



STUDIES IN THE
SERMON
ON THE MOUNT

GOD'S CHARACTER AND
THE BELIEVER'S CONDUCT

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AUTHOR OF MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST

Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

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ONE

HIS TEACHING AND
OUR TRAINING

MATTHEW 5:1-20



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In order to understand the Sermon on the Mount, it is necessary to have the mind of its preacher, and this knowledge can be gained by anyone who will receive the Holy Spirit (see Luke 11:13; John 20:22; Acts 19:2). The Holy Spirit alone can expound the teachings of Jesus Christ. The one abiding method of interpretation of the teachings of Jesus is the Spirit of Jesus in the heart of the believer applying His principles to the particular circumstances in which he or she is placed. “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” says Paul, “that you may prove”—make out—“what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

Beware of placing our Lord as Teacher first instead of Savior. That tendency is prevalent today, and it is a dangerous tendency. We must know Him first as Savior before His teaching can have any meaning for us or before it can have any meaning other than that of an ideal that leads to despair. Fancy coming to men and women with defective lives and defiled hearts and wrong main-springs, and telling them to be pure in heart! What is the use of giving us an ideal we cannot possibly attain? We are happier without it. If Jesus is a teacher only, then all He can do is to tantalize us by erecting a standard we cannot come anywhere near. But if by being born again from above we know Him first as Savior, we know that He did not come to teach us only: *He came to make us what He teaches we should be*. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is having His way with us.

STUDIES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount produces despair in the heart of the natural man, and that is the very thing Jesus means it to do, because as soon as we reach the point of despair we are willing to come as paupers to Jesus Christ and receive from Him. "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—that is the first principle of the kingdom. As long as we have a conceited, self-righteous idea that we can do the thing if God will help us, God has to allow us to go on until we break the neck of our ignorance over some obstacle, then we will be willing to come and receive from Him. The bedrock of Jesus Christ's kingdom is poverty, not possession; not decisions for Jesus Christ, but a sense of absolute futility, "I cannot begin to do it." Then, says Jesus, "Blessed are you." That is the entrance, and it takes us a long while to believe we are poor. The knowledge of our own poverty brings us to the moral frontier where Jesus Christ works.

Every mind has two compartments—conscious and subconscious. We say that the things we hear and read slip away from memory; they do not really, they pass into the subconscious mind. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring back into the conscious mind the things that are stored in the subconscious. In studying the Bible, never think that because you do not understand it, therefore it is of no use. A truth may be of no use to you just now, but when the circumstances arise in which that truth is needed, the Holy Spirit will bring it back to your remembrance. This accounts for the curious emergence of the statements of Jesus; we say, "I wonder where that word came from?" Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would "bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). The point is, will I obey Him when He does bring it to my remembrance? If I discuss the matter with someone else the probability is that I will not obey. "I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1:16). Always trust the originality of the Holy Spirit when He brings a word to your remembrance.

Bear in mind the twofold aspect of the mind; there is nothing supernatural or uncanny about it, it is simply the knowledge of how

God has made us. It is foolish therefore to estimate only by what you consciously understand at the time. There may be much of which you do not begin to grasp the meaning, but as you go on storing your mind with Bible truth, the Holy Spirit will bring back to your conscious mind the word you need and will apply it to you in your particular circumstances. These three things always work together—moral intelligence, the spontaneous originality of the Holy Spirit, and the setting of a life lived in communion with God.

DIVINE DISPROPORTION 5:1-12

Our Lord began His discourse by saying, “Blessed are . . . ,” and His hearers must have been staggered by what followed. According to Jesus Christ they were to be blessed in each condition that from earliest childhood they had been taught to regard as a curse. Our Lord was speaking to Jews, and they believed that the sign of the blessing of God was material prosperity in every shape and form, and yet Jesus said, Blessed are you for exactly the opposite: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn.”

(a) The Mines of God (vv. 1-10; compare Luke 6:20-26)

The first time we read the Beatitudes they appear to be simple and beautiful and unstartling statements, and they go unobserved into the subconscious mind. We are so used to the sayings of Jesus that they slip over us unheeded; they sound sweet and pious and wonderfully simple, but they are in reality like spiritual torpedoes that burst and explode in the subconscious mind, and when the Holy Spirit brings them back to our conscious minds we realize what startling statements they are. For instance, the Beatitudes seem merely mild and beautiful precepts for unworldly people and of very little use for the stern world in which we live. We soon find, however, that they contain the dynamite of the Holy Spirit; they explode like spiritual mines, when the circumstances of our lives

require them to do so, and rip and tear and revolutionize all our conceptions.

The test of discipleship is obedience to the light when these truths are brought to the conscious mind. We do not hunt through the Bible for some precept to obey—Jesus Christ's teaching never leads to making ourselves moral prigs—but we live so in touch with God that the Holy Spirit can continually bring some word of His and apply it to the circumstances we are in. We are not brought to the test until the Holy Spirit brings the word back.

Neither is it a question of applying the Beatitudes literally, but of allowing the life of God to invade us by regeneration, and of then soaking our minds in the teaching of Jesus Christ, which slips down into the subconscious mind. By and by a set of circumstances will arise when one of Jesus Christ's statements emerges, and instantly we have to decide whether we will accept the tremendous spiritual revolution that will be produced if we do obey this precept of His. If we do obey it, our actual lives will become different, and we shall find we have the power to obey if we will. That is the way the Holy Spirit works in the heart of a disciple. The teaching of Jesus Christ comes with astonishing discomfort to begin with, because it is out of all proportion to our natural way of looking at things, but Jesus puts in a new sense of proportion, and slowly we form our way of walking and our conversation on the line of His precepts. Remember that our Lord's teaching applies only to those who are His disciples.

(b) The Motive of Godliness vv. 11–12

The motive at the back of the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount is love of God. Read the Beatitudes with your mind fixed on God, and you will realize their neglected side. Their meaning in relationship to people is so obvious that it scarcely needs stating, but the Godward aspect is not so obvious. "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—toward God. Am I a pauper toward God? Do I

know I cannot prevail in prayer; I cannot blot out the sins of the past; I cannot alter my disposition; I cannot lift myself nearer to God? Then I am in the very place where I am able to receive the Holy Spirit. No one can receive the Holy Spirit who is not convinced he or she is a pauper spiritually. “Blessed are the meek”—toward God’s dispensations. “Blessed are the merciful”—to God’s reputation. Do I awaken sympathy for myself when I am in trouble? Then I am slandering God because the reflex thought in people’s minds is, *How hard God is with that individual!* It is easy to slander God’s character because He never attempts to vindicate Himself. “Blessed are the pure in heart”—that is obviously Godward. “Blessed are the peacemakers”—between God and humanity, the note that was struck at the birth of Jesus. Is it possible to carry out the Beatitudes? Never! Unless God can do what Jesus Christ says He can, unless He can give us the Holy Spirit who will remake us and bear us into a new realm. The essential element in the life of a saint is simplicity, and Jesus Christ makes the motive of godliness gloriously simple: Be carefully careless about everything except your relationship to Me. The motive of a disciple is to be well pleasing to God. The true blessedness of the saint is in determinedly making and keeping God first. Herein lies the disproportion between Jesus Christ’s principles and all other moral teaching: Jesus bases everything on God-realization, while other teachers base everything on self-realization.

There is a difference between devotion to principles and devotion to a person. Jesus Christ never proclaimed a cause; He proclaimed personal devotion to Himself—“for My sake.” Discipleship is based not on devotion to abstract ideals, but on devotion to a person, the Lord Jesus Christ; consequently the whole of the Christian life is stamped by originality. Whenever the Holy Spirit sees a chance to glorify Jesus Christ, He will take your whole personality and simply make it blaze and glow with personal passionate devotion to the Lord Jesus. You are no longer devoted to a cause, nor

the devotee of a principle; you are the devoted love slave of the Lord Jesus. No one on earth has that love unless the Holy Spirit has imparted it to him or to her. People may admire Him and respect Him and reverence Him, but no one can love God until the Holy Spirit has poured out that love in his or her heart (see Romans 5:5). The only lover of the Lord Jesus Christ is the Holy Spirit.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.” Jesus Christ puts all the blessedness of high virtue and rare felicity on the ground of—“for My sake.” It is not suffering for conscience’ sake or for convictions’ sake or because of the ordinary troubles of life, but something other than all that—“for My sake.”

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake.” Jesus did not say rejoice when people separate you from their company because of your own crotchety notions—but when they revile you “for My sake.” When you begin to deport yourself amongst others as a saint, they will leave you absolutely alone, you will be reviled and persecuted. No one can stand that unless you are in love with Jesus Christ; you cannot do it for a conviction or a creed, but you can do it for a Being whom you love. Devotion to a person is the only thing that tells; devotion to death to a person, not devotion to a creed or a doctrine.

*Who that one moment has the least descried Him,
Dimly and faintly, hidden and afar,
Doth not despise all excellence beside Him,
Pleasures and powers that are not and that are:—*

*Ay, amid all men bear himself thereafter
Smit with a solemn and a sweet surprise,
Dumb to their scorn and turning on their laughter
Only the dominance of earnest eyes.*

DIVINE DISADVANTAGE vv. 13–16

The disadvantage of a saint in the present order of things is that his or her confession of Jesus Christ is not to be in secret, but glaringly public. It would doubtless be to our advantage from the standpoint of self-realization to keep quiet, and nowadays the tendency to say, “Be a Christian, live a holy life, but don’t talk about it,” is growing stronger. Our Lord uses in illustration the most conspicuous things—salt, light, and a city set on a hill—and He says, Be like that in your home, in your business, in your church; be conspicuously a Christian for ridicule or respect according to the mood of the people you are with. In Matthew 10:26–28, our Lord taught the need to be conspicuous proclaimers of the truth and not to cover it up for fear of wolfish people.

(a) *Concentrated Service* v. 13

Not *consecrated* service, but *concentrated*. Consecration would soon be changed into sanctification if we would only concentrate on what God wants. Concentration means pinning down the four corners of the mind until it is settled on what God wants. The literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is child’s play; the interpretation by the Holy Spirit is the stern work of a saint, and it requires spiritual concentration.

“You are the salt of the earth.” Some modern teachers seem to think our Lord said, You are the sugar of the earth, meaning that gentleness and winsomeness without curativeness is the ideal of the Christian. Our Lord’s illustration of a Christian is salt, and salt is the most concentrated thing known. Salt preserves wholesomeness and prevents decay. It is a disadvantage to be salt. Think of the action of salt on a wound, and you will realize this. If you get salt into a wound, it hurts, and when God’s children are amongst those who are “raw” towards God, their presence hurts. The person who is wrong with God is like an open wound, and when salt gets in it

causes annoyance and distress and the person is spiteful and bitter. The disciples of Jesus in the present dispensation preserve society from corruption; the salt causes excessive irritation, which spells persecution for the saint.

How are we to maintain the healthy, salty tang of saintliness? By remaining rightly related to God through Jesus Christ. In the present dispensation, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation. . . . For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20). People are called on to live out His teaching in an age that will not recognize Him, and that spells limitation and very often persecution. This is the day of the humiliation of the saints; in the next dispensation will be the glorification of the saints, and the kingdom of God will be outside as well as inside people.

(b) Conspicuous Setting vv. 14-16

The illustrations our Lord uses are all conspicuous—salt, light, and a city set on a hill. There is no possibility of mistaking them. Salt, to preserve from corruption, has to be placed in the midst, and before it can do its work it causes excessive irritation, which spells persecution. Light attracts bats and night moths and points out the way for burglars as well as honest people. Jesus would have us remember that society will certainly defraud us. A city is a gathering place for all the human driftwood that will not work for its own living, and a Christian will have any number of parasites and ungrateful hangers-on. All these considerations form a powerful temptation to make us pretend we are not salt, to make us put our light under a bushel and cover our city with a fog, but Jesus will have nothing in the nature of covert discipleship.

"You are the light of the world." Light cannot be soiled; you may try to grasp a beam of light with the sootiest hand, but you leave no mark on the light. A sunbeam may shine into the filthiest hovel in the slums of a city, but it cannot be soiled. A merely moral individual, or an innocent one, may be soiled in spite of his or her

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integrity; the person who is made pure by the Holy Spirit cannot be soiled but is as light. Thank God for the men and women who are spending their lives in the slums of the earth, not as social reformers to lift their brothers and sisters to cleaner sties, but as the light of God, revealing a way back to God. God keeps them as the light, unsullied. If you have been covering your light, uncover it! Walk as children of light. The light always reveals and guides; people dislike it and prefer darkness when their deeds are evil (John 3:19–20).

Are we the salt of the earth? Are we the light of the world? Are we allowing God to exhibit in our lives the truth of these startling statements of Jesus Christ?

DIVINE DECLARATION vv. 17–20

(a) His Mission vv. 17–19

“I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” An amazing word! Our shoes ought to be off our feet and every commonsense mood stripped from our minds when we hear Jesus Christ speak. In Him we deal with God as human, the God-Man, the representative of the whole human race in one person. The men of His day traced their religious pedigree back to the constitution of God, and this young Nazarene carpenter says, I am the constitution of God; consequently to them He was a blasphemer.

Our Lord places Himself as the exact meaning and fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies: His mission, He says, is to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and He further says that anyone who breaks the old laws because they belong to a former dispensation and teaches others to break them shall suffer severe impoverishment. If the old commandments were difficult, our Lord's principles are unfathomably more difficult. Our Lord goes behind the old law to the disposition. Everything He teaches is impossible unless He can put into us His Spirit and remake us from within. The Sermon on the Mount is quite

unlike the Ten Commandments in the sense of its being absolutely unworkable unless Jesus Christ can remake us.

There are teachers who argue that the Sermon on the Mount supersedes the Ten Commandments, and that, because “we are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:15), it does not matter whether we honor our fathers and mothers, whether we covet, and so forth. Beware of statements like this: There is no need nowadays to observe giving the tenth either of money or of time; we are in a new dispensation and everything belongs to God. That, in practical application, is sentimental dust-throwing. The giving of the tenth is not a sign that all belongs to God, but a sign that the tenth belongs to God and the rest is ours, and we are held responsible for what we do with it. To be under grace does not mean that we can do as we like. It is surprising how easily we can juggle ourselves out of Jesus Christ’s principles by one or two pious sayings repeated sufficiently often. The only safeguard is to keep personally related to God. The secret of all spiritual understanding is to walk in the light—not the light of our convictions, or of our theories, but the light of God (1 John 1:7).

(b) His Message v. 20

“Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Think of the most upright individual you know, the most moral, sterling, religious individual (for example, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, so was Saul of Tarsus—“blameless” according to the law) who has never received the Holy Spirit; Jesus says you must exceed that person in righteousness. You have to be not only as moral as the most moral person you know, but infinitely more—to be so right in your actions, so pure in your motives, that God Almighty can see nothing to blame in you.

Is it too strong to call this a spiritual torpedo? These statements of Jesus are the most revolutionary statements human ears ever lis-

tened to, and it needs the Holy Spirit to interpret them to us; the shallow admiration for Jesus Christ as a teacher that is taught today is of no use.

Who is going to climb that “hill of the Lord”? To stand before God and say, “My hands are clean, my heart is pure”—who can do it? Who can stand in the eternal light of God and have nothing for God to blame in him or in her?—only the Son of God; if the Son of God is formed in us by regeneration and sanctification, He will exhibit Himself through our mortal flesh. That is the ideal of Christianity—“that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11).

Jesus says our disposition must be right to its depths, not only our conscious motives but our unconscious motives. Now we are beyond our depth. Can God make me pure in heart? Blessed be the name of God, He can! Can He alter my disposition so that when circumstances reveal me to myself, I am amazed? He can. Can He impart His nature to me until it is identically the same as His own? He can. That, and nothing less, is the meaning of His cross and resurrection.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds. . . .” The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was right, not wrong; that they did other than righteousness is obvious, but Jesus is speaking here of their righteousness, which His disciples are to exceed. What exceeds right doing if it be not right being? Right being without right doing is possible if we refuse to enter into relationship with God, but that cannot exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus Christ’s message here is that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in doing—they were nothing in being—or we shall never enter into the kingdom of heaven. The monks in the Middle Ages refused to take the responsibilities of life, and they shut themselves away from the world; all they wanted was to be and not to do. People today want to do the same thing and they cut themselves off from this and that relationship.

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That does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. If our Lord had meant His disciples to exceed in being only, He would not have used the word “exceed”; He would have said, “Unless your righteousness be otherwise than. . . .” We cannot exceed the righteousness of the most moral person we know on the line of what he or she does, but only on the line of what he or she is.

The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount must produce despair in the natural man; if it does not, it is because he has paid no attention to it. Pay attention to Jesus Christ’s teaching and you will soon say, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Blessed are the pure in heart. If Jesus Christ means what He says, where are we in regard to it? “Come to Me,” says Jesus.