



SALT & LIGHT

Living the Sermon on the Mount



Eberhard
ARNOLD

Introduction by
Scot McKnight

Afterword by
Jürgen Moltmann



Eberhard Arnold

Salt and Light

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Sermon on
the Mount

Plough

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Preface

Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935) was widely sought after during his lifetime as a public speaker and publisher in his native Germany. During his studies (he completed his doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche in 1909), he was active in the revival movement then sweeping the country's universities and became national secretary of the Christian Student Union.

Like thousands of young Europeans in the turbulent years that followed the First World War, Arnold and his wife, Emmy von Hollander, were disillusioned by the failure of the establishment, especially the churches, to provide meaningful answers to the problems of the day. In their seeking, they were influenced particularly by Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. In 1920, inspired by the early Christian congregations described in the Book of Acts, they founded an intentional community (now known as the Bruderhof) near Frankfurt.

Salt and Light is a collection of Arnold's articles, talks, and lectures on the Sermon on the Mount from 1915 to 1935, compiled in German by his wife Emmy after his death. She wrote out the text, decorated it with calligraphy, and bound it by hand. This new edition

follows the first English edition of 1967 and an abridged version from 1998; we have reworked these earlier translations, reinstated the final two chapters, and added Bible references.

Arnold grappled with the implications of the Sermon on the Mount throughout his life, and his adherence to its demands bore practical fruit in a community that is still alive and growing. Although he was addressing a Germany in political and social ferment, his words are not bound to time or place and will speak (we hope) to today's reader with the same force they exerted on his original audience. In the spirit of the apostle James, who exhorted his readers to be not mere hearers of the Word, but doers, these readings represent a call to action.

Christopher Zimmerman

2025

Introduction

Scot McKnight

For fifty years, I have been entranced by the Sermon on the Mount, a text that rebukes, restores, and revives my faith. It calls me back to read it again and again. It centers my theology and my attempts to live it out. It flips the American script and beckons me to a way of life no one, apart from Jesus, has yet fully lived. The Sermon on the Mount is a deep well filled with the best of Jesus' teachings. But it does not comfort. It does not say to us, "It is well with my soul." It says, "Follow me, follow the Jesus of the cross." It stirs. It provokes. It excites the imagination to a new way of life. It calls us to the kingdom of God, and as Eberhard Arnold writes in this wonderful collection of pieces about the Sermon on the Mount, "The kingdom of God is absolute. Its love is unconditional. Its social justice is perfect."

This sermon was born when Jesus took a stand on a hill in Galilee and spoke up so all could hear. In so doing, he spoke against the ways of those who found his crowds potentially dangerous, dangerous enough to foment a riot or a rebellion or a revolution. It turns out there was no danger of them rioting, but time has told us it was indeed a revolution that Jesus was setting in motion that day – a revolution of the moral imagination.

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As a college sophomore at a bookstore in downtown Grand Rapids, I bought a copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. I don't now recall why. I suspect one of my teachers or pastors had mentioned him. I read the book and was captivated. It was a firehose blowing me away, but it was more than that: it was an encounter with a new worldview – the worldview of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It broke my fundamentalist past apart. It left me in pieces that would take decades to put back together. Bonhoeffer taught me to read the Sermon on the Mount, so I began reading it. Between my first and second years in seminary I spent the entire summer examining nothing but the Beatitudes.

Blessed. I was intrigued by the meaning of the word “blessed” in the Bible. I examined the term in the Old Testament and in the Jewish sources I had access to. The background clarifies its meaning for Jesus’ Beatitudes, but no English translation, least of all “happy,” captures its meaning. The term evokes the God who blesses, and it touches on a relationship of grace with God that begins now but will not be complete until the kingdom fully comes. Yet to be blessed by God remains in important senses conditional. Those who are blessed are marked by behaviors that belong to the kingdom, such as peacemaking and being merciful to others. The virtues at work in those who are blessed are relational virtues springing from a redeemed character: the pure in heart, those who mourn, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. As Arnold writes, in these Beatitudes Jesus “discerned the nature of those who had God’s righteousness.” Finally, the term “blessed” evokes a powerful contrast and even more:

a total reversal. Those blessed were not on the top of the social ladder in Galilee or Judea. They were instead mostly from the lower classes, even the margins. But they were promised that all things would be made right. This did not mean flipping power from the rich to the poor, so the poor could be just as imperialistic as those before them. No, the reversal here is a reversal of justice: injustice defeated, justice established.

This can only happen in community. The Beatitudes of Jesus toss the gracious waters of God's ultimate approval on people. Kingdom people. People committed to one another in the kingdom coalition Jesus formed and still is forming. Throughout his biography of Arnold, *Against the Wind*, Markus Baum shows how following Jesus with others in community was a central concern in Arnold's life.

Righteousness. Later I became entranced by the meaning of the word "righteousness" in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are those who long for righteousness and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Jesus tells his disciples they are to possess a righteousness that far outstrips that of the Pharisees and scribes. Not because theirs was legalistic or picayune. No, what made the difference was following Jesus and his way of interpreting the Law of Moses.¹

¹ I'm confident if Arnold were writing today he'd be more sensitive to the implications of some of his descriptions of Judaism and the Pharisees. He couldn't have imagined the ways National Socialism would later turn such characterizations against the Jews. Since then, Christian writers have become more aware of the impact of our words for our Jewish sisters and brothers. Certainly, Arnold would agree that Jesus' righteousness was not anti-Jewish but a way of observance unlike some and like others. The Jewishness of Jesus is most visible in the Sermon on the Mount.

Righteousness describes how followers of Jesus are generous with their resources, and it especially describes the central vision of their way of life. Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” and in so doing, the blessings of God will come your way – not as a life of luxury but as a life blessed by God. As such, in true Jewish fashion, the term “righteousness” describes behavior, practices, and a way of life – a way of observing the Torah of Moses with Jesus as the rabbi, Jesus as Lord, Jesus as Messiah, Jesus as Savior. It is a mistake to think that what Jesus is referring to in the Sermon on the Mount is some kind of imputed righteousness. Followers of Jesus would have to wait until Paul to hear that teaching. In Jesus’ day and in Jesus’ way, righteousness was doing the right thing at the right time. It was going the way of Jesus when other ways were on offer.

Love. I am struck how often Arnold sees love in the Sermon on the Mount. The term “love” appears but five times, one of which is quoting the Old Testament, but the love of Jesus infuses every passage. If Jesus’ followers had heard in synagogues that they were to love their neighbors but detest the Romans, which is probably what “enemies” means, they were now ordered by the Lord of Love to love their enemies and pray even for those who persecuted them. Loving only those who love us is ungodlike, because God loves all. For Jesus, perfection is acting like God in loving all persons. The importance of love in the Sermon on the Mount becomes clear later in the Gospel when Jesus, who is presented here as the new Moses, is asked which of Moses’ commandments is the fairest of them all.

His answer is twofold: love God, and love others as we love ourselves. If that's the Jesus way to read the Law of Moses, then all of the Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of love. As Arnold encapsulates it, "This is the secret of the attitude that knows and recognizes but one law: perfect, pure, true love, manifested in all areas of life."

But what is love? We need to develop the discipline of refraining from using modern dictionaries to define Jesus' words. Rather, we should look to God's revelation in Jesus himself to define love. Love for Jesus is a rugged, affective commitment to another person that involves presence (being with someone), advocacy (being for someone), and mutual formation into the way of Jesus. Jesus called disciples to be with him; he shielded them; he spoke for them; he mentored them; and he showed them how to live a life of love in the kingdom coalition he was forming. Eberhard Arnold understood the challenge of Jesus this way:

It is an either-or decision. Either we are dependent on God and love him and become people of love, with a heart turned toward others – one that has overcome the disposition to kill or to injure or to rob anyone of their livelihood, and one that is free of impurity and the filth that drags love into the dirt. Or we are people of mammon who, in every relationship, calculate how much we may earn, what advantages we might gain, how we can become successful, how to enlarge our property, how to make our living more secure, how we can overcome financial need by accumulating more money. This hardens our hearts and destroys any yearning for God and his love, and corrupts the deepest urges of love in our own hearts.

Mammon. From his first sermon in Nazareth to the care he showed his mother with his dying breath, Jesus cared for the poor. His gospel was for them; he blessed them, and he called his followers to give to the poor. The flip-side of this song was his warning to the rich. He knew that the lure of money and wealth stifled the gospel he preached. We should not be surprised, then, that in the Sermon on the Mount he tells his disciples that they can only serve one master – either God or mammon. And he instructs them not to let mammon and resources and provisions dominate their hearts. Rather, they are to seek the kingdom of God and God’s justice and righteousness. In so doing, they will discover a new kind of flourishing. Such a life, one of farming, building, creativity, generosity, and hospitality, has always marked the Anabaptist vision that Arnold came to embrace. In this vision, all creation witnesses to the provisions of God. Mammon chokes; Jesus’ way of life sets us free. A life that is anti-mammon can only be lived through mutual commitment with others. The anti-mammon life is shared because sharing breaks the hold of mammon.

Evangelism. Few people realize how evangelistic the Sermon on the Mount is. Not evangelism in the classic evangelical or revivalist or megachurch sense, but in the Jesus sense. The Sermon is set up by Matthew 4:23–25, which informs the reader that Jesus ministered throughout Galilee, doing three things: teaching in the synagogues, declaring the gospel of the kingdom, and healing anyone with any problem. That opener is repeated in nearly identical language at the end of Matthew’s ninth chapter: teaching, preaching, and healing.

In between those bookends, Matthew locates the Sermon on the Mount and ten stories of healing that summon people to follow Jesus. This long section in Matthew's Gospel, unfortunately broken up by chapter and verse divisions when reading to oneself, presents Jesus to audiences who, throughout the centuries, have mostly heard the Gospel read aloud. Through it, they are being summoned to see Jesus and to hear Jesus and to render a decision about Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount, it must be maintained, is Jesus' own form of evangelism. *Hear me out*, he says. *What do you think of my vision?* he asks. *Do you want to follow me?* That's evangelism. This way of evangelism is a summons to see who he is and to render a decision about whether or not one wants to follow him.

Jesus, Arnold claims, "lives in the prophetic truth which knows that law and society can be transformed only through the religious and moral renewal of the spiritual life." Like Jesus' unparalleled sermon, the talks and essays collected in *Salt and Light* point the way to this renewal and transformation. I hope you will be as unsettled and encouraged as I have been.

The Sermon on the Mount

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser

hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with

him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father

knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if

your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the

speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his son asks him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise person who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish person who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Matthew 5, 6, 7 (RSV)

1

Not a New Law

What is our position on the Sermon on the Mount? Is it really the way we are called to follow? It seems fundamentally important to me that our community should think deeply about this question, since the Sermon on the Mount is the first step on the path of discipleship. I feel that we need to revisit this first step again, and that we need to be fully united in our understanding of it. Because once we fully grasp the Sermon on the Mount, then – if we really believe it – nothing can frighten us: neither our own self-recognition, nor financial threats, nor the frailty of our community or its composition. And then we will be adequate to the situation, just as we are, with all of our weaknesses.

When we were beginning to walk this path [of communal living], the Sermon on the Mount shook us so powerfully that I simply cannot describe it. It spoke to me and encouraged me with tremendous force and depth. To me, the most vital content of the Sermon on the Mount is the essence of salt, the warming blaze of

“Not a New Law” is based on a talk Arnold gave on October 27, 1935, a month before his death, to members of the Bruderhof, the community that he and his wife, Emmy, had founded in 1920. As with the other chapters in this book that derive from oral presentations, this one is based on a shorthand transcription.

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light, the nature of the city community, and the life-power of the tree (Matt. 5:13–16; 7:15–20).

The central tenets of the Sermon on the Mount make it very plain that it is not a new set of laws – the dedication demanded here does not take the form of a new moral assignment. Instead, it is a matter of forgiveness. This is where Christ is found – in the essence of salt’s strength, and the light and warmth of the Holy Spirit. This is where the inner light is found, and the clarity of the inner eye (Matt. 6:22–23), and the vitality found in the tree that bears good fruit. This is where the community’s character as a city on a hill – a light for the whole world – is to be found. And this is how we need to grasp it: not as high-tension moralism, nor as an ethical demand, but as the revelation of God’s real power in human life.

Only if we take our devotion to God seriously – only if God enters us as the strength of light, the strength of the tree, the elemental energy which alone makes new life possible – will we be capable of living the new life. That is what is decisive.

If, as Tolstoyans do, we were to interpret the Sermon on the Mount as five new commandments, we would be entirely off the mark.¹ No, the clarity of the law is made even more pointed here – Jesus says so (Matt. 5:17–20). And his demands cannot be watered down. In fact, he shows us that instead of being weakened by their entrance into the stream of world history, his demands are infinitely sharpened.

Of course, these are only five examples – five hundred or five thousand could just as easily be given – of the formidable effect of this essence of light,

¹ Arnold is referring to Leo Tolstoy’s 1884 book *My Religion*, in which he compares Jesus’ teachings to Moses’ Ten Commandments.

and of the living power of this mighty fruit-bearing tree. They reveal how God works in Christ. The fulfillment of the law means that this justice and righteousness² is better than that of all the scholars and theologians. What is presented here is completely different; it cannot be attained at all by means of moral intentions, ideas, and concepts. Instead, it offers a whole new way of meeting these demands – the organic way. It is authentic, pulsing life. Just as light shines, just as salt sears, just as a flame flares up, and as sap runs in a tree, so does this life spring from God. It is life, life, life!

I want to say that there is no point whatsoever in our being together if we do not share this primal life in the sense of the Sermon on the Mount.

² Here and throughout his work, Arnold uses *Gerechtigkeit*, a word that can be translated as either “justice” or “righteousness,” or both, depending on the context.

