

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

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**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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<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).