

A MOSTLY MISUNDERSTOOD SECTION OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

WE REFER to the section Matthew vi. 25ff. The usual traditional exposition is about as follows:

You need not have any care for food and clothes; you have, of course, to work to get these things, but "cast all your care upon Him; He careth for you" (1 Pet. v. 7). "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." It is enough that you have your share of every day's evil or troubles.

It is now maintained that this view is entirely wrong. What the Lord says is something entirely different. Thoughts, not wrong in themselves, but taken from elsewhere, are substituted for what the Lord actually says. But can we afford to lose even a single word that He says and that we have in the Gospel narrative? The answer ought certainly to be an emphatic "No".

What does the Lord then say in the section in question?

First of all let us determine clearly and without any compromise the answer to this question: are those to whom the Lord speaks here to work for food and clothes or are they not to work for these things?

When the Lord refers them to the birds and the lilies which do not work and yet receive all that they need, does this imply that the Lord's listeners, the addressees here, whoever they were (we come to that point later on), should work or not work? It is indeed very difficult to evade the conclusion that they, too, were exempted from working for food and clothes and yet would get all that they needed. Whether others had and have to work for livelihood—and that they have is so clear from the teaching of the New Testament that we need not labour this point any more—one thing must be clear: those to whom the Lord speaks here were exempted from working for their livelihood, but on one condition: if they sought first the kingdom of God, whatever this expression means. The traditional exposition and view may be wrong here.

We proceed to the Greek word which is rendered "take thought". It occurs in verses 25, 27, 31 and 34. What does this

Greek word mean? For this is the point; the translation may be wrong.

The Greek word *μέριμνα* means "care" and it means also "work". In verse 27, where it is used about the impossibility of adding one cubit unto the stature, the meaning "care" is clearly out of question.¹ Should such a thing at all be possible—and it is obviously no easy matter, to say the least of it—then all imaginable exertion would obviously be necessary. Our very section shows consequently unavoidably that *μέριμνα* can mean "work" and that it *must* mean work in verse 27. Does it then mean something else in the other verses of the same section? It may be the case. But is it so in reality?

You remember the narrative about our Lord being the guest of the two sisters Martha and Mary. "Martha was cumbered about much serving", it is stated. She is annoyed that her sister does not help her and complains hereof before the Lord. The Lord answers: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful (and troubled) about many things." But she did not sit in a corner and give herself over to grievous thoughts. That was not her nature. She worked all she could for the meal for the Lord and His disciples. *Μέριμνα* means here "work", not "care". The translation can rightly be questioned. 1 Corinthians vii. 32, 33; 1 Corinthians xii. 25; Philippians ii. 20; 2 Corinthians xi. 28 and Luke xxi. 34 are other passages where *μέριμνα* certainly means work, exertion and not or not only anxious thoughts.

Leaving the word *μέριμνα* aside for a moment, we consider what the Gentiles are doing. They are said, in verse 32, to "seek all these things", i.e. food and clothes. What does the word "seek" mean, what *must* it mean here?

Nobody will in earnest maintain or even in his wildest dreams imagine that the Gentiles, proverbially so happy and therefore logically so enviable, run about here and there seeking food and clothes. They will certainly have to work for "all these things", yea, work hard, at least their womenfolk.

If now the Gentiles' seeking is work, mostly hard work, is it then reasonable to think that the Lord's exhortation to His listeners—whoever they are—"Seek ye first the kingdom of God" means something else than some work, some kind of work for the sake of the kingdom of God? It may refer to working

¹ If we did not know it before, the modern psychologists tell us clearly that cares are most apt to shorten the life instead of lengthen it. Most probably it had been the same at the time of our Lord.

out one's own salvation, as St. Paul says (Phil. ii. 12), or it may refer to some sort of work to bring others into the kingdom of God. That this latter thing also is a work, yea, a heavy work, the same St. Paul asserts many times in his epistles. Which meaning may here be the right one?

The Lord says that unto those who "seek first the kingdom of God . . . all these things [i.e. food and clothes] shall be added". Can He mean that those who work out their own salvation (by listening to God in the Bible, by talking to Him in prayer and by letting this communion with God bear fruit in their relationship to the brethren, to those outside, and to the things in the world) will get "all these things" without the least effort on their part, so to say as a kind of reward? That is hardly possible. On the contrary it is only reasonable and wholly in concordance with what we read in the New Testament that those who are working to bring others into the Kingdom get their earthly needs without needing to work for these things, as, e.g., St. Paul says: "Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel" (1 Cor. ix. 14). We therefore conclude and strongly assert that the Greek word *μέριμνα*, rendered in verse 33 by "taking thought" (i.e. care) must here also mean "work" and nothing else.

We now may be prepared to find out who those were to whom the Lord says all this. If they are to work for bringing others into the kingdom of God, they certainly are themselves members of this kingdom. For how could those outside it be exhorted to bring others where they were not themselves? Were they at all able to perform such a thing?

What, then, about the sufficiency of the evil in verse 33?

"Evil" is the translation of the Greek word *κακία*. What does this word refer to?

The life of our Lord as well as the lives of His disciples, especially of those who preached the Kingdom of God, show abundantly how much they had to suffer through the opposition from their hearers, especially the Jews. Think, e.g., of St. Paul's several catalogues of his sufferings. It is, by the way, these he refers to by the expression "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. xii. 7, the context of which together with several other facts show that there can be no thought or talk of any illness here). The "evil" about which the Lord speaks here is the wickedness of men shown by rejecting the Gospel preached to them by His messengers, so

that when these were hungry, they gave them no meat, when they were thirsty, they gave them no drink, etc., according to the words of the King and Judge in Matthew xxv. 42ff.

With the word about the *κατα*, the wickedness, chapter vi ends. And therefore most people think that there is no connection with the following chapter. That is, however, a grave mistake. The division into chapters does not belong to the original, but was made in the sixteenth century and is at some places not made according to the meaning.

Let us think again and look at the situation.

The disciples obeyed the word of their Master to preach the gospel to men. Mostly their message was rejected and they themselves were, as the Lord very clearly predicts (Matt. xxiv. 9), "hated of all nations". This experience contained a very strong temptation for them to judge. Yet they should resist the temptation. This is expressly said in vii. 1: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Whether the Lord added this warning here or not we do not know. St. Matthew felt from what he otherwise had learnt from his Master that such a warning was most necessary and added it here. And we certainly think he was right.

St. Paul remembered this warning of the Lord as well as he remembered the promise above referred to. He writes in 2 Timothy iv. 14: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil (Gk. *κατα*); the Lord will reward him according to his works."

This exposition of the section of the Sermon on the Mount in question is greatly strengthened by St. John in his third epistle. But he looks at the matter, so to say, from the other side. He praises Gaius, to whom he writes, because he acted faithfully, i.e. showed his faith towards God, by helping those brethren who "went forth", namely to preach the gospel, "taking nothing of the Gentiles", and being sure that he would get all he needed, while the disciples who "went forth" to the Gentiles "to seek first the kingdom of God" had to show their faith towards God by forgoing work for their livelihood and yet being sure they would get all they needed.

The high esteem of the Sermon on the Mount has not wholly been an advantage. It has caused a certain amount of isolation for this portion of the New Testament, so that its very real and important connection with the other parts of the New Testament has been overlooked to a great extent. But if this happens,

then there is a great danger that it will be misunderstood and misinterpreted. And this is really a most regrettable fact. The difference between the traditional exposition and that given above bears witness hereto.

I am greatly indebted to the distinguished German scholar, Professor K. Bornhäuser, late of Marburg, for most of the views put forward above. Professor J. Jeremias of Göttingen, who does not always endorse Prof. Bornhäuser's findings, says however here: "B. has seen correctly that the Lord here forbids his disciples the double work, the one for their livelihood and the other 'to seek first the kingdom of God'" (*Die Gleichnisse Jesu* [Zürich, 1947], p. 104).

Some people say—as a preacher in fact said the other day—that we rob ourselves of a precious and very necessary promise of the Lord through this exposition. Has the Lord not promised his disciples that they may "cast all their cares on Him"? To this we would answer the following. We do not take away any word of the Lord. On the contrary, we regain and re-establish a very important promise that He once gave foremost to the apostles.

When a change took place within the Christian Church, when the zeal for winning men for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and therefore the work of evangelising slackened and the need of this word of the Lord was not felt and the true meaning of it forgotten, a new way of explanation made itself necessary. The section was there in the Gospel and had to be explained. So it was made to refer to the cares, "thoughts". The new explanation, in truth foreign to the original meaning, was taken from somewhere else. It is very good indeed. There is no doubt about that. But the fault is that it actually robs us of a word of Jesus. How can we afford to do so? Besides, times may come when we are again in need of this very word. Then we shall understand it and thank Him who gave it to us.

C. SANDEGREN.

Uppsala,
Sweden.

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THE DOCTRINE OF REDEMPTION IN THE ACROSTIC SCRIPTURES

IN THE Book of the Psalms there are seven psalms which in the Hebrew are acrostic; that is to say, the first verse or clause begins with *Aleph*, and each succeeding verse or clause begins with the letter next in order in the alphabet.

If these scriptures are carefully studied many interesting facts emerge, but the predominant impressions are: (1) the grandeur of design in the original Scriptures; (2) the "scarlet thread" underlying Holy Writ, viz. emphasis on blood-redemption. The seven psalms are xxv, xxxiv, xxxvii, cxi, cxii, cxix, cxlv.

The 119th psalm has eight verses to each letter of the alphabet, so with the other six psalms running through it once we have the alphabet traversed fourteen times in the seven psalms. Without delving into Panin-ism, this is an evidence of design.

When we examine Psalms xxv and xxxiv we find that an extra verse beginning with *Pe* is added to the end, in each case the extra verse begins with the redemption verb *padah* (cf. Exod. xiii. 13); in Psalm xxv a prayer, "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles", and in Psalm xxxiv, "Jehovah redeemeth the soul of His servants, and none of them that trust in him shall be desolate". In the Hebrew the verb comes first. "Trust in the Redeemer" in the Old Testament is an adumbration of "faith in His blood" in the New Testament (Rom. iii. 25).

Fuller light is thrown on this truth when we consider the *Pe* verse in these psalms in their proper sequence.

Here again a word of the same root is used in each psalm: in Psalm xxv. 16, "Turn unto me" (or "Face unto me", as the verb really means) and in Psalm xxxiv. 16 the noun from the same root is used, "The face of Jehovah is against them that do evil". So in each case the truth is emphasised; the only way one can enjoy Peniel, the face of God (cf. Gen. xxxii. 30), is—as shown in the final extra verse—by redemption: "When I see the blood, I will hover over you" (Exod. xii. 13)—if there is no blood, His face is against the sinner.

When we go outside the Psalms we find a similar design and the same truth. In the Book of Lamentations we find four acrostic chapters. The first two traverse the alphabet once in each case, but the third chapter with its sixty-six verses has a

triple frame for the "man of sorrows" it depicts—three consecutive *Alephs*, *Beths*, etc., three consecutive occurrences for each of the twenty-two letters. When we come to the fourth chapter we find the twenty-two letters occurring once each in the right order. This makes the sixth time the alphabet was run through. But when we come to examine the fifth chapter, there is no acrostic, no alphabetic order—it is broken up, surely, to show the broken condition of Zion and Israel.

Nevertheless the present writer felt somewhere in Holy Writ should be the seventh acrostic chapter and he can still remember the thrill when, while a missionary in North Africa, he found one day in his studies that the tenth verse in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs begins an acrostic. There the Perfect Bride is depicted in the next twenty-two verses and surely the triply-framed Man of Sorrows in Lamentations iii is to be joined to the Bride of Proverbs xxxi.

In one case the perfect Man of Sorrows is foreshadowed and in the other His perfect Bride—the Church purchased with His blood who "clothes her household with scarlet" (*verse 21*).

Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

*Brockenhurst,
Hants.*

F. A. RAYNER.