properly orienting one’s relationships on earth. In addition, the relationship between interpersonal forgiveness and divine forgiveness is made explicit in verses 14–15 (see also the forgiveness petition).

There is also an interesting thematic link here with the entirety of chapter 6. The hypocrites, who have been mentioned earlier, continuously practice their righteousness before others to be seen. These admonitions against practicing righteousness before others do not abrogate social relationships (see Matt 6:19–7:12) but rather serves as a reminder that a disciple must be careful to attend to proper outward response in conjunction with proper prayer.<sup>55</sup> Not to mention, this outward response is linked to one’s status as a child of the Father in heaven.

3. *Matthew 7:12 (Golden Rule)*. Matthew 7:12 states: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” Mattison sees in this verse the culmination of the Sermon’s teaching as they inform the virtues of prudence and justice.<sup>56</sup> In the commentary preceding his explanation of 7:12, Mattison shows some unifying themes in 6:19–7:11.<sup>57</sup> He states, “What unifies 6:19–34 is the claim that a proper grasp of how things are enables one to act well

<sup>53</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 499; R. T. France, *Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 2007), 119, 271; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 206–7.

<sup>54</sup> See also Matt 21:28–32. In the parable of the two sons, Jesus asks who performed the will of the Father (v. 31). He explains that the “righteous” obedience of being baptized (v. 32) marks the one doing God’s will.

<sup>55</sup> One must be careful here because Matthew 6 warns against doing things “outwardly” to impress others. The condemnation in this chapter is not in regard to all “outward” expressions of righteousness, but rather those which focus on the individual and not the Father in heaven. This point is similarly made in Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 124–36.

<sup>56</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 198–203.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 164–98.

with regard to those activities.”<sup>58</sup> Mattison argues that Matt 7:1–11 has a similar ethical thrust but as it pertains to others.<sup>59</sup> Taken collectively then, one’s response to activities forms prudence and one’s response to others forms justice. Pennington similarly points out the summative function of this verse but with slightly different emphases. He states, “Matthew 7:12 is [...] climatic and significant for the structure, flow, and vision of the Sermon.”<sup>60</sup> Pennington offers two observations concerning the verse’s meaning. Besides the continuity it provides with the Jewish scriptures and tradition, Pennington argues that the Golden Rule is a “prime example of a virtue-ethics vision over against a rules-based ethic.”<sup>61</sup> This vision concerns how to be in the world in a way which embodies the (1) “greater righteousness” and summarizes how to be (2) *teleios* (see also Matt 5:48).

The summative function of this verse is an important observation and rightfully concludes one’s estimation of the Sermon’s ethic. Within this summative verse is the instruction “to do” (*poieō*) as it accords with the Law and the Prophets, and this action is in response to others. In this regard, the teaching in Matt 7:12 thematically parallels the aforementioned emphasis in the Lord’s Prayer on the will of God, righteousness, and response.<sup>62</sup> As one treats others in a befitting manner, the would-be disciple is fulfilling God’s commands (i.e. “the Law and Prophets”).<sup>63</sup>

4. *Matthew 7:24–27 (Wise/Foolish Foundations)*. As 7:12 functions as an ending and summary to the body of the Sermon, so 7:24–27 functions as an ending and summary to the entirety of the Sermon. Matthew 7:24–27 recounts the story of the wise and foolish builders. Mattison begins his explanation of 7:24–27 with a discussion of *phronesis*, or “wise builder.”<sup>64</sup> In his explanation, Mattison adjudicates the differences in prudence and skill. A skillful person can build an excellent house but still be a scoundrel.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, a prudent person is one who builds an excellent home, but the value in the home is in the intrinsic excellence of the builder. Mattison notes that the interesting aspect of 7:24–27 is that the house is one’s own life. Thus, in Mattison’s words, “Like an effective builder who constructs a sturdy home, the person who hears and acts on Jesus’s words in the Sermon builds a life that is lasting, [...] one of the traditional characteristics of true happiness.”<sup>66</sup>

In Pennington’s exegesis of these concluding verses, he similarly focuses on the concept of *phronesis*. This word is used as a contrast to the “moron” or foolish one. As Pennington notes, “The Sermon is an invitation to wisdom—practiced,

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 266.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>62</sup> Further evidence for this parallel includes the structure of the Lord’s Prayer. The petition for God’s will is structurally parallel to the forgiveness petition and therefore connected thematically with the sayings commentary of 6:14–15.

<sup>63</sup> After all, “the Law and Prophets” hang on the twin commandments to love God and love neighbor (Matt 22:34–40).

<sup>64</sup> Mattison, *Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 210.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Christ-centered, kingdom-shaped, eschatologically oriented wise living,” and it is only fitting that the Sermon would close with an invitation to a particular way of living.<sup>67</sup> Here, Pennington foregrounds the theme of inner righteousness (i.e. wisdom) over outer righteousness.<sup>68</sup>

Matthew 7:24–27, like 7:12, emphasizes hearing the word of God and doing it. It echoes the charge of Jesus’s commission that his disciples teach others to “obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:20). Interestingly, *poieō* is a recurrent lexeme throughout the Sermon. Not only is the word featured in the current passage, but also our previous example of 7:12 and eight total times in the Sermon’s closing, 7:15–27. On word statistics alone, this repetition argues for the importance of actions as consonant with the importance of virtues. These actions are in accordance with Jesus’s rule. The element of response is prominent when 7:24–27 is read in light of 5:13–16.<sup>69</sup> These passages mutually inform how to interpret the other’s meaning. In this (chiastic?) arrangement, the fool builds his foundation on sand and the overall effect is uselessness (7:26: *moros*/5:13: *morainō*). This useless sand mimics the “bad” salt. Sand resembles the shape of granular salt but is unsalted and trampled underfoot. On the other hand, the wise man builds his house on a rock. This metaphor connects with the light that is set on the hill. In this high place, it is most capable of shining brightest. The suggestion of parallelism is at least plausible considering the similar wording and themes. The point is that the “wise worker” of good does so in order to bring glory to the Father in heaven. Good works are characteristic of the Father’s children and this response defines proper obedience to Jesus’s teaching.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to show that the Sermon on the Mount has a thick and robust ethic—a deontological virtue ethic of response. Certainly, Mattison and Pennington are correct to point out the importance of virtue in the Sermon. But, as I have attempted to argue, McKnight was correct to argue a more tri-elemental approach to the Sermon’s ethic. Taken together with Pennington’s insightful criticism that McKnight misses the emphasis on individuals, both internally and externally following Jesus, my suggested emphases of obedience to the divine will, elements of response, and virtue attempt to strike a balance of emphases and refocus attention on the disciple’s growth as a growing member of the Father’s family. These emphases are not only found in the exegesis but at structurally significant introductions (5:3–12), seams (6:5–15 as the Sermon’s centerpiece), and conclusions (7:12; 24–27) within the Sermon. The preceding argument has sought to add *obligation/direction* and *community with others and the Father* as equal emphases alongside virtue in the Sermon on the Mount.

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<sup>67</sup> Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 280.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>69</sup> The relationship between these passages is argued extensively in Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 468–73.