

As a firm believer that one of the best ways of learning is to examine and watch the ones that have gone before us and accomplished it themselves, I strongly recommend this book.

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***Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7.* By Charles H. Talbert, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 181 pages. Softcover, \$17.95.**

This text is a scholarly study of the Sermon on the Mount which interprets Jesus' primary intention in His presentation to develop the character of His disciples and prepare them for making moral decisions, based on that character. Part I is a brief treatment of such critical issues as Matthew's relation to Judaism, authorship, the structure of the sermon, and the function of character development and decision making. He also attends to the issue of the supposed legalism of this Gospel. Of great interest to the author is that of examining the possible understanding and reactions of the hearers and later followers of Jesus' "sermon." He projects what those "auditors" could have understood by showing what contemporary philosophers (Greek, Roman, Jewish, Egyptian, etc.), or other writers of that general epoch had expressed of similar concepts. Also, since most of the auditors were Jewish or had knowledge of Jewish traditions, Talbert frequently reviews the Old Testament background for many of the Lord's sayings in the Sermon.

The primary technique of the book is the exploration of chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew's Gospel, applying a formula for dealing with each section. That formula consists of (1) utilizing exegetical study of the text, (2) making reflections from contemporary writers and thinkers to project the possible understanding of the "auditors" of the Sermon, (3) application of Jesus' teachings as they pointed to the character development of His disciples and would-be followers, and (4) how those teachings prepared the disciples to live a life of righteousness (in contrast to that of the Jewish leaders—Matt. 5:20-48). Perhaps the genius of this work is that the author consistently interpreted Jesus' intention in the Sermon to be the exposure of His disciples to the necessary ingredients of godly character and to prepare them for being moral agents conscious of God's original intention in much of the moral law of the Old Testament. However, a weakness in the author's presentation is that at times the formula, which he so consistently utilized, seems a bit forced, but not to the degree that it detracts from the growing conviction in the reader that this is a plausible key for understanding the whole Sermon on the Mount.

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