

Contents

On the Mountainside ~ 2

The Beatitudes ~ 5

The Spirituality of the Law ~ 22

The True Motive in Service ~ 40

The Lord's Prayer ~ 52

Not Judging, but Doing ~ 63

On the Mountainside

More than fourteen centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the children of Israel gathered in the fair vale of Shechem, and from the mountains on either side the voices of the priests were heard proclaiming the blessings and the curses—“the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God”; “the curse, if you do not obey” (Deuteronomy 11:27, 28). And thus the mountain from which the words of benediction were spoken came to be known as the mount of blessing.

But no longer is Gerizim known as the mount of the Beatitudes; it is that unnamed mountain beside the Lake of Gennesaret where Jesus spoke the words of blessing to His disciples and the multitude.

Let us in imagination go back to that scene, and, as we sit with the disciples on the mountainside, enter into the thoughts and feelings that filled their hearts. Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.

When the Savior began His ministry, the popular conception of the Messiah and His work was such as wholly unfitted the people to receive Him. The Jews looked for the coming One, not as a Savior from sin, but as a great prince who should bring all nations under the supremacy of the Lion of the tribe of Judah. In vain had John the Baptist called them to repentance.

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In vain had he, beside the Jordan, pointed to Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). God was seeking to direct their minds to Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering Savior, but they would not hear.

Had the teachers and leaders in Israel yielded to His transforming grace, Jesus would have made them His ambassadors among the people. In Judea first the coming of the kingdom had been proclaimed, and the call to repentance had been given. In the act of driving out the desecrators from the Temple at Jerusalem, Jesus had announced Himself as the Messiah—the one who should cleanse the soul from the defilement of sin and make His people a holy temple for the Lord. But the Jewish leaders would not humble themselves to receive the lowly Teacher from Nazareth. Then it was that, leaving Judea, He entered upon His ministry in Galilee.

His work there had continued some months before the Sermon on the Mount was given. The message He had proclaimed throughout the land, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17), had arrested the attention of all classes, and had still further fanned the flame of their ambitious hopes. The fame of the new Teacher had spread beyond the limits of Palestine. Notwithstanding the attitude of the religious leaders, the feeling was widespread that this might be the hoped-for Deliverer. Great multitudes thronged the steps of Jesus, and the popular enthusiasm ran high.

The time had come for the disciples who had been most closely associated with Christ to unite more directly in His work, that these vast throngs might not be left uncared-for, as sheep without a shepherd. Some of these disciples had joined themselves to Him at the beginning of His ministry, and nearly all the twelve had been associated together as members of the family of Jesus. Yet they also, misled by the teaching of the rabbis, shared the popular expectation of an earthly kingdom. Already they had been perplexed and troubled that He made no effort to strengthen His cause by securing the support of the priests and rabbis, that He did nothing to establish His authority as an earthly king.

A great work was yet to be accomplished for these disciples before they would be prepared for the sacred trust that would be theirs when Jesus should ascend to heaven. Yet they had responded to the love of Christ, and, though they were slow to believe, Jesus saw in them those whom He could train and discipline for His great work. And now that they had been long enough with Him to establish, in a measure, their faith in the divine char-

acter of His mission, and the people also had received evidence of His power which they could not question, the way was prepared for a clear statement of the principles of His kingdom that would help them to comprehend its true nature.

Alone upon a mountain near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had spent all night in prayer for these chosen ones. At the dawn He called them to Him, and, with words of prayer and instruction, laid His hands upon their heads in benediction, setting them apart to the gospel work. Then He went with them to the seaside, where in the early morning a great multitude had already begun to assemble.

Besides the usual crowd from the Galilean towns, there were great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Perea, and the half-heathen population of Decapolis. Others came from Idumea, away to the south of Judea, and from Tyre and Sidon, the Phoenician cities on the shore of the Mediterranean. “When they heard how many things [Jesus] was doing” (Mark 3:8) they “came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases. . . . Power went out from Him and healed them all” (Luke 6:17-19).

Then, as the narrow beach did not afford even standing room within reach of His voice for all who desired to hear Him, Jesus led the way back to the mountainside. Reaching a level space that afforded a pleasant gathering place for the vast assembly, He seated Himself upon the grass, and His disciples and the multitude followed His example.

As they sat upon the green hillside, awaiting the words of the divine Teacher, their hearts were filled with thoughts of future glory. There were scribes and Pharisees who looked forward to the day when they should have dominion over the hated Romans and possess the riches and splendor of the world’s great empire. The poor peasants and fishermen hoped to hear the assurance that their wretched hovels, the scanty food, the life of toil, and the fear of want were to be exchanged for mansions of plenty and days of ease. In place of the one coarse garment which was their covering by day and their blanket at night, they hoped that Christ would give them the rich and costly robes of their conquerors.

All hearts thrilled with the proud hope that Israel was soon to be honored before the nations as the chosen of the Lord, and Jerusalem exalted as the head of a universal kingdom.

The Beatitudes

“Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’” Matthew 5:2, 3.

As something strange and new, these words fall upon the ears of the wondering multitude. Such teaching is contrary to all they have ever heard from priest or rabbi. They see in it nothing to flatter their pride or to feed their ambitious hopes. But there is about this new Teacher a power that holds them spellbound. All feel instinctively that here is One who reads the secrets of the soul, yet who comes near to them with tender compassion. Their hearts open to Him. As they listen, the Holy Spirit unfolds to them something of the meaning of that lesson which humanity in all ages so needs to learn.

In the days of Christ the religious leaders of the people felt that they were rich in spiritual treasure. The prayer of the Pharisee, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men” (Luke 18:11), expressed the feeling of his class and, to a great degree, of the whole nation. But in the throng that surrounded Jesus there were some who had a sense of their spiritual poverty. They longed for “the grace of God that brings salvation” (Titus 2:11). In these souls, Christ’s words of greeting awakened hope.

Jesus had presented the cup of blessing to those who felt that they were “rich” and “wealthy” (Revelation 3:17), and had need of nothing, and they had turned with scorn from the gracious gift. Those who feel whole, who think that they are reasonably good and are content with their condition, do not seek to become partakers of the grace and righteousness of Christ. Pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ and the infinite blessings He came to give. Those who know that they cannot possibly save themselves, or of themselves do any righteous action, are the ones who appreciate the help that Christ can bestow. They are the poor in spirit, whom He declares to be blessed.

Whom Christ pardons, He first makes penitent, and it is the office of the Holy Spirit to convince of sin. Those whose hearts have been moved

by the convicting Spirit of God see that there is nothing good in themselves. They see that all they have ever done is mingled with self and sin. There is forgiveness for the penitent, because Christ is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

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grace, His righteousness. His subjects are the poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted for righteousness’ sake. The kingdom of heaven is theirs. Though not yet fully accomplished, the work is begun in them which will make them “to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Colossians 1:12).

All who have a sense of their deep soul poverty, who feel that they have nothing good in themselves, may find righteousness and strength by looking to Jesus. We are not worthy of God’s love, but Christ, our surety, is abundantly able to save all who come to Him. Whatever may have been your past experience, however discouraging your present circumstances, if you will come to Jesus just as you are, weak, helpless, and despairing, our compassionate Savior will meet you a great way off and will throw about you His arms of love and His robe of righteousness. He presents us to the Father clothed in the white raiment of His own character.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4.

The mourning here brought to view is true heart sorrow for sin. Jesus says, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32). And as people are drawn to behold Jesus uplifted on the cross, they discern the sinfulness of humanity. They see that, while they have been loved with unspeakable tenderness, their lives have been a continual scene of ingratitude and rebellion. They have forsaken their best Friend and abused heaven’s most precious gift. They are separated

from God by a gulf of sin that is broad and black and deep, and they mourn in brokenness of heart.

Such mourning will be comforted. God reveals to us our guilt that we may flee to Christ, and through Him be set free from the bondage of sin. In true contrition we may come to the foot of the cross, and there leave our burdens.

The Savior’s words have a message of comfort to those also who are suffering affliction or bereavement. God “does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3:33). When He permits trials and afflictions, it is “that we may be partakers of His holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). If received in faith, the cruel blow that blights the joys of earth will be the means of turning our eyes to heaven.

The trials of life are God’s workers, to remove the impurities and roughness from our character. Their hewing, squaring, and chiseling, their burnishing and polishing, is a painful process. But the stone is brought forth prepared to fill its place in the heavenly temple. Upon no useless material does the Master bestow such careful, thorough work. Only His precious stones are polished after the similitude of a palace.

When tribulation comes upon us, how many of us are like Jacob! We think it the hand of an enemy. In the darkness we wrestle blindly until our strength is spent, and we find no comfort or deliverance. To Jacob the divine touch at break of day revealed the One with whom he had been contending—the Angel of the covenant. Weeping and helpless, he fell upon the breast of Infinite Love, to receive the blessing for which his soul longed. We also need to learn that trials mean benefit. To every stricken one, Jesus comes with the ministry of healing. The life of bereavement, pain, and suffering may be brightened by precious revealings of His presence.

God would not have us remain pressed down by speechless sorrow, with sore and breaking hearts. He would have us look up and behold His dear face of love. The blessed Savior stands by many whose eyes are so blinded by tears that they do not discern Him. He longs to clasp our hands, to have us look to Him in simple faith, permitting Him to guide us. His heart is open to our griefs, our sorrows, and our trials.

Blessed are they also who weep with Jesus in sympathy with the