

The inspired writer shifts with delightful ease his standpoint of observation, backward and forward. Now he assumes the fact of incarnation. Now he subsumes the reality of pre-existence. Here he steps backward, and running along the everlasting line of the divine nature of our Lord, antedates creation. Before Abraham was, Jesus is. Before Adam was, Jesus is. Before the worlds were, Jesus is. *The Father made the worlds through Him*, both the 'under' and the 'upper' world,—the whole universe; and hence He is fit to bear, without incongruity on the one hand, and without the least sense of oppression or weariness on the other, the entire weight and glory of the dignity that is involved in being Heir and Lord and Ruler of "all things."

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THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

ST. MATTHEW v—vii.

I. The Argument of the Sermon.

THE Sermon on the Mount is confessedly the master-piece of ethical wisdom. Nothing between the covers of the Bible is more admired, or so generally admired. Yet the Lord Jesus did not give the world his best wine in this cup, marvellous and precious though it be. The best thing in the Gospels is the gospel itself,—that manifestation of the righteousness and love of God in the person, the life, and the death of his Son by which He wins our love and makes us righteous. This disclosure of the redeeming love of God which proves the Father of all men to be "the Saviour of all men,"

is, beyond comparison, the most precious possession of the human race.

But after "the good tidings of great joy," probably nothing is more precious to us than the Sermon in which the Lord Jesus places his ideal, the distinctively Christian ideal, of human life before us, — an ideal so beautiful, and which so sweetly commends itself at once to our judgments and our hearts, that many who reject the gospel nevertheless confess this Sermon to be the most perfect and sublime discourse which ever fell from the lips of man.

It was in the second year of his public ministry that, on his return from a tour through the towns and villages of Galilee, the Lord Jesus ascended a mountain to which He loved to repair for meditation and communion with his Father in heaven. This mountain was, in all probability, a singular elevation, some seven miles from the Sea of Gennesaret, which is known at this day as the *Kurn Hattin*, or "Horns of Hattin." It is an upland rather than a mountain, rising to about a thousand feet above the level of the sea, and distinctly marked out from the neighbouring eminences by the two humps, or horns, which rise some sixty feet above and crown the summit. Between these "horns" there is a wide stretch of grass, a natural amphitheatre, in which a great multitude might easily gather within hearing of a single voice.

It was up the lower slopes of this mountain that the Lord Jesus went on the day He returned from his tour, followed by an immense multitude "from Galilee, and from the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem,

and from Judæa, and from beyond Jordan." Gliding from among them as the night fell, separating Himself, as it would seem, even from the Twelve, He retired into some solitary spot on the summit of the mountain, and continued all night in prayer unto God.

On *this* night the Son of Man might well feel his need of a Divine Communion ; for, on the morrow, He was about to select the twelve men who were to be always with Him, to set them apart, not from the world only, but even from the general circle of his disciples, and formally to lay down the laws of that kingdom of which they were to be the ambassadors and apostles. Accordingly, at early dawn, He called his disciples round Him, and chose from among them "twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach." They had been called to his discipleship before ; now they are called to the apostleship, — called to leave all that they had, in order that they might follow Him, and bear witness to Him.

While He was thus calling and consecrating the Twelve, great multitudes had assembled on the mountain, longing to hear his voice and to see some mighty work. "Seeing the multitudes," Jesus, followed by his disciples, came down from the horn, or peak, on which He stood, to the flat summit of the mountain,¹ on which the people were gathered, and went among them, healing the diseases by which many of them were afflicted, and casting out the unclean spirits by which they were possessed, the whole multitude pressing on Him, and seeking to

¹ "The level space" of which St. Luke speaks (vi. 17).

touch Him, because a healing virtue went out of Him. Then, when they were seated on the flower-strewn grass of this natural amphitheatre, and were bending on Him attentive and expectant eyes, He seems to have climbed a few steps above them, and to have sat down, in the attitude of one who was about to teach. The apostles flock round Him, and seat themselves nearest to Him, in the exercise of the right and privilege He had just conferred upon them. And then, "being set," He "lifted up his eyes," which had probably been bent downward in inward prayer, and "opened his mouth," — a phrase used to denote the gravity of the occasion, and the solemnity and authority with which He spoke.

The Sermon dates itself—*i. e.*, it informs us at what season of the year it was preached. For as He spake, and to illustrate the lesson of tranquil rest in God, the Lord Jesus pointed the multitude to the lilies that clothed the grass with more than royal splendour, and to the birds—"the swifts"—that darted by, uttering their soft melodious wail; and the coming of the swifts and the opening of the lilies in the Galilean fields were signs that summer had begun. We may safely conclude, therefore, that the warm fragrant winds of early summer were blowing, and that the land was decked in its most varied and richest beauty when, seated on some jutting rock on the level summit of Hattin, the Son of man preached this divine discourse.

The occasion which prompted it helps us in many ways to the right interpretation of the Sermon. It was this. After He had opened his ministry in

Galilee, our Lord spent nearly a whole year in Jerusalem and its vicinity before He returned to the northern province and resumed his ministry among the peasants and boatmen with whom He had been familiar from childhood. We are told but little of his work in the metropolis during the time He sojourned in it, but we know that it issued in an open rupture with the rulers of the Jews—the priests and statesmen who, “dressed in a little brief authority,” did in very deed play “such fantastic tricks before high Heaven as made the angels weep.” So soon as they had caught the real scope and purport of his mission, they “persecuted Jesus, and sought to slay him.”

Rejected in Judæa, He returned to Galilee. And here, at first, He won great favour with the common people. They heard Him gladly. They followed Him from place to place, that they might hear more of the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth. His popularity and success were reported to the rulers in Jerusalem, who sent “doctors” into Galilee to collect materials for a charge against Him, and to “concert with the local Pharisees” how they might damage his reputation and lessen his influence with the friendly multitudes that followed Him. Finding Himself thus dogged and opposed, He set Himself to consolidate and organize his kingdom, to bind to his service those who were willing to risk all for his sake, and to give them leaders and guides. It was with this view that He chose the Twelve, who were to be always with Him, always learning that they might teach, and developed in them spiritual gifts and

powers which fitted them to co-operate with Him, and to carry on his work when He should be taken away. It was with this view also that He publicly and solemnly proclaimed to the multitude the laws of his kingdom, shewed them what manner of men they must become if they would be his disciples indeed, how pure and heavenly must be their spirit if they would enter the kingdom of heaven.

Some formal and authoritative proclamation of the principles on which his kingdom was to be based was greatly needed. For even the friendly multitude had formed many erroneous conceptions of Him, and of the spiritual kingdom He came to set up. In common with their whole race—and, one may almost say, in common with the whole world—they were expecting the advent of a great Teacher and Deliverer, who should give men “nobler modes of life, with sweeter manners, purer laws,” who should set up a veritable “kingdom of heaven” on the earth. They eagerly embraced the good news which Jesus proclaimed, that this kingdom of heaven was now at hand. They were even disposed to believe that He Himself was the promised Deliverer and Teacher. Some of them were fully persuaded that in Him they had found the Messiah, and had cheerfully left house and home that they might follow Him whithersoever He went, “being every one of them, however, big with Expectation from Him, that they should make their Fortunes in His service.” What most of all they needed was to be undeceived and instructed, to be stripped of the gross and erroneous

conceptions and hopes they had formed, and to be taught what they might really expect and hope for if they committed themselves to Him. And this most necessary instruction they received in the Sermon on the Mount, which they found to be a very Sermon *on the Mount*, since they discovered that they must climb high above their former selves if they were to dwell in its pure and lofty atmosphere and to breathe its spirit. The very Beatitudes, with which the Sermon opens, sufficed to shew them how wrongly they had conceived of the Messianic kingdom, how utterly their thoughts and expectations must be changed and raised if they were to accept *Jesus* as the Christ, and his kingdom as the kingdom of God. They had been taught by their rabbis to believe that when the Christ came they would be enriched with inexhaustible wealth, the gold and silver of all nations flowing into Jerusalem; that they would riot in mirth and luxury; that they would be permitted to take an ample revenge on all their enemies and to trample them under their feet. They believed that, instead of any longer earning a livelihood by the painful labours of a lawful vocation, they would be called to conquer and despoil the world; that, instead of shewing gentleness and compassion, they would be allowed to indulge the cruel and violent passions which wait on the sword: that, instead of paying tribute to Cæsar, the Messiah would summon them to revolt and conquest, and to set the world aflame, to pursue to the uttermost all that stood in their way, "without any thought of forgiving the injuries or patiently bearing the losses they had sustained

from their enemies." In short, nothing could be more opposed to the spirit and laws of Jesus the Saviour than the Messianic conceptions and hopes which they had been led to frame. It was to correct these misconceptions that the Beatitudes were uttered. Over against their expectation of unbounded wealth, and in rebuke of their covetous and ambitious spirit, Christ set his blessing on poverty and poverty of spirit. Over against their hope of an unstinted sensual mirth and enjoyment, He set his blessing on those who mourn. Over against their thirst for a fierce exterminating revenge on their enemies, He set his blessing on the meek. Over against their lust of conquest and spoliation and plunder, He set his blessing on righteousness and equity. Over against their spirit of hard unrelenting cruelty with which, as they conceived, their conquests were to be pursued, He set his blessing on the merciful and compassionate. Over against their hope of an unbridled indulgence of the lusts of the flesh, He set his blessing on purity of heart. Over against their eager anticipation of successful insurrection and revolt, He set his blessing on the lovers and makers of peace. Over against their design to pursue their enemies to the uttermost, He set his blessing on those who, so far from inflicting, patiently endure loss and wrong and persecution. Obviously, it entered into our Lord's design in uttering the whole series of Beatitudes, although it by no means exhausted his design, to correct the misconceptions of the Jewish multitude He addressed, to warn them against the evil dispositions they cherished and hoped to indulge in the very name of

Religion, and to shew them what manner of men they must become if they would acknowledge Him for their Lord and be enrolled among the subjects of his kingdom. In fine, so soon as we apprehend the occasion which prompted the Discourse, we get a new insight into its meaning throughout, just as, when we know at what season and amid what scenes it was delivered, we find a new beauty in many of its illustrations.

So much, then, for the scene, the time, and the occasion of the Sermon. It was preached in the green and sheltered amphitheatre on the summit of Hattin, what time the grass was bright with flowers and the air musical with the notes of birds; and it was designed to shew the multitudes what were the principles and laws of the kingdom they were minded to enter.

The main theme and *the argument* of the Sermon are not so easily determined as the conditions under which it was delivered; and even so great an expositor as Calvin has affirmed that it is not a sermon at all, but a collection of ethical maxims uttered by our Lord at different times in the course of his ministry, and arranged in one discourse by the evangelist Matthew. That theory, however, finds little support from the scholars of the present age; and, indeed, it never deserved so much as it once met. *They* are pretty well agreed that the Sermon on the Mount is a veritable sermon; though some of them maintain that St. Matthew has only presented the outlines of it. And, I suppose, the popular conception of the Sermon is that,

whether St. Matthew collected into one discourse the moral sayings uttered at various times, or whether he cared only to preserve the outlines of a discourse actually uttered on the horns of Hattin, what he really gives us is a series of weighty but disjointed utterances, without order or method, or logical connection. To most readers of the New Testament, I apprehend, the noble sayings which compose this Sermon have even less connection than the beads of a necklace, however valuable each may be in itself; for the beads are at least strung on a single cord, and do not merely touch each other on the outside.

Those who have entertained this conception of the Sermon on the Mount cannot get rid of it too soon or too completely. We shall never understand or appreciate the Sermon as we may and ought until we perceive that it has an organic and vital unity, until we see what the order and method of it are, and can link on thought to thought and verse to verse. Nor is it so difficult as it may seem to trace out the theme which gives unity and force to the whole discourse; for, when once the clue is put into our hands, we can only wonder that we should ever have missed our way.

It will help us to seize and to retain the clue if we bear well in mind that in this Sermon our Lord gave his first formal and public deliverance of the great body of truths He came to teach, of the moral laws and principles which He regarded it as his special mission to establish, and if we ask ourselves what we should expect to hear from Him on an occasion so solemn, and pregnant, and momentous.

What *was* his mission, then? His mission was to establish "the kingdom of heaven" upon the earth. Should we not expect, then, to hear from Him a formal and complete statement of the laws and principles by which that kingdom was ruled, and by a willing obedience to which men might enter it? But there was already a divine kingdom on the earth, or what claimed to be a divine kingdom, in the Hebrew Commonwealth and in the Law that came by Moses. Should we not, then, expect to hear how the new form of this kingdom was related to the old, and in what the new was better than the old which it came to supersede? Well, this is precisely what Christ gives us in the Sermon on the Mount. He meets our natural expectations: He does lay down the laws and principles of the kingdom of heaven; He does shew how the new form of that kingdom which He came to set up was related to the old Jewish form, and in what respects it excelled and surpassed it. And here we have the only clue we require to the true method and connection of this sublime Discourse.

But we may put the case in another and a still more helpful form, because a form which recalls many of the most memorable and impressive sayings of the Sermon. The Mosaic law was given to reveal the righteousness of God, and to induce men to make that righteousness their own. The Hebrews were called to a special communion and a special relation to Him, that they might become both a righteous people and a model and pattern of righteousness to all the earth. In like manner, as St. Paul affirms, Christ came to reveal the righteous-

ness of God, in order that we might submit to it instead of any longer going about to establish a righteousness of our own.¹ That is to say, He came to disclose the right and kind will of God, and in disclosing this will to put before men an ideal of life at once higher than any they had known before, and, in much, contradictory to the ideals they had hitherto cherished. He came to teach that to live in love was better than to strive for supremacy, that to be poor in spirit was better than to be rich in goods, that to be wise was better than to be powerful, that to be good was better than to be wise, that to bear pain was better than to inflict it, that to serve others was at once better than to rule them and the only true way of ruling them, that to overcome evil with good was better than to return blow for blow and curse for curse : and this was an ideal which, while it transcended, also contradicted the ideal of life that ruled the heathen world. He came, moreover, to teach that obedience is better than sacrifice, that an inward faith is better than an outward service, that a secret and modest goodness is better than a scrupulous and ostentatious observance of religious rule ; in brief, that charity is the end of the commandment and the fulfilling of the law : and this was an ideal which at once transcended and contradicted the Hebrew ideal of life.

Now, as Christ came to reveal the righteousness of God, should we not expect to hear from Him in what that righteousness consisted ? As He came to reverse and surpass the conceptions of righteous-

¹ Romans x. 3, 4

ness which men then held to be the highest and best, should we not expect to hear from Him how his righteousness stood related to these former conceptions and ideals, and in what respects it excelled them? Well, but this again is the true clue to the meaning and connection of his Discourse. He meets our expectations. He shews us both what the new righteousness is and in what, if we take Him for our Teacher and Lord, our righteousness must exceed not only that of the heathen and the publican but also that of the Pharisees and Scribes.

Let us take this clue in our hands, then, and follow it through the Sermon. Unless I much mistake, it will guide us safely from end to end.

The Sermon opens with "the Beatitudes." And here, in eight matchless sentences, Christ claims as his own the poor in spirit, those who mourn for sin, the meek, those who yearn for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the pacific, and those who suffer for righteousness' sake. *These* are the qualities and virtues He singles out for the special approbation of Heaven. The new righteousness, that which men are to seek, and seek first, is not wealth, nor high estate, nor courage, nor political power, nor culture, nor wisdom, nor an exact observance of maxims and rites, but humility, penitence, meekness, compassion, purity, peacefulness, patience—virtues, in short, which men had heretofore hardly regarded as virtues, and still less as the highest virtues. He then shews his disciples how great their blessedness will be, how healthy their influence, how fruitful their service, if they possess themselves of the new righteousness; they will be

as the salt of a corrupted world, the light of a darkened world, and will win men, by their good deeds, to glorify their Father in heaven.

But all this was so new and surprising, so much in advance of the current conceptions of what was right and good and fair, that, lest men should suppose He asked them to break with the past and with all that was good in it and best, the Lord Jesus proceeds to shew both that his righteousness is a development, a fulfilment, of the highest law yet given to man, that He has come not to destroy but to complete and perfect it; and that the new righteousness is better than the old, because it fulfils and completes it, because it is so much more searching and inward and spiritual. He has not come to take away a single jot or tittle from the law, to break, or to teach men to break, even the least of its commandments; and yet, if they would enter the kingdom of heaven, their righteousness must exceed that of the most punctilious observers of the old law. To make this clear He contrasts the new righteousness with the old, the Gospel with the Law, in five cardinal points of the moral code: in the law of murder, the law of adultery, the law of oaths, the law of retaliation, and the law of charity. As He knew that out of the heart are the issues of life, He carried the Divine law *inward*, and gave it authority over the thoughts and passions of the soul. He sought to purify and sweeten human conduct by sweetening and purifying its source. The law had been content, in the ruder stages of society, to forbid the murder which springs from anger; but He forbids the anger from which it springs, affirm-

ing that whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer, although his hatred should not express itself in any overt act. The law had forbidden the act of lust; He condemns the adultery of the eye and of the heart. The law, restraining the natural inconstancy of passion, had forbidden men to put away their wives save by a public and legal act; He makes it criminal to divorce a wife save for the one crime which proves her to have already separated herself from her husband. The law had forbidden the violation of oaths; He teaches men to cultivate the sincerity which renders oaths unnecessary, affirming not that they are evil in themselves indeed, but that they come of that which is evil, of the insincerity and untrustworthiness into which men have fallen. The law, because of the weakness of those who had received it, had permitted retaliation; He bids us, instead of requiting evil with evil, to overcome evil with good. The law had enjoined men to love their friends only; He enjoins us to love our very enemies, that so we may become perfect, even as our Father who is in heaven is perfect. In each case He shews that his new righteousness is simply an extension, a development, of the old; and that, simply because it is a development, a fulfilment, it must be better than the old.

So that, in the first section of his Sermon (Chap. v.) He takes the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven for his theme, and shews us both what it is in itself, and how it transcends the righteousness which is of the law: in verses 1-16 He teaches us what it is in itself, what virtues it inculcates and demands; and, in the rest of the

Chapter, he proves that, in five main respects, it transcends the older righteousness.

In the next section of the Sermon (Chap. vi.) He pursues precisely the same theme in the very same method; though now his Discourse takes even a more practical and familiar tone. In verses 1-18, He shews that in the daily duties, in the ritual of religion, no less than in its moral code, the new righteousness is better than the old: that it is better in almsgiving, better in prayer, better in fasting; and better very mainly because it is unostentatious, simple, modest; because it "does its righteousness" unto God, and not to be seen of men: while, in verses 16-34, He shews what this new righteousness is in itself,—bidding men take in the whole round of their daily life the same simple, unostentatious, unselfish, and unworldly tone which He had enjoined them to take when they worshipped God, and thus to make their whole life worshipful. They are to lay up treasure in heaven rather than on earth; they are to keep a single eye that they may walk in light; they are not to attempt an impossible combination of the service of Mammon with the service of God; they are to replace an anxious care for the morrow with a cordial trust in Him who clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the fowl of the air. In the worship of the Sanctuary and in the daily worship of an obedient and heavenly life they are to transcend the current conceptions of righteousness; their lives are to be as much better than those of the Pharisees as their thoughts are to be higher than the teaching of the Scribes.

In the final section of the Sermon (Chap. vii.) the same strain of thought is continued and carried to a noble close. Our Lord still has the new and the old righteousness in his mind, and runs a tacit comparison between them. The Scribes and Pharisees were nothing if not critical and censorious; but we, if we would have and shew the true righteousness, are not to judge our neighbours, not to pluck at motes in their eyes while some monstrous beam is projecting from our own. *They* were ostentatious, doing their good deeds to be seen of men; but *we* are not to parade our religious principles and emotions, lest we profane that which is holy and vulgarize that which is select and precious—casting that which should be sacred to God before the dogs and pearls before swine (verses 1-6). But, as it is very hard to subdue the censoriousness and vanity which are native to us, our Lord bids us pray for Divine help in our great task, and assures us that, if we ask, we shall have, that if we seek, we shall find (verses 7-11).

In the Golden Rule (verse 12), He sums up our whole duty to man, bidding us do to others "all things whatsoever" we would that they should do to us; and assuring us that, if we thus replace our natural selfishness with charity, we shall rise into a righteousness which will be the fulfilment of whatever either the law or the prophets have enjoined. A golden rule indeed; no doubt obedience to it would bring in the golden age: but it is as hard to obey as it is easy to repeat. To obey it is like pushing through a strait gate and walking in a narrow path; whereas to follow the promptings of

our native selfishness is like passing through a wide gate and walking in a broad way, with many companions at our side. Christ exhorts us to prefer the strait gate and narrow path of charity, since this leads to the lofty halls and ample spaces of eternal life; while the way of selfishness, though the entrance to it be spacious and the path easy for a time, can only land us in the dark and crowded pit of perdition (verses 13, 14).

He is urgent with us that we make a right choice, for a special danger attends the act of choice. False prophets hang about the gates to beguile us into a wrong choice, to betray us to our harm; to put a noble seeming of manliness and independence on self-will and self-indulgence, and a mean appearance of weakness and cowardice on the righteousness which springs from love. Against these misguided and misleading prophets, who hide a wolf's heart under their fleece, we must be on our guard (verses 15-23).

And so we reach the close of the Sermon in the impressive parable on Profession and Obedience, in which the issues of the old and the new righteousness are set forth. The righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees was a righteousness of the word and the mouth, of publicity and parade; the righteousness of Christ is to be a righteousness in deed and in reality. Their righteousness was built on the sand of profession; his, on the rock of obedience. Sand may be a good foundation where there are no tides, no torrents, no storms; and talk might serve our turn did we not live in a world of realities: but the world is very real, with real and perilous storms of change in it. To build on sand is, therefore, to lose

our labour ; we can be secure against all tides and storms only as we build on the solid rock.

A more detailed and elaborate examination of the movement of thought in this incomparable Discourse would have greatly strengthened our argument ; but even this brief and meagre outline of it may suffice to shew that the Sermon on the Mount is a true sermon, quick with a vital and organic unity, and not a mere collection of detached and unconnected maxims. Its sole and ruling theme is *Righteousness*—the righteousness which Christ came to reveal, and the superiority of this new Christian righteousness over that of the law which He came both to fulfil and to abolish by fulfilling it. And when once we grasp this theme, we may easily trace it through its modulations, and see how it moulds and inspires the whole Discourse.

CARPUS.
