

## The Sermon on the Mount

Imagine what it would have been like to be an Israelite when our Lord was on earth in human form. For 1000's of years the Jewish people had awaited the coming of the Messiah, some perhaps with the understanding that He would indeed be the Son of God, God Himself. What would it be like when He came, as He promised He would? What would He do, what would He say? What would it be like to hear the word of God, God's own teaching, His own revelation, from His own lips? And then finally, after eons...He arrives. Ladies and gentlemen, do we long to hear God's own message, His own words? Do we seek after it? If not, how can we claim to love Him? It is easy to get used to hearing God's words without really listening to them.

For weekday Mass, the Gospels over the past week or so have been coming from what's called our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Let us set the stage. Our Lord, God Himself in human form, sees a multitude, a multitude longing to hear God's own words directly from His own mouth. These are His children and He wants to draw them to Himself and to the home He has prepared for them. He must teach them how to be in order for them to get there. So, He goes up the mount – a high, steep, hill actually – and He sits. The seated position is a position of authority in Jewish tradition. He opens His mouth and begins to speak. And what does He say?

We will come back to what He says. Let's begin with an overview. The "Sermon on the Mount" is our Lord's longest recorded discourse in Sacred Scripture, occupying 3 full chapters in the Gospel of Matthew. It is our Lord's great moral teaching. St Augustine said that the entirety of moral teaching can be found in this discourse. What does moral teaching refer to? People often think it means just sexual morality but morality covers the whole spectrum of human actions – both interior and exterior actions, interior actions being things like thoughts, motives, intentions, disposition, and so on. Sexual morality is just a part of morality. The topic of virtues, for example – habitual ways of being – falls under morality. One of the most important things to bear in mind, something that will both help to understand what our Lord presents here and motivate us to embrace it, is that our Lord is actually telling us who He is, what He is like, with these moral teachings, and thus what we must become. The Sermon on the Mount could easily be renamed: The Imitation of Christ.

To become like Christ (Imitation of Christ) is the essence of getting to Heaven. We must fix in our minds that there is no Heaven without being perfectly conformed to our Lord. What makes Heaven Heaven is seeing God face-to-face, being in the presence of the all-good beloved. But if I'm forced to be in the presence of someone that I hate or even just don't like, that's misery not joy. If I hate or reject or place judgement on our Lord's teachings, then I hate or reject or place judgement on Him. His teachings are about who He is, what He is like. One of the mystics of the Church said something like: those in Heaven and those in hell both see the same thing – the love of God, but those in hell experience it as wrath and pain whereas those in Heaven experience it as ecstatic joy. Everyone will almost certainly find something in the Sermon on the Mount that they don't really like or at least that they don't want to do. I know I do. But the "solution" is not to say: I will be a god unto myself and I will decide what is right, good, and true. No, that will only land a person in hell. When you run into something that our Lord is commanding and you don't want to do it, you just have to say to yourself and to the Lord: Lord, I really don't want to (turn the other cheek, for example) but because you say so and because this is the way you are, I will put my mind to it and I will strive to do it better and better...for your sake, because you say so, because this is the way You are and I want to be like You, just like a son wants to be like his father. It's not easy, but nothing worthwhile is cheap, easy, or automatic.

After eons of waiting, our Lord, God in human form, has arrived. He mounts the big hill and is seated. We are about to hear God Himself speak the truths of life to us. He opens His mouth and begins to speak. What does He say? He starts with what we now call the Beatitudes. Beatitude does mean happiness but it is not an "ordinary" happiness that we might experience in this life and this world, one that comes and goes. It is an ecstatic happiness that never subsides. The happiness that the word beatitude refers to is the happiness of Heaven. He opens His mouth and begins to speak...and what comes out of God's mouth is perhaps quite surprising and unexpected. It turns any worldly notion of happiness upside down and inside out. Our Lord says that Blessed are the lowly, those with poverty of spirit, who think little of themselves, who often end up being nobodies in the eyes of the world, like Joseph & Mary. We should pause on this very first instruction. What do

you think of it? Do you accept it? Will you really try to put it into practice, live it out in everyday life? Or do you place judgement on it? Do you say, well, I guess that's fine and dandy for others but, well, I'm just too important or too smart for that, people look up to me, and on and on? If so, we have rejected our Lord and what He's like. He says Blessed are those who mourn. Do I really mourn my own sins? Do I really mourn the loss of faith so prevalent in the world? Do I mourn the blasphemy and other gross offenses against God and His saints that is heralded as virtue today? Do I mourn the glorification of sin? Do I mourn enough that I want to make reparation to our Lord for these things? Blessed are you when you are persecuted for My sake – not “persecuted” rightly because of my sins, but persecuted because I stand with the Lord. Is this something I am willing to endure? Is my love for our Lord that great? Am I willing to embrace the virtue of humility in its full reality and all of that goes with it?

There is way more in the great Sermon on the Mount than what can be covered in one article – or for that matter a whole book. A whole book (or books) could be written on the Beatitudes alone, and that's only the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Nonetheless, let us turn to a few more things that our Lord says here, especially ones that might be more difficult to understand or just simply difficult to live out. One that will probably be difficult for many, myself included, is this:

“You have heard it said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.” Ah Lord, I really don't want to “turn the other cheek;” I want to give the guy his comeuppance! The first thing we have to do is understand what He means here, that still won't make it easy but we do have to be clear about what it means. Both Aquinas and Augustine give long commentaries on this passage, indicating that there's a lot to say in order to understand it correctly. Let's start with: an eye for an eye. Our Lord said at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount that He has not come to set aside the law – not even one small part – but to fulfill it, i.e., to fill it out, to complete it. Augustine points out, then, that “an eye for an eye” in the Old Testament was not a positive command – it did/does not mean that you must take an eye for an eye. It was rather, Augustine explains, meant to limit a man's vengeance. The inclination is to do a hundred times over whatever was done to me. That guy stole my horse and I'm gonna take everything he has and burn his place to the ground on top of it. So limiting ‘vengeance’ to strictly an eye for an eye was a first step; but now our Lord fills out or completes that command by saying: seek no vengeance at all, don't even desire it. Now this does not eliminate some degree of self-defense, including that on the part of a country or state. But even there, the motivation is the good of the attacker (to stop them from sinning) and the good of all others. In regard to “self-defense” by government, Aquinas says this in his commentary on this passage: “For someone can resist evil in two ways: out of love for a public good or for a private one. But the Lord did not intend to prohibit us from resisting evil for the good of the community, but rather that no one should burn with revenge for his own private good. For nothing preserves the society of men more than that a man not have the power of doing evil for his own private ends.” In other words, our Lord's command here does not preclude stopping those who do harm to others.

The thrust of the command is fairly simple: don't seek or even desire revenge but Augustine does perhaps the best job of bringing this out: “*let him not resist* should be understood according to the preparation of the soul: for a man should be prepared to endure or undergo all evils for the benefit of his neighbor. If someone, for example, were taking care of a deranged man who struck him or did something like that, the first man, if he had good will toward the other, would be prepared to endure even other evils for his welfare: and this you must do for the benefit of the Church.” This is largely a reiteration of the spiritual work of mercy: bear wrongs patiently.

Part of the reason for pulling out this particular command, from all of those given in the Sermon on the Mount, is because it really helps to grasp the way that our Lord is, and in particular how He is towards us. This is exactly how He is towards us. Suppose God lived by the rule: an eye for an eye. We'd all be sunk. If you don't realize that it's probably because of the vice of pride. It should instill within us a tremendous appreciation for what He has done, for the way that He is towards us. He does not seek vengeance, He desires repentance and conversion so that He can bestow on us the great inheritance that He has prepared for us.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.