

Frank J. Matera. *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life*.  
Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013. 121 pages. \$11.66.

Frank Matera's *The Sermon on the Mount* summons the reader to a "single-minded devotion to God" (ix). He views chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel as a "call to discipleship" (x). *The Sermon on the Mount* is the culmination of Matera's thirty years of teaching on the Synoptic Gospels and originates from his initial encounter with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reading of the Sermon on the Mount. Matera's intended audience is not primarily those within academia; rather, he desires to reach "all who seek to live a Christian life" (x).

Matera introduces his work with a simple claim: "[T]he Sermon on the Mount is a call to Christian perfection intended for every believer to be lived in every sphere of life, the public as well as the private" (2). He debunks the normative view of perfection as mistake free and employs the idea of perfection as "completely devoted to God" (64). Matera notes that Jesus' sermon had a singular theme of righteousness that was primarily aimed at the disciples. He defines righteousness as behavior in harmony with God's will (13). Thus, the Sermon on the Mount, for Matera, is an "ethic of discipleship" (12).

This loving walk through Jesus' sermon begins with an analysis of the Beatitudes and the nature of discipleship. Matera states that the characteristics named in the Beatitudes—poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, etc.—are dimensions of discipleship. The blessedness attached to each characteristic "is not so much the result of [one's] own effort as it is the result of the gift of final salvation that God brings with the kingdom" (31). Matera posits the argument that the last beatitude must be the ethical hermeneutic for the previous eight. He highlights the difference of the ninth beatitude as the use of second person plural ("blessed are you"). Matera believes this change in language signifies that Jesus was directing the last beatitude—and consequently all the beatitudes—at the disciples. As insightful and helpful as this point is, Matera may lack foundation for this claim. He does not explain how that one turn of phrase for the ninth beatitude turns the other eight from general maxims to specific directives.

In chapter 2, Matera explores how "Jesus adopts a maximalist rather than a minimalist approach to the Law" (49). Jesus provides deeper meaning of the Law instead of destroying it through revised interpretations and new insights. Jesus warns against lust in addition to adultery since lust leads to adultery. While much of what Matera puts forth is clear and beneficial, his writing becomes ambiguous around certain sayings of Jesus. For example, Matera does not give a practical interpretation of Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek. Matera raises the question of practical implementation but does not answer. Nonetheless, Matera makes clear that Jesus' fulfillment of the Law directs disciples beyond the Law into loving relationships with all persons.

Matera delves into Jesus' views on piety in chapter 3. Jesus sees those practicing piety for others' approval as hypocrites and admonishes the disciples to practice piety privately. Matera points out the seeming contradiction this statement presents when juxtaposed to Jesus' statement about letting one's light shine. Matera says each has a different objective. Letting one's light shine through good works places emphasis on God. Practicing piety for public approval only glorifies the individual. This hypocrite is not completely focused on God. Jesus wants the disciples "to practice a greater righteousness that expresses its piety in a hidden way that only God can see" (85).

In the final two chapters, Matera investigates the themes of single-minded devotion to God and the need to do Jesus' words respectively. A person with a single-minded devotion to

God “lives in wholehearted service to God” (105) without worry and judgment, only focused on spiritual treasures, confident prayer, and serving God alone (105). Matera realizes that people die daily from lack of material needs and worry; yet, he declares, “For every argument against the practicality of what Jesus teaches, there is the witness of those who have confirmed his teaching by their lives” (97). Thus, Jesus’ sermon is not a set of laws, but it is “the path to life” (107). For disciples to travel that path, they must be “doers of the Word” (113).

Matera achieves his goal. He shows Jesus’ sermon as a call to Christian perfection and an ethic of discipleship. This work reminds lay, clergy, and scholar alike of the need continually to follow the words of Jesus. It is a tremendous resource: a great supplement for laypersons studying the Synoptic Gospels and a helpful approach for scholars—particularly those in homiletics, biblical studies, and Christian ethics—looking to bridge the gap between the academy and the church.

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