

Christ's "Sermon on the Mount"

We are here, once again, to break bread and drink wine, not only from love of him whose memory is thus brought before us, but in obedience to his commandment: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" Obedience is the great lesson of the faith. It is the one great feature of the house of Christ. It is the one simple test by which his friends are to be found out, and by which they will be chosen and confessed in the day of his glory. Christ is "*the author of eternal salvation to all* **THEM THAT OBEY HIM**" (Heb. 5:9). We may know him well in a theoretical way, and be busy enough about his affairs in the department of doctrine, preaching, and contention; but if we obey not his commandments, he will disown us at the last, saying, "*Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*" (Luke 6:46). No truth is more distinctly or more constantly taught in the Word than this. It will, therefore, be time well spent if we look this morning at a few of the things he has commanded.

There is one part of his teaching in particular with which he has associated this explicit declaration: "*Every one that heareth **these sayings of mine**, and doeth them **NOT**, shall be likened to 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.*" The "sayings" and commandments to which he thus points with unmistakable significance, as regards their obligation on every believer who means to be found at the last with his house established on the rock, are those which go to make up what is familiarly called "the Sermon on the Mount." All his "sayings" are binding on his brethren directly or indirectly; but there is a special solemnity in those so directly pointed to by himself, as those which will determine, in our obedience of them or otherwise, our position in the great day that will manifest every man's work, of what sort it is. It is, therefore, of peculiar importance that we consider them, so that we may escape classification at his coming with those of whom he elsewhere speaks as the servants that knew their Lord's will and did it not; or the servants that were ignorant of their Lord's will and consequently did it not; both of whom are to be among the punished, though the former are more severely dealt with than the latter.

Leaving aside the illustrative remarks and statements of collateral fact with which the discourse abounds, we may discover something like twenty-six or twenty-eight distinct commands which are obligatory on every believer of the Gospel if he would be accepted. Let us look at them briefly in the order in which he has given them.

1.—**Let your light shine before men.** In illustration of this, Jesus says, Men do not light a candle to put it under a bushel, but to set it on a candlestick. This is an intimation that those who receive the light of the truth do not receive it for their own advantage merely; but for exhibition to all around. They are lights kindled by God for irradiation into the surrounding darkness. It is, therefore, incumbent upon every believer to exhibit the light both in word and deed, whether the darkness comprehend it or not. This is the meaning of Christ's last message, "*Let him that heareth say, Come.*" Every man having the truth who hides it, for whatever reason, or fails to show it to the extent in his power, is, therefore, disobedient. There is nothing in this commandment inconsistent with the other which forbids the parade of our good deeds before men to obtain their praise.

2.—**Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.** Here our relation to brethren is made sacred. In former times, the law was against murder: but Jesus takes the law further, and prohibits the anger that leads to the murder,

making a man guilty at the very inception of the crime, as it were. It is not anger in all cases, however, that is forbidden, but anger "*without a cause*," that is, without a just cause. No man would be angry with another absolutely without cause: but he may be angry for a reason that is not a good one. He may be angry at something that is really right in the other. In the scriptural sense, this is being angry without a cause; and the danger connected with such a mistake is here made a reason for great circumspection in the matter of giving reins to our disapprobation. It is the exhortation that Paul gives in another form, "*Be angry and sin not*" (Eph. 4:26). Be sure your anger is justifiable: and take care that even if it be a righteous anger, it does not lead you to unrighteous deeds. As for him that deliberately hateth his brother, John tells us he is a murderer (1 John 3:15). The cause of hate is generally that specified by John in the case of Cain and Abel: "*And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.*"

3.—If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. The allusion to the "*altar*" shows that at first this had reference to the worship connected with the Mosaic ritual, and therefore to the Jews who were his audience on the occasion; but the precept is made binding, with all the others, upon all believers, Jews or Gentiles, till the end of the days, by the direction given by Christ to his apostles before he ascended: "*Teach them (all nations) to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:20). We have, therefore, to accept it as an obligation from Christ that if we have done wrongfully to a brother, the recollection of his grievance against us should be a barrier to our approaches to God till the matter has been put right by reconciliation. There is, of course, such a thing as unjust accusation. The remedy in that case is in Matt. 18:15, unless we prefer the other course, of silently and patiently taking wrong, which in some cases is the preferable one (1 Cor. 6:7; 1 Pet. 2:19, 20).

4.—Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him. It is better to end strife in the shortest way. It is better to restore that which we have not taken away than strive at the risk of the loss of meekness. It is better to give place unto wrath than fight with unreasonable and wicked men. It is better to give in to unjust demands than engage in a conflict which will be to our hurt in a scriptural sense. "Doves" and "sheep" are the comparisons to which the Lord likens his brethren; both of them creatures in which there is no "fight." The saints are lions at last, but not now. They are in training for that honour in being asked meanwhile to submit to evil.

5.—Whoso looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. As in murder, so in this: the law forbade the crime: Christ forbids those libidinous contemplations that lead to the crime. Thus he places our very thoughts in subjection, and helps us to attain that purity of heart that fits for the kingdom of God. The "*motions of sin in our members*" are involuntary; and as to these, we can say with Paul, "*It is no more I, but sin that dwelleth in me*": but if the propensities of the flesh are mentally indulged, they become sin. This is the teaching of the precept.

6.—If thy right eye or right hand offend thee (or more properly, cause thee to offend), cast it from thee, that thy whole body perish not. The literal eye and the literal hand cannot become a cause of spiritual stumbling. Hence the force of this command: that even IF such were the case, our eye and hand must be sacrificed. This leaves no doubt as to our duty whenever anything—be it a habit, a friend, a connection, or what else—acts as a hindrance in

the race. It is the duty expressed by Paul: "*Lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset.*" All things that are lawful are not necessarily "expedient": do they hinder or help the work of the Gospel in us? This is the simple test by which we may easily decide what is wise to be done. There are many enterprises, occupations, and things that, judged by this rule, will be let alone by spiritual men—enterprises, occupations and things which, while innocuous enough in themselves, are prosperously effected only at the peril of eternal life. Under this category, it would be easy to include large business aims, worldly friendships, scientific specialities, political and social hobbies, and fashionable pleasure taking.

7.—**Swear not at all, but let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay.** What comment is needed here? A simple, pure and truthful style of communication, free from the garniture of exaggerated emphasis of all kinds, will characterize those who follow the precepts and examples of the Lord. Purity of speech helps purity of thought, and thus obedience is itself an aid to perfection.

8.—**Resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.** This is the most difficult of all the commandments to obey. Perhaps this is why its obligation is least recognized and advocated, and its force sometimes frittered away by theories that make it of non-effect. It cannot be said that it is not plain, or that its meaning is difficult of understanding. Some say it applies only to the persecutions of the early ages. Jesus does not so limit it. Indeed, he does not apply it to persecutions at all as such. On the contrary, he connects it with ordinary civil matters as between man and man. He introduces it by a reference to the principle of judicial dealing established by the law of Moses: "*Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.*" Now, on reference to Exod. 21:24, it will be found that this principle was laid down for the settlement of cases brought to the judges, and, therefore, referred to civil suits. Consequently, the new law that Christ laid down must apply in the same relation. Indeed, he so applies it: "*If any man sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat* (instead of acting on the eye for an eye principle, resist not the evil), *let him have thy cloke also.*" Suing at the law is not the process of persecution; therefore, it is not to circumstances of persecution that Jesus intends the application of this command, but to all the possible relations of life, and, therefore, to persecution as well. The attempt to limit it to persecution is gratuitous, strained, and unnatural. It would be strange if Christ forbade us to defend him, but left us at liberty to defend ourselves. Others again, admitting it applies to process of law, contend that it applies only to the case of brethren doing evil to us or bringing law against us; that is, that we are not to resist evil if a brother is the evil-doer; that we are not to defend ourselves at law if a brother is the suitor, grounding this view on 1 Cor. 6. But this is equally untenable. Christ says "*If ANY man*" do thus and so, we are not to resist. He does not say "any brother." But, says the objector, the Sermon on the Mount was addressed to the Lord's disciples. This is true, but does not divert the application of the commandment. The discourse, though addressed to the disciples, related to their doings and submission towards **men who were not disciples**. Thus Jesus says a few sentences farther on, "*Love your enemies ... if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others?*" There will be no question here that Jesus, though speaking to his disciples, speaks of their relation to other men. Therefore, when he says, "*If any man sue thee at the law,*" he means, "any man," and not "any brother." It would be strange if he allowed us to defend ourselves from wolves and not from wolves in sheep's clothing. It is evident that it is to our dealings with wolves in every shape that his words apply. If he prohibits defence at law, it would certainly follow that prosecution at law is excluded, even if he had not excluded it in express words. But he has not left this to

inference. He says, "*Of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again*" (Luke 6:30) It is natural to say that such a line of action would bring ruin, and that in fact these commandments are "impracticable." But this does not dispose of the commandments. There they are still; and we are not warranted in considering the consequences of obeying them. It is dangerous to consider consequences in this relation. If Abraham had been governed by the doctrine of consequences when commanded to offer up his son Isaac, he would have hesitated and lost the blessing. If we are the children of God, we are in the school of obedience, and it is an expressly appointed feature of this school that the path of obedience is a path of suffering. Obedience is not tested by the command to do what is agreeable. It is the command to do contrary to what our natural impulses incline us to that puts us to the test. No impulse of nature is stronger than self-defence: consequently, no more powerful or constantly operative discipline of submission to the will of God could be established in the house of God than the command, during the ascendancy of Gentilism in the world, to "*resist not evil*." The command is associated with promise: "*Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord*." So that faith is called into exercise as well as submission by the command to be subject, for conscience sake. It is a question of waiting God's time for vindication. It is a hard precept, perhaps; but we are not at liberty to disobey the hard precepts. The way is expressly made narrow: the broad way is easy and pleasant.

But some think this is making the way narrower than it is. God forbid that such should be done. Wisdom is only anxious to exhibit and uphold Christ's way. The commandments are his: woe to the man that adds to or takes away from them. They are not weakened by the lapse of eighteen centuries. It remains as true now as when Christ said so, that the man that "*heareth these sayings and doeth them*" is the man who will be established at his coming. But, asks another objector, "Is not all that Christ means, this: that we are not personally to resent injury or seek redress, but leave it to the constituted authorities, who are the appointed ministers of God to us for good?" The obvious answer to this is that it is not the mode of seeking redress with which the discourse of Christ on the mountain deals, but with the fact of seeking it at all. He does not say, "If men take away thy goods, ask them not again personally, but ask them by the policeman." He says, "*Ask them not again*." Asking them by the policeman is asking them again. Besides, to what meaningless purport such a qualification would reduce all his commandments! It would put Jesus as a teacher on a level with the Town Clerk of Ephesus, when he said, "*If Demetrius, and the craftsmen that are with him, have a matter against any man, the law is open, and there are deputies: let them implead one another*" (Acts 19:38), and it would reduce the commandments to absurdity. "*Resist not evil*," would mean, "Resist not by your own hands, but resist by the law which is mightier than you." If a man smite thee on the one cheek, turn the other also," would mean, "Submit to the smiter till the policeman arrives, and then smite both the cheeks of the smiter by the hand of the policeman." So also, "If a man sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also, till you are able to bring a cross-action and recover not only your cloke and coat but damages also!" Such a style of construing the commandments of Christ would reduce his teaching to the mere inculcation of orderly citizenship of this world, to which he said he and his disciples did not belong: whereas the higher view shows him putting his friends under a preliminary discipline for the exaltation which awaits the obedient of them in the kingdom of God. The question is settled by the comparison of his friends to "*sheep in the midst of wolves*," and by his own example of passiveness under all the injuries and insults of men. Sheep don't fight. They fly from the wolves, and if bitten they are content to escape. God certainly makes use of the powers that be to restrain evil and preserve a situation favourable to the working out of His purpose with the saints; but he does not permit them to make use of them as agents in the doing what they are forbidden to do for themselves. What a

man does by the law, he does himself. By this, he can more destructively smite his enemy on the cheek than if he tried it with his own hands. What virtue in withholding a blow with your own hand if it is only that you may inflict a heavier one through the resistless and cruel instruments of the law? Doing good to them that hate and hurt you excludes the resort to all retribution—by the law or otherwise.

9.—Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. This is but an enforcement of the other commandment: "*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*" Men love their neighbours when they are well off, and are ready to do people a good turn who are not particularly in need of it. Christ would have us show our neighbourliness towards those who fall into misfortune; for this is his own illustration of the point in answer to the question, "*Who is my neighbour?*" (see Luke 10:29-37). A man fell among thieves who robbed and abused him, and left him half dead. A stranger picked him up and attended to him. Christ's moral to the case is contained in the words: "*Go, and do thou likewise.*" This is the principle of the commandment under consideration. "*Give to him that asketh,*" which, of course, is the man in need. Turn not away from his entreaties. The usual practice is to stop the ear at the cry of the poor. This may be convenient and profitable at present, but there will come a bitter sequel (Prov. 21:13). The commandment is to do good unto all as opportunity arises. The reason of the commandment is: "*That ye may be the children of the Highest.*" The political economist may say, "There is no end to this; everybody should look after their own poor." The answer is, there is an end to life and an end to our trial, and our business is to act on Christ's precepts, and not on the worldly-wise maxims of a generation without God. The poor we have always with us: and the man who wearies at the constant test is a man who wearies in well-doing, and will fail to reap in the "due season" of the Divine harvest which is fast coming on. But God is not unreasonable. Where a man has not to spare (which is the case of the majority), he cannot give to every one that asketh. In that case, he will say with Peter, who was asked to give alms to the cripple at the gate of the temple: "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee.*" The principle of the commandment is to consider the need of others as it comes under our notice and not to shut up our bowels of compassion.

10.—Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that spitefully use you and persecute you. This may be difficult, but becomes possible and even easy at last to such as come under the power of the Spirit in the constant reading and meditation of the word. There are many senses in which it is true that "*all things are possible to them that believe.*" The love of enemies and well-doing to the malicious are not native to the natural man (and we all have the natural man). But the natural man has to be brought under the supremacy of the spiritual man's rules of action. The old man has to be crucified: the victory must be achieved, or we are the vanquished instead of the victorious. The victory that overcometh is our faith. This enables us, with eyes on Christ, to entertain benevolent regards towards those who are at enmity with us; to do good, when opportunity arises, to those who would destroy us; and to pray for their well-being. These dispositions, however, do not in true saints work against those other commandments enjoined and exemplified extensively in the New Testament, which require us to make no friendship with the world and to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness nor to associate with brethren who walk contrary to the truth. The love to enemies exists as a sentiment that would desire and seek to promote their well-being without interfering with the law of God, which forbids us to "*help the ungodly, or love them that hate the Lord*" (2 Chron. 19:2). Christ and the apostles may be taken as the right exemplification of this precept. Jesus, though animated by the highest benevolence, denounced his enemies as "*hypocrites,*" wolves

in sheep's clothing, graves filled with rottenness (Matt. 23), and looked on them with anger (Mark 3:5). So with Paul, Peter, and the other apostles, though obedient to, this commandment of Christ, to love their enemies and pray for them, they assumed towards them an attitude of pronounced and uncompromising opposition, and spoke of them in terms of wholesale condemnation (Acts 13:10; 2 Pet. 2:12-19; Jude 10-16). To the mind not practically experienced in the matter, there may appear to be some contradiction here. There is none in reality. In the abstract (as to what you would do if your enemies would allow it), you may love them, feeling towards them a benevolent desire for their good, which, as opportunity serves, you may even carry into practical effect; and yet be compelled to antagonize and oppose and contend with them in the attitude they assume towards the things of God. The existence of your real sentiments may be clouded from view by the circumstances surrounding you, as in the case of the Lord among the Pharisees; but its existence is there all the same, and shows itself negatively, at all events, in the absence of effort to hurt. The difference between those who are controlled by this precept and those who are not, is perhaps more evident when power to hurt is possessed. The righteous man is free from malice, and refrains from inflicting harm; the man of the flesh embraces the opportunity without mercy, and schemes to create the opportunity of inflicting evil if it does not exist. The spirit of the commandment may be apprehended by considering God, whom we are commanded to imitate. All His designs are based in love; but, with the wicked, He is angry, and will at last destroy them, though not willing that they should perish. Nothing, however, will more foster the commandment than the observance of its letter.

11.—When thou doest thine alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. This commandment has a purifying effect. It forbids the disclosure of our almsgiving to human knowledge. Many things are done for the sake of human opinion, as with the Pharisees, who, like mankind at the present day, *"loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."* This is a corrupt source of well-doing. In fact, deeds emanating from such a motive are defiled, and not reckoned as well-doing. *"Let thine alms be in secret,"* says Jesus; *"and thy Father, who seeth in secret, shall himself reward thee openly."* The tendency of this precept is to make us frame our purposes and do our deeds without reference to man, and in view only of Him whose eyes are in every place beholding the evil and the good. Thus our works become *"wrought in God."*

12.—When thou prayest, enter into thy closet. Prayer in secret is genuine prayer. Prayer in the presence of others is not necessarily so. Christ inculcates privacy in the matter; not that he excludes public address to the Father in season; for he himself exemplified this phase (John 11: 41, 42), and Paul also (Acts 27:35). But he enjoins the same secrecy, on the whole, in this matter, as in almsgiving. Men of God pray much in secret, as Jesus did, who often withdrew himself to solitude to pray (Luke 6:12), and Daniel, who did so three times a day (Dan. 6:10), and the Psalmist, who seven times a day gave thanks and praise (Psalm 119:164). The men who pray most in secret pray best in public; for the genuineness of their private habit infuses itself into their public petitions. Mere formality in prayer-saying is a transparent abomination.

The rest of the commandments contained in the Sermon on the Mount are simple and perhaps of easier reception than some of the foregoing.

13.—Use not vain repetitions in prayer.

14.—Forgive those who offend against you.

15.—When you mourn before God, do not parade the fact before men, but anoint thy head and wash thy face.

16.—**Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.**

This, perhaps, is an exception to the easiness. Here is a common practice condemned. To accumulate property is considered a virtue. It is enjoined as an "honourable ambition," and sanctioned by so many high-sounding and pleasant phrases of commendation that men get at last to think it is positively a highly moral achievement to make money. There is certainly no more sure way of securing the good opinions of men than to get rich. But there is another side to the subject; that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. The possession of riches is an inheritance of great peril. A rich man needs to be more anxious and careful towards God than a poor man. It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. So declared Christ, who knew what was in man, and who here gives us this commandment, forbidding us to get into the position of rich men. He commands us to—

17— **Lay up our treasures in heaven.** Paul and Peter tell us how this is to be done (1 Tim. 6:18, 19), by using the goodness of God that may be in our hands in the blessing of those who are destitute, and in the doing and contriving of those things that shall be for the welfare of men in the Gospel. Very few—scarcely any—receive this doctrine; but there it is, to judge us at the last. It is no doctrine of human invention. It is too much opposed to human instincts for that. It is Christ's direction to those who would follow him. But it is now as it was in the days of Paul, who, speaking of professors, says, "*All seek their own.*" Yet God has opened the hearts of a few, by the power of His Word, to obey His Word, to give themselves as living sacrifices for the work of His house. The time is too short to hope for much increase in the number of these, but His Word will accomplish that for which it has been sent.

18.—**Take no thought (anxious care) for your life,** is a plain precept, and difficulty only for those who have not learnt to have that faith in God which Christ commands; and without which, we are no sons of His. So also is it with—

19.—**Seek first the kingdom of God.**

20.—**Judge not.**

21.—**Cast not pearls before swine.**

22.—**Ask, seek, knock.**

23.—**Do unto men as ye would they should do unto you.**

24.—**Enter in at the strait gate.**

25.—**Beware of false prophets.**

It is with reference to all these commandments that Jesus utters the solemn words: "*Whosoever heareth **these sayings of mine**, and **DOETH THEM NOT**, shall be likened unto a foolish man that built his house upon the sand: and the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon the house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.*" They are, therefore, of a peculiar obligation one and all. Of what avail will our knowledge and acknowledgment of him be, if we disobey his commandments? It is to be feared that many a man knows the truth in its theoretical outline who is habitually disobedient in relation to some, if not all, of these precepts. It is a sad and discouraging fact that men zealous of "doctrine" may be heedless of the commandments. Must we draw a veil over the commandments to please men? Let those do so who are not the servants of Christ. It is saying the truth to say that they look in vain for salvation, who, with the profoundest understanding of the mysteries of God, combine an habitual violation of the commandments that Christ has given for our obedience during his absence.

Those commands are opposed to the maxims of human wisdom because their object is altogether different from what men propose to themselves in the adoption of any rules of conduct. Men usually act in defence of self-interest. The object of Christ's commandments is to educate us for the kingdom of God, the first law of which is the obedience of God, and the ultimate object of which is glory to Him and blessing to all mankind. Therefore, his commandments teach us to disregard self-interest as a motive of action, and to have God and our neighbour distinctly before us.

Men would not be in harmony with His great purpose unless they were themselves taught and disciplined in those principles upon which that purpose hinges; and they cannot be taught in these otherwise than in the way God has appointed in the obedience of commandments which are contrary to the flesh and which we perform for the sake of him who hath given them to us for our exercise and proof towards him. In view of this, it is a mistake to discuss the human consequences of anything he has commanded. He requires us in case of need to sacrifice our very lives in his obedience; and no other consequence need be considered by the side of this. The consequence to be considered is the consequence in the presence of Christ at his coming. By setting aside his commandments, we may save ourselves from inconvenience and harm now, but it will be at the expense of his approbation then; and what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? A glorious revolution is in store, and is now even at the door, when the poor and the afflicted and the out-cast and down-trodden and the slain of those who are obedient to Christ will be exalted in wealth and honour and renown in the day when it will be said to the purple-and-fine-linen despisers of Christ: *"Thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented."*

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 264-272 by Bro. R. Roberts.)