The contents of jesus' teaching on the sermon on the mount and its application to...

Religion, Christianity

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is one of three major discourses spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ in the discharge of His prophetic office while engaged in His ministry on earth. Concerning the Upper Room Discourse and the Olivet Discourse there is little divergence among Bible-believing interpreters as to the period of applicability, the persons addressed, or the principles of action contained in them. There is no such unanimity in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, even among interpreters who approach Scripture from the same literal and dispensational viewpoint. Differences with other Gospels. In both Gospels the sermon begins with what are commonly called the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-12; Lk 6: 20-23), short sayings that begin. ' Blessed are ...' The Greek adjective translated ' blessed' represents a Hebrew word used often in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms and Proverbs. It means fortunate, well off, to be congratulated, or the like. The person pronounced blessed may not feel at all happy; in fact, those whom Jesus called blessed would appear to most people to be decidedly unhappy.

There are four differences between the Beatitudes given by Matthew and those given by Luke. First, Matthew has nine Beatitudes, Luke only four. The sayings concerning the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness are lacking in Luke. Second, whereas Matthew's Beatitudes are stated more generally in the third person (' the poor in spirit,' ' those who mourn,' and so on), shifting to the second person only in the last Beatitude, Luke's are all addressed directly to the hearers in the second person (' you poor,' ' you that hunger now'). A

third and very important difference is that Luke understands and phrases the Beatitudes in a more literal and material sense than Matthew does. It is not ' the poor in spirit' who are called blessed in Luke but ' you poor,' not ' those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' but ' you that hunger now.' Instead of ' those who mourn' Luke has ' you that weep now', and instead of ' they shall be comforted' he has ' you shall laugh.' The fourth difference is even more emphatic. Luke's four Beatitudes are followed by four corresponding Woes (6: 24-26): ' But woe to you that are rich, woe to you that are full now, woe to you that laugh now, woe to you, when all men speak well of you.

The Lord's Prayer

Sincerity in prayer requires that it be direct and simple. God is not impressed by verbosity (vv 7-8). Nor is the purpose of prayer to give him information. Prayer is a child's expression of his hopes, fears, and aspirations to his Father, who already knows what the child needs, but wants the communion of spirit with spirit.

Matthew gives here (6: 9-15; cf. Lk 11: 2-4) what we call the Lord's Prayer, introduced with the simple direction, ' Pray then like this.' Luke puts it after the story of Mary and Martha. Both settings may be artificial; it is the prayer itself that matters. Mark does not report it at all.

It begins with ' Our Father who art in heaven.' Luke has simply, ' Father." Matthew (or his special source) favors the expression ' Father who is heaven' or its equivalent ' heavenly Father,' both in prayer and in speaking of God (e. g., Mt 16: 17; 18: 10, 19). It is a Jewish form of address that Jesus himself

may very well have used. In one form or another, Jesus' most characteristic word for God was ' Father.' With the possessive pronoun ' my' or ' his' or only the definite article (Mk 8: 38 and parallels; 13: 32 and parallels) it refers to God as the Father of Jesus himself or of the coming Son of Man or Messiah. According to Luke. Jesus even as a boy spoke of God as ' my Father' (2: 49). It is Luke also who reports that Jesus twice called upon God as Father from the cross (23: 34, 46), and after his resurrection spoke to the troubled disciples of ' the promise of my Father' (24: 49). But Jesus spoke not only of God as his own Father; he spoke also of ' your Father' (Mt 6: 15 and often) and taught the disciples to address God as ' our Father' or simply ' Father.'

In Judaism it was by no means unusual to speak of God and to him as Father, both of individuals and of the whole people of Israel. Some prayers in the Jewish Prayer Book begin, ' Our Father, our King.' A famous rabbinic saying is, ' Who is there for us to lean on? On our Father who is in heaven.' A prayer in the apocryphal book of Sirach begins, ' O Lord. Father and Ruler of my life' (Sir 23: 1); and in another place (51: 10) the reading of the Greek text. '' the Father of my lord,' represents a Hebrew text that was probably intended to be read, ' my Father, my Lord.'

For Jesus the term ' Father' meant not only Creator, though that was a part of the meaning. It meant not only the supreme authority whom we must obey, though it did mean that. It meant also Provider, Protector, loving Parent, with all that human parenthood at its best implies. It meant far more, indeed, than the most perfect human parenthood could mean. ' If you then, who are evil,' Jesus said (Mt 7: 11; cf. Lk 11: 13), ' know how to give good

gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him.'

In Matthew the Lord's Prayer consists of seven petitions, of which Luke has five. The first three are requests not for anything for ourselves but for God's glory and his purposes on earth. The first petition is typically Jewish: ' Hallowed be thy name.' The idea of the hallowing of the name has a long history behind it. Among the early Semites the name represented fame or reputation; indeed it expressed and embodied the very existence and identity of a person. So God's gracious acts were said to be done for his name's sake (e. g. Ps 23: 3); blasphemy or any speech or conduct reflecting discredit upon him was said to profane his name (e. g., Lev 22: 32); while reverence for him as holy. praising him as holy, and so acting as to reflect credit upon him were called (e. g. Is 29: 23) hallowing or sanctifying his name (literally, making it holy). This must be the first concern of Jesus' disciples.

The second petition in both Matthew and Luke is ' Thy kingdom come'(Mt 6: 10; Lk 11: 2). Jesus had proclaimed when he first came back into Galilee after his baptism (Mk 1: 15 and parallels): ' The kingdom of God is at hand. " Near as it was, it had obviously not yet arrived when he gave the disciples this prayer. It still has not come. It's coming depends upon God.

' Thy will be done,' whether or not it corresponds to our own desires, is the ultimate wish of every dedicated heart. It was the prayer of Jesus himself in Gethsemane. What God's will requires must be accepted with sincere

submission. This is the passive aspect of the petition. Actively it means that he who prays wishes to do God's will himself, and wants every group of which he is a member to do God's will.

The phrase ' on earth as it is in heaven' applies not only to the third petition but to all three. Critical editions of the Greek text make this clear by their arrangement of the lines, but our English translations obscure or ignore it. Literally the phrase reads, ' as in heaven, also on earth.' In heaven, this implies, God's name is hallowed, his kingdom is present and manifest, his will is done. What does ' in heaven' mean? Jesus, as a child of his time, may have thought of heaven in simple terms of time and space. Rabbinic Judaism believed in several heavens, sometimes three, sometimes as many as seven. How much meaning such ideas had for Jesus we cannot tell. His statement that those who participated in the resurrection of the dead would be like angels, not marrying or giving in marriage (Mk 12: 25 and parallels), implies a kind of incorporeal existence. All we can be sure of is that he believed in a real world in which was already realized what could only be hoped and prayed for here. However, that may be, there can be no getting away from the plain meaning of ' also on earth.'

Luke's shorter form of the Lord's Prayer omits both ' Thy will be done' and ' as in heaven, also on earth.' Possibly' this omission merely reflects the liturgical practice of a different group of churches. Possibly Luke has preserved the original prayer. and Matthew presents a liturgical expansion. The same question applies to the form of address at the beginning of the prayer. There is no way to determine the right answer to it. What the

disciples are to pray for is not vitally affected. Matthew's form has a clear structure, but this may be a result of the use of the prayer in public worship.

The four remaining petitions are for our own benefit, but only the first has to do with bodily needs. ' Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6: 11; Lk 11: 3) is a request for physical sustenance, perhaps intended to cover not only food but all the necessities of everyday life. Instead of ' this day' Luke has ' each day'; in either case provision is asked only for one day at a time. Whether ' daily bread' is the right translation is a question on which scholars disagree. The Greek adjective occurs nowhere else. To me ' our bread for the coming day' seems the best translation. In the morning this would refer to the day just beginning; in the evening it would mean the following day. That the petition has anything to do with the Messianic banquet of the coming age seems to me improbable.

In the next petition the words ' debts' and ' debtors' bother some people, who prefer ' trespasses" and ' those who trespass against us.' The latter reading goes back all the way to the pioneer work of Tyndale (1535). The English Prayer Book perpetuated this rendering, which is still used in many churches. All the standard English versions after Tyndale. however, have ' debts' and ' debtors'; and this is what the Greek actually says. In Aramaic, sins are regularly called debts and sinners are called debtors. Luke reads ' sins' instead of ' debts' (11: 4). Probably this is simply a different translation of the same Aramaic word. The idea of debt is preserved in Luke's ' every one who is indebted to us' where Matthew has ' our debtors.' Several recent

translations read ' the wrong we have done' and ' those who have wronged us' or the like.

The petition (Mt 6: 13; Lk 11: 4), ' And lead us not into temptation,' has troubled sincere Christians perhaps more than anything else in the Lord's Prayer. It seems unworthy and cowardly to ask to be spared temptation, and the idea that God would ever tempt anyone to sin seems incongruous (cf. James 1: 13). The word ' temptation.' however, was not always so limited in meaning as it is for us now. The Bible refers often to tempting God (cf. Mt 4: 7) in the sense of putting him to the test. The Greek word translated ' temptation' means testing or trial of any kind, including persecution.

' But deliver us from evil.' The Greek is ambiguous (cf. Mt 5: 39). The connection with the preceding clause suggests a special reference to the temptation or trial from which the disciples ask to be spared. Thus, the double petition may mean. ' Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Tempter'; or, since ' evil' in the Bible has a wide range of meanings, ' Do not cause us to be tried too severely, but deliver us from harm.' Since we cannot tell precisely what Jesus had in mind, it would seem justifiable to use the prayer in any of these senses.

The whole prayer is couched in the plural. Even if Luke's simple ' Father' is more authentic than Matthew's ' Our Father,' both Luke and Matthew read ' give us our daily bread, ' forgive us our debts,' and ' our debtors,' ' Lead us not ... but deliver us.' Even in the privacy of his own room with the door shut, a Christian cannot leave his brother out of his prayers.

Obviously, this model prayer was not meant to exhaust all the things for which the disciples might pray. Everything in the Gospels bearing on the subject warrants the assumption that anything worth asking for or desiring would be a worthy object of prayer, subject always to Jesus' ' Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt' (Mt 26: 39).

At the end of the prayer in Matthew (6: 13) some manuscripts have, ' For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever. Amen.' The parallel in Luke (11: 4) and some manuscripts of Matthew omit this. It seems clearly to have been added in the liturgical use of the prayer in some churches. There is a tendency in liturgy to multiply words (cf. Mt 6: 7-8), though in this instance the language is by no means redundant or inappropriate. It is less prolix than the prayer of David (I Chron 29: 10-111), which probably afforded a pattern for it.

After the prayer, Jesus adds in Matthew (6: 14). ' For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.' This is one of only three sayings in the Sermon on the Mount (5: 29-30. 312-33) that have parallels in Mark (9: 43-48; 10: 11-12; 11: 25-26). In all three instances Matthew has a doublet later.

Firstly, the standard of character in the Kingdom is God· like perfection. v. 3-48. This is described in its progress and experiences, in the beatitudes, v. 3-12. Hatch, in his " Essays in Biblical Greek," tells us that the terms here employed (πτωχ!!), -ραεις) were commonly used to describe the fellahin of

the East, the poor suffering multitudes out of whom all spirit had been crushed by the relentless oppression of the rich and ruling classes. In this natural condition of the lowest classes of the population Jesus sees an illustration of the conscious spiritual condition of all who have just entered the Kingdom. Personally, they feel themselves to be spiritually bankrupt.

Secondly, its’ worth to the world, w. 13-16. The members of the Kingdom are like salt, which saves the world from corruption, v. 13 and light, to give light to men and bring glory to the Father, w. 14-16.

Third, its relation to that demanded under the law — it completes the latter, w. 17-47. This is stated expressly in w. 17-20. The opening words (“ think not”) indicate that Jesus has in mind the suspicion, and possibly charge, already afloat that He was loosening the bonds of morality. That He utterly disclaims. The law’s demands are not to be abolished but fulfilled, actualized; not lowered, but carried higher, even to perfection. The righteousness of the Kingdom must far exceed the prevalent standard of the Scribes and Pharisees. The body of truth revealed in the law and the prophets is likened to a temple slowly rising through the centuries under the hand of God.

To summarize, the character demanded in the Kingdom is one of Godlike perfection, v. 48. The children of the Kingdom are to be perfect as their Heavenly Father. That this verse is intended to summarize the teaching of the whole chapter is not only suggested by the nature of the thought, but expressly indicated by the particle.

The Principles of the Sermon on the Mount

The first part of the Sermon deals with the Law (5: 17-48) the second with the nature of true worship: almsgiving, prayer, fasting (6: 1-18); and the third with deeds of loving kindness (6: 19-7: 12)." For Kurzinger, Matt 5: 17 and 5: 20 are leading ideas of the Sermon (Leitgedanke), and he attempts his triadic reconstruction of the Sermon on this basis. But he does not include under the " better righteousness" all of the material from the latter part of the Sermon which really belongs there.

The Role of the Sermon on the Moun

These results of modern biblical scholarship provide a remarkably rich theological context in which we can understand and appreciate the role and the teaching contents of the Sermon on the Mount. As Pope Benedict observed in his recent study of Jesus (p. 68), ' The Sermon on the Mount is the new Torah brought by Jesus as the new Moses whose words constitute the definitive Torah.'

In addition, the sermon can also be understood within the new covenant which God was setting up with the new Israel as the opening address of Jesus inaugurating the kingdom of God. As the leader of God's new people, he was spelling out the message of the dramatic miracles and healings which he had been performing earlier in Matthew's gospel, that the kingly power of God was now beginning to be made manifest in the activities and teaching of Jesus. As Matthew summarised it, ' Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people' (Mt 4: 23). The

sermon which closed this opening section of Jesus' gospel ministry in Matthew shows us Jesus now describing and explaining what life would be like for his followers in the kingdom, as it would describe and confirm to subsequent generations of new Christians, beginning with the Matthaean community, what being a disciple of Jesus would now regularly involve for them.

The roles of the Sermon on the Mount in the time of Jesus and later in the life of the Church was well brought out by Pope Benedict (p. 101) when he described how, " In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks to his people, to Israel, as to the first bearer of the promise. But in giving them the new Torah, he opens them up, in order to bring to birth a great new family of God drawn from Israel and the Gentiles. Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jewish Christians and, more widely, for the Jewish world, in order to renew this great impulse that Jesus had initiated."

Viewing the Sermon on the Mount thus as a preview of Christian living within the kingdom of God helps us to uncover its inner structure and thus to recognise the whole discourse as being carefully fashioned from previous sayings of Jesus to provide a detailed exposition of his key statement which forms, as it were, the text of the sermon: ' I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5: 20). The sermon is an unpacking of what the true relationship of Christians to God must entail, as contrasted with the ways in which their opponents, the scribes and Pharisees, are (polemically) portrayed as behaving. As with Paul in his letter to the Romans, the famous

but elusive biblical term ' righteousness', or dikaiosune (based on the Greek term dike, or justice), attempts in the Sermon on the Mount to capture how a forgiving God takes the initiative in relating to us and how we in turn should correspondingly respond from our hearts to this generous heavenly father.

Conclusion

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is aimed at presenting an authoritative portrait of Christian discipleship. After a description of Jesus' introductory healing ministry, the scene is set in his ascending the hill and solemnly sitting down to address his disciples and the crowd of interested bystanders. In the opening section of his address he sketches in the Beatitudes a portrait of his followers and then commissions them, exhorting them to show ' greater rightness' than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. The main body of the sermon can then be identified as containing three sections to do with this relationship with God: one contrasting traditional Jewish moral teaching with new moral principles enunciated by Jesus; a second on the practice of ' righteousness,' (Mt 6), religious and devotional practices as performed by the Pharisees, to be rejected now in favour of Christian practices; and a third section, less clearly composed than the previous two, which can be read as describing the true righteousness which is henceforth to be found and practised in the kingdom of God, and the complete trust and single-minded devotion which God's sons and daughters are invited to manifest to their loving and protecting Father. The first thing that needs to be done, Jesus concludes here (6: 33), is to seek the kingdom of God and its (or his) righteousness, and everything else will come later. There follow then some

closing warnings on the seriousness of the situation and a parable aimed at emphasising the need not just to listen to the words of Jesus but also to obey them. In conclusion we are told, " the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (7: 28-29).

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