

OUR LORD'S
SERMON ON
THE MOUNT

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According to Matthew

by
St. Augustine of Hippo

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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BOOK I

*Explanation of the first part of the sermon
delivered by our Lord on the mount, as
contained in the fifth chapter of Matthew.*

CHAPTER I

If any one will piously and soberly consider the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke on the mount, as we read it in the Gospel according to Matthew, I think that he will find in it, so far as regards the highest morals, a perfect standard of the Christian life: and this we do not rashly venture to promise, but gather it from the very words of the Lord Himself. For the sermon itself is brought to a close in such a way, that it is clear there are in it all the precepts which go to mould the life. For thus He speaks: “Therefore, whosoever heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, I will liken¹ him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat² upon that house; and it fell not: for it

¹ *Similabo*. The Vulgate, conforming more closely to the Greek, has *assimilabitur*, “shall be likened.”

² *Offenderunt*; the Vulgate has *irruerunt*.

was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, I will liken³ unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it." Since, therefore, He has not simply said, "Whosoever heareth my words," but has made an addition, saying, "Whosoever heareth these words of mine," He has sufficiently indicated, as I think, that these sayings which He uttered on the mount so perfectly guide the life of those who may be willing to live according to them, that they may justly be compared to one building upon a rock. I have said this merely that it may be clear that the sermon before us is perfect in all the precepts by which the Christian life is moulded; for as regards this particular section a more careful treatment will be given in its own place.⁴

³ The Vulgate, more closely conforming to the Greek, has *similis erit*.

⁴ The main purpose of the Sermon on the Mount has been variously stated. Augustine regards it as a perfect code of morals. Tholuck (*Die Bergpredigt*) calls it "the Magna Charta of the kingdom of heaven." Lange says, "The grand fundamental idea is to present the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven in its relation to that of the Old Testament theocracy." Geikie declares it to be the "formal inauguration of the kingdom of God and the Magna Charta

of our faith." Edersheim regards it as presenting "the full delineation of the ideal man of God, of prayer, and of righteousness; in short, of the inward and outward manifestation of discipleship." Meyer (*Com.* 6th ed. p. 210) says that the aim of Jesus is, as the One who fulfils the Law and the Prophets, to present the moral conditions of participation in the Messianic kingdom. Weiss (*Leben Jesu*) speaks of it as being "as little an ethical discourse as a new proclamation of law. It is nothing else than an announcement of the kingdom of God, in which is visible everywhere the purpose of Jesus to distinguish between its righteousness and the righteousness revealed in the Old Testament as well as that taught by the teachers of his day."

The Sermon on the Mount is a practical discourse, containing little of what, in the strict sense, may be termed the *credenda* of Christianity. It is the fullest statement of the nature and obligations of citizenship in God's kingdom. It is noteworthy for its omissions as well as for its contents. No reference is made to a priesthood, a ritual, sacred places, or offerings. There is almost a total absence of all that is sensuous and external. It deals with the motives and affections of the inner man, and so comes into comparison and contrast with the Mosaic law as well as with the Pharisaic ceremonialism of the Lord's Day. The moral grandeur of the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount has been acknowledged by believer and sceptics alike. Renan (*Life of Jesus*) says, "The Sermon on the Mount will never be surpassed." On the 15th of October, 1852, two weeks before he died, Daniel Webster wrote and signed his name to the following words, containing a testimony to this portion of Scripture, which he also ordered placed upon his tombstone: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief....My heart has assured me and reassured me that the gospel of Jesus Christ must

The beginning, then, of this sermon is introduced as follows: "And when He saw the great⁵ multitudes,

be a divine reality. The Sermon on the Mount cannot be a merely human production. This belief enters into the very depth of my conscience. The whole history of man proves it" (Curtis, *Life of Webster*, ii. p. 684).

The relation which the reports of Matthew and Luke (vi. 20–49) sustain to each other is ignored by Augustine here (who, except in rare cases, omits all critical discussion), but is discussed in his *Harmony of the Gospels*, ii. 19. The agreements are numerous. The differences are striking, and concern the matter, the arrangement, the language, and the setting of the sermon. Matthew has a hundred and seven verses, Luke thirty. Matthew has seven (or eight) beatitudes, Luke but four, and adds four woes which Matthew omits. According to the first evangelist Jesus spoke sitting on a mountain: according to the third evangelist He spoke standing, and in the plain. The views are, (1) Matthew and Luke give accounts of the same discourse (Origen, Chrysostom, Calvin, Tholuck, Meyer, Keil, Schaff, Weiss). (2) They report different sermons spoken at different times (Augustine not positively, Storr, Plumptre). This is not probable, as so much of the matter in both is identical: both begin with the same beatitude, and close with the same parable; and both accounts are followed with the report of the healing of the centurion's servant. (3) The two sermons were delivered in close succession on the summit of the mountain to the disciples, and on the plain to the multitude (Lange). Alford confesses inability to reconcile the discrepancy.

⁵ *Multas turbas*. The Vulgate omits *multas*.

He went up into a mountain:⁶ and when He was set, His disciples came unto Him: and He opened His mouth, and taught them, saying.” If it is asked what the “mountain” means, it may well be understood as meaning the greater precepts of righteousness; for there were lesser ones which were given to the Jews. Yet it is one God who, through His holy prophets and servants, according to a thoroughly arranged distribution of times, gave the lesser precepts to a people who as yet required to be bound by fear; and who, through His Son, gave the greater ones to a people whom it had now become suitable to set free by love. Moreover,

⁶ The Greek has the definite article τὸ ὄρος. Some, on this ground, explain the expression to mean “mountain region.” According to the Latin tradition of the time of the Crusaders, the exact spot is the Horns of Hattin, which Dean Stanley (*Sinai and Palestine*, Am. ed. p. 436) and most others adopt. The hill, which is horned like a saddle, is southwest of Capernaum, and commands a good view of the Lake of Galilee. It seems to meet the requirements of the text. Robinson says there are a dozen other hills as eligible as this one. Tholuck enlarges upon the “beautiful temple of nature in which the Lord delivered the sermon.” Matthew Henry says, “When the law was given, the Lord came down upon the mountain, now the Lord went up; then He spake in thunder and lightning, now in a still, small voice; then the people were ordered to keep their distance, now they are invited to draw near,—a blessed change!”

when the lesser are given to the lesser, and the greater to the greater, they are given by Him who alone knows how to present to the human race the medicine suited to the occasion. Nor is it surprising that the greater precepts are given for the kingdom of heaven, and the lesser for an earthly kingdom, by that one and the same God, who made heaven and earth. With respect, therefore, to that righteousness which is the greater, it is said through the prophet, "Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God:"⁷ and this may well mean that the one Master alone fit to teach matters of so great importance teaches on a mountain. Then He teaches sitting, as behooves the dignity of the instructor's office; and His disciples come to Him, in order that they might be nearer in body for hearing His words, as they also approached in spirit to fulfil His precepts. "And He opened His mouth, and taught them, saying." The circumlocution before us, which runs, "And He opened His mouth," perhaps gracefully intimates by the mere pause that the sermon will be somewhat longer than usual, unless, perchance, it should not be without meaning, that now He is said to have opened

7 Ps. xxxvi. 6.

His own mouth, whereas under the old law He was accustomed to open the mouths of the prophets.⁸

What, then, does He say? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We read in Scripture concerning the striving after temporal things, “All is vanity and presumption of spirit;”⁹ but presumption of spirit means audacity and pride: usually also the proud are said to have great spirits; and rightly, inasmuch as the wind also is called spirit. And hence it is written, “Fire, hail, snow, ice, spirit of tempest.”¹⁰ But, indeed, who does not know that the proud are spoken of as puffed up, as if swelled out with wind? And hence also that expression of the apostle, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.”¹¹ And “the poor in spirit” are rightly understood here, as meaning the humble and God-fearing, *i.e.* those who have not the spirit which puffeth up. Nor ought blessedness to begin at any other point whatever, if indeed it is to attain unto the highest

⁸ Chrysostom, Euthymius, etc., see in the expression the implication that Christ also taught by works. Tholuck, with many modern commentators, finds in it a reference to “loud and solemn utterance.”

⁹ Eccles. i. 14.

¹⁰ Ps. cxlviii. 8.

¹¹ 1 Cor. viii. 1.

wisdom; "but the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;"¹² for, on the other hand also, "pride" is entitled "the beginning of all sin."¹³ Let the proud, therefore, seek after and love the kingdoms of the earth; but "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹⁴

¹² Ps. cxi. 10.

¹³ Ecclesiasticus x. 13.

¹⁴ Not the intellectually poor (Fritzsche), nor the poor in worldly goods, as we might gather from Luke vi. 20. Roman Catholic commentators have found here support for the doctrine of voluntary poverty (Cornelius à Lapide, Maldonatus, etc.). The Emperor Julian, in allusion to this passage and others like it, said he would only confiscate the goods of Christians, that they might enter as *the poor* into the kingdom of heaven (*Lett.* xliii.). Some (Olearius, Michaelis, Paulus) have joined "in spirit" with "blessed." Augustine explains the passage of those who are not elated or proud, taking "spirit" in an evil sense. In another place he says, "Blessed are the poor in their own spirit, rich in God's Spirit, for every man who follows his own spirit is proud." He then compares him who subdues his own spirit to one living in a valley which is filled with water from the hills (*En. in Ps.* cxli. 4). The most explain of those who are conscious of spiritual need (Matt. xi. 28), and are ready to be filled with the gospel riches, as opposed to the spiritually proud, the just who need no repentance (Tholuck, Meyer, Lange, etc.). "Many are poor in the world, but high in spirit; poor and proud, murmuring and complaining, and blaming their lot. Laodicea was poor

in spirituals, and yet rich in spirit; so well increased with goods as to have need of nothing. Paul was rich in spirituals, excelling most in gifts and graces and yet poor in spirit; the least of the apostles, and less than the least of all saints” (M. Henry).