

Eberhard Arnold

Salt and Light: Living the Sermon on the Mount

A Guide for Discussion

Page numbers refer to Plough's 2025 edition.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (Matthew 5-7, RSV)

Read the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety (pp. 1-8), preferably without commentary or discussion. If someone prefers a different version, feel free to use that instead or as well.

INTRODUCTION

Now go back to Scot McKnight's introduction (pp. ix-xv).

1. McKnight says that reading the Sermon of the Mount centers, revives, and restores him, but does not comfort him; in fact, he says it rebukes and unsettles him. Can you identify with him? Why do you think this is so? What is your own relationship to this most foundational teaching of Jesus?
2. McKnight parses the various meanings of several terms that are key to understanding the message of this book: "blessed," "righteousness," "love," "mammon," and "evangelism." Discuss your own understanding of these concepts in light of the Sermon on the Mount.

CHAPTER 1: NOT A NEW LAW

1. Discuss Arnold's initial questions: "What is our position on the Sermon on the Mount? Is it really the way we are called to follow?" (p. 9).
2. What do you think Arnold means when he says (more than once) that the Sermon on the Mount is not a mere "set of laws"?
3. Arnold argues that it is not dogma – not Jesus' teachings per se – but our devotion and our attempts to actually live according to them that are decisive; and he goes on to say that this must be done together with others in a life that we "share" with them. What could "sharing" your life with others look like? What does community mean to you?

CHAPTER 2: BECOMING TRULY HUMAN

1. What do you think Arnold is getting at when he says that Jesus' righteousness is "quite different" from the "piety and dogmatism of theologians and moralists" (p. 13)?

2. Why do you think Arnold worries that his attempts to instruct his readers are probably of little value – that Jesus’ teachings need to be “born in your heart and come alive and burn there” (p. 14)?
3. Discuss the paradox Arnold describes in the passage about being “perfected” in love, but still never becoming a saint – remaining weak (p. 16). How is love “the gate” and “the road” and “the way”?

CHAPTER 3: SALT AND LIGHT

1. What examples can you think of that fall under the general idea of “being salt,” (pp. 18-21) and how does the command to be the “salt of the earth” relate to your own attempts to be a follower of Jesus?
2. What examples can you think of that fall under the general idea of “being light,” (pp. 21-25) how does the command to “shine your light” relate to your own desire / attempts to be a follower of Jesus?
3. Discuss Arnold’s extended description of the way light burns by “consuming itself” without becoming exhausted; and how it “gathers and draws” people together even as it disperses shadows and “unmasks” darkness; how it is “warm” but simultaneously “austere” (pp. 23-25). How do you experience power of light in your life and relationships?
4. What does Arnold mean by saying that no area of life must remain unaffected by the powers of salt and light (p. 25)? What might this mean in terms of your responsibility as a Christian in the public sphere?

CHAPTER 4: HAPPINESS

1. Discuss Arnold’s contention that “unless the change we seek extends to all areas, it is a lost cause to try to emulate Christ in one respect only” (p. 27).
2. Arnold says that religious self-satisfaction is not akin to happiness; in fact, he claims they are fundamentally opposed (p. 29). Why do you think he says this? Do you agree?
3. How are the “people of the Beatitudes” that Arnold describes “rich and poor” at the same time (p. 29)?

CHAPTER 5: THE NATURE OF THE NEW JUSTICE

1. What is Arnold’s understanding of the “new justice” (p. 33).

2. Discuss Arnold's contention that ultimately, justice for all cannot be achieved or manufactured by human striving. Is he saying that we should therefore resign ourselves to injustice?
3. What do think Arnolds means when he argues that divine justice does not bear fruit in terms of equal rights, but in mutual acts of love – in community (pp. 33-34)? Do you agree?
4. Why does Arnold claim that the Sermon on the Mount "judges" and simultaneously "frees" us (pp. 36-38)? What role does trusting and relying on God play in "freeing us" to live "joyful lives" (p. 39)?

CHAPTER 6: HUMAN GOODNESS AND GOD'S SPIRIT

1. Arnold goes to great lengths to differentiate between human goodness and morality and the innate, perfect goodness of Christ. Why is this distinction so important?
2. What is the difference between earnestly or slavishly following "ethical demands" (p. 42) and being "gripped by love" (p. 44), and how do these two polar states of being play out in your life?

CHAPTER 7: AWAY FROM COMPROMISE AND SHADOW

1. Do you agree with Arnold when he says that it is never permissible a follower of Jesus to make compromises with evil?
2. If "love" and "forgiveness" and "grace" outweigh the demands of the Law, what are the implications? How do you see this playing out in personal life, or in the life of a congregation or church?
3. What does Arnold say about the "age-old" topic of sinlessness and perfection (p. 51)? What is his answer or advice?

CHAPTER 8: AGAINST BLOODSHED AND VIOLENCE

1. Arnold says a follower of Jesus should not even participate in maintaining "law and order" by means of lethal force, let alone support armed insurrection on behalf of the oppressed (p. 53). What path does he suggest we follow instead to attain justice?
2. What does Arnold say about the Mosaic prohibition against killing (p. 56)? What does he mean by saying that Jesus "intensifies" this command?

3. Discuss the extended quotation by Herman Hesse (pp. 58-59). Have you personally ever injured or “killed” something in another person? Do you agree that we each bear a responsibility in helping humanity to advance from living as animals to living as true humans?

CHAPTER 9: THE BETTER RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. Arnold suggests that “human” righteousness is often bound up with moral compulsion, whereas Christ’s “new” righteousness is something that “liberates” and “brings freedom” (pp. 60-61). Has that been your experience?
2. Arnold implies that there is no such thing as righteousness as a mere state of being, that it cannot exist apart from doing deeds of righteousness. What are some of those deeds you could do?

CHAPTER 10: GOD OR MAMMON

1. In what way do followers of mammon become its slaves?
2. Why and how does self-denial – that is, the disavowal of mammon – bring about freedom and happiness?
3. Can you identify areas of your own life where you are enslaved by mammon, and times when you have become free of such servitude?

CHAPTER 11: THE FIGHT AGAINST MAMMON

1. Why does Arnold refuse to equate religion and religiosity with goodness and righteousness (p. 69)?
2. Arnold argues that historically, Christianity has often in practice rejected Jesus’ teachings on mammon. Do you agree? Why? Why not? Where do you see evidence?
3. What is Arnold talking about when he says that the use of money results in the “objectification” of human relationships (p. 74)? Can you think of other examples?
4. Arnold describes how Jesus and the early church “waged war” against mammon. Could the church do the same today?
5. What might the Christ-centered communism or communalism that Arnold envisions look like in our day? What distinguishes it from political communism?

CHAPTER 12: MAMMON AND THE LIVING GOD

1. Analyze the extended passage by Zoroaster (pp. 83-86). What do you think Arnold finds significant about the perspective of this ancient prophet-poet?

2. Arnold sees the nurturing of human communities or fellowships as the answer to the ravages of mammon in society at large (pp. 93-100). How can we encourage more such responses?
3. On pages 100 to 105, Arnold rejects the dualism of the material versus the abstract, and the bodily versus the spiritual, as a false dichotomy when seeking to understand Jesus' teachings. Do you agree? What do you understand him to mean with his exhortation "Brothers and sisters, love the Earth!" (p. 102)?

CHAPTER 13: THE DECISION

1. Discuss Arnold's assertion that much of what passes as "Christian" is in fact anti-Christian – that is, it stands in opposition to the spirit of Jesus' teachings (p. 107). Where do you see evidence of this in today's Christianity?
2. Arnold illustrates his thoughts with stories: drawing first on the Gospels, he cites the rich young man who is chided by Jesus; and he retells the story of the nineteenth-century Russian "holy fool" Rachoff; and anecdotes of people he knew personally (pp. 110-114). Can you think of others (either famous, or known to you personally) whose lives demonstrate the path of self-renunciation or the forsaking of worldly pleasures to serve humanity and God?

CHAPTER 14: RESISTANCE BY SURRENDER

1. Why does Arnold insist that the church of Christ must be a church of peace – of nonviolence (pp. 119-122)? What is your own stance on this issue, and your biblical basis for holding it; how would you explain or defend it, if pressed?
2. What do you think Arnold is talking about when he argues that the idea of dedicating "half of your life" to following "half of Jesus" is a delusion, and not really discipleship at all (p. 124)?

CHAPTER 15: THE SPIRIT THAT OVERCOMES

1. On pages 129 to 131 Arnold once again reveals his deep suspicion of good intentions. At the same time, he insists that following Jesus demands "human decision" and "action." Is this a paradox?
2. Arnold addresses the tension between Jesus' prohibition against judging others and the need for clarity vis-à-vis sin, but also the dangers of a "softness" that tolerates anything and everything. He sums up the conversation by contrasting the "nature of the lamb" versus the "nature of the wolf." Which is more of a danger for you?

3. What two recognitions does Arnold see as decisive in trying to follow Jesus amid the messy realities of daily life (p. 134)?
4. On page 137, Arnold says that everything we do must “become a prayer.” How can we make that happen?

CHAPTER 16: THE PRESENT EXPERIENCE OF THE FUTURE KINGDOM

1. On page 139, what do you think Arnold means when he talks about being “baptized in the spirit”?
2. In a sense, page 142 sums up the heart of the entire book. What do you find most important here?
3. On page 143, what is the “perfect social justice” of the kingdom of God, and how does it differ from human attempts to achieve a more just or equitable society? How does this relate to the overturning of “class-based antagonisms” (p. 147).
4. Arnold concedes that the spirit of the kingdom of God does not yet rule the world. But he argues that it can still have transformative power wherever we “let it in.” (pp. 145, 149). How can our lives reflect or point toward that kingdom?

CHAPTER 17: THE JOYFUL NEWS OF THE KINGDOM

1. On pages 150 to 152 Arnold describes the “new birth” we must undergo to become more like Jesus. How does this happen?
2. Arnold says that divine truth is expressed in “loving action” (p. 154) and that the kingdom of God consists in “doing” (p. 155), and that “everything that Jesus said, he also did” (p. 157). What do you think he is driving at here?

CHAPTER 18: GOD AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

1. What is Arnold getting at when he asserts that “we are not yet human beings” (pp. 159-160)?
2. Arnold argues that ultimately, God “cannot be perceived” except by “actually doing his will” (pp. 161-62). Do you agree?
3. What do you think Arnold is attempting to accomplish with this sweeping survey of historical approaches to the divine – from the Stone Age to the Babylonian and Egyptian eras, and with respect to Zoroaster and Muhammad (pp. 163-172)?
4. Read the passage that begins in the middle of p. 174 and ends on the top of p. 176. How do you envision incorporating this decisive call to action in your life?

5. Arnold describes Jesus' goal in coming to earth as the "revaluation of all things" (p. 176). He then describes the single-mindedness of the "people of the future" as the necessary condition for attaining this revaluation. He says that without this, it will remain an abstraction. How can we live the values of the kingdom in an imperfect world?

CHAPTER 19: THE JESUS OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

1. Arnold argues that as human beings we are constantly confronted by an unavoidable either/or: we will either be subject to one spirit – the spirit of the abyss – or to another – "the spirit of God" (pp. 183-187). How does this relate to Jesus' own struggle to remain true to God in the face of temptation?
2. Arnold directs our gaze away from what is wrong in the world to the hope of the "new birth," "new righteousness," and "new justice" that mark a life lived for Jesus (p. 188). He implies that these are not merely lofty ideals, but real forces that can actually shape daily life. Do you agree?
3. Arnold argues that worry or anxiety over material things is just as ungodly and enslaving as the love of money and the quest to amass wealth (p. 191). Have you found this to be true?
4. Arnold says the "new justice" in a society ordered by divine principles must begin at the personal level; it will not come about unless it is also there in the way we treat one another as individuals (pp. 192-194). Do you agree that personal change must precede social reform?
5. Arnold warns us that as "ambassadors" of the kingdom of God, we dare not forget Jesus' most incisive parable regarding human goodness: the one about removing the "beam" from our own eye before trying to remove the "splinter" from someone's else's eye (p. 200). What are some beams and splinters we need to address?
6. Arnold warns of the danger of being "wrapped up" in the question of individual salvation (p. 204). Why do you think he insists on continually seeking the larger view of "all people," "all worlds," and "all creation"?

AFTERWORD

1. Moltmann says that as he was reading this book, he was "suddenly struck by the inseparable connection between discipleship and the communal life of the Twelve, between the expectation of God's kingdom on earth and a life of brotherly love. These things must never be separated." Have these things been separated for you?
2. Moltmann wonders how churches today might become more "living" and "communal" and goes on to ask, "How can our parishes become communities of faith and of life?" What can we do about it?

3. Moltmann notes that to Arnold, true Christian hope cannot just be a matter of “the salvation of the soul in the hereafter,” but a belief that the principles and spirit of God’s kingdom can be realized “on earth as in heaven.” Moltmann continues, “I pray for the advent of this kingdom, I cannot abandon the earth to wars and ecological destruction and to those who hope for security by threatening such disasters. If I pray for the coming of God’s kingdom, I cannot stand by while the environment and my fellow creatures are being annihilated through the progress of civilization and nuclear disasters. Praying for the coming of God’s kingdom calls for a decisive resistance to the destruction of the earth.” How might this expand our concept of prayer?

WRAP-UP

According to the preface, Arnold was not concerned with propounding a theology of the Sermon on the Mount, but in convincing his listeners and readers that it is a valid, viable guide for living. The preface ends: “In the spirit of the Apostle of James, who exhorted his readers to be not mere hearers of the Word, but doers, these readings represent a call to action.”

In a similar vein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a contemporary of Arnold, once wrote:

Humanly speaking, one could understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience. Not interpreting it or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his word. He does not mean that it is to be discussed as an ideal; he really means us to get on with it.

In light of these two thoughts, how do you hope to put into practice the insights and truths you have gained from reading and discussing this book?