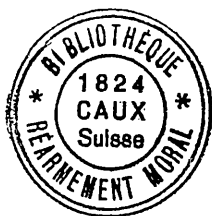


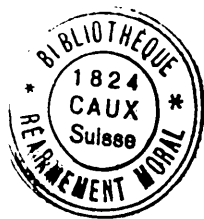
THE HEART OF IT ALL



# THE HEART OF IT ALL

A study of  
the Sermon on the Mount

PAUL PETROCOKINO



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Quotations from the New Testament are taken principally from the Authorised, Revised Standard, Moffat and Good News versions, whichever seemed to bring out the sense most clearly — P.P.

MANY MODERN SCHOLARS have come to believe that the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of St Matthew's Gospel, is not so much a report of one isolated speech made by Jesus, but rather the heart and centre of his teaching through the years of his public ministry.

Professor William Barclay wrote: "The Sermon on the Mount is the summary and the essence and the core of all that Jesus continuously and habitually taught.... It is the opening of Jesus' whole mind to his disciples."\*

It is the kernel of the truth he wanted them to live by and then to give to the world.

This being so, nothing more important than these chapters has ever been written. To the Christian, Jesus is God incarnate, and the mind of Jesus is the mind of God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. What he says is the ultimate truth. The world of Islam reveres Jesus as a supremely important prophet of God, miraculously born and without fault. There are humanists who stress the supreme value and potentiality of man, and "The Son of Man" was an expression Jesus constantly used to describe himself. There are revolutionaries, bent on changing the world and replacing injustice with justice; and there are conservationists, concerned not only with preventing

\* *The Daily Study Bible, Gospel of St Matthew*, volume 1, Saint Andrew Press.

further mutilation and destruction of the environment but also with preserving the moral and cultural basis of civilisation from decay and demolition. There are the ordinary men and women who want to know how to live, those in quest of a life of security and happiness, who want a firm ground for their feet to walk on and a yardstick to judge by; and many who are seeking how best to be of service to the world they live in.

For all of these, nothing more illuminating exists than the Sermon on the Mount.

Admittedly, some people call it idealistic and impractical. There are those who think they know what it contains, and believe it simply to mean, "Do not do to other people what you would not like them to do to you." If the Sermon on the Mount were to mean nothing more than that, that alone, if seriously applied by men and by nations, would bring about a greater change for the better than the application of all the writings of the materialist, racialist and anti-racialist revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The object of this book is to try and see what the Sermon on the Mount actually says and means, and to go into what might be involved by making its teaching the basis of our whole life; what might be involved by making our primary aim that this teaching becomes the philosophy by which the world lives.

## The Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount starts with eight Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 3-10). The Greek word translated "blessed" or "happy" in different translations of the Bible is *Makarios* (in Latin *Beatus*), which has become a household word by being chosen as his official name by the Archbishop of Cyprus, the first President of the newly independent island.

*Makarios* is a far stronger word than "happy". Though the trouble with "blessed" is that the average person is apt to write it off as other-worldly and therefore incomprehensible, it is none the less better to translate it "blessed". It means "supremely and fundamentally joyous because receiving the favour of the gods" (in the pagan classical world or, in the Jewish and Christian world, "of God").

Jesus starts his teaching by naming eight qualities which he wants to see in his men and women, and through them the distinctive qualities of a new order of human beings—the foundation of a new society. The first is:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

The literal Greek translation of "the poor in spirit" is "the spiritually destitute". This means realising that, as far as our own resources of character are concerned, we are totally inadequate for our responsibilities. Without the resources which God will most gladly give whenever we turn to him, none of us can really be a good parent or partner in marriage, a truly useful citizen, a wise politician or effective in helping other people. We cannot in our own



strength gain victory over a temptation and conquer evil. So the first need, no matter what our background or training, is to know and repeatedly bring to mind that we are inadequate and spiritually poverty-stricken.

It is said of Socrates that when the oracle told him he was the wisest of all the philosophers he was in a dilemma. If he doubted the oracle he would be guilty of irreverence; if he believed it, of conceit. The solution seemed to him to be that whilst other philosophers thought they knew when they did not know, Socrates at least knew he did not know and that was why he was wiser than they.

For those who do feel this sense of need, there is great hope and no occasion for despair. Cardinal Newman was feeling like this when, in Malta, he wrote the famous poem, "Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom". He points to the answer in the lines, "I do not ask to see the distant scene. One step enough for me." And the next step God will assuredly show.

With every beatitude, there is a corresponding statement of assurance or a promise; in this case *for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*. The Kingdom of Heaven is an immense concept and one of the central themes of Jesus' teaching. It might in modern terms be called the heart of his ideology. It is the highest conceivable good. It belongs both to the present and the future: to this world today; to a greater degree, if we fight for it, to this world tomorrow; and in totality it will be realised in the world to come—the latter being an aspect of life to which many people today, partly through materialist propaganda about "pie in the sky", are apt to pay too scant attention.

The Kingdom of Heaven means a situation where God's will is sought and carried out: where what he says goes. It is

the only true new society. Other so-called new societies are the same old bad penny with tails on top instead of heads. This is a new and valid coin.

In this beatitude Jesus is saying that anyone who is aware of his own need, and desperately wants it answered, can turn to God, find out what he wants done and be given the power to do it. If the disciples were to become a community who lived on that basis, they would be the nucleus of a new order in the world. Jesus himself personified it one hundred per cent.

One sure way to become aware of our own need is simply to ask God to make us growingly aware of it, and should any reader chance not to believe in God, he can at least try as an experiment making this request over a period of, say, a fortnight to "God if there is a God", and then see what happens.

The second beatitude is:

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

This is the only beatitude that seems not to be concerned with a moral quality. It could be that this beatitude means precisely what it seems to say—that God's compassion and care go out in a special degree to those who have recently undergone the pain of bereavement. There may well have been particular people listening to Jesus when he said this for whom he knew it would help.

Much of what Jesus said was not general truth thrown out for the benefit of all and sundry, but was deliberately designed to meet the needs of definite people he had in mind; and when one learns of the bereavement of a friend,

the truth that there will be reunion at the end of this life's journey comes especially alive. Blessedness, or supreme joy, does not imply the absence of a sense of loss. The mourner can be given strength—which is what “comforted” means—by turning to God, keeping close to him, letting him fill the gap, and letting him use the sorrow to enlarge the mourner's heart and give him compassion for others.

“Mourn” may also mean to feel acutely the tragedy of our own failure and of what is wrong with the world. When things were desperately wrong in the nation, the Israelites were told, in the Old Testament, that they should rend their hearts and mourn for the state of their country.

However, let us return to the more obvious meaning of this beatitude. A prominent Soviet leader was visiting Britain and gave an extended nationwide television interview. He looked deeply gloomy. It transpired that his wife was near death from cancer and he knew it. How desperately needed today is the abandonment of the godless ideologies that rob a man like that of the genuine consolation he could have found, had he not swallowed the lie that there is no God, no after-life, no hope of reunion with our loved ones.

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

The word “meek” as used in the Bible does not mean what it conveys in everyday parlance today—abject, spineless and obsequious. It is a virile quality and means perfectly trained, responsive to orders, the opposite of self-assertive and self-willed. In the Old Testament, Moses, the indomitable leader of his people, was described as “very

meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12: 13). Yet we think of him as a thunderer, almost Olympian. What it means is that he was ready to accept and carry out God’s will, not his own. It was precisely this soldierly quality that a Roman officer recognised and instinctively responded to in Jesus himself, when he said, “I also am a man under authority” (Matthew 8: 9).

The future belongs to those who are prepared to have their wills cut across and controlled by God’s will on all points. They will exert an influence far and away more powerful than the most craggily self-willed. Moses’ “meekness” started by his taking on an assignment wholly beyond his strength and absolutely contrary to his inclination, because God told him to. It was to confront Pharaoh, Rameses II, a truly Stalin-like autocrat, and demand in God’s name the liberation of his people, and then to weld this people, a disorderly and fractious mob, into the makings of a nation. To this day, the Jewish, Christian and Islamic worlds feel the impact of Moses’ “meekness” in BC 1250. Mohammed called the war against one’s own self-will the greatest Jihad or holy war. To have achieved victory in that is what is meant by “meekness”. Jesus, in what was perhaps the culminating moment of his life on earth, said in Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless let not my will but thine be done.” That is the perfection of meekness. It made the Cross, the Resurrection, the forgiveness and rebirth of the human race possible.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,  
for they shall be filled.*

Barclay's commentary on this passage is enlightening. He points out that again and again in the beatitudes Jesus quite deliberately uses the strongest words he can. He does not say, "Those who are not averse to righteousness". He means those who desperately long for it, as much as a famished man longs for something to eat; as much as someone parched with thirst craves for water.

There are those who cordially dislike the idea of "righteousness". Though they hope for a square deal from others, they would rather die than be called square themselves. Many people respect integrity in others, and wistfully in their better moments want a greater measure of it in themselves. Jesus says that one needs to long passionately for it.

Righteousness has a number of facets, and the emphasis in different ages is apt to vary. Sometimes the virtue of strict moral rectitude is in fashion and a breach of it, or at any rate an open breach, is a passport to social ostracism. Sometimes righteousness in the sense of moral rectitude is contemptuously dismissed as puritanism while righteousness in the sense of compassion is in vogue. Then an attitude that not only understands but condones and even encourages loose living and the cutting of corners is called compassionate.

Righteousness is one of the distinctive qualities of God. Jesus personified the most total integrity and purity (and demanded it) and also the most thorough-going compassion. The stories of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son and the woman taken in adultery show this. It is highly probable

that Jesus' effect on his hearers was, by the very quality of his life as well as the power of his words, to stimulate the beginnings of such a hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is a hunger and thirst that must be life-long.

The corresponding promise is that *they shall be filled*. Most people, whether they know it or not, have a goal, the attainment of which they feel will give them a satisfied life. It can be comfort; more money; a position; recognition; the political emancipation of one's race; the achievement of something memorable such as the creation of a work of art or a feat of exploration or a record in sport. The quest that truly brings satisfaction is for righteousness, in oneself first and subsequently and consequently in others. Jesus returns to this point even more powerfully in Matthew 6.

*Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall obtain mercy.*

Barclay's comment on the meaning of the Hebrew word which was translated into Greek and thence into English as "mercy" is worth reading. Mercy means far more than dealing not unkindly with someone with whom one is in a position to settle an old score, or the leniency that will punish an offender lightly, or even the compassion that will go out of its way to help someone in need. To quote Barclay directly, *Chesedh* (the Hebrew word) means "the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind and feel things with his feelings." That is the quality for which Jesus is calling—an essential characteristic of the new man.

The corresponding promise is that the merciful will receive merciful treatment from God. Jesus makes this

point again and again; most strongly in the case of the debtor unable to pay his huge debt, who implored his creditor to cancel his debt, which the creditor readily and generously did. The debtor then promptly seized hold of a man who owed him a small sum, and, as the man had not the means to pay him, had him thrown into prison. This merciless act came to the ears of the creditor, who had the first debtor imprisoned for a long stretch.

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

This beatitude means exactly what it says. The Greek word for pure is *katharos*, which means clean, the opposite of dirty. True, it may also be extended to mean single-hearted and with no mixed motives, but here Jesus states unequivocally that purity of heart, the opposite of lust, is a condition for "seeing God", the ultimate good, in this world indirectly and in the world to come face to face.

St Francis had this experience. In the sun, his fellow creature, "Brother Sun" as he called it, a source of light and warmth and life to the world, he saw a pattern of God the creator. St Benedict, seven centuries before him, who had as a young man fiercely and victoriously fought against impurity in his heart, had towards the end of his days a vision whereby he saw the world as God saw it. Both of these men were instrumental in ushering in a new stage in human history at a time of violence and chaos. Their lives were self-denying and austere, yet their life's work led, as a by-product, to a rich creativity that produced some of the noblest architecture and most glorious painting and sculpture in the history of man.

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

Peace, in the sense in which it is used in the Bible, means far more than the absence of fighting. When Jesus, sending out his disciples two by two, tells them to say to whoever will receive them, "Peace be to this house", he is not urging them to tell their host and hostess to stop quarrelling! He is telling them to bless the family and the home. Peace means the well-being that comes from a right relationship with God and man; but making peace includes the art of reconciliation. To bring reunion where there is division is far harder and far more rewarding than to stir up dissension.

Often people put the cart before the horse and say, "When this injustice has been removed, when the wrong we feel we and our people are suffering has been brought to an end, then and not till then will we be prepared to stop hating and fighting our opponents" (or whoever they blame for what is wrong). In fact, however, a just settlement cannot be brought to birth in an atmosphere of vindictiveness.

A Japanese woman senator, a socialist, formerly a Marxist, had found the beginning of a faith in God. She had found a new relationship with her husband and their home had been remade. Her party was in opposition when she learnt that the Government was planning to send a trade mission to many of the Pacific nations with which Japan had been at war and which had suffered at the hands of the Japanese. She had a compelling thought, which she believed came from the mind of God, to go and see the Prime Minister and tell him that the need was for Japan



humbly to ask the forgiveness of each nation she had wronged, and that without such an apology the mission would fail hopelessly. With much trepidation she called on the Prime Minister and found him meeting with some of his Cabinet. She told him the thought she had had. His face gave no clue as to how he reacted. Wherever he went, however, including some countries that planned to give him a hostile reception, Prime Minister Kishi first asked forgiveness for what his nation had done and spoke too of practical steps of reparation that Japan would make. This mission was described as "the statesmanship of the humble heart". It helped beyond all measure to create new relationships in the Pacific. How much better would democracy function if opposition parties felt their job was to ensure that the right thing was done, rather than to harry and obstruct the government on almost every occasion.

A Christian is called to be an apostle of reconciliation. Older people who fight among themselves, especially in families which break up, create an insecure, restless, rootless and violent younger generation. Younger people who hate their parents and then crusade for peace and justice in the world are howling for the moon. Peace of the kind that Jesus means begins with the removal of every shred of resentment from one's own spirit. As every resentment seems to be justified and a natural reaction to a wrong, letting go of it and asking forgiveness for it is hard and humbling. One is afraid of weakening one's position. In fact a hate-free man is far stronger than a hate-filled man.

Such apostles of reconciliation shall be called "children of God". In one sense everyone is a child of God, having

been created by him. In another sense everyone needs rebirth, with God's spirit replacing his own nature, before he is fully a child of God; and building bridges where there is a gulf of division is part of the normal revolutionary action of the new type of man, the true child of God.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

These days even to be respectable is not tolerated in some circles, but here Jesus is calling for something far more extreme than respectability. He demands absolute moral standards and later in the chapter he goes on to specify what these are and what they involve.

Those who aim to live by absolute moral standards magnetise people and, at the same time, rouse opposition. That was so in the time of Christ. It is even more so today when evil is organised, when ideological forces seeking to dominate the life of nations use the moral Achilles' heels in people's character to secure a leverage over them. A man who is absolutely honest in his business dealings will naturally stir the conscience of those who are not. Frank Buchman\*, after the First World War, fought for absolute moral standards, including purity, in the universities of America and Britain. He ran into fierce opposition from those whose sense of guilt was aroused, and also from far-sighted materialist revolutionaries whose aim was to break down the moral standards of the future leaders of those nations, so that they would become amoral or immoral and therefore tools in their hands. The Bible repeatedly

\*For the development of the work and thinking of Frank N. D. Buchman (1878-1961), see *The Revolutionary Path*, Grosvenor Books, 1975, 75p.

and rightly connects personal morality with national security.

The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who refuse to compromise with evil and who fight on, not withdrawing when they encounter opposition, and also who, when they are made aware of a hitherto unsuspected area of evil in their own lives, are honest about it and let God surgically remove it.

*Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil falsely against you for my sake. Your reward will be great in Heaven, for that is how they persecuted the prophets which were before you.*

Having spoken of eight characteristics of the new type of man, Jesus then turns directly to those already following him. They will be particularly blessed, he says, when they are persecuted and they will have a rich reward in Heaven when they encounter opposition because of their identification with him. It is worth noting that here again Jesus lays emphasis on Heaven as distinct from earth, a very unfashionable emphasis these days when some are so pre-occupied with social conditions and the standard of living that they dismiss the idea of eternity as irrelevant.

Part of the task of those who fight for righteousness is to clash with evil, to smoke out sin: not to point the finger of blame but to be honest and to tell people the truth as God shows it, so that they become aware of the need and find the cure. That was what the Old Testament prophets did, even though God's chosen people reacted by persecuting them, rather than facing the truth. As Jesus foretold, the early Christians had the same experience. Stephen was

stoned to death. Paul was hounded from one place to another; he was beaten; several attempts were made on his life; and he and Peter were eventually martyred in Rome.

Four centuries later, two attempts were made to poison St Benedict, one by monks who resented his high standards when he was abbot of their monastery, and one by a priest who was jealous of his effective work. St Francis was thrown out of his own home. St Thomas More was beheaded. John Wesley was assaulted and he and his followers accused, among other things, of trying to raise a "fifth column" to help the French conquer England. Frank Buchman was accused by totalitarian forces of the left of being a totalitarian of the right, and vice versa. There is an essential tension between the ways of the world and the ways of those committed to live by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is interesting that Jesus should stress *all manner of evil falsely against you*. So many good people, hungry to find an answer for themselves, their families or their country, allow themselves to be choked off because they have heard some negative rumour about the people who could help them, have swallowed the rumour and, instead of going to the people concerned and finding out the facts, have made up their minds to play safe and keep their distance, thereby missing their destiny.

It is true that right down the ages those who have tried to serve God wholeheartedly have made mistakes. St Peter, for instance, once cut off a man's ear. However, people whose whole purpose in life is one big mistake latch on to real or imaginary mistakes on the part of those fighting God's battle in the world in order to avoid the cost to themselves of doing whatever that involves.

## **The Christian's vocation and task**

*You are the salt of the earth. If the salt has become insipid, how can it regain its saltiness? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and to be trampled by man.*

In verses 13 to 16 of Matthew 5, Jesus tells his disciples what their primary vocation is. It is to be “the salt of the earth”. It means something vastly different from the popular understanding of that phrase—“thoroughly likeable, good-hearted people”. It is a calling to be the antiseptic, disinfectant and preservative force for a world that would otherwise putrefy and be destroyed. Salt has sting. In ancient days it was a symbol of purity. As Barclay puts it: “One of the characteristics of the world in which we live is the lowering of standards: standards of honesty, standards of diligence in work, standards of conscientiousness all tend to be lowered. The Christian must be the person who holds aloft the standard of absolute purity in speech, conduct and even in thought.”

The vision of the people Jesus was addressing was largely limited to throwing off the yoke of the Roman imperial power. Jesus tells them their job is to purify the whole world.

What makes salt become insipid? What makes people cease to be the channels through whom the cleansing force of God's Spirit can work? Any moral compromise that is not faced and dealt with; any wrong relationships; any order of God that is not carried out.

*You are the light of the world. A city which is built on a hill cannot be hidden: nor do people light a lamp and put it under a*

*bushel (or bucket) but on a lamp stand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see the good you do and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.*

To be the salt of the earth—a great cleansing force—and to be the light of the world: that is the destiny of those who decide to take Jesus' teaching seriously.

Light shows people the way to go. Without it they get lost and stumble in the dark—and not only individuals but also nations. Light also shows things up. It is both comforting and discomfiting. Sunshine pouring in through a window will show up dust on a table that would otherwise be unnoticed. There is a very close connection between being “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” and being “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”. The last thing most people enjoy is being confronted with a degree of purity that stings awake a dormant conscience which had come to terms with a measure of impurity. No one likes having the things that are wrong with him brought to his consciousness (although they may be very obvious to his family and neighbours). This is as true at a national level as it is with individuals.

Lastly Jesus sets out the purpose and true motive of so living as to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”. It is *that men may glorify your Father who is in Heaven*; in other words to turn to God themselves and put their lives at his disposal. Jesus connects this closely with publicity. He condemns as absurd the idea that people should not come out into the open to proclaim God's truth, but rather, through a false humility and a fear of what the world will think, try to make do with “living a Christian life on the quiet”, hoping no one will mind too much.

One of the people who must have repeatedly heard Jesus declaring this principle was St Peter. Again and again in the Acts of the Apostles one reads of his irrepressible passion to tell people by the thousand about Jesus and about the need for them to turn to him and start a new life. For instance, in Acts 2: 41, we read, *Many people believed his (St Peter's) message and about three thousand people were added to the group that day.* That is being "the light of the world".

### **Our heritage—destroy it or build on it?**

*Never imagine I have come to destroy the Law or the prophets;  
I have not come to destroy but to fulfil.*

Jesus now speaks of his relation to the God-given heritage of his people's past, the Law and the prophets. He says he has not come to destroy them, which was the criticism directed at him by the religious leaders of his day, but to fulfil them. By the Law he did not mean the innumerable, petty, irksome, restrictive, man-made rules and regulations that the Jewish legal and religious authorities had evolved, but the genuine Law of Moses, especially the Ten Commandments. Jesus went out of his way to break some of the man-made interpretations of the Law, for example concerning what constituted "work" on the Sabbath. Having the mind of God, he knew perfectly well they were out of line with what God required, and wanted to wake people up to that fact.

The so-called "modern" attitude of debunking the past, the great names of a nation's history, the moral "Thou shalt nots" which make for granite in national character, is

the opposite of what Jesus had in mind. He specifically attacked those who, in the smallest way, tried to water down the commands and laws of God.

To disregard the law of gravity is to be in for a fall: to disregard the moral law is likewise to be heading for a crash. There are those today, and not only in the secular and humanist world, who are exerting the maximum possible pressure on the Church to repeal God's laws on such matters as adultery, homosexual practice, divorce and murder—of which abortion can be a form. It has been rightly said that the real need today is not to humanise Christianity but to Christianise humanity. People today condemn Pharisaical conduct without much thought about what it means. The Pharisees preached a strict morality. Jesus' complaint was not about their strictness but that they did not practise what they preached. He called them hypocrites, or play-actors: they were pretending to be something they were not. Jesus did not lower the hurdles so that people might jump over them more easily. He raised them so that people could not, without a lift from a Power above, jump over them at all.

What was admirable about the Jewish people was that, in theory at least, they did not departmentalise life, dividing it into the religious and secular. Their idea was that God's law covered the whole of life. Where they went wrong was to invent a host of cumbersome regulations and call them God's law. The world today needs to see the emergence of a country where God's will is sought and obeyed in every section of national life.



## Let go of resentment

Jesus goes on to specify what he means by saying, *Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.* The old law permitted revenge, on a basis of equality of damage inflicted. It forbade murder. Jesus said that not only was murder forbidden but also the resentment that is the cause of the act. Resentment is contrary to God's will and that is that: and no one has yet felt resentment without feeling that he is, or belongs to, the injured party and that the injury is someone else's fault.

Jesus also makes it abundantly clear that to worship God is valueless if, at the same time, you are on bad terms with anyone. The first step is to put the human relationship right. Then *you can come back and offer your gift to God.*

Putting things right with people is never easy— either people against whom one has a resentment or people who one knows have a resentment against oneself, whether humanly justified or not. Jesus, however, is quite categorical that one must swallow one's pride and put the relationship right, even at the risk of being told, "About time, too!"

## Let go of lust

*You have heard how it used to be said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you, any one who ever looks with lust at a woman has committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

Jesus here deals trenchantly with the question of sex. The peculiar adjective "modern" is attached these days to

an approach to sex that is pre-Christian—two thousand years out of date. Jesus not only forbids adultery but the lust that leads to it, just as sweepingly as he forbids the resentment that, if not rooted out, can lead to murder.

The wrong look and the wrong touch have to be cut right out. Temptation is inevitable, especially these days with the sex motive exploited commercially and ideologically, in advertisements and in the media. But the question is what one does about a temptation. Toy with it? Foster it and eventually yield to it? Be scared of it, humanly try to suppress it and end up overpowered by it? Or turn at once to the superior power of Christ to vanquish what one cannot vanquish in one's own strength.

A fall can be a fall in thought. Thomas a Kempis wrote: "We must be especially on our guard at the beginning of temptation, for the enemy is more easily overcome if at the start he be not suffered to pass the door of the mind. Let him be met outside, on the threshold at the very moment he knocks... for first there comes into the mind a simple thought, then grows a vivid imagination, afterwards follow delectation, evil impulse, consent."\*

Presumably if it is forbidden for a man *to look at a woman to lust after her*, it is by the same token forbidden for a woman so to act or to dress as deliberately to provoke that lust, or for fashion designers to make money out of the destruction of other people's moral integrity. What Jesus requires from men and women is absolute purity.

Jesus' merciful dealing with the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1-11) which saved her from death by stoning is sometimes cited as evidence that Jesus was broadminded and liberal about these things. The neglected

\**Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, chapter 13.

point of the story—one might even say the punch line—is that he told her to *go and sin no more*. He did not in fact differentiate between “sins of the flesh” and “sins of the spirit”. He considered impurity a sin of the spirit. He made it clear how seriously he took it by his vivid picture that it was better to pull out your eye if it led you into sin, and get into the Kingdom of Heaven with one eye, than to keep both eyes and be sentenced to eternal separation from God—a picture none of his hearers would be likely to forget.

Nor did he relax the Mosaic law on divorce, but rather tightened it up. The colossal pressure to repeal this law of God put on the Church today, by elements calling themselves Christians motivated by charity, is the most monumental hypocrisy. In those marvellous and moving chapters of St John’s Gospel, which describe Jesus’ final discourse with his disciples before his crucifixion, he tells them that if they really love him, they will keep his commandments. Nothing could be clearer: yet so called avant-garde Christians are engaged in a campaign to make it easy for people to break his commandments, particularly those concerned with sexual morality, and to do so with an untroubled conscience. Frank Buchman put it this way: “Take purity: you may say that it is just a personal matter. But what is happening to the nation?... Too few try to bring a great cleansing force to the nation. What is going to happen to a nation when nobody brings a cure any more? Broken homes, unstable children, the decay of culture, the seeding plot of revolution.”

The passage concerning vows (Matthew 5: 33-37) and Jesus’ command not to swear by Heaven or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or by one’s head has two points particularly

applicable today. The first is to realise the immense power and importance of God, and the total dependence on him and relative smallness and helplessness of man. The second is to be honest, to say what one means, and only to undertake to do things for anyone that one really intends to carry out regardless of inconvenience—a point political parties at election time could do well to heed.

### **Let go the desire for revenge**

*You have heard the saying, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. But I tell you, you are not to resist an injury: whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well.*

Jesus here talks about revenge which according to Old Testament law was on a basis of *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. The purpose of this was to limit the extent of the revenge. Jesus emphatically bans all revenge and all thought of revenge. There is a singularly fatuous saying, “Revenge is sweet”. Revenge is not sweet. It is asinine. A wrongs B, so in revenge B wrongs A. What will A then do? Call it quits? Not on your life. He will have another go at B: and so ad infinitum. That has been the story not only of individuals but of clans, classes and nations. Jesus lays down that if we are wronged by another person, we should be so free of self-love that instead of wanting to pay him back in his own coin, we should be concerned not with ourselves but with him and how to help him, how to meet his need. That is the only way to break the vicious circle.

Knowing very well how the Jews felt about the Romans, he illustrates the point by the example of a Roman soldier

of the occupation forces ordering a Jew to accompany him for a mile. Jesus says that, instead of bristling with indignation, the Jew should give the Roman his heart and offer to go two miles. That way would be more likely to impress the Roman with the true character of the God of Israel and could eventually lead to the Roman's believing in him. To bring "light to the Gentiles" was the God-ordained calling of the Jewish people.

Before coming to the final point in this chapter, it is worth commenting on the natural assumption of divine authority by Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth. He takes point after point of the Mosaic law, which had made the Jewish people morally far ahead of any contemporary civilisation, and says of it, *You have heard it said... but I say unto you*. Each of the points he makes, however, does not weaken but fulfils and strengthens the Mosaic law.

### **Love everyone—no exceptions permitted**

*You have heard the saying, "You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

Jesus goes on to command not only to love one's friends, but to include one's enemies in one's love. "Your enemies" can mean those you know are out personally to injure you, and presumably also "those with whom your nation is at war". Or if "you" means a follower of Christ, it means those who obstruct, attack, malign and aim to destroy your work.

"Love" does not mean "like" or "feel affinity with"; nor

does it mean to approve of what they are doing. It means to seek their highest good. In his play "Mr Brown comes down the hill", Peter Howard illustrates this in a scene where a militant black man loaded with hate against the whites has a mountain top interview with Mr Brown (who represents God). "Hate what they do by all means," says Mr Brown, "but love what they can become and help them to become it."

Love comes from the heart. It is unsentimental but it is also more than a correct attitude. It is warm enough to melt hate. It is more than human affection. It is a gift that comes from God only and can be had for the asking.

### **Absolute standards**

The chapter ends with the most staggering command. It is a command and not an exhortation:

*You must be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.*

St Peter expressed the same truth: *As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct* (1 Peter 1: 15). Those who seriously decide to be Jesus' followers must allow no known fault or weak point in their character to go uncured. Their standards must be absolute, not those that are currently accepted as adequate. Everybody, good or bad, must come within the range of his love, no weak tolerance, but a love charged with the transforming power of God which straightens out the crooked, purifies the impure, makes the self-centred selfless and replaces resentment with creative care.

## **The wrong and the right motive for worship and giving**

The sixth chapter starts with a passage that may not at first sight seem applicable to today.

*Be careful not to perform your religious duties in public in order that people will see what you do.*

Jesus was talking to his followers in a nation where apparent godliness was a status symbol, which is not true of today's society, though some people do attend public worship primarily as a matter of form and custom. He also says with regard to almsgiving, a religious duty to the Jews, *Do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it.*

The point Jesus is making, which applies as much in today's secular society as in the religious society of his time, is that it is possible to do a good and necessary thing for the wrong motive, such as to gain the approval or admiration of others—a natural but none the less wrong instinct. If one does a good deed in order to get human applause, he says, one will get human applause, and that is all. Jesus requires a good act such as giving to be prompted by a genuine sense that it is God's will to give, and a concern for the recipient of the gift, with no self-seeking motive mixed in with it.

The same with prayer. Jesus by no means implies, "Do not go to church." What he stresses is the urgent need of personal prayer to God. How many of those who regularly attend a place of worship today also *go to their room, close the door, and pray to their Father who is unseen?* Time alone with his

Father was of the highest priority in Jesus' own life, and the mainspring of his work.

He goes on to say how not to pray—in meaningless words and at great length like the heathen. It is perfectly possible to say prayers, the words of which are inspired, in a way that is totally meaningless, because one is just repeating familiar sentences with no thought as to what they imply. That type of praying is part of a religion that can be justly dismissed as “the opiate of the people”.

## **The Lord's Prayer**

This is followed by one of the most important passages ever written. First Jesus says: *Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him.* It is a sobering thought that our whole life, our innermost thoughts, our true condition, are an open book to God, and not just because he is omniscient in a general impersonal way, but because he takes an intense, affectionate and realistic interest in everyone that exists—including ourselves and, be it remembered, equally the people we are tempted most to disapprove of.

*This is how you should pray: “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. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”*

*Our Father, who art in Heaven.* There is a book by Père Grou called, “How to Pray”\* which is worth its weight in

\**How to Pray*, by J. N. Grou SJ, published by Anthony Clarke Books, 1965.



gold. He makes the point that Jesus gave his followers this prayer because he expected them to regulate their lives by it. To summarise some of Père Grou's points, he writes that God is our Father in the sense that he created us and is responsible for the fact that we exist at all; he is our Father because he is concerned for our highest good in this world and wants our company in the bliss of the world to come; that the right attitude to our fellow human beings can only spring from realising that they also are God's sons and daughters on whose good he has set his heart. However, he is also "our Father in Heaven", which gives a proper sense of proportion. We are creatures limited by time and space. He is the Creator of the Universe and, as the *Te Deum* so well puts it, "of limitless majesty". John Newton, once captain of a slave-ship who became a militant Christian, and was largely responsible for inspiring Wilberforce to take on his long and victorious battle to end the slave trade, wrote these words about prayer: "Thou art coming to a King; large petitions with thee bring."

If we seriously pray *Hallowed be thy name* it involves us in making the first aim of our lives that God Almighty be honoured, obeyed and loved by everyone everywhere—a life-long battle, in Frank Buchman's words, "to restore God to leadership as the directing force in the life of men and nations". It also involves us in so living that people instinctively recognise that we are God's representatives, and are drawn to follow him by the way we live. How we live and what we say can, at any point, either draw people to God or repel them from him, an awesome responsibility.

*Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.* Here we come to the very kernel of the Lord's Prayer. The two sections of this petition mean the same thing, the second

describing the first. Jesus speaks with authority, Heaven having always been his home, and to him therefore not a matter of hope or speculation but of experience. He knew what he was talking about, and he commands us to pray that the same glad, prompt, whole-hearted, universal obedience to God's will become as characteristic of earth as of Heaven. This is the most revolutionary idea ever conceived. We lightly use the phrase, "Heaven on earth", sometimes accompanied by a wistful sigh, but Heaven on earth was precisely what Jesus came to usher in, and in his own life he personified it. To ponder this one petition for a quarter of an hour every day for a month, to write down one's thoughts about it and execute the decisions resulting from it would mean a month well spent. One does not need to wait "till Kingdom come" but by an irrevocable commitment to obey God, to live a life under orders, one can step right into the Kingdom. Humanly this is impossible, but Christ gave his life to make it possible, and the very men to whom he first addressed the Sermon on the Mount brought about, in their lifetime, active cells of the Kingdom, established throughout most of the Roman Empire.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* This presumably means exactly what it says. Barclay, in his commentary on Matthew, makes the interesting point that the Greek word translated "daily" or "for the day" was not known in any other passage of ancient writing until quite recently it was discovered on a papyrus fragment, at the head of a woman's shopping list. This is really a command to live by faith and prayer one day at a time. The world work of Moral Re-Armament, to cite one example, operates economically on a basis that first God's will and plan are

sought: then there is prayer, individual and corporate, general and specific, for God to provide the means to put that plan into operation, and sustain it. Often he just provides enough for the immediate need, withholding the certainty of the necessary amount for future needs. This necessitates faith. The world is apt to limit its undertakings according to the means apparently available. In the Kingdom of God the law is that God's enterprises must be undertaken and he provides the means, generally through the sacrificial giving of people. Every individual and every group that has lived by the principle that "where God guides he provides" has found that it works.

This is how a Chancellor of the Exchequer should conduct the economic affairs of a Christian country—first to ask, "Is such and such an undertaking God's will?" and, if convinced with his colleagues that it is, to launch into it, and if not to reject it; if uncertain, to wait till God chooses to show his purpose clearly.

*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.* All of us need God's forgiveness for what we do that we should not, and what we have neglected to do that we should have done, as well as for faults in character and for wrong attitudes. It helps to be definite about these things. If our conscience is not yet aroused where it needs to be, it helps to ask God to show us specifically our trespasses of commission, omission, character and attitude. To measure our life against the standards of Christ, absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, and to write down the thoughts that come to mind, makes specific where we need to be forgiven.

Most of us are more acutely conscious of where other people have wronged us than of where we have wronged

other people. Jesus returns to the attack, begun in Matthew 5, on the subject of holding resentment. He makes the alarming statement that we can only expect forgiveness from God to the extent that we have forgiven *them that trespass against us*.

Forgiveness, be it said, does not consist of saying condescendingly, "You have treated me (or my people) abominably but I am prepared to let bygones be bygones." It is exemplified by the action taken by Frank Buchman in 1908 after he had had a vision of Christ on the Cross. There were six men, a board of governors, who were guilty of social injustice and of thwarting his plans for correcting the injustice. It was borne in on him that, though they were wrong, he had made himself the seventh wrong man by allowing resentment to fester in his spirit against them for having spoilt his plans. This resentment was a chasm between himself and Christ. So he wrote each of them asking for forgiveness for having nursed ill-will against him. Nothing of blame, nothing of condescension, just a costly humble apology and, as far as his side was concerned, reconciliation leaving their side of the wrong to God and their consciences. After this act, God filled him with new life and he was immediately able to help other people in need.

*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* The Greek word translated "temptation" can either mean "testing" or "enticement to sin". This petition seems to mean, "Do not let us yield to sin but set us free from the power of evil" (or "the evil one"—the Greek could mean either). God does test people: for example, he can put them into a position where they can courageously take a stand for what they believe in, or back down and follow the crowd. Jesus

himself was tempted and resolutely and skilfully repelled the attack. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews makes the point that because of the very fact that Jesus experienced at first hand the temptations that assault everyone, he is able to help the tempted.

### **The wrong and the right motives for fasting**

After dealing with prayer, Jesus goes on to speak about the wrong and the right motives for fasting. Fasting is not such a usual religious practice today as it was in the first century AD. Today one reads of it more as a form of political action taken by imprisoned revolutionaries to acquire the kudos of martyrdom for their cause and as a means of achieving their objective.

Fasting is meant to be a matter between man and God, undertaken when and how God shows. It has the merit, when rightly carried out, of establishing the mastery of one's spirit over one's bodily cravings and of giving a clarity to the mind. What it is not intended to do is to boost one's prestige.

This form of austerity, Jesus says, should be undertaken in a spirit of zest and cheerfulness. One of the jolliest of the saints, a man who himself gave the impression he was having a thoroughly good time, was St Philip Neri, who practised extreme self-discipline. He was a man with an irrepressible sense of fun, and a practical joker. The young flocked to him, irresistibly magnetised by his spirit, and he was instrumental in leading them to find a new life and purpose for living. That is an example of God's idea of fasting.

## Treasure on earth and treasure in Heaven

*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.*

This is a very well-known saying and repays careful study. It cuts right at the root of Western materialism, and not only Western materialism. Treasures or “riches for oneself” can mean not only money and possessions but also popularity, fame, success, power. It is as applicable to the ladder-climbing in the ranks of the materialist revolutionary ideologies as it is to the self-indulgent opulence of the West, to the commissar as to the millionaire; to the heady flaunting of newly acquired wealth and power in some Third World leaders as it is to the unconscious and infuriating sense of superiority characteristic of some representatives of the West.

Jesus stresses not so much that it is wrong from a moral point of view to store up these things as that it is a dangerous and stupid risk, because they can all be taken away overnight. He does not add, “Seek nothing for yourself, but only what is for the common good.” He specifically says, *Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven*. He once more commands his followers to keep eternity always in mind. He *does* tell people to do good with a view to a reward in the next world. The reality and extreme importance of Heaven was ever in the forefront of Jesus’ thinking and teaching.

What is treasure in Heaven? It may be foreshadowed in

this world by the joy of having carried out God's will no matter at what cost, of having been instrumental in "fishing for men" (as Jesus told his fishermen disciples they would be doing), in experiencing the joy of spiritual fatherhood. The characteristic of treasure in Heaven is that it is unassailable. It cannot be destroyed by moth or rust or stolen by thieves.

St Peter writes: *So we look forward to possess the rich blessings that God keeps for his people. He keeps them for you in Heaven where they cannot decay or spoil or fade away* (1 Peter 1: 4). This is not only important for older people. Jesus was quite young when he spoke of treasure in Heaven, and one's life in this world can end at any age. Thinking of eternity is as relevant for the young as for the old, and is part of the revolution needed in an age when materialism predominates.

Jesus summarises this part of his teaching as: *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*. What does this mean? Is it a challenge first to look at how we spend our money and thereby be given a clear indication of what, above all else, we are seeking in life? Is it also a challenge boldly and sacrificially to invest our resources in the work of restoring God to his rightful place in the life of the world? Sometimes the meaning and application of a passage will come clear if one asks God to illuminate it.

*The light of the body is the eye. If your eye be single, your whole body will be full of light. If your eye be evil, your whole body will be in darkness, and if the light that is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness!*

Frank Buchman would say sin blinds. Jesus is warning against the terrible state where we are in darkness because

our organ of perceiving the truth, of discerning between right and wrong is atrophied. To complete Buchman's quotation: "Sin binds, blinds, multiplies, deafens and deadens." That is the state of total darkness which Jesus contrasts with the state of those whose body is full of light because their eye is single.

Barclay points out that the Greek words translated "single" and "evil" are often used in the sense of "generous" and "grudging". It seems more likely though that Jesus is warning his hearers to remove everything that can obscure the vision of the spirit. He was no doubt thinking of the resolute refusal to see the truth which he was to encounter in his country, and which would lead first to his rejection and then to his country's destruction in AD70. The warning Jesus gave then still applies today, as the forces that were operative in people's hearts then are operative now.

### **A straight choice: God or materialism**

*No one can serve two masters. 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.*

Sometimes people wonder why Jesus, who "did so much good and said such wonderful things", should have incurred such violent opposition. The point is that he cut across, and still cuts across, every wrong motive in life. In his day the religious gatherings were full of people whose real concern was with money and getting what money could buy. Jesus says it is a simple "either... or". Money



runs your life or God does, and you have to choose. Perhaps also in the word “Mammon” can be included other pursuits such as pleasure, fame and power. Barclay makes the interesting point that the word translated “serve” actually means “be the slave of” and the master has total control over and ownership of the slave. Is one prepared to be the slave of God?

In his “Journal of a Soul”, Pope John XXIII wrote: “I live only to obey God’s slightest commands. In his presence I stand like the meanest soldier standing to attention before his officer, ready to do all. This must be my task my whole life long, because I was born for this. I am a servant. I must always look on myself as a servant. Therefore I shall not have one single moment free for serving my own interests, my pleasures, etc. If I were to do so, I should be no better than a thief because I should be stealing time that is not my own.”\* It is precisely that attitude which Jesus is demanding of those who say they want to be his followers.

Jesus goes on to tell them that it is not up to them to worry about where the necessities of life will come from. He compares the situation with the way neither birds nor flowers have to earn their living, and does so in such picturesque language that it paints the intended picture in people’s minds today. A soldier also does not have to worry about where his money is coming from; the commanding authority provides. The provision is God’s part: man’s part is to carry out orders, just like the soldier’s, which is the way St Paul expresses the same truth (1 Corinthians 9: 7 and 2 Timothy 2: 3,4).

Just as people are passionately concerned about making enough money to support themselves and their families—

\**Journal of a Soul* by Pope John XXIII, published by Geoffrey Chapman, 1980.

Jesus is not talking here about the pursuit of wealth and luxury—so his followers must be as passionately concerned with *the Kingdom of God and his righteousness*, that is to say, with extending the area of human life where God's will is done. Jesus orders his followers to put the seeking of God's Kingdom and his righteousness before anything else in life. The idea that comes into the Lord's Prayer, *Give us this day our daily bread*, is repeated here. *Do not be anxious about tomorrow's needs*. His followers are to live one day at a time.

Again in the background of all this teaching there is the picture of a caring and generous God. This, as in Jesus' authoritative statements about Heaven, is not a matter of hope or speculation. First, he has always known God the Father, and second, as the Nicene creed puts it, Jesus as the Son of God was "of one substance with the Father". Their character was the same. The way he felt was the way the Father felt.

## **Start with yourself**

The seventh chapter consists of a series of vital points. It starts with Jesus' saying:

*Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you, because God will judge you in the same way that you judge others, and he will apply to you the same rules you apply to others.*

North American Indians have a saying: "Do not criticise another man until you have walked two miles in his moccasins." One needs to live into other people's lives so one can understand why they act the way they do.

Jesus continues with his famous saying about the mote and the beam. There are two equally important points here. The first everybody understands (but not necessarily applies): having faults oneself—probably far bigger than the faults in the person one is criticising—one must cut out fault-finding, because the fault (the beam or log) in one's own eye makes it impossible to see clearly in order to help the other man with his fault (the "mote" or speck of dust) in his eye. The equally important, and generally overlooked, second point is that then you will see clearly to take the mote out of your brother's eye. Having faced one's own sins and let God deal with them, one is given the gift of clear-sightedness about the nature of other people. One is given the right motive and the caring surgical skill to help others with the removal of what prevents their being what God means them to be. Buchman would say, "You need to be able to read a man like a page of print."

There is a touch of humour here as elsewhere in Jesus' teaching. The deliberately exaggerated picture of the man with the log in his eye offering his services to help the man bothered by a speck of dust is rather like the exaggerated picture of a man too scrupulous to let a gnat go down his throat, but having no qualms about swallowing a camel, hump and all. More than a ripple of laughter on the part of the audience would have greeted these pictures.

All are sinners in the sight of God, but a man who has let God cure him of his greatest need and is prepared to be honest about it with the man he is trying to help will find more often than not that the other man's reaction will be, "Touché. That's just like me." An accusatory exercise in finger-pointing will make the other man either bristle like a porcupine or shut up like a clam.

This is followed by a warning not to spill out to all and sundry one's greatest and deepest experiences. Some people are not yet ready for them and will react with needless hostility. One must share one's experiences wisely as God directs. They are precious, to be invested, not wasted.

### **Persistent prayer moves the hand that moves the world**

Now we come to one of the most encouraging and important passages in the Sermon on the Mount:

*Ask, and you will receive; Seek, and you will find; Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and he who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to him who knocks.... Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more will your Father in Heaven give to those who ask him!*

This is both a promise and a command. It is a promise that whoever turns to God and asks for something will be given what they ask or something better, because of the very nature of God, but this imposes a colossal responsibility to pray and keep on praying. People pray for what they want. This promise and command imply the necessity for wanting the right thing for oneself and for other people. There is an old and true saying: "Prayer moves the hand that moves the world." The actual request may or may not be granted, according to whether it is God's will or not, but the act of prayer brings the power of God to bear on the person or situation one prays for.

Prayer, Jesus points out elsewhere, has to be persistent. We are to *pray and never lose heart* (Luke 18: 1). In his youth, Augustine of Hippo was a rascal, a delinquent as well as brilliant youth. Year after year his mother Monica prayed for him. She herself had experienced a change of heart, so she knew it could happen to him; and eventually it did. He became one of the most powerful forces for good in history. His great mind, through his writings, shaped the thinking of Christendom for centuries, but it took years of apparently unrewarded prayer on Monica's part.

Prayer is hard work. It is not a substitute for work. It is work. Elsewhere Jesus says, *Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it and you will* (Mark 11: 24). The Cure d'Ars, quoted by Pope John in his "Journal of a Soul", wrote: "The man who does not pray is like a hen or turkey that cannot rise into the air, and if it tries to fly, it falls to the ground at once."

## **How to treat other people**

Jesus continues with what is probably the best known saying in the Sermon on the Mount:

*So then whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye unto them, for this is the Law and the prophets.*

Confucius, as well as the Jewish Rabbis, had said before: "What you would not like other people to do to you, refrain from doing to them." Jesus expresses this idea positively and there is far more to it than meet the eye. It requires a change in your own human nature to be so free

from concern with yourself that you are constantly sensitive to the other person and his needs and feelings: the person across the counter, in front of or behind you in a queue, the members of your family, or the members of the other parties if you are an MP.

It certainly does not mean, "Give the other person what he wants." That would thoroughly spoil him. It is an injunction to respect the other man's personality and feelings. To be equipped to carry out this command we need a constant, unclouded and close touch with God, especially when we are in the company of other people. It is terribly easy to be so full of our own ideas—good ideas perhaps—that we fail to find out what is on other people's hearts and minds and give them what they really need. We magnetise them to ourselves rather than to God, so they end up liking us more but are not an inch nearer to God.

## **The two gates**

This is immediately followed by an arresting and most disconcerting passage:

*Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and easy is the way that leads to destruction and there are many who go in through it. Narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life and those who find it are few.*

What is the narrow gate and what is the wide? The narrow gate implies what an Indian boy said in a prayer in the presence of Frank Buchman: "Lord, manage me because I can't manage myself." Elsewhere Jesus tells his

followers, *Unless you change and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 18: 3). It means a decision to obey God for ever. Entry by the narrow gate is followed by the first step on the hard way, the good road that leads to life. For many people this has meant putting right wrongs said, done and felt, with those concerned. The hard way involves living in personal and public life by God's standards in a materialistic age, swimming against the current, not drifting with it.

The wide gate is *not* making the decision to be governed by God. The easy way is to follow one's own inclinations, to be ruled by what other people think, including members of one's family, by considerations of security, by the drive for success; in other words to live the way the world lives—and the world includes black and white, East and West, and people of all classes. In these days so many false issues are raised, based on the importance of class or colour. Jesus cuts across all these issues by saying that the point is to follow God's will or one's own, and adds regretfully that most people choose to follow their own. This is the same as saying, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled*; but he says it in a different key and there is a note of urgency and warning.

### **False prophets and misleading ideas**

Next Jesus warns against false prophets, *wolves in sheep's clothing*, and says:

*Men do not gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. Every good tree produces fine fruit: every rotten tree produces rotten fruit.*

This reference to good and rotten fruit calls to mind St Paul's famous list of "the works of the flesh" and "the fruit of the Spirit": *Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. I warn you that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God; but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires* (Galatians 5: 19-25).

False prophets are not so much those who foretell that something is going to happen which in the event does not happen. They are those who disseminate and proclaim ideas other than God's truth. In these days they include those who argue, "Times have changed, so what can be considered acceptable Christian morality has changed also"—which means that what Jesus said is no longer binding. Certainly times have changed and will continue to change, but to ensure that the change is for the better and not for the worse it is doubly necessary to heed Jesus' teaching. They include those who say that the human race in its immaturity needed the concept of God, the father-figure, but now that mankind has become mature it can stand on its own feet and no longer needs a God. One would have thought that a brisk look at the headlines of a newspaper any day would be enough to dispel the idea that mankind has become good and wise.

False prophets also include those who say you can bring a new world of justice and peace to birth through a violent change of system, without God and without changing the human heart. They also include those who say, "You have never had it so good," when a nation is going morally to



pieces. False prophets almost always appeal to what people want to hear, and they make the worst elements in one's nature the dominant elements.

Jesus tells us to *beware of false prophets*. There was nothing known as the media in his time on earth, just the grapevine. Today there is need to watch out for the voice of the false prophet on the media. The acid test is whether the results of the words of those who write or speak on the media produce St Paul's "works of the flesh" or "fruit of the Spirit".

### **It is obedience that counts**

Now Jesus moves to the climax of the Sermon on the Mount, still with the note of urgency and warning.

*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.*

He threatens he will disown and dismiss many who will claim to have acted and spoken in his name. This is calculated to disturb the complacent, in fact anyone who reads it. The Kingdom of Heaven, which here seems to refer to the Kingdom in the world to come, will be entered by those who do the will of God, not by all who call themselves Christians.

Henry Drummond, the great nineteenth century Scottish Christian leader and man of science, wrote about the will of God: "Nothing in life should be dreaded so much as that the soul should ever lose its sensitiveness to God: that God

should ever speak and find the ear just dull enough to miss what he has said.” He adds: “It requires a well-kept life to know the will of God. As the eye is the organ of physical sight, the mind of intellectual sight, so the organ of spiritual vision is this strange power, obedience. This is one of the great discoveries the Bible has made to the world. Philosophy never conceived the truth so simple, yet so sublime. There is nothing more worth coveting than the will to do God’s will. There is no greater possession for any Christian life than the transparently simple mechanism of a sincerely obeying heart.”\*

Père Grou wrote: “The thought ‘God wills it’, is it the ruling motive in all my actions? Do not be alarmed by the ideal of perfection, and do not make it a reason for declining the undertaking. What is asked of you is a firm determination to submit yourself to God’s will in everything, unceasing persistence in practising that submission even if the struggle costs you pain sometimes, a sincere repentance each time you fail in it and a prompt and faithful return to it.”

Anyone who decides to live by the will of God and, even further, to devote his life to making the will of God regnant in the world can find out what God wants him to do. He can find out what his part is in this world-wide transfer of power from man to God. God may, and probably will, put into our minds things to do which are humanly impossible—even a humble apology is often humanly impossible because of our innate pride. But God always provides the power to do what he says.

Actions taken as a result of obeying the guidance of God set in motion a train of events that can affect the life of

\**The Greatest Thing in the World*, Collins, 1978.

nations, as in the story of the Japanese woman senator.

Part of the “well-kept life” that Drummond prescribes is the discipline of rising early each day and taking time both to talk to God, to lay before him our own needs and those of people and situations for which we are concerned, and to be quiet and let God put into our minds thoughts of what he wants done. It is good to write these thoughts down, so as not to forget them: if the thoughts that come are in line with the moral standards of Christ, it is probable that they come from God.

Frank Buchman would often say: “God gave a man two ears and one mouth. Why don’t we listen twice as much as we talk?” A perceptive journalist, studying photographs of Buchman, wrote that the most distinctive thing about his expression was, strange to say, a look of apparent helplessness, as though he did not know what to do but was waiting and alert to be shown by God. And shown by God he would be, from details such as the choice of a menu for a particular guest, to what to say to a statesman. Buchman felt strongly that being governed by God was not meant to be just the experience of a particular group but normal living for everyone, the common-sense way to operate. His last words were: “I want to see the world governed by men who are governed by God. Why not let God run the world?”

### **The resounding climax**

Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount on a note of tremendous authority. Christians who have been taught over the centuries to think of him as the Son of God can

easily fail to realise how such words must have impacted his hearers.

*So then everyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed and the winds blew hard against that house, but it did not fall because it had been built on the rock: but everyone who hears these words of mine and does not obey them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed and the wind blew hard against that house and it fell. What a terrible fall that was!*

One can marvel at the artistry of the end of the Sermon on the Mount: the indelible contrasting pictures so simply and powerfully painted that they are visual aids in words.

The central figure in Tolstoy's final novel, *Resurrection*, after striving and struggling to find the answer for his life, in the end discovers the illumination he had been seeking. This is what Tolstoy writes: "After reading the Sermon on the Mount he saw in it today for the first time not beautiful abstract thoughts setting forth exaggerated and impossible demands, but clear, simple, practical commandments which if obeyed would establish a completely new order of things in the social life of mankind." The key words here are, "if obeyed". Tolstoy's character, Nekhlyudov, decides to make it his life's work to translate the Sermon on the Mount into action. It was this decision that led to his resurrection—the title of the novel.

It will be the resurrection of anyone who makes the same decision and abides by it.

## For discussion—and decision

### Page

- 7 To whom is Jesus speaking in these chapters?
- 9 Do we expect our own faith to be “supremely and fundamentally joyous”? How have we experienced this? If we have not, what might have prevented it?  
(*Matthew 5: 3-10; Luke 6: 20-23*)
- 9-10 What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? How relevant is this Beatitude to twentieth century cultured, self-confident Western man? Is a sense of need better or worse than thinking we have all we need spiritually? (cf *Revelation 3: 17-18*) Has being poor in spirit any relation to being poor or rich materially? (*Matthew 5: 3; Luke 6: 20*)
- 11-12 What do Christians mourn for? Do they mourn for themselves or for others? How can they be comforted? (*Matthew 5: 4; Luke 6: 21*)
- 12-13 Is the word “meek” misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians? Where do I need to learn to be meek in the sense in which Jesus uses it or in the sense in which it was used of Moses? (*Matthew 5: 5*)
- 14-15 What is righteousness? Is it the same as self-righteousness? Do Christians usually crave for righteousness, and if not, why not? Do you?  
(*Matthew 5: 6; Luke 6: 21*)

- 15-16 Could being merciful mean saying, "Forget it", when someone has done something to upset you? Have you ever forgiven someone when you knew they were wholly in the wrong and knew it? Do you still need to? How did Jesus "get right inside another person's skin"? (*Matthew 5: 7*)
- 16 What is purity of heart? Has it anything to do with motives? With aims? Can you be pure in heart and still exploit someone else, for pleasure or gain, at the same time? Why is it the pure in heart who will see God? Does knowing God depend on a moral condition? (*Matthew 5: 8*)
- 17-18 The French New Testament, translated, reads: "Blessed are the bricklayers of peace." Do people get confused between being *peacable* and being *peace-makers*? Where did you last do some peace-making—at home? On the job? In your church? With someone of another race or country? *How* do you make peace? Can you give examples? (*Matthew 5: 9*)
- 19-21 Why are vital Christians always liable to persecution and false accusations? Why is it that some people "needs must hate the highest when they see it"? What are the roots of opposition to Christian faith whenever it is lived and applied fearlessly? How should Christians respond to this kind of assault? Is my life so oriented towards achievement in my daily routine that "reward in Heaven" has no meaning? (*Matthew 5: 10,11; Luke 6: 22*)

- 7-21 Compare the Beatitudes with Jesus' proclamation, Luke 4: 16-19. Contrast Jesus' idea of happiness and what brings it, with the world's idea of happiness. Write a Humanist or a Materialist's version of the Beatitudes.
- 22 What does salt do? How does a Christian act as salt —with his fellow Christians? With non-Christians? Compare St Paul's view in Colossians 4: 6.  
(*Matthew 5:13; Luke 14: 34, 35*)
- 22-24 Does this mean that how you live and what you do speak louder than what you say? Light also shows things up. Does this explain why some people hate it?  
(*Matthew 5: 14-16; Luke 11: 33*)
- 24-26 How is our righteousness meant to "exceed that of the Pharisees?" Does it mean keeping the rules more scrupulously? Or is Jesus asking us to carry God's demands to the deepest levels of motive and impulse? How deeply are you prepared to let his searchlight reach into the dark places behind your own actions?  
(*Matthew 5: 17-20; Luke 16: 17*)
- 26 Jesus says that if you remember that your friend has anything against *you*, you should leave your gift until you are reconciled with him. It is what you have done that has riled or hurt someone else that you have to put right. Have you any experience of putting this sort of relationship right? Did making an honest apology play any part in it?  
(*Matthew 5: 21-26; Luke 12: 58, 59*)

- 26-28 Do we accept as Christians that there is no basic difference between the thought and the act? Between, say, a “wolf-whistle” and actually committing adultery? Is it possible to appear outwardly upright but inwardly be a jungle of desires and lusts? Where do your thoughts go when you are on your own? Do we expect that Christ can both cleanse and satisfy us? (*Matthew 5: 27-32; Luke 16: 18*)
- 28-29 Do you say what you mean and mean what you say, or do you trim to the company you’re in?  
(*Matthew 5: 33-37*)
- 29-30 Can resentment and revenge be answered by generosity? If you give more than the other man compels you to do, does this put you in a different non-dependent relationship with him?  
(*Matthew 5: 38-42*)
- 30-31 What does it mean to love our enemies? Can we “hate what they do but love what they can become”? Can you separate the two—the man from his actions? Can you do it in your own strength? (*Matthew 5: 43-47; Luke 6: 27-36*)
- 31 Do the absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love reflect the perfection of God? Are they our standards? How do we advance towards them?  
(*Matthew 5: 43*)
- 32-33 What is Jesus getting at in describing the right and the wrong way to pray? Is he once more going



behind outward action to basic motive and disposition in us? If God knows what we need before we ask, why do we need to remind him?

*(Matthew 6: 1-8)*

33-38 What are the priorities in the Lord's Prayer? Is it meant to be a pattern for all our prayers? How much time do we spend each morning discovering what "Thy will be done on earth" means for us in practical terms today? (See "The Lord's Prayer and Modern Man" by Roger Hicks, Blandford Press, 1965) *(Matthew 6: 9-15; Luke 11: 2-4)*

38 What are the modern equivalents of fasting? Is it part of the call to "deny ourselves"? Does this apply to other areas besides food? And does it make you more cheerful towards the outside world, or only keener to show how disciplined you are? *(Matthew 6: 16-18)*

39-41 Is it possible to live lightly to things on earth—not to be captivated and dominated by them—because we know our true destiny lies in eternity? Does such a view mean neglecting our material and other responsibilities? Being "so Heavenly minded we are no earthly good"? If all I own belongs to God, am I ready to seek God's direction for its use in openness with a trusted fellow Christian? What does it mean to be single minded? If you have your eye on the wrong things and set your heart on them, what effect does this have on your life?

*(Matthew 6: 19-23; Luke 12: 16-21)*

- 41-42 Have we made a straight choice—God or materialism? What does it involve? Does “Mammon” mean only money—or what else might it include?  
(*Matthew 6: 24*)
- 42-43 What is the distinction between anxiety about tomorrow’s needs and taking wise forethought for them? Can anxiety lead to faith? “Wants are the fountains of felicity” (Traherne). Is this our experience?  
(*Matthew 6: 25-34; Luke 12: 22-31*)
- 43-44 What is it in “judgment” that Christ condemns? Is it possible to have insight, even critical insight, into someone without judgment? Have you ever complained about a speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye without noticing the plank in your own? When was the last time? How, according to St Paul (Galatians 6: 1) are you to correct someone “overtaken in a fault”?(*Matthew 7: 1-6; Luke 6: 37,38*)
- 45-46 What does Jesus reveal here about the nature of God? Do we rejoice in the generosity of God and bank on it in our prayers? Have we any recent experience of asking and receiving, seeking and finding, knocking and opening? What do you need to ask for, but dare not ask?  
(*Matthew 7: 7-11; Luke 11: 9-13*)
- 46-47 How would it modify our lives if we always treated other people in the ways in which we wish they would treat us? How would we treat the young? The middle aged? The old? Are they to start doing it or are we?  
(*Matthew 7: 12; Luke 6: 31*).

- 47-48 Why is there always a choice at the centre of Christian faith? (*Matthew 7: 13, 14; Luke 13: 24*)
- 48-50 Is the test of reality how people live, not what they say? (*Matthew 7: 15-20*)
- 50-52 Is the supreme test for Christians not reiterating “Jesus is Lord” but actually doing what He tells us? Not asking him to bless our plans but to tell us his? See John 7: 17. It has been said that there are two stages in the Christian life: the first when we say, “I will do anything God tells me”, the second when we say, “I will do only what God tells.” What do we think of this?  
(*Matthew 7: 21-23; Luke 6: 46*)
- 53 What are the floods and storms which try to overwhelm us today? How are we to build on rock?  
(*Matthew 7: 24-27; Luke 6: 47-49*)

Have a time of silence to consider what step in obedience God is asking of you (not of someone else).

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