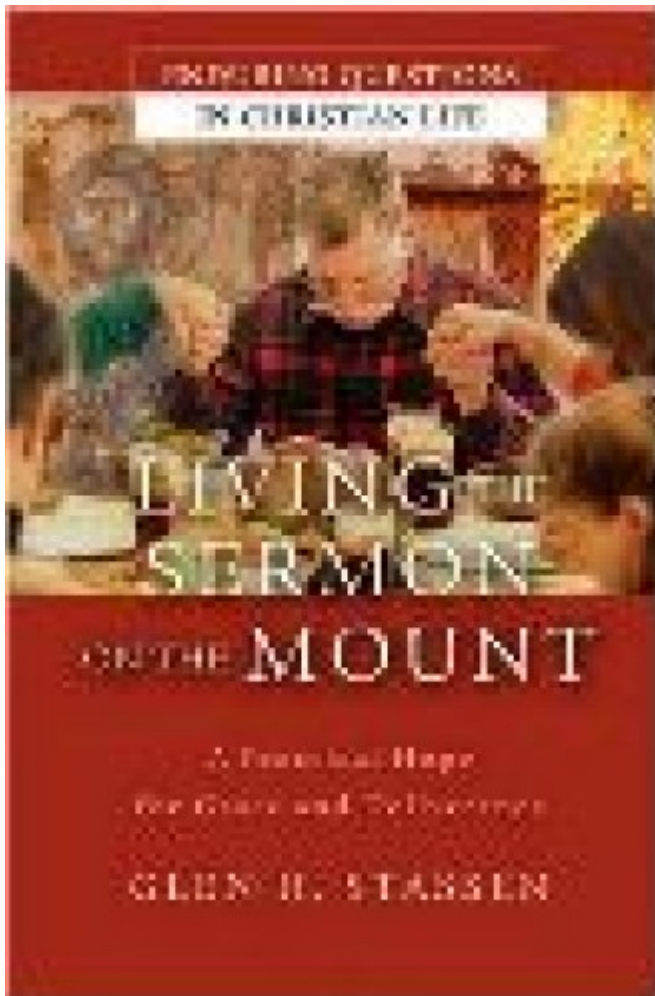


Living the Sermon on the Mount

reviewed by [Thomas Trzyna](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Living The Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance

Glen H. Stassen
Jossey-Bass

Early in his introduction, Glen Stassen asks why a book on the Sermon on the Mount belongs in Jossey-Bass's series called Enduring Questions in Christian Life. The Sermon on the Mount is indeed an enduring question as well as a central biblical text.

I have sometimes suggested to students that I could toss out the entire Bible with the exception of the Beatitudes, and there have been many others who have found in the Sermon on the Mount not only sufficient spiritual guidance but also a message that differs markedly from the rest of scripture and much of the Christian tradition. Tolstoy argued that you cannot have both the Sermon on the Mount and the creeds: in his mind, they were mutually exclusive. Other radical thinkers have made similar claims about the centrality of the Sermon in Matthew, such as Gandhi's student Lanza del Vasto and the American pacifist Ammon Hennacy. Stassen is not as radical as these writers, but he does argue for the primacy of Jesus' words and for the Sermon on the Mount as the key to Christian faith and practice.

Stassen picks two sections of the Bible as his core texts: the Sermon on the Mount and Isaiah. He contends that Isaiah was the most widely read and widely available text in Jesus' time and that it was also the book that people associated with the Qumran community would have known best. Like Tolstoy, but in a much more nuanced way, Stassen suggests a recentering of Christian faith and practice on the words of Jesus and the prophecies of Isaiah rather than on other writings.

Stassen's treatment of the Sermon on the Mount is scholarly and at the same time warm, pastoral and wise. His meditation on the Sermon encompasses many thoughtful and pointed applications to the current world situation, addressing moral, economic, political and environmental issues, as well as providing a critique of the role of the media in our lives. His style is flowing and easy to comprehend, and the chapters are packed with insights. This book would be an excellent resource for adult education as well as for private reading. Moreover, because of the extraordinary amount of material Stassen has packed into this short manual, it is worth rereading and keeping on hand as a resource.

The Lew Smedes Professor of Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, Stassen is a worthy successor to Smedes in style as well as in depth of thought. His underlying purpose is to show that the Sermon on the Mount can be a realistic guide for living, and he makes a compelling case for restoring the Sermon to a larger place in

Christian life as the most systematic statement of Jesus' philosophy. He supports his case with a detailed rhetorical and numerical analysis of the structure of the Sermon.

If his meditation on Christ's words reveals a struggle of any kind, it is precisely the one that got under the skin of radicals such as Tolstoy. Stassen wants the Sermon to be understood as a document that describes an attainable ideal so that we will try to live by its message, but he returns often to the thought that ideals can be too high and therefore intimidating. Here as in his work on just peacemaking theory, Stassen seeks to offer ideas that can be applied readily without requiring revolutionary changes or unrealistic costs.

At the same time, he gives examples of people who not only lived by the Sermon—including Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—but also died for their beliefs. I will reread *Living the Sermon on the Mount* with just this tension in mind. Jesus, after all, had the good humor to demand that we strive for the ideal while generously pointing out that achieving it is impossible without God's help.