



***CHARLES
GORE***

***THE SERMON
ON THE MOUNT:
A PRACTICAL
EXPOSITION***

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The Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Exposition

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PREFACE

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There is no plant in the spiritual garden of the Church of England which at the present moment needs more diligent watering and tending than the practical, devotional study of Holy Scripture. The extent to which spiritual sloth, or reaction against Protestant individualism, or the excuse of critical difficulties is allowed to minister to the neglect of this most necessary practice, is greatly to be deplored. It is surprising in how few parts of the Bible critical difficulties, be they what they may, need be any bar to its practical use.

The present exposition is, I trust, based upon a careful study of the original text, but it is, as presented, intended simply to assist ordinary people to meditate on the Sermon on the Mount in the Revised Version, and to apply its teaching to their own lives. If it proves useful, I hope, as occasion offers, to follow it up with other similar expositions of St. Paul's epistles to the Romans and Ephesians, and the epistles of St. John.

My original intention was to publish some lectures given in Westminster Abbey on the Sermon on the Mount in Lent and Easter, 1895. But the attempt to correct for the press a report of those lectures was practically abandoned, and the exposition as now printed is a new one.

It is intended to suggest thoughts rather than to develop them, and to minister to practical reflection rather than to intellectual study; and I have ventured, in view of this latter aim, to omit almost all references and discussions such as involve footnotes.

I owe as much gratitude as usual to the Rev. Richard Rackham, my brother in the Community of the Resurrection, for help in the correction of proofs.

C. G.
RADLEY,
All Saints' Day, 1896.

ANALYSIS

OF

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

CHAPTER I

THE SERMON

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I

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WHAT is the Sermon on the Mount? It is the moral law of the kingdom of Christ, or in other words it occupies in the New Testament the place which in the Old Testament is occupied by the Ten Commandments. It is thus an excellent example of the relation of the two divine “testaments,” or rather covenants, to one another. There is a sentence of St. Augustine’s on this subject which it would be useful for every one to have constantly in mind. “We do wrong,” he says, “to the Old Testament if we deny that it comes from the same just and good God as the New. On the other hand, we do wrong to the New Testament if we put the Old on a level with it.”² This is a general statement of the relation between the two covenants, and it applies especially to the moral law. The moral law of the Old Testament, as it is expressed in the Ten Commandments, was the utterance of the same God who now speaks to us in the person of Jesus Christ. It reappears here in the Sermon on the Mount, but deepened and developed. We may say with truth that the Sermon on the Mount supersedes the Ten Commandments;

but it supersedes them by including them in a greater, deeper, and more positive whole.

This Sermon on the Mount, then, is the moral law of the new kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of the Messiah. We have been used to think of the Messiah, the Christ, as an isolated figure; but the Messiah whose advent is expected in the Old Testament is only the centre of the Messianic kingdom. Round about the king is the kingdom. The king implies the kingdom as the kingdom implies the king. Thus the way in which Christ announced His Messiahship was by the phrase “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And now—now that He has gathered round Him his first disciples—He takes them apart, and there on the mountain He announces to them the moral law of the new kingdom to which they are to belong. Thus it is a law not only for individual consciences, but for a society—a law which, recognized and accepted by the individual conscience, is to be applied in order to establish a new social order. It is the law of a kingdom, and a kingdom is a graduated society of human beings in common subordination to their king.

But observe, what we have here is law—law, not grace. In St. Paul's phrase, it is letter, not spirit. When St. Paul says that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,”³ he means this—that an external written commandment (that is, the letter) is capable of informing our consciences, of telling us what God's will is, of bowing us down to the dust with a sense of our inability to fulfil it; but it is not capable of going further. Thus it “killeth”; it makes us conscious of our sin, of our powerlessness, but it leaves it for something else to put

life into us to do the thing we ought. That life-giving power is the Spirit. Thus the law, by informing, kills us: the Spirit, by empowering, gives us life. Observe, it is a good, a necessary thing to be thus killed. The perilous state is “to be alive without the law,”⁴ that is, to have an unenlightened conscience and be living in a false peace. “If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness.” The first thing is to know what we ought to do; and the very fact that we feel our powerlessness to do it, makes us ready to offer the cry, the appeal for divine help.

Again I would ask you to notice a sentence of Augustine’s, which is full of meaning: “The law was given that men might seek grace; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.”⁵

Thus what we have here, in the Sermon on the Mount, is the climax of law, the completeness of the letter, the letter which killeth; and because it is so much more searching and thorough than the Ten Commandments, therefore does it kill all the more effectually. It makes us all the more conscious of sin; all the more full of the clamorous demand that God, who asks such things of us, shall give us also the power to fulfil them. But just as in many departments of human life “man’s necessity is God’s opportunity,” just as in some well-constructed drama the very culminating moment of difficulty suggests the immediate arrival of release, so it is here. The divine requirement is pressed home with unequalled force upon the conscience, but it is pressed home not in the form of mere laws of conduct, but (as we shall see) as a type of character,—not out of the thick darkness by an inaccessible God, but by the Divine Love

manifested in manhood and pledging His own faithfulness that he who hungers shall be satisfied and he who asks shall be heard. The hard demand of the letter is here in the closest possible connexion with the promise of the Spirit.



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You will often see it noticed that a resemblance to some of the precepts in the Sermon on the Mount is to be discovered, not only in the Old Testament, on which the whole is confessedly based, but in the sayings of Jewish fathers, or in heathen philosophers and writers, like Confucius among the Chinese, and Socrates or Plato among the Greeks; and this has at times distressed Christians jealous of the unique glory of their religion. Thus they have sometimes sought to account for the coincidences between “inspired” and “uninspired” authors, or between the divine and the human speakers, by supposing that even heathen writers borrowed from the Old Testament. They were forgetting surely a great truth, a truth of which in the early centuries the minds of men were full: that Christ is the Word; and it is through fellowship in the Word, who is also the Reason of God, that all men are rational. Christ, therefore, is the light which in conscience and reason lightens every man from end to end of history. Christ has been at work, moving by His Spirit in the consciousness of man, so that the whole moral development of mankind, the whole moral education of the human race, is of one piece from end to end. There moves in it the same Spirit, there expresses itself the same Word. So that, as we should

expect, there are fragments of the moral truth which in the Sermon on the Mount is completely delivered, fragments—greater or smaller, we need not now discuss—to be found among the Chinese, the Japanese, the Greeks, the Indians, because God left Himself nowhere without witness, the witness of His Word and Spirit in the hearts of men.⁶

But what we also find to be true is, that the moral law here given supersedes the moral law as it is found among heathen nations or even among the Jews, by including it in a greater whole. We may compare the morality of this Sermon with that expressed by other religious teachers in several ways.

1. The Sermon on the Mount compared with the summaries of moral duty belonging to other religions is comprehensive while they are fragmentary. No moral code can be produced which approaches this in completeness or depth. There is no other moral code belonging to an accepted and ancient religion for which any educated European could even claim finality and completeness. We know what John Stuart Mill, though not a believer, said about our Lord's moral teaching. He said "Not even now would it be easy, even for an unbeliever, to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete, than to endeavour so to live that Jesus Christ would approve our life." And Dr. Pusey commented on that by saying "If men would set this before themselves, there would be fewer unbelievers."⁷ There is then, I say, no other moral summary belonging to an ancient religion on behalf of which a man of modern enlightenment could, with a reasonable chance of being listened to, make the claim that

its principles can never be outgrown or found insufficient for any race of men. This is to others as the comprehensive to the fragmentary.

2. It is as the pure to the partially corrupt or mixed. Origen, in commenting on the words of the twelfth Psalm, "the words of the Lord are pure words, even as the silver which from the earth is tried and purified seven times in the fire," contrasts in this respect the sacred writings of the heathen with those of the Christians. "For though there are *noble* words among those who are not Christians, yet they are not *pure*, because they are mixed up with so much that is false." Take for an example the Symposium of Plato. You find in it much that is most noble about divine love; but you find this noble element mixed with dross, that is with acquiescence in some of the foulest practices of Greek life. The same is true of the sacred books of Buddhism. The Sermon on the Mount, then, is to other moral codes as the pure to the mixed or partially corrupt.

3. It is as teaching for grown men, who are also free, compared to teaching for children and slaves. It teaches, not by negative enactments or by literal enactments at all, but by principles, positive and weighty principles, embodied in proverbs which must be apprehended in their inner spirit and reapplied continually anew as circumstances change.

4. Lastly, it differs from other codes by the authoritative sanction which is given to the words by the person of the speaker. "He spoke as one having authority, and not as the scribes." All the weight of His mysterious person, all the majesty of His tone, His demeanour, His authority, go to give sanction to this law which He uttered: and not only to

give it sanction, in the sense of making men feel that they were dealing with one whose mysterious power it would be better not to offend: His person gives sanction to His words also by inspiring the profoundest confidence that He who makes the claim will also provide strength to correspond with it.



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I must say one word about a problem which could not by any means be satisfactorily dealt with in the space now at our disposal.

We know that the critics of the Gospel narratives are in our time occupied with nothing so much as with the difficult problem of the relation which the Gospels bear to one another. This problem presents itself in connexion with our present subject.

The Sermon on the Mount as given in St. Matthew corresponds, though with many differences, to what you find scattered over a great number of different chapters in St. Luke—vi. 20-49, xi. 1-4, 9-13, 33-36, xii. 22-31, 58-59, xiii. 24-27, xiv. 34-35, xvi. 13, 17-18.⁸ Now what are we to say about the relation of these two accounts of the same teaching? There is a good deal that is most characteristic in St. Matthew's sermon which has nothing corresponding to it in the other evangelist, e.g. the spiritual treatment of the Commandments and of the typical religious duties of prayer, almsgiving and fasting; but where they are on the same ground they are often so closely similar that it is plain they are drawing from the same source. Whether this source was

oral or written is a question we need not now discuss; but what are we to say of the different treatment of the same material?

It is throughout the method of St. Matthew to collect or group similar incidents or sayings. Thus he gives us a group of miracles (ch. viii-ix), a group of seven parables (ch. xiii), a long denunciation of the Pharisees which is represented in two different passages of St. Luke's Gospel (ch. xxiii), and a great group of discourses about "the end" of which the same thing may be said (ch. xxiv). Judging from his general method, then, we should conclude that in the Sermon on the Mount we have grouped together sayings which probably were uttered in fact, as St. Luke represents, on different occasions. For it is St. Luke's intention throughout to present events "in order," and the sayings of Christ each in its proper context.

But it must not be forgotten that a teacher who, like our Lord, teaches by way of "sentences" or proverbs, is sure to repeat the same truth in different forms and from different points of view. Those who have examined Francis Bacon's note-books and published works tell us how those weighty sentences of his were written down again and again and reappear continually in slightly different shapes. So we may suppose it probable that our Lord frequently repeated similar utterances.

Thus if St. Luke truly represents that our Lord on a certain occasion consoled His disciples by short and emphatic benedictions pronounced on the actual poverty in which they lived and the actual persecutions which they endured—"Blessed are ye poor, blessed are ye that hunger now,

blessed are ye that weep now, blessed are ye when men hate you”—it does not by any means follow that He did not on another occasion pronounce, as recorded by St. Matthew, similar benedictions, more numerous, more general, and more spiritual, beginning with one not now on certain actually poor men, but on the “poor in spirit” in general. Thus on another occasion⁹ He repeated the saying, “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God,” in the more spiritual form, “How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God.” Again, it does not follow that because He gave the pattern prayer in a shorter form, as recorded by St. Luke, He should not also have given it in the longer form, as recorded by St. Matthew.

The collection of our Lord’s discourses which characterizes the first Gospel is—there is every reason to believe—the work of the apostle St. Matthew. If so, we need to remember that it was the work not only of a first-rate witness, but also of one whose memory, naturally retentive, was quickened by a special gift of the divine Spirit bestowed on the apostles “to bring to their remembrance all that Christ had said unto them.”¹⁰

CHAPTER II

THE BEATITUDES IN GENERAL

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“And seeing the multitudes, he went up into the mountain: and when he had sat down, his disciples came unto 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 they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

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

Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

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 they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

OUR Lord went up into the mountain to get away from the multitudes. Thither He was followed by His chosen disciples, and it is to them that the Sermon is uttered. It was spoken

to the Church, not to the world; but as 'the multitudes' appear also to have listened¹¹ to it, we may say that it was spoken into the ear of the Church and overheard by the world.

1. It begins with the familiar "Beatitudes." They are a description of the character of the citizen of the new kingdom; that is, the character of the man who, enjoying the freedom of the kingdom of God, has entered into the inheritance of true blessedness. Observe, we have a description of a certain character, not of certain acts. Christ requires us not to do such and such things, but to be such and such people. And the character which we find here described is beyond all question nothing else than our Lord's own character put into words, the human character of our Lord corresponding always in flawless perfection with the teaching which He gave. Here are two reasons why our Lord's teaching is capable of universal and individual application: (1) because it is not made up of detailed commandments, but is the description of a character which, in its principles, can be apprehended and embodied in all possible circumstances: (2) because it is not only a description in words but a description set side by side with a living example.

And we cannot remind ourselves too early that this is the character by which we shall be finally judged. It is "by this man," as St. Paul says, "God will judge the world." And St. John says "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."¹² The estimate of our worth in God's sight depends simply on this, How like are we, or rather, how like are we

becoming to the character of Christ? But of this we shall have opportunity of speaking later on.

2. The beatitudes describe the blessed life—in other words, the citizen of the new kingdom is one who can say with Mary “all generations shall call me blessed.”

The idea of a blessed life had been common. We cannot begin to think about life without seeing that there are certain conditions which a man’s life must have if we are to be able to congratulate him on being alive. What sort of life is worth living? That is a question thinking men have asked from old days. Gautama and Confucius, Plato and Aristotle asked it. What sort of life possesses the characteristics which make it blessed—what sort of life can you congratulate a man, thoroughly and heartily, upon living?

Now observe a contrast in the answers given. To Gautama, the Buddha, the existence not merely of selfishness, but of the self, is a fundamental evil, delusion, and source of misery; and the true blessedness of painless peace is only to be attained by the emptying out of all desire, the extinction of all clinging to existence, and so at last by the extinction of life or personality itself. Thus though the Buddha’s moral teaching has many beautiful resemblances to that of our Lord, it has this fundamental difference, that Buddha regarded personal existence as a delusion and an evil to be got rid of, but Christ as a supreme truth and good to be at last realized in the vision of God and the fruition of eternal life. “I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly.”

Again, Aristotle asked the question, What is the blessed life? and he came to the conclusion that the life truly worth

living was possible only for very few men. It was impossible for slaves, because they were the mere tools of other men; or for the diseased, because they were necessarily miserable; or for paupers, because they had not a sufficiency of this world's goods; or for those dying young, because they had not time enough to realize true blessedness. Observe, I say, the contrast in all this. Christ lays the blessed life open to all. And why? Because he takes a man at once up to God: He centres his life on God: He puts him in full view of God as the goal of life: He bases life on God as a foundation. Again, as a consequence of this, He calculates life—as a life lived in God must be calculated—on the scale of eternity. Grant these two things—that each human life may be based on God and calculated on the scale of eternity—and you get rid of all the limitations which made Aristotle declare that neither the slave, nor the diseased, nor the poor, nor those who die young, can live the blessed life. Thus our Lord has described the character of true blessedness as belonging to man as man, to all men if they will have it, simply by the recognition of their true relation to God. From that point of view all accidents of life fade away into insignificance. They give, indeed, its special character to each life, and the conditions of its probation, but they cannot touch its true blessedness.

We can go one step farther. If you take the latter parts of the beatitudes, you will find in them a more detailed account of the blessed life. The end of each beatitude tells us what our Lord meant by blessedness. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven; they shall be comforted; they shall inherit the earth; they shall be filled; they shall obtain

mercy; they shall see God; they shall be called sons of God.” All the last six of these seven expressions may be said simply to expand the first. They amplify the idea of membership in the kingdom of heaven. Membership in the kingdom is a life of perfect relationship with man and nature based on perfect fellowship with God. That is true blessedness, and that is open to all. Therein is consolation after all troubles; there is the freedom to move about with a sense of heirship in God’s world, as in our legitimate heritage and with no fear of being turned out; there is the satisfaction of all legitimate aspiration; there is gracious acceptance at all hands; there is the vision of all truth and beauty and goodness, in God; there is final and full recognition. That is true blessedness. That is the life which our Lord promises to every one who will simply put himself in the right relation to God.

3. There is only one more point that we need notice with regard to these beatitudes as a whole, and it concerns their order. Our Lord begins with strong paradoxes: Blessed are the poor—the mourners—the meek. That is to say in other words, He first describes the true character by its contrast to the character of the world. We frequently have occasion to use the expression “the world.” Let me, therefore, once for all explain what I understand by it when it is used in a bad sense. It means, of course, not God’s creation as such, which was pronounced very good. When “the world” is spoken of in a bad sense—the worldly world—you may define it in this way: it is human society organizing itself apart from God. That is what in the Bible is meant by “the world.” Well, the world notoriously clutches at all the gold it

can get. The world avoids all the pain and suffering it possibly can, avoids it with a calculating selfishness. The world shrinks from nothing so much as from humiliation, and says "Assert yourself and your rights as much as you can." Our Lord then describes the true blessedness, first of all negatively in the first three beatitudes by strong and marked contrasts to the character of the world: blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the mourners. Then He goes on to give its positive characteristics: its strong spiritual appetite for righteousness; its active and vigorous compassionateness; its single-mindedness or purity of heart; the deliberate aim it has to promote the kingdom of peace. Then, in the last beatitude, He answers the question how is such a character likely to find itself in such a world; and answers that question in terms very like those employed by a Jewish writer, possibly not very long before our Lord's time, the writer of the Book of Wisdom, who describes the attitude of the world towards the righteous thus:

"But let us lie in wait for the righteous man,
Because he is of disservice to us
And is contrary to our works,
And upbraideth us with sins against the law,
And layeth to our charge sins against our discipline.
He professeth to have knowledge of God,
And nameth himself servant of the Lord.
He became to us a reproof of our thoughts.
He is grievous unto us even to behold,
Because his life is unlike other men's,
And his paths are of strange fashion.

We were accounted of him as base metal,
And he abstaineth from our ways as from uncleannesses.
The latter end of the righteous he calleth happy;
And he vaunteth that God is his father.
Let us see if his words be true,
And let us try what shall befall in the ending of his life.
For if the righteous man is God's son, he will uphold him,
And he will deliver him out of the hand of his adversaries.
With outrage and torture let us put him to the test,
That we may learn his gentleness,
And may prove his patience under wrong.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
For he shall be visited according to his words.
Thus reasoned they, and they were led astray;
For their wickedness blinded them,
And they knew not the mysteries of God,
Neither hoped they for wages of holiness,
Nor did they judge that there is a prize for blameless
souls."13

"Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

CHAPTER III

THE BEATITUDES IN DETAIL

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

THE Old Testament is full of descriptions of the spirit of the world, the spirit of selfish wealth with its attendant cruelty: and by contrast to this are descriptions of the oppressed poor who are the friends of God. Our Lord took up all this language upon His own lips when, as St. Luke records, He turned to His disciples and said “Blessed are ye poor ... woe unto you that are rich.” But all the actually poor are not the disciples of Christ. It is possible to combine the selfishness and grasping avarice of “the rich” with the condition of poverty. So our Lord has, as recorded by St. Matthew, gone beneath the surface and based His kingdom, the character of His citizens, not upon actual poverty, but upon detachment. The world says “Get all you can, and keep it.” Christ says, Blessed are those who at least in heart and will have nothing.

There is one verse in the Old Testament which describes this poverty of spirit. It is the utterance of [Job:14](#) “The Lord

gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” There is pure, perfect detachment. Job took and used aright what God gave him, adoring the sovereignty of God. The sovereign took away what He had given; Job gave it up freely. Being detached—that is poverty of spirit; at the least, “having food and covering, let us be therewith content.”¹⁵

Our Lord says then, Blessed are those who are thus detached; and of course we look to Him for illustration, for these beatitudes express His own character. He was detached. The Incarnation was a self-emptying. He clung not to all the glories of heaven, but “emptied Himself” and “beggared Himself,” as St. Paul says.¹⁶ Then when He had been born a man, He set the example of clinging to nothing external. He abandoned ease, popularity, the favour of the great, even the sympathy of His friends, even, last and greatest of all, on the cross, the consolation of the divine presence. Each privilege in turn was abandoned without a murmur, not, speaking generally, on the ascetic principle, but because moral obedience to God in fulfilment of His mission required it. He became utterly naked, poorer than the poorest; therefore in a supreme sense “His was the kingdom of heaven.” He stood empty, persecuted, before Pilate, and said “Thou sayest that I am a king”; and the moral conscience of the world has witnessed that He spoke truth. So we, like Him, are to be ready to surrender, ready to give up; and in proportion to this detachment, in proportion as we do really in will adore the sovereignty of God, and are ready to receive and to give up according to His will, in that proportion are all the hindrances removed by which the