



Rock Mountain Creed

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

by

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Marietta, Ohio

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For Tom & Sara
brother & sister in Christ

And Paul
friend and confidant in Christ

Toward the clarification
of all things
Mark 13:23

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INTRODUCTION

What difference does Jesus make? Did His teaching and ministry change everything? Or did Jesus' teaching simply uphold the Old Testament law without changing a jot or a tittle, as He is sometimes understood to have said in Matthew 5:18? Do the Ten Commandments still stand today? Or did Jesus change them? The question is so huge and important that there must be a clear biblical answer. If you know of a clear answer about this, please point me to it.

Most Christians believe that the Ten Commandments are still in force, as do I. And yet, if they are still in force, why do Christians not worship on Saturday, the Sabbath?

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:9-11).

The seventh day is Saturday, not Sunday. But does a change of day mean that the Fourth Commandment is no longer in effect? Not at all! But it does mean that something has changed, that Christ brought a very important change to God's law, at least to part of it.

My intention here is not to answer the Sabbath question in full, but to simply use it as an example that points out that the birth, life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has

brought an important change to the world—to the whole world. Suffice it to say here as a way to tickle your curiosity that Christians worship on the Eighth Day.¹

If you are not familiar with the Eighth Day or with God's eternal Sabbath, your own lack of familiarity should suggest to you that something in your life, in your Christian education and your church is amiss. If God said that the Ten Commandments are eternal, and He did, and if Jesus Christ changed something so fundamental and essential as the day of worship, which He did, then Christians everywhere should understand and be able to explain it. But in my experience, this is not the case. I doubt that one in a thousand Christians could provide a rational explanation about the change of Sabbath worship.

But I don't want to get stuck on the Sabbath. There is much more to this issue than Sabbath considerations. What about the First Commandment and religious toleration? What about the Second Commandment and icons? Does that include the various trinkets that can be found in Christian bookstores? What about the Third Commandment and movies, television, CDs and DVDs? Should Christians expose themselves and their children to the trash that passes for entertainment today? Where do children learn to honor their parents today? At school? Think again! What about adultery, theft, bearing false witness, not to mention covetousness? Not a recent high school graduate in ten thousand will have any idea about what I'm talking about.

Providing real answers for these questions may mean the difference between human survival and destruction. Have I overstated the issue? I don't think so. And yet, my intention here is not to answer all of these questions. A lot of people write books in order to provide answers because readers like to have answers. Questions are harder. Questions make people think. Questions make people uncomfortable.

After thirty years in Christian ministry I'm convinced that the Bible itself does not simply provide answers. The Bible asks questions that confound us and our most qualified scholars, who spend lifetimes trying to untie the intellectual knots provided by other

1 Christians worship on the Eighth Day for a variety of reasons, central to which is the fact that Christ fulfilled the Sabbath and that fulfillment inaugurated God's eternal Sabbath, which stands outside of time itself. See: Exodus 22:30; Leviticus 9:1; 12:3; 14:10,23; 15:14,29; 22:27; 23:36,39; Numbers 6:10; 7:54; 29:35; 1 Kings 8:66; 12:32,33; 2 Chronicles 7:9; 29:17; Nehemiah 8:18; Ezekiel 43:27; Luke 1:59; Acts 7:8; Philippians 3:5.

scholars so that they can tie their knots in different and noteworthy ways. But, God did not simply give the Bible to scholars. He has given it to His church, to His people, to those who are inhabited by His Holy Spirit. And in fact it is the Holy Spirit through regeneration who answers the questions that the Bible asks.

The power and presence of the Holy Spirit through personal regeneration is absolutely essential to the correct, orthodox understanding of Scripture. The whole point of the Bible is to invite or in some cases drive people to the personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is the foundation of Christian faith. God Himself must—and will—answer the questions He poses in His Word. My answers cannot satisfy you, nor will yours satisfy me. We must each hear from God Himself. Have I overstated the case? I don't think so, but I do think that hearing from God is nothing like what people imagine it to be. It is not magical or mystical, but is actually quite ordinary. At least God intends it to be quite ordinary.

It is, however, a lot of work. God needs it to be that way because there is a lot to understand. The world is not as simple as our ancestors thought. I'm not suggesting that previous generations of Christians were wrong. They were not! But their answers are not our answers, and inasmuch as we try to rely on their answers to the deep biblical questions, we will continue to find those answers to be inadequate to the complexities of our contemporary world. It has always been this way. Every person and every generation needs, not to reinvent Christianity, but to understand it for themselves.

Today we find that the ineffectiveness of the church in our world is tied to our own regurgitation of old answers. The answers themselves don't change, but our languages and circumstances change all the time—and faster every year! It is not that we need new Christian answers, but that we need renewed hearts and minds to engage God's answers through regeneration.

All this having been said, we must also understand that God does not forbid nor discount scholarship. In fact, it can be a great help. But scholarship is not a substitute for regeneration. However, it is a relatively common understanding among Christians that God's enemies will often attempt to substitute scholarship for regeneration, especially among church leaders. Indeed, seminary students are all too often easily coaxed to do exactly this. I know because I was one. Seminaries are too often more faithful to academics than they are to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I say this with great fear and trepidation because no seminary staff person would

ever suggest such a thing of their own seminary, though they might suggest it about others. The point of this observation is not to devolve into name calling and mud slinging, but to call all Christians to a renewed self-evaluation in the light of Christ by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and according to Scripture. The healing and unity that Christ offers is not something that Christians find, it is something that we give.

We can—and must—help one another find biblical answers for our world’s problems. That’s how God’s Holy Spirit works. He doesn’t simply give you and me answers privately. He gives them publicly. God interacts with Himself through our engagement of His Word (the Bible) by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the light of Jesus Christ. Christ’s church is a corporate thing, and necessarily so. But the goal is not to have a grand systematic or biblical theology that defeats all comers for all time. The goal is discussion and growth in the midst of relationship, first with Christ and then with one another.

God’s intent in Scripture is to change our minds through disillusionment, and to continue that change all our lives. God intends for us to outgrow our childish and immature beliefs and illusions. And that growth, that sanctification, does not end in this life, which means that we are always growing, always learning and always changing. But the changes that we are to undergo are not a kind of flip-flopping reversals about what we believe. Rather, Christian growth is always a matter of growing deeper in faithfulness.

Indeed, Peter assures us that the revelation of God in Christ is progressive, that it will continue to unfold in both depth and breadth over time—eternally. The revelation of God in Christ will continue to develop over time and in history because Christians will continue to grow and mature, and that growth and maturity will continue to unfold the depth and richness of God’s blessings spiritually, personally, corporately, scientifically and technologically.²

Here, we will examine Jesus’ understanding of how the human manifestation of His Sonship, and His impending sacrifice (at the point He gave the Sermon on the Mount) and how its propitiation for sin affected God’s moral law. Jesus understood and accepted His role in the trinitarian Godhead. How could He not since it was His reality? This also means that He understood the complex character of human identity as having both individual and corporate

2 See *Peter’s Vision of Christ’s Purpose in First Peter*, by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2012.

poles, as well. Remember, He was both fully divine and fully human, both at the same time without mixing or confusing His divinity with His humanity. This is the orthodox, historic, inherited Christian and universally accepted teaching. Indeed, belief in the doctrine of the Trinity is essential for Christian identity.

My presumption in these pages, garnered from Scripture and confirmed by my own regeneration, is that the image in which humanity has been created is in some way trinitarian. When God created Man (Adam), God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness” (Genesis 1:26). God used a plural referent to Himself. The next verse also indicates the plural character of Man. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The fact of the two sexes of Man confirm that we are necessarily social beings who have a corporate element to our individual identities.

Why take this as an axiom of human character? Because God’s trinitarian character is the most unique thing about God, and it is the one thing that identifies God as completely and ultimately unique. God’s trinitarian character is in a sense the one thing that makes God God. Therefore, it is this image that should come to mind when we think of God, in whose image we have been created. And it is the necessity of the corporate character of human identity that gives rise to human morality.

Human morality is an essential element of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus will say about human morality is that it issues from the reality of our simultaneous individual and corporate character. And that this simultaneity itself issues from the fact of our creation in God’s likeness. Humanity was created to be a kind of reflection of God’s character, both as individuals and socially or corporately. And this is why Jesus focused on right worship, which issues out of the positional relationship with Jesus Christ held by the born-again (twice-born or regenerate), and the moral relationships between and among Christ’s people.

These are the topics that Jesus addressed in this Sermon. Yet, there is an additional issue or problem presented by the Sermon on the Mount. In order to understand what Jesus was talking about requires, in contemporary parlance, an understanding of the context and the subtext of Jesus’ words. In order to understand what Jesus was talking about (or what anyone talks about for that matter), we must share to a convincing degree Jesus’ perspective. We must have some understanding of where He was coming from

in order to understand what He means by His words. In order to understand Jesus we must stand under Him. We must account ourselves to be His people, both individually and corporately.

You and I must belong to Jesus Christ personally, which means everything that the orthodox, historic idea of being personally and individually saved, born-again and/or regenerated by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit means. And at the same time we must belong to the corporate body of Christ, the church. We must find and establish our identity as individuals in Jesus Christ and as a people in His church. To fail in this regard is to stand outside of Jesus Christ, not under Him. To fail in this regard is to not have access to Jesus' context, subtext and/or perspective, which will preclude people from seeing God's kingdom or even God Himself, as Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:3, 5).

Therefore, I pray that you, my reader, will already have this perspective. And if you don't or if you aren't sure, I pray that what follows will help you stand under the Lord of the Universe who is manifest in the human flesh of Jesus Christ, and who lives and reigns forever. And I pray for your patience with me as I delve into issues that are far more complex than our ancestors ever imagined. Just as medical science has revealed the dizzying complexity of the human body, so God in Christ is still revealing the astonishingly simple faith that unlocks the infinite complexity of God in Christ. To this God Jesus prayed (and Jesus' prayers are efficacious),

As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:18-23).

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March 2011
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I. THE VISION THING

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And 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.” —Matthew 5:1-4

In all likelihood, the Sermon on the Mount didn't actually happen as it was recorded in Scripture. Of course, Jesus taught these things to His disciples, but probably not in one sitting (or setting). Luke recorded these teachings as the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-ff). Don't get me wrong, these are true teachings of Jesus. We can be sure of this because Scripture truly represents and teaches the character of God. However, in order to access the true meaning of Jesus' teachings we must read them faithfully.

By this I mean that we need to assume that they are true, that they truly teach God's character and wisdom, and that we can completely depend upon them. If we begin with doubt we will end with doubt because we will read our own doubts into these words of Jesus. We are not going to do that here. We are going to begin this study of the Sermon on the Mount by consciously assuming that the text we encounter is true and can be trusted to teach God's truth. This assumption, which is the central act of faith in Christianity, will be our guide and the foundation upon which our understanding will rest. Why do this? Because apart from this assumption or presupposition Christian faithfulness cannot stand.³

³ Assuming the truth of the Bible as is done here involves what I call presuppositional trinitarianism or presupposing the reality of the Trinity. For more on this see *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians* (2008), *Varsy Arsy—Proclaiming the Gospel in Second Corinthians* (2009), and *Colossians—Chris-*

There is no Christianity apart from biblical Christianity. Christian faith rests upon the biblical context, and that context issues from a unified whole, from the uniquely Christian Trinity. The beginning of Christian faithfulness comes from God, from the Trinity, who created the world, and gave His Word to the various Old Testament prophets. In the fullness of time He sent Christ, who in turn sent His Holy Spirit to regenerate His people. All of these various things and events work to provide the context in which the assumption of faithfulness can take root.

Of course, this context, which originated in the trinitarian Godhead, is not established apart from human involvement. And the primary instance of human involvement that has provided this necessary context within human history was the advent of Jesus Christ—His fleshly birth. Jesus Christ was born to Mary in Bethlehem in a manger, died as a propitiation for sin on the cross and was raised from the dead to be seated at the right hand of God almighty with all earthly power and authority. Jesus Christ is the fulcrum or pulley that by God’s grace moves the whole world through the participation of believers in Christ, through faith in Christ.

The world cannot be moved by human effort alone. The world is moved by the fulcrum or pulley of the trinitarian God in Christ. All such movement is the work of God in Christ. God in Christ moved Jesus to faithfulness, as God in Christ moves all of Christ’s disciples to faithfulness. The faithfulness of Christ and of His disciples, both the divine faithfulness of God and the human faithfulness of Jesus at work in His people, then moves the world. Ultimately, it is all God’s work in Christ. Proximately, it is Christ’s work through Christians.

Understanding and/or making good use of the Sermon on the Mount requires that we begin with the proper context of faithfulness, which is where Jesus began, where God began, in the trinitarian Godhead. Similarly, having been created in God’s image, we also begin with the Trinity. We begin in Christ. And that is the secret of the Sermon on the Mount: it was given by Christ for those in Christ. Deep speaks to deep (Psalm 42:7).

NOT NEW

Contrary to popular opinion the various teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are not new. Jesus did not originate them in

tos Singularis (2010), all by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform.

this Sermon. They can all be found in the Old Testament. So, rather than being different because they were new, Jesus set them in relief in the Sermon by comparing them with common misunderstandings of the times in which He lived. Sometimes that comparison was stated—“You have heard that it was said...” (Matthew 5:27, etc.). And sometimes it was the result of shocking His hearers out of their usual expectations by showing them that the values of God’s kingdom were the reverse of the values of the world —“Blessed are the poor in spirit... (Matthew 5:5).

The Pagan and Greek understanding of blessedness was a function of individual freedom. The Pagan and Greek gods were blessed because they were not bound by the laws of this world, neither the laws of physics nor the laws of justice. They could do what they pleased, and that freedom was understood as a great blessing. The Greeks and Pagans wanted to become like their gods. That kind of freedom was the hope and aspiration of many people in antiquity. It still is.

Contrary to Christian teaching, but in harmony with the subversion of multiculturalism, people today tend to cling to this Pagan understanding regarding the blessings of freedom. People think that being free means that they can do whatever they want. The poor think that the rich have this kind of freedom because they can afford to do whatever they want. And the rich think that the poor have this kind of freedom because they are not encumbered by the obligations of wealth maintenance.

Contemporary people generally think that freedom means not being bound or obligated by anything, and particularly not being bound by God’s law. Freedom in our day is, by popular definition, antinomian. People mistakenly believe that by faith and God’s grace Christians are freed from all laws, including the moral standards of culture.

But this is not what Jesus taught. People tend to read this understanding into the Sermon on the Mount, but it is a faithless reading. It assumes a Pagan or Greek worldview and then reads that worldview into Scripture. Much of the difficulty understanding the Sermon on the Mount comes because people don’t assume the worldview of biblical faithfulness, as Jesus did. People begin with a different set of unbiblical presuppositions and find that Jesus’ teachings don’t make sense on the basis of those presuppositions unless they spiritualize the Sermon to the point that it doesn’t say what Jesus said, or doesn’t apply to this world. Too many people

believe the Sermon to set an ideal that is intended for heaven and not for this world.

RIGHTLY DIVIDING

There is an easier way to make better sense of the Sermon: by assuming that it is faithful to Scripture, to the Old Testament, by assuming that it is not antinomian. As we shall see, Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that God's blessings are the fruit of obedience to God's Word, as originally taught in the Old Testament.

Jesus did not put an end to Old Testament law in such a way that it has no further application. Rather, He was Himself the end or purpose of the law. In Christ the purpose of the law was fulfilled, and that fulfillment of the law brought about a new administration of God's covenant, an administration for people who now stand on the other side of Christ's advent and His historical fulfillment of the law.

Old Testament law can be divided into three parts: moral, ceremonial and civil. This division is neither perfect nor exclusive, which means that almost every part of the Old Law contains moral, ceremonial and civil aspects. The division is not clean, though there is much truth to it. Jesus changed or ended parts of the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law, and many of those changes are the subject, directly or indirectly, of His Sermon on the Mount. But more than changing various aspects of the law, Jesus changed hearts and minds, which gave people a completely different perspective regarding God's law.

Jesus taught differently than the Scribes and Pharisees (Mark 1:22), but not differently than the Old Testament. The newness of the New Covenant in Christ is not a function of its difference from the Old Covenant, but is a function of its fulfillment of the Old Covenant in Christ, and of the new people with whom the New Covenant is made, people who are renewed or regenerated in Christ.

UNSEEN

What was new was Christ's fulfillment of the Old Covenant as He died on the cross, and the dispensation of God's Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (Matthew 12:18, Acts 10:44-45, Romans 15:16, Galatians 3:14). God's covenant in Christ does not exclude the Jews or the conditions of the Old Covenant. Christ has not abrogated God's

law, He fulfilled it Himself, and provided the means for its fulfillment by His people through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through regeneration. Christ fulfilled God's covenant and died as a propitiation of sin for His people, which recreated a way for people to grow in grace by drawing near to God.

But the Scribes and Pharisees who interacted with Jesus in the New Testament stories didn't see this reality. They didn't believe it, didn't accept or understand that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

We can't blame them for not seeing it. It couldn't be seen until it was complete, until the death and resurrection of Christ had fully manifested in history. That's why it was necessary for Jesus to die on the cross. Had He not finished the revelation of the Trinity in human flesh, it would never have been seen. Consequently, at the time that this Sermon on the Mount was given, the time of Jesus' earthy ministry, they didn't see it. They couldn't see it because it had been veiled (2 Corinthians 3:13-18).⁴ Paul didn't see it either, not until after it was complete and he met the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul didn't see it until Christ knocked him off his high horse and explained it to him.

This Sermon came pretty early in Jesus' ministry. In chapter four of Matthew's gospel, Jesus had just started preaching, after having been tempted by Satan. He was just beginning to preach and gather His disciples. Matthew said that Jesus preached this Sermon on the Mount, said these things, because He saw the crowd, because He took notice of the multitudes of people who had followed Him. This sermon was Jesus' response to seeing the people, seeing their needs, seeing their hopelessness and their faithlessness.

Jesus began preaching in earnest as He took over the message and leadership of John The Baptist. "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17). John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. And John's job was to prepare the way for the Messiah, for Jesus, which he did. With this message of repentance Jesus began to call for disciples, promising to make them "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). He began teaching and healing and drawing crowds of people. And as multitudes of people were drawn to Jesus, He saw

4 For more on the veiling of the gospel see the corresponding sections of *Varsy Arsy—Proclaiming the Gospel in Second Corinthians*, Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2009.

them. He saw their needs, their potential, their interests and their weaknesses.

ON THE MOUNTAIN

So, He “went up on the mountain” (v. 1). His purpose in going up on the mountain was at least two-fold. He needed a platform from which to teach. He needed His voice to carry so that the multitude could hear Him. And yet He knew that they needed “ears to hear” (Matthew 11:15), as well. There is more to hearing Jesus than acoustics. The platform also needed to be a symbolic place that would help His message reverberate, a place from which His teaching would resound or echo.

Part of that echo was to remind people of God’s law, the laws that Moses had brought down from the mountain. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was an echo of the law of Moses, an echo of the Ten Commandments. It wasn’t a simple reproduction of that law, but was reminiscent of it. God’s law, the Ten Commandments, would echo through Jesus’ teaching by design and intention. It has proven to be more of a clarification than a simple recapitulation.

By going up on the mountain Jesus also put Himself in the symbolic place of Moses, the law giver. But Jesus’ teaching would not be a pontification like that of Moses, who simply carried to the people the law that God had written with His very finger upon tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18). That law, which Jesus would not change, not even a jot or a tittle (Matthew 5:18), had already been given.

Jesus did not rescind it. Rather, Jesus’ purpose was to clarify the law and teach its principles, its application from the perspective of its fulfillment, from a fully revealed trinitarian perspective. His purpose was to help His people, His disciples, better understand and practice God’s law. Jesus would reiterate or echo God’s law from the mountain, showing it in the light of Christ. The advent of Christ cast the Law in a different light through His fulfillment of it.

To emphasize the fact that in Christ God Himself had come down to the people to provide further clarification of His law, Luke remembered this sermon as being on the Plain (*pedinos*, or level place—Luke 6:17). Luke’s version has Jesus off the mountain and down with the people, where He could speak with them directly, man to man. Luke’s symbolism is important because it emphasized the humanity of Jesus during a time that He was functioning out of His divinity as lawgiver. Nonetheless, we are going to follow

Matthew's presentation rather than Luke's. We will refer to Luke when he provides additional perspective.

So, was Jesus actually on the mountain or in the plain? Because we understand the gospel writers to have provided a collection of Jesus' teachings rather than a blow by blow account of how it happened, we can easily imagine that these teachings took place both on the mountain and in the plain. Indeed, these are the central teachings of the Lord, which He taught everywhere He went to anyone who would listen.

Before speaking, Jesus "sat down" (v. 1). This seemingly minor detail demonstrates that Jesus taught in the tradition of the Rabbis. Unlike modern times, in the days of the Lord, Rabbis addressed their congregations from a sitting position. The teacher would sit at the head of the table, or in a prominent position facing the people.

Jesus was always out ahead of His disciples, showing them the way, or preparing things for them. And so here, I imagine Jesus being ahead of them, up the hill, looking for the right spot from which to address the crowd. And when He found it, He sat, and waited for the disciples and the crowd to catch up. As they did, as they came to Him, He opened his mouth and began teaching them (vs. 1-2).

BLESSED

The first word out of His mouth was *blessed*, (*makarios*). The Greek word means supremely favored and by extension fortunate, well off or happy. Blessed is a description of context and circumstance. Jesus spoke about those who are favored by God, and by implication, those who are faithful to God, those upon whom God smiles. The reference is Deuteronomy 28:1-14, the declaration of God's blessings upon His people, upon those who "faithfully obey the voice of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 28:1). Jesus provided the principles of blessedness, lessons about how to be on the receiving end of God's blessings.

So, the first question to ask is, Who does God bless? And the answer is that God blesses those who "faithfully obey the voice of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 28:1), if I may repeat myself—and I must because God does. But, you may wonder, isn't this idea of being blessed for one's obedience an Old Testament teaching? It is, but what we see here in the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus has made it a New Testament teaching as well, which makes it a both testaments teaching, which makes it doubly important. Repetition

is good for the soul.

Is this a kind of salvation by works teaching? No. Salvation is only by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). But the faith here is the faith of those who obey the voice of the Lord. While salvation is by faith alone, by the singularity of faith, blessing—sanctification or growing near to God—comes through obedience. In Deuteronomy 28 God spoke to His people, not to individuals alone but to His people as a group. The blessings are for them in the plural, as a whole. Of course those blessings will manifest for individuals as well, but they are not for individuals exclusively. These blessings are for the people of God, for the body of Christ, the church, in all of its trinitarian complexities.⁵

The full measure of God's blessing is reserved for His people as a people. The full measure of God's blessing manifests more fully when His people are in unity, in Christ, when obedience is measured corporately rather than merely individually. And yet corporate obedience requires individual obedience, but is more than mere personal obedience. Such obedience, the corporate blessings of God's people, also comes by grace through faith. And while God's blessings are for God's people, for the church, they impact more than the church. God's blessings will have a positive impact upon the world (Luke 2:14, 2 Corinthians 5:19-21), upon all people, even the ungodly.

POOR IN SPIRIT

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (v. 3).

At first hearing our ears are rankled because this is not what we expect to hear. Those who first heard it were undoubtedly shocked, perhaps even confused. Those who had followed Jesus tended to be poor, uneducated and unhealthy. They were people who were dominated by problems of various sorts, and they followed Jesus hoping to solve some of their problems, to get healing for themselves or their loved ones. They were less interested in learning what Jesus had to teach, than they were in getting particular problems fixed. Many had health problems or came on behalf of someone who had health problems. So, Jesus healed some of them.

⁵ For more on how presuppositional trinitarianism is related to the body of Christ see the corresponding sections of *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians*, Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2008.

But Jesus' primary concern was not fixing their problems. He healed in order to get their attention and to establish His credentials. Rather, than simply giving hungry people a fish, Jesus wanted to teach them how to fish, if I may build upon the well-known aphorism. Speaking to Peter and Andrew, He said,

“Follow me, and I will make you,” not fishermen—they were already fishermen, but *“fishers of men”* (Matthew 4:19).

In Christ, they would expand their existing skill set and apply it to the mission of Christ. The blessings of God would come with the growth and maturity of His people. This is what Jesus taught on the Mount.

While the Sermon on the Mount is not composed of explicit principles for Christian evangelism, it is composed of principles for Christian evangelists because Christians must actually practice Christianity before they can engage in evangelism. The teachings and principles of the Sermon on the Mount are not for unconverted sinners, as if Jesus was teaching works-righteousness to the unsaved. Not only are these principles beyond the reach of those who are not Christian, they have proven to stretch the grasp of most Christians, as well. They can only be practiced from a Christian perspective. They don't make sense apart from Christ's trinitarian perspective. All Christian understanding is necessarily trinitarian, and is unique to Christianity. Apart from Christ this understanding is impossible, but in Christ it is inevitable. In addition, faithfully engaging these principles takes practice and discipline. They are simple, but not easy.

Of course, everyone will benefit from faithfully engaging these principles, from learning and applying these principles in their own lives. But the truth is that only those who are actually animated by God have the interest and ability to do so, and few of those to date—at least in the contemporary world—actually manifest the fullness of that ability. Gilbert K. Chesterton said that “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”

The promise of Jesus Christ is that the faithful exercise of these principles will be common to all in the kingdom of God. So, in anticipation of that kingdom we are to learn and practice them as individuals, as families, as churches. Christ fixes sin through His propitiation on the cross. And through the practice and perfection

of these principles by those who are saved, God will fix the rest of our problems by providing His many blessings. God's blessings are the fix that the world needs now.

Jesus did not use the Sermon on the Mount to inspire the masses who had followed Him up the mountain to become Christians. That's not what He was doing here, nor did that happen. These Beatitudes are not all that inspiring. The discipline and work of sanctification are not things that people naturally want to engage. Most people are unaffected, confused or disgusted by them, not inspired. Jesus was not trying to reach people who wanted to be inspired.

Inspired people are not poor in spirit, the inspired are rich in spirit. They are filled with their inspirations, their hopes and dreams. Those who are inspired are full, not empty, rich in spirit, not poor. Jesus was not speaking to the rich in spirit. Christianity is not about inspirational messages for people who feel bad. Christian hope is not like worldly hope.

Rather, Christianity is for the poor in spirit, for those who don't have much spirit, who are uninspired. That's why they are poor in it. Paul, quoting Jesus, mentioned this to the Corinthians.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Jesus was not simply talking about people who need God, but about people who know that they need God, people who know their own sinfulness and their own inability to do what needs to be done. In contrast, people who think themselves to be basically good, people who are proud of their Christianity or their spirituality or their faithfulness or their inherent goodness, are not poor in spirit.

The poor in spirit are humble. They are meek, modest, not arrogant or prideful. They are patient and kind. They do not envy or boast. They are not arrogant or rude. They do not insist on their own way. They are not irritable or resentful. They do not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoice with the truth. They bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things (1 Corinthians 14:3-7).

These are the kinds of people who compose the kingdom of heaven, who will build the kingdom of heaven on earth (as it is in heaven), who will inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not about simply providing directions for people who want to go to heaven, but is descriptive of those who are engaged in Christ's mission to bring the kingdom of God to earth, "for theirs is

the kingdom of heaven (v. 3)—*is not will be*.

THOSE WHO MOURN

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted
(v. 4).

This verse is very much like the previous verse. Again, we see Jesus standing godless common sense on its head. How can mourning be a blessing? What sort of blessing is grief and sorrow? Questions like these reveal a godless common sense perspective, not a faithful Christian perspective. The person who asks questions like these has hold of the issue by the wrong end. Jesus did not say that it is a blessing to mourn, to feel sadness.

People mourn in the face of loss—the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of a home or something of value. There is no blessing in an act of mourning. It is a painful and sad experience. And everyone knows it because it is a universal experience. Everyone mourns in this life because everyone experiences losses in this life. Mourning is a universal experience. Some mourn more and some less, but everyone mourns.

Those who mourn in Christ will be comforted in Christ. So, it is not the fact of mourning that is a blessing. Rather, the blessing is the comfort that comes to those in Christ. The use of the word *shall* here conveys the idea that the comfort is assured. Nothing can keep the comfort away. The *comfort* (*parakaleō*) that Jesus has in mind is a matter of calling near, which is the literal meaning of the Greek word. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be called near. Near to what or who? To Jesus, of course. Being near to Jesus is a blessing.

In these two verses Christ has called attention to humility and sadness, and suggested that there is an up side to these things in Christ, that we should not fear humiliation or sadness. Rather, if we can engage them in Christ, if we can hold on to faithfulness in the midst of such things, there will be a benefit, a blessing. Faithfulness is the key to the comfort. The comfort comes through faithfulness. It is a product of faithfulness.

Paul spoke of a similar idea when he wrote to the Romans.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace

in which we stand, and in which we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:1-5).

In Christ the bitterness of such experiences is transformed into fuel for character development and hope, both of which are blessings.

The pain of mourning is mitigated by faithfulness in Christ. Yes, but more than that, faithfulness dissolves the pain of mourning into hope, and hope is the fuel of sanctification for the engine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. The pain of loss in this sinful world cannot be avoided. But it can be changed into the joy of growth and maturity in Christ—and that is the blessing that awaits those in Christ who mourn.

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