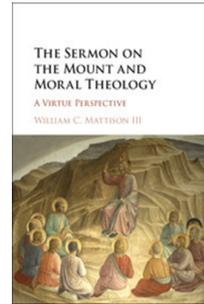


## Book Review

Mattison III, William C. 2017.  
*The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology:  
A Virtue Perspective.* Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press. 978-1-107-17148 vii-279  
including indices.

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**Dr. Mattison is Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame (Back cover). His research centers on ethics, particularly those of Aquinas. So, it should come as little surprise to know that Mattison investigates the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) from the perspective of the seven cardinal virtues.**

He begins by discussing the goals and methodology for the work. Mattison believes that the centrality of the Sermon on the Mount (SoM) for grounding Christian ethical thinking needs to be restored (p.1). Interestingly, his secondary goal is to demonstrate that virtue-based ethics is not only compatible with Scripture but also reveals connections between the SoM and ethics in general. His method for showing this is quite simple. Rather than delve into the intricacies of exegesis, Mattison summarizes the interpretations of Church Fathers and contemporary theologians to reveal how earlier Christian thought on SoM accords with a virtue ethics perspective. In this regard, Mattison unashamedly writes from a Christian, specifically Roman Catholic, faith-based perspective. Mattison's faith should not be understood as an abrogation of profound intellectual thought, as the book amply demonstrates. Rather, Mattison's epistemological foundation allows him to accept the authority and integrity of the Scriptural material thereby avoiding the needless and often fruitless distraction of defending the source material.

In Chapter 1, Mattison begins with the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-16). He contends that happiness is the attainment of the highest good, namely God (he uses the term Kingdom of God p.23) and that the state of blessedness is intrinsically (rather than extrinsically) connected with the eternal rewards mentioned in the section. What he means by "intrinsic" is that the actions of being merciful, or persecuted, or poor in spirit are essential actions in being happy in this life on the way to the obtaining ultimate happiness in heaven rather than simply means to the reward that cease upon the reward's achievement which characterizes an extrinsic relationship. He then systematically works his way through each beatitude to show how they confirm his claim.

Chapter 2 engages Matthew 5:17-48 and the thorny question of how virtues relate to the law. Mattison argues that virtues meet the law's expectations and surpass them. He spends his effort showing how the virtues of temperance and fortitude control the vices of desire and aggression. His thoughts here are extremely helpful for those struggling with how to live out Christ's commands listed here. Where Mattison stumbled was in his discussion of supercessionism as he seemed to have forgotten the testimony of Hebrews about the status of the ceremonial law (pp. 93ff) as well as being too wedded to Catholic sacramental theology (p.113).

In Chapter 3, Mattison shows how Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 underscore the role that intentions

play in moral behavior, development of virtue and love. Using concepts of immediate goal and further goal as stand ins for intention and object, Mattison argues that while two actions may look identical from the outside, further investigation at the intentional level will show that the two actions are not identical. Thus, the reasons behind performance of an action are essential to the “goodness” of that action even if the same action done for personal reward is itself deemed good by onlookers. The connection between intention and act leads us to the principle that how we act influences who we are in an endless spiraling reciprocal cycle.

Chapter 4 shows how Matthew 6:19-7:12 discusses the importance of ultimate ends, our relationships with others and money. The virtue grounding this section is prudence. This reviewer found Mattison’s approach to be very helpful in understanding the practical implications of Christ’s words, particularly in how to understand our relationship with money. In addition, Mattison correctly rebukes the modern notion that life is a series of punctuated activities rather than an integrated whole from the beginning to end (p. 166).

Chapter 5, Matthew 7:13-29, reviews the role that hope, and prudence have in the life of a follower of Christ. Mattison pays special attention to the vice of presumption as he believes this section of Scripture is meant for believers and not outsiders. He argues that the vice of presumption usually takes one of two forms. The first form is the idea that a Christian can fulfill God’s requirements on his/her own efforts. The second form is that God’s grace is so secure that one’s behavior does not need to change (p. 225).

The final chapter takes up the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:7-15). Mattison contends that the seven petitions of the prayer align with the seven

virtues. He openly asserts that his comments are not the last word on the subject. But he believes he has provided enough evidence to substantiate his perspective and to encourage other scholars to investigate this idea for themselves. This reviewer was fascinated with this perspective as it provides another meaningful way to unpack the riches of this most beautiful prayer.

Mattison deserves much praise for this work. First, he does a superb job showing that a virtue approach to the SoM has merit. Merit in not only showing an inner coherence to the Sermon but also a way to resolve apparent conflicts with other portions of Scripture and common sense. Mattison’s methodology offers a fine demonstration that theological analysis of scripture has much to commend for itself and should be encouraged amongst bible-centered Christians. In this way, Mattison’s work is a corrective to hyper-analytical exegesis that fails to account for the unity of thought undergirding Scriptural teaching. Second, Mattison has written a work that combines intellectual rigor but one that also enriches one’s faith in Christian doctrine. Repeatedly throughout the book, this reviewer found himself encouraged and strengthened in the faith. Dry theology is a moniker that does not apply to this book. Though Mattison’s adherence to Roman Catholic teaching on saints and sacraments was an unfortunate example of his failure to let Scripture fully inform faith and practice, this reviewer was grateful to be challenged by a Catholic theologian who still believed in the historic teachings held by all faithful Christians. His respect for, and insight in, the sacred Scripture was a profound blessing and an experience that other readers will certainly benefit from.