

J.C. Ryle:

Matthew chapter 5

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Seeing the multitudes, he went up onto the mountain. When he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He opened his mouth and taught them, saying,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

"Blessed are you when people reproach you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The three chapters which begin with these verses deserve the special attention of all readers of the Bible. They contain what is commonly called the "sermon on the mount."

Every word of the Lord Jesus ought to be most precious to professing Christians. It is the voice of the chief Shepherd. It is the charge of the great Bishop and Head of the Church. It is the Master speaking. It is the word of Him who "spoke as never man spoke," and by whom we shall all be judged at the last day.

Would we know what kind of people Christians ought to be? Would we know the character at which Christians ought to aim? Would we know the outward walk and inward habit of mind which become a follower of Jesus? Then let us often study the sermon on the mount. Let us often ponder each sentence, and prove ourselves by it. Not least let us often consider who they are that are called BLESSED at the beginning of the sermon. Those whom the great High Priest blesses are blessed indeed.

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are poor in spirit. He means the humble, and lowly-minded, and self-abased. He means those who are deeply convinced of their own sinfulness in God's sight. These are they who are not "wise in their own eyes and holy in their own sight." They are not "rich and increased with goods." They do not imagine that they need nothing. They regard themselves as "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Blessed are all such! Humility is the very first letter in the alphabet of Christianity. We must begin low, if we would build high.

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who mourn. He means those who sorrow for sin, and grieve daily over their own short-comings. These are they who trouble themselves more about sin than about anything on earth. The remembrance of it is grievous to them. The burden of it is intolerable. Blessed are all such! "The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite spirit." One day they shall weep no more. "They shall be comforted."

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are meek. He means those who are of a patient and contented spirit. They are willing to put up with little honor here below. They can bear injuries without resentment. They are not ready to take offence. Like Lazarus in the parable, they are content to wait for their good things. Blessed are all such! They are never losers in the long run. One day they shall "reign on the earth." (Rev. 5:10.)

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. He means those who desire above all things to be entirely conformed to the mind of God. They long not so much to be rich, or wealthy, or learned, as to be holy. Blessed are all such! They shall have enough one day. They shall "awake up after God's likeness and be satisfied." (Psalm. 17:15.)

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are merciful. He means those who are full of compassion towards others. They pity all who are suffering either from sin or sorrow, and are tenderly desirous to make their sufferings less. They are full of good works, and endeavors to do good. Blessed are all such! Both in this life and that to come they shall reap a rich reward.

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are pure in heart. He means those who do not aim merely at outward correctness, but at inward holiness. They are not satisfied with a mere external show of religion. They strive to keep a heart and conscience void of offence, and to serve God with the spirit and the inner man. Blessed are all such! The heart is the man. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7.) He that is most spiritual-minded will have most communion with God.

The Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are peacemakers. He means those who use all their influence to promote peace and charity on earth, in private and in public, at home and abroad. He means those who strive to make all men love one another, by teaching that Gospel which says, "love is the fulfilling of the law." Blessed are all such! They are doing the very work which the Son of God began, when he came to earth the first time, and which He will finish when He returns the second time.

Lastly, the Lord Jesus calls those blessed, who are persecuted for righteousness sake. He means those who are laughed at, mocked, despised, and ill-used, because they endeavor to live as true Christians. Blessed are all such! They drink of the same cup which their Master drank. They are now confessing Him before men, and He will confess them before His Father and the angels at the last day. "Great is their reward."

Such are the eight foundation-stones, which the Lord lays down at the beginning of the sermon on the mount. Eight great testing truths are placed before us. May we mark well each one of them, and learn wisdom!

Let us learn how entirely contrary are the principles of Christ to the principles of the world. It is vain to deny it. They are almost diametrically opposed. The very characters which the Lord Jesus praises, the world despises. The very pride, and thoughtlessness, and high tempers, and worldliness, and selfishness, and formality, and unlovingness, which abound everywhere, the Lord Jesus condemns.

Let us learn how unhappily different is the teaching of Christ from the practice of many professing Christians. Where shall we find men and women among those who go to churches and chapels, who are striving to live up to the pattern we have read of today? Alas! there is much reason to fear, that many baptized people are utterly ignorant of what the New Testament contains.

Above all let us learn how holy and spiritual-minded all believers should be. They should never aim at any standard lower than that of the sermon on the mount. Christianity is eminently a practical religion. Sound doctrine is its root and foundation, but holy living should always be its fruit. And if we would know what holy living is, let us often bethink ourselves who they are that Jesus calls "blessed."

MATTHEW 5:13-20

"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house. Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

"Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

In these verses the Lord Jesus treats of two subjects. One is the character which true Christians must support and maintain in the world. The other is the relation between His doctrines and those of the Old Testament. It is of great importance to have clear views on both these subjects.

True Christians are to be in the world like SALT. Now salt has a peculiar taste of its own, utterly unlike anything else. When mingled with other substances, it preserves them from corruption. It imparts a portion of its taste to everything it is mixed with. It is useful so long as it preserves its savor, but no longer. Are we true Christians? Then behold here our place and its duties!

True Christians are to be in the world like LIGHT. Now it is the property of light to be utterly distinct from darkness. The least spark in a dark room can be seen at once. Of all things created light is the most useful. It fertilizes. It guides. It cheers. It was the first thing called into being. Without it the world would be a gloomy blank. Are we true Christians? Then behold again our position and its responsibilities!

Surely, if words mean anything, we are meant to learn from these two figures, that there must be something marked, distinct, and peculiar about our character, if we are true Christians. It will never do to idle through life, thinking and living like others, if we mean to be owned by Christ as His people. Have we grace? Then it must be seen. Have we the Spirit? Then there must be fruit. Have we any saving religion? Then there must be a difference of habits, tastes, and turn of mind, between us and those who think only of the world. It is perfectly clear that true Christianity is something more than being baptized and going to church. "Salt" and "light" evidently imply peculiarity both of heart and life, of faith and practice. We must dare to be singular and unlike the world, if we mean to be saved.

The relation between our Lord's teaching and that of the Old Testament, is cleared up by our Lord in one striking sentence. He says, "Don't think that I came to destroy the law, or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill." These are remarkable words. They were deeply important when spoken, as satisfying the natural anxiety of the Jews on the point. They will be deeply important as long as the world stands, as a testimony that the religion of the Old and New Testament is one harmonious whole.

The Lord Jesus came to fulfill the predictions of the prophets, who had long foretold that a Savior would one day appear. He came to fulfill the ceremonial law, by becoming the great sacrifice for sin, to which all the Mosaic offerings had ever pointed. He came to fulfill the moral law, by yielding to it a perfect obedience, which we could never have yielded--and by paying the penalty for our breach of it with His atoning blood, which we could never have paid. In all these ways He exalted the law of God, and made its importance more evident even than it had been before. In a word, "He magnified the law and made it honorable." (Isaiah 42:21.)

There are deep lessons of wisdom to be learned from these words of our Lord. Let us consider them well, and lay them up in our hearts.

Let us beware of despising the Old Testament under any pretense whatever. Let us never listen to those who bid us throw it aside as an obsolete, antiquated, useless book. The religion of the Old Testament is the embryo of Christianity. The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud. The New Testament is the Gospel in full flower. The Old Testament is the Gospel in the blade. The New Testament is the Gospel in full ear. The saints in the Old Testament saw many things through a glass darkly. But they all looked by faith to the same Savior, and were led by the same Spirit as ourselves. These are no light matters. Much infidelity begins with an ignorant contempt of the Old Testament.

Let us, for another thing, beware of despising the law of the Ten Commandments. Let us not suppose for a moment that it is set aside by the Gospel, or that Christians have nothing to do with it. The coming of Christ did not alter the position of the Ten Commandments one hair's breadth. If anything, it exalted and raised their authority. (Rom. 3:31.) The law of the Ten Commandments is God's eternal measure of right and wrong. By it, is the knowledge of sin. By it, the Spirit shows men their need of Christ, and drives them to Him. To it, Christ refers His people as their rule and guide for holy living. In its right place it is just as important as "the glorious Gospel." It cannot save us. We cannot be justified by it. But never, never let us despise it. It is a symptom of an ignorant and unhealthy state of religion, when the law is lightly esteemed. The true Christian "delights in God's law." (Rom. 7:22.)

In the last place, let us beware of supposing that the Gospel has lowered the standard of personal holiness, and that the Christian is not intended to be as strict and particular about his daily life as the Jew. This is an immense mistake, but one that is unhappily very common. So far from this being the case, the sanctification of the New Testament saint ought to exceed that of him who has nothing but the Old Testament for his guide. The more light we have, the more we ought to love God. The more clearly we see our own complete and full forgiveness in Christ, the more heartily ought we to work for His glory. We know what it cost to redeem us far better than the Old Testament saints did. We have read what happened in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and they only saw it dimly and indistinctly as a thing yet to come. May we never forget our obligations! The Christian who is content with a low standard of personal holiness has got much to learn.

MATTHEW 5:21-37

"You have heard that it was said to the ancient ones, 'You shall not murder;' and 'Whoever shall murder shall be in danger of the judgment.' But I tell you, that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council; and whoever shall say, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.

"If therefore you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are with him in the way; lest perhaps the prosecutor deliver you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and you be cast into prison. Most certainly I tell you, you shall by no means get out of there, until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery;' but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it away from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members should perish, than for your whole body to be cast into Gehenna. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, and throw it away from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members should perish, than for your whole body to be cast into Gehenna."

"It was also said, 'Whoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorce,' but I tell you that whoever puts away his wife, except for the cause of sexual immorality, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries her when she is put away commits adultery.

"Again you have heard that it was said to them of old time, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall perform to the Lord your vows,' but I tell you, don't swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God; nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shall you swear by your head, for you can't make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.' Whatever is more than these is of the evil one.

These verses deserve the closest attention of all readers of the Bible. A right understanding of the doctrines they contain lies at the very root of Christianity. The Lord Jesus here explains more fully the meaning of His words, "I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill." He teaches us that His Gospel magnifies the law, and exalts its authority. He shows us that the law, as expounded by Him, was a far more spiritual and heart-searching rule than most of the Jews supposed. And He proves this by selecting three commandments out of the ten as examples of what He means.

He expounds the sixth commandment. Many thought that they kept this part of God's law, so long as they did not commit actual MURDER. The Lord Jesus shows, that its requirements go much further than this. It condemns all angry and passionate language, and especially when used without a cause. Let us mark this well. We may be perfectly innocent of taking life away, and yet be guilty of breaking the sixth commandment.

He expounds the seventh commandment. Many supposed that they kept this part of God's law, if they did not actually commit ADULTERY. The Lord Jesus teaches, that we may break it in our thoughts, hearts, and imaginations, even when our outward conduct is moral and correct. The God with whom we have to do looks far beyond actions. With him even a glance of the eye may be a sin.

He expounds the third commandment. Many fancied that they kept this part of God's law, so long as they did not swear falsely, and performed their OATHS. The Lord Jesus forbids all vain and light swearing altogether. All swearing by created things, even when God's name is not brought forward--all calling upon God to witness, excepting on the most solemn occasions, is a great sin.

Now all this is very instructive. It ought to raise very serious reflections in our minds. It calls us loudly to use great searching of heart. And what does it teach?

It teaches us the exceeding holiness of God. He is a most pure and perfect Being, who sees faults and imperfections, where man's eyes often see none. He reads our inward motives. He notes our words and thoughts, as well as our actions. "He requires truth in the inward parts." Oh! that men would consider this part of God's character more than they do! There would be no room for pride, and self-righteousness, and carelessness, if they only saw God "as He is."

It teaches us the exceeding ignorance of man in spiritual things. There are thousands and ten thousands of professing Christians, it may be feared, who know no more of the requirements of God's law than the most ignorant Jews. They know the letter of the ten commandments well enough. They fancy, like the young ruler, "all these have I kept from my youth up." They never dream that it is possible to break the sixth and seventh commandments, if they do not break them by outward act or deed. And so they live on satisfied with themselves, and quite content with their little bit of religion. Happy indeed are they who really understand God's law!

It teaches us our exceeding need of the Lord Jesus Christ's atoning blood to save us. What man or woman upon earth can ever stand before such a God as this, and plead "not guilty?" Who is there that has ever grown to years of discretion, and not broken the commandments thousands of times? "There is none righteous, no! not one." Without a mighty Mediator, every one would be condemned in the judgment. Ignorance of the real meaning of the law is one plain reason why so many do not value the Gospel, and content themselves with a little formal Christianity. They do not see the strictness and holiness of God's Ten commandments. If they did, they would never rest until they were safe in Christ.

In the last place, this passage teaches us the exceeding importance of avoiding all occasions of sin. If we really desire to be holy, we must "take heed to our ways, that we offend not in our tongues." We must be ready to make up quarrels and disagreements, lest they gradually lead on to greater evils. "The beginning of strife is like breaching a dam." We must labor to crucify our flesh and mortify our members, to make any sacrifice and endure any bodily inconvenience rather than sin. We must keep our lips as it were with a bridle, and exercise an hourly strictness over our words. Let men call us precise, if they will, for so doing. Let them say, if they please, that we are "too particular." We need not be moved. We are merely doing as our Lord Jesus Christ bids us, and, if this is the case, we have no cause to be ashamed.

MATTHEW 5:38-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, don't resist him who is evil; but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone sues you to take away your coat, let him have your cloak also. Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away him who desires to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? If you only greet your friends, what more do you do than others? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

You have here our Lord Jesus Christ's rules for our conduct one towards another. He that would know how He ought to feel and act towards his fellow men, should often study these verses. They deserve to be written in letters of gold. They have extorted praise even from the enemies of Christianity. Let us mark well what they contain.

The Lord Jesus forbids everything like an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. A readiness to resent injuries--a quickness in taking offence--a quarrelsome and contentious disposition--a keenness in asserting our rights--all, all are contrary to the mind of Christ. The world may see no harm in these habits of mind. But they do not correspond to the character of the Christian. Our Master says, "Don't resist him who is evil."

The Lord Jesus enjoins on us a spirit of universal love and charity. We ought to put away all malice. We ought to return good for evil, and blessing for cursing. We ought to "love even our enemies." Moreover we are not to love in word only, but in deed. We are to deny ourselves, and take trouble, in order to be kind and courteous. If any man "compels you to go one mile, go with him two." We are to put up with much and bear much, rather than hurt another, or give offence. In all things we are to be unselfish. Our thought must never be, "how do others behave to me?" but "what would Christ have me to do?"

A standard of conduct like this may seem, at first sight, extravagantly high. But we must never content ourselves with aiming at one lower. We must observe the two weighty arguments by which our Lord backs up

this part of His instruction. They deserve serious attention.

For one thing, if we do not aim at the spirit and temper which are here recommended, we are not yet children of God. Our "Father in heaven" is kind to all. He sends rain on good and on evil alike. He causes "His sun" to shine on all without distinction. A son should be like his father. But where is our likeness to our Father in heaven, if we cannot show mercy and kindness to everybody? Where is the evidence that we are new creatures, if we lack charity? It is altogether lacking. We must yet be "born again." (John 3:7.)

For another thing, if we do not aim at the spirit and temper here recommended, we are manifestly yet of the world. Even those who have no religion can "love those who love them." They can do good and show kindness, when their affection or interest moves them. But a Christian ought to be influenced by higher principles than these. Do we flinch from the test? Do we find it impossible to do good to our enemies? If that be the case, we may be sure we have yet to be converted. As yet we have not "received the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:12.)

There is much in all this which calls loudly for solemn reflection. There are few passages of Scripture so calculated to raise in our minds humbling thoughts. We have here a lovely picture of the Christian as he ought to be. We cannot look at it without painful feelings. We must all allow that it differs widely from the Christian as he is. Let us carry away from it two general lessons.

In the first place if the spirit of these ten verses were more continually remembered by true believers, they would recommend Christianity to the world far more than they do. We must not allow ourselves to suppose that the least words in this passage are trifling and of small moment. They are not so. It is attention to the spirit of this passage which makes our religion beautiful. It is the neglect of the things which it contains by which our religion is deformed. Unfailing courtesy, kindness, tenderness, and consideration for others, are some of the greatest ornaments to the character of the child of God. The world can understand these things, if it cannot understand doctrine. There is no religion in rudeness, roughness, bluntness, and incivility. The perfection of practical Christianity consists in attending to the little duties of holiness as well as to the great.

In the second place, if the spirit of these ten verses had more dominion and power in the world, how much happier the world would be than it is. Who does not know that quarrelings, strifes, selfishness, and unkindness cause half the miseries by which mankind is visited? Who can fail to see that nothing would so much tend to increase happiness as the spread of Christian love, such as is here recommended by our Lord? Let us all remember this. Those who fancy that true religion has any tendency to make men unhappy, are greatly mistaken. It is the absence of it that does this, and not the presence. True religion has the directly contrary effect. It tends to promote peace, and charity, and kindness, and goodwill among men. The more men are brought under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the more they will love one another, and the more happy they will be.