

General Introduction

IT is a wise rule in the examination of any teaching to proceed from the general to the particular. This is the only way of avoiding the danger of 'missing the wood because of the trees.' This rule is of particular importance in connection with the Sermon on the Mount. We must realize, therefore, that at the outset certain general questions have to be asked about this famous Sermon and its place in the life, thought and outlook of Christian people.

The obvious question with which to start is this: Why should we consider the Sermon on the Mount at all? Why should I call your attention to it and to its teaching? Well, I do not know that it is a part of the business of a preacher to explain the processes of his own mind and his own heart, but clearly no man should preach unless he has felt that God has given him a message. It is the business of any man who tries to preach and expound the Scriptures to wait upon God for leading and guidance. I suppose fundamentally, therefore, my main reason for preaching on the Sermon on the Mount was that I had felt this persuasion, this compulsion, this leading of the Spirit. I say that deliberately, because if I had been left to my own choice I would not have chosen to preach a series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. And as I understand this sense of compulsion, I feel the particular reason for doing so is the peculiar condition of the life of the Christian Church in general at the present time.

I do not think it is a harsh judgment to say that the most obvious feature of the life of the Christian Church today is, alas, its superficiality. That judgment is based not only on contemporary observation, but still more on contemporary observation in the light of previous epochs and eras in the life of the Church. There is nothing that is more salutary to the Christian life than to read the history of the Church, to read again of the great movements of God's Spirit, and to observe what has happened in the Church at various times. Now I think that

anyone who looks at the present state of the Christian Church in the light of that background will be driven to the reluctant conclusion that the outstanding characteristic of the life of the Church today is, as I have said, its superficiality. When I say that, I am thinking not only of the life and activity of the Church in an evangelistic sense. In that particular respect I think everybody would agree that superficiality is the most obvious characteristic. But I am thinking not only of modern evangelistic activities as compared and contrasted with the great evangelistic efforts of the Church in the past — the present-day tendency to boisterousness, for example, and the use of means which would have horrified and shocked our fathers; but I also have in mind the life of the Church in general where the same thing is true, even in such matters as her conception of holiness and her whole approach to the doctrine of sanctification.

The important thing for us is to discover the causes of this. For myself I would suggest that one main cause is our attitude to the Bible, our failure to take it seriously, our failure to take it as it is and to allow it to speak to us. Coupled with that, perhaps, is our invariable tendency to go from one extreme to the other. But the main thing, I feel, is our attitude towards the Scriptures. Let me explain in a little more detail what I mean by that.

There is nothing more important in the Christian life than the way in which we approach the Bible, and the way in which we read it. It is our textbook, it is our only source, it is our only authority. We know nothing about God and about the Christian life in a true sense apart from the Bible. We can draw various deductions from nature (and possibly from various mystical experiences) by which we can arrive at a belief in a supreme Creator. But I think it is agreed by most Christians, and it has been traditional throughout the long history of the Church, that we have no authority save this Book. We cannot rely solely upon subjective experiences because there are evil spirits as well as good spirits; there are counterfeit experiences. Here, in the Bible, is our sole authority.

Very well; it is obviously important that we should approach this Book in the right manner. We must start by agreeing that merely to read the Bible is not enough in and of itself. It is possible for us to read the Bible in such a mechanical manner that we derive no benefit from doing so. That is why I think we have to be careful with every kind of rule and regulation in the matter of discipline in the spiritual life. It is a good thing to read the Bible daily, but it can be quite profitless if we merely do so for the sake of being able to say we read the Bible daily. I am a great advocate of schemes of Bible reading, but we have to be careful that in our use of such schemes we are not content just to read the portion for the day and then to rush off without thought and meditation. That can be quite profitless. Our approach to the Bible is something which is of vital importance.

Now the Bible itself tells us this. You remember the apostle Peter's famous remark with regard to the writings of the apostle Paul. He says that there are things in them which are 'hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest . . . unto their own destruction'. What he means is this. They read these Epistles of Paul, yes; but they are twisting them, they are wresting them to their own destruction. You can easily read these Epistles and be no wiser at the end than you were at the beginning because of what you have been reading into what Paul says, wresting them to your own destruction. Now that is something which we must always bear in mind with regard to the whole of the Bible. I can be seated with the Bible in front of me; I can be reading its words and going through its chapters; and yet I may be drawing a conclusion which is quite false to the pages in front of me.

There can be no doubt at all that the commonest cause of all this is our tendency so often to approach the Bible with a theory. We go to our Bibles with this theory, and everything we read is controlled by it. Now we are all quite familiar with that. There is a sense in which it is true to say that you can prove anything you like from the Bible. That is how heresies have arisen. The heretics were never dishonest men; they were mistaken men. They should not be thought of as men who were deliberately setting out to go wrong and to teach something that is wrong; they have been some of the most sincere men that the Church has ever known. What was the matter with them? Their trouble was this: they evolved a theory and they were rather pleased with it; then they went back with this theory to the Bible, and they seemed to find it everywhere. If you read half a verse and emphasize over-much some other half verse elsewhere, your theory is soon proved. Now obviously this is something of which we have to be very wary. There is nothing so dangerous as to come to the Bible with a theory, with preconceived ideas, with some pet idea of our own, because the moment we do so, we shall be tempted to over-emphasize one aspect and under-emphasize another.

Now this particular danger tends chiefly to manifest itself in the matter of the relationship between law and grace. That has always been true in the Church from the very beginning and it is still true today. Some so emphasize the law as to turn the gospel of Jesus Christ with its glorious liberty into nothing but a collection of moral maxims. It is all law to them and there is no grace left. They so talk of the Christian life as something that we have to do in order to make ourselves Christian that it becomes pure legalism and there is really no grace in it. But let us remember also that it is equally possible so to over-emphasize grace at the expense of law as, again, to have something which is not the gospel of the New Testament.

Let me give you a classical illustration of that. The apostle Paul, of all men,

constantly had to be facing this difficulty. There was never a man whose preaching, with its mighty emphasis upon grace, was so frequently misunderstood. You remember the deduction some people had been drawing in Rome and in other places. They said, 'Now then, in view of the teaching of this man Paul, let us do evil that grace may abound, for, surely, this teaching is something that leads to that conclusion and to no other. Paul has just been saying, "Where sin abounded grace did much more abound"; very well, let us continue in sin that more and more grace may abound.' 'God forbid', says Paul; and he is constantly having to say that. To say that because we are under grace we therefore have nothing at all to do with law and can forget it, is not the teaching of the Scriptures. We certainly are no longer under the law but are under grace. Yet that does not mean that we need not keep the law. We are not under the law in the sense that it condemns us; it no longer pronounces judgment or condemnation on us. No! but we are meant to live it, and we are even meant to go beyond it. The argument of the apostle Paul is that I should live, not as a man who is under the law, but as Christ's free man. Christ kept the law, He lived the law; as this very Sermon on the Mount emphasizes, our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, He has not come to abolish the law; every jot and tittle has to be fulfilled and perfected. Now that is something which we very frequently find forgotten in this attempt to put up law and grace as antitheses, and the result is that men and women often completely and entirely ignore the law.

But let me put it in this way. Is it not true to say of many of us that in actual practice our view of the doctrine of grace is such that we scarcely ever take the plain teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ seriously? We have so emphasized the teaching that all is of grace and that we ought not to try to imitate His example in order to make ourselves Christians, that we are virtually in the position of ignoring His teaching altogether and of saying that it has nothing to do with us because we are under grace. Now I wonder how seriously we take the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The best way of concentrating on that question is, I think, to face the Sermon on the Mount. What is our view, I wonder, of this Sermon? Supposing that at this point I suggested that we should all write down on paper our answers to the following questions: What does the Sermon on the Mount mean to us? Where does it come in our lives and what is its place in our thinking and outlook? What is our relationship to this extraordinary Sermon that has such a prominent position in these three chapters in the Gospel according to St. Matthew? I think you would find the result would be very interesting and perhaps very surprising. Oh, yes, we know all about the doctrine of grace and forgiveness, and we are looking to Christ. But here in these documents, which we claim to be authoritative, is this Sermon. Where does it come in our scheme?

Now that is what I mean by background and introduction. However, let us take it a step further, by facing together another vital question. For whom is the Sermon on the Mount intended? To whom does it apply? What is really the purpose of this Sermon; what is its relevance? Now, here, there have been a number of conflicting opinions. There was once the so-called 'social gospel' view of the Sermon on the Mount. What it comes to is this, that the Sermon is in reality the only thing that matters in the New Testament, that there, in it, is the basis of the so-called social gospel. The principles, it was said, were there laid down as to how life should be lived by men, and all we have to do is to apply the Sermon on the Mount. We can thereby produce the kingdom of God on earth, war will be banished and all our troubles will be ended. That is the typical social gospel view, but we do not need to waste time with it. It has already become outmoded; it is to be found only amongst certain people whom I can describe as remnants and relics of the mentality of thirty years ago. The two world wars have shaken that view to its very foundation. Critical as we may be in many respects of the Barthian movement in theology, let us pay it this tribute: it has once and for ever made the social gospel look utterly ridiculous. But of course the real answer to this view of the Sermon on the Mount is that it has always ignored the Beatitudes, those statements with which the Sermon begins — 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'; 'Blessed are they that mourn.' As I hope to show you, these statements mean that no man can live the Sermon on the Mount in and of himself, and unaided. The advocates of the social gospel, having conveniently ignored the Beatitudes, have then rushed on to a consideration of the detailed injunctions, and have said, 'This is the gospel.'

Another view, which is perhaps a little more serious for us, is that which regards the Sermon on the Mount as nothing but an elaboration or an exposition of the Mosaic law. Our Lord, it is maintained, realized that the Pharisees and scribes and other teachers of the people were misinterpreting the law, as given by God to the people through Moses; what He does, therefore, in the Sermon on the Mount is to elaborate and expound the Mosaic law, giving it a higher spiritual content. That is a more serious view, obviously; and yet I feel it is totally inadequate if for no other reason than that it, also, fails to take account of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes immediately take us into a realm that is beyond the law of Moses completely. The Sermon on the Mount does expound and explain the law at certain points — but it goes beyond it.

Then the next view I want to mention is what we may call the 'dispensational' view of the Sermon on the Mount. Probably many of you are familiar with it. It has been popularized in certain 'Bibles'. (I never like these adjectives; there is only one Bible, but we unfortunately tend to talk about 'So-and-so's Bible'.) There are, then, certain teachings which have been made popu-

lar in this way, and which teach a dispensational view of the Sermon on the Mount, saying that it has nothing whatsoever to do with modern Christians. They say our Lord began to preach about the kingdom of God, and the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount was in connection with the inauguration of this kingdom. Unfortunately, they continue, the Jews did not believe His teaching. So our Lord could not establish the kingdom, and therefore, almost as a kind of afterthought, the death on the cross came in, and as another afterthought the whole Church and the whole Church age came in, and that will persist up to a certain point in history. Then our Lord will return with the kingdom and again the Sermon on the Mount will be introduced. That is the teaching; it says, in effect, that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with us. It is meant 'for the kingdom age'. It was meant for the people to whom He was preaching; it will be meant again in the millennial age. It is the law of that age and of the kingdom of heaven, and has nothing whatsoever to do with Christians in the meantime.

Now obviously this is a serious matter for us. This view is right or else it is not. According to this view I need not read the Sermon on the Mount; I need not be concerned about its precepts; I need not feel condemned because I am not doing certain things; it has no relevance for me. It seems to me that the answer to all that can be put like this. The Sermon on the Mount was preached primarily and specifically to the disciples. 'When he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying . . .' Now the whole presupposition is that it is preached to them. Take, for instance, the words which He spoke to them when He said, 'Ye are the salt of the earth'; 'Ye are the light of the world.' If the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with Christian people now, we must never say that we are the salt of the earth, or that we are the light of the world, for that does not apply to us. It applied to the first disciples; it will apply to some people later on. But, in the meantime, it has nothing to do with us. We must likewise ignore the gracious promises in this Sermon. We must not say that we must let our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven. If the whole Sermon on the Mount is inapplicable to modern Christians, all that is irrelevant. But clearly our Lord was preaching to these men and telling them what they were to do in this world, not only while He was here, but after He had gone. It was preached to people who were meant to practise it at that time and ever afterwards.

Not only that. To me another very important consideration is that there is no teaching to be found in the Sermon on the Mount which is not also found in the various New Testament Epistles. Make a list of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount; then read your Epistles. You will find that the teaching of the

Sermon on the Mount is there also. Now all the Epistles are meant for Christians today; so if their teaching is the same as that of the Sermon on the Mount, clearly its teaching also is meant for Christians today. That is a weighty and important argument. But perhaps I can put it best like this. The Sermon on the Mount is nothing but a great and grand and perfect elaboration of what our Lord called His 'new commandment'. His new commandment was that we love one another even as He has loved us. The Sermon on the Mount is nothing but a grand elaboration of that. If we are Christ's, and our Lord has meant that word for us, that we should love one another even as He loved us, here we are shown how to do it.

The dispensational view is based on a wrong conception of the kingdom of God. This is where the confusion arises. I agree, of course, that the kingdom of God in one sense has not been established on the earth yet. It is a kingdom which is to come; yes. But it is also a kingdom which has come. 'The kingdom of God is among you,' and 'within you'; the kingdom of God is in every true Christian, and in the Church. It means 'the reign of God', 'the reign of Christ'; and Christ is reigning today in every true Christian. He reigns in the Church when she acknowledges Him truly. The kingdom has come, the kingdom is coming, the kingdom is yet to come. Now we must always bear that in mind. Whenever Christ is enthroned as King, the kingdom of God is come, so that, while we cannot say that He is ruling over all in the world at the present time, He is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all His people.

There is nothing, therefore, so dangerous as to say that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with modern Christians. Indeed, I will put it like this: it is something which is meant for all Christian people. It is a perfect picture of the life of the kingdom of God. Now I have no doubt at all in my own mind that that is why Matthew put it in his Gospel at the beginning. It is agreed that Matthew was writing his Gospel especially for the Jews. That was his set desire. Hence all this emphasis upon the kingdom of heaven. And what was Matthew out to emphasize? Surely it was this. The Jews had a false, materialistic conception of the kingdom. They thought the Messiah was one who was coming to give them political emancipation. They were looking forward to someone who would deliver them from the bondage and yoke of the Roman Empire. They always thought of the kingdom in an external sense, a mechanical, military, materialistic sense. So Matthew puts the true teaching concerning the kingdom in the very forefront of his Gospel, for the great purpose of this Sermon is to give an exposition of the kingdom as something which is essentially spiritual. The kingdom is primarily something 'within you'. It is that which governs and controls the heart and mind and outlook. Far from being something which leads to great military power, it is to be 'poor in spirit'. In other words, we are not told in

the Sermon on the Mount, 'Live like this and you will become Christian'; rather we are told, 'Because you are Christian live like this.' This is how Christians ought to live; this is how Christians are meant to live.

But to complete this part of our argument we must face another difficulty. Some say, 'Surely the Sermon on the Mount teaches that we have our sins forgiven only if we forgive others? Doesn't our Lord say, "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"? Is not that law? Where is grace there? To be told that if we do not forgive, we shall not be forgiven, is not grace.' Thus they seem to be able to prove that the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to us. But if you say that, you will have to take almost the whole of Christianity out of the gospel. Remember also that our Lord taught exactly the same thing in His parable, recorded at the end of Matthew 18, of the steward who committed an offence against his master. This man went to his master and pleaded with him to forgive him; and his master forgave him. But he refused to forgive an underling who was likewise in debt to him, with the result that his master withdrew his forgiveness and punished him. Our Lord comments on this: 'So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.' That is exactly the same teaching. But does it teach that I am forgiven only because I have forgiven? No, the teaching is, and we have to take this teaching seriously, that if I do not forgive, I am not forgiven. I explain it like this: the man who has seen himself as a guilty, vile sinner before God knows his only hope of heaven is that God has forgiven him freely. The man who truly sees and knows and believes that, is one who cannot refuse to forgive another. So the man who does not forgive another does not know forgiveness himself. If my heart has been broken in the presence of God I cannot refuse to forgive; and, therefore, I say to any man who is imagining fondly that his sins are to be forgiven by Christ, though he does not forgive anybody else, Beware, my friend, lest you wake up in eternity and find Him saying to you, 'Depart from me; I never knew you.' You are misinterpreting the doctrine, the glorious doctrine of the grace of God. The man who is truly forgiven and knows it, is a man who forgives. That is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount at this point.

We shall be going into this in detail later. Here let me just put one last question. Having considered the people to whom the Sermon on the Mount applies, let us ask ourselves this: Why should we study it? Why should we try to live it? Let me give you a list of answers. The Lord Jesus Christ died to enable us to live the Sermon on the Mount. He died. Why? 'That he might . . . purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works,' says the apostle Paul — the apostle of

grace (see Titus 2:14). What does he mean? He means that He died in order that I might now live the Sermon on the Mount. He has made this possible for me.

The second reason for studying it is that nothing shows me the absolute need of the new birth, and of the Holy Spirit and His work within, so much as the Sermon on the Mount. These Beatitudes crush me to the ground. They show me my utter helplessness. Were it not for the new birth, I am undone. Read and study it, face yourself in the light of it. It will drive you to see your ultimate need of the rebirth and the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing that so leads to the gospel and its grace as the Sermon on the Mount.

Another reason is this. The more we live and try to practise this Sermon on the Mount, the more shall we experience blessing. Look at the blessings that are promised to those who do practise it. The trouble with much holiness teaching is that it leaves out the Sermon on the Mount, and asks us to experience sanctification. That is not the biblical method. If you want to have power in your life and to be blessed, go straight to the Sermon on the Mount. Live and practise it and give yourself to it, and as you do so the promised blessings will come. 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.' If you want to be filled, don't seek some mystic blessing; don't rush to meetings hoping you will get it. Face the Sermon on the Mount and its implications and demands, see your utter need, and then you will get it. It is the direct road to blessing.

But this is what I want to leave in your minds. I suggest to you it is the best means of evangelism. Surely we all ought to be urgently concerned about this at the present time. The world today is looking for, and desperately needs, true Christians. I am never tired of saying that what the Church needs to do is not to organize evangelistic campaigns to attract outside people, but to begin herself to live the Christian life. If she did that, men and women would be crowding into our buildings. They would say, 'What is the secret of this?' Almost every day we read that the real secret of communism at the present time is that it seems to be doing something and giving people something. I am told repeatedly, as I talk to young people and read books, that communism is conquering as it is in the modern world because people feel that its adherents are doing things and are sacrificing for what they believe. That is how they are gaining their members. Now there is only one way to counter that, and that is to show we have something infinitely bigger and greater. It has been my privilege to meet comparatively recently more than one person converted from communism, and in each case it has not been as a result of some intellectual sermon or argument but as the result of this communist seeing in some simple Christian a more thorough-going practice of self-abnegation and concern for others than he or she had ever thought of.

Let me enforce this by quoting something I read some time ago. A one-time Law Minister in the Indian Government was a great man called Dr. Ambedkar, an outcaste himself and a leader of the outcastes in India. At the time of which I am speaking he was taking a great interest in the teachings of Buddhism, and attended a great Conference of twenty-seven countries in Ceylon which had met together to inaugurate a world fellowship of Buddhists. He gave as his chief reason for attending the Conference, his desire to discover to what extent the religion of Buddha was a live thing. He said at the Conference, 'I am here to find out to what extent there is dynamic in the Buddhist religion as far as the people of this country are concerned.' There was the leader of the outcastes turning to Buddhism, and examining it. He said, 'I want to find if it is alive. Has it something to give to these masses of my fellow outcastes? Has it dynamic in it? Is it something that can uplift people?' But the real tragedy about this able, learned man is that he had already spent much time in America and Great Britain studying Christianity. And it was because he had found it was not a live thing, because he had found an absence of dynamic in it, that he was now turning to Buddhism. Though he had not accepted Buddhism, yet he was seeking to find whether this was the power he was looking for. That is the challenge that comes to you and to me. We know Buddhism is not the answer. We claim to believe that the Son of God has come into the world and has sent His own Holy Spirit into us, His own absolute power that will reside in men and make them live a quality of life like His own. He came, I say, and lived and died and rose again and sent the Holy Spirit in order that you and I might live the Sermon on the Mount.

Do not say it has nothing to do with us. Why, it has everything to do with us! If only all of us were living the Sermon on the Mount, men would know that there is dynamic in the Christian gospel; they would know that this is a live thing; they would not go looking for anything else. They would say, 'Here it is.' And if you read the history of the Church you will find it has always been when men and women have taken this Sermon seriously and faced themselves in the light of it, that true revival has come. And when the world sees the truly Christian man, it not only feels condemned, it is drawn, it is attracted. Then let us carefully study this Sermon that claims to show what we ought to be. Let us consider it that we may see what we can be. For it not only states the demand; it points to the supply, to the source of power. God give us grace to face the Sermon on the Mount seriously and honestly and prayerfully until we become living examples of it, and exemplifiers of its glorious teaching.