

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

and to prepare as his own successor Elisha of Abelmeholah; and the lesson he learnt was this, that no spiritual impressions will ever be permanent unless they are made by the Holy Ghost. How that lesson was taught is expressly told in the story. It was by means of several extraordinary demonstrations. First, a hurricane arose and rushed down the mountain ravines with such tremendous fury that the rocks were riven by it; but the Lord was not in the wind. Next came an earthquake, whose power seemed equally awful; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Afterwards fire burst forth which looked as if it would devour everything before it; but the Lord was not in the fire. Finally, however, there was heard a still small voice—the thrilling, penetrating call as of a living person, and the prophet who had been appalled, but not overpowered by the preceding manifestations, gave way before this more searching appeal, and came forth from his cave with his mantle over his face to listen to the Divine message. What was it that was thus taught him? Was it not this: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord.”

Now what greatly interests us further in Elijah's history is the record of how his latter days were spent. From this point his life becomes less eventful. He comes forth again once or twice, as of old, when special circumstances seemed to demand his reappearance in public life, as, for example, when Ahab had murdered Naboth for the sake of his vineyard; but as a rule he lives in retirement, and in a manner which is less romantic and exciting. It would, however, be a great mistake to conclude that he spent the evening of his days

as a hermit or in doing nothing. The truth is, that the last chapter of his life was probably his busiest. How it came about we do not know, but the age of persecution seemed to have passed. A spirit of comparative toleration prevailed. Schools of the prophets were allowed to be established in various places, and *Elijah spent his closing years in an active superintendence of these*. Thus he was taught a lesson which we have much need to lay to heart in these days, that the kingdom of darkness in this world is not a fortress which may be taken by assault, but one which will be reduced only by a long and laborious process of sapping and mining. The prophet, when he commenced his ministry, imagined that the idolatry of his country could be overthrown by a stroke. He closed his life-work by organising a system of means which required the co-operation of many men, and which it took years to carry into effect. His history then, from this point of view, is a very instructive one. What it proclaims is this, that we must neither grow weary of quiet well-doing, nor imagine that supernatural effects are to follow from natural causes. The results from our ordinary religious agencies—our colleges and Sabbath schools—our sermons and prayer-meetings—may seem to us exceedingly small, and we may grow impatient when we think of them. But after all, they may prove more efficacious than Elijah's drought or his answer by fire. In any case, we see in them God's method for subduing the world to Himself; and if the method seems to accomplish little, the explanation may be that we are forgetting the other lesson the prophet was taught, viz. the need for an outpouring of the Holy Ghost.

The Moral Teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

BY THE REV. F. H. WOODS, B.D., LATE FELLOW OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.

THERE is perhaps no portion of the New Testament about which so many questions of all kinds have arisen as the Sermon on the Mount. These may roughly be divided under three heads—I. The purely critical. II. Those which are suggested by these critical questions, and answered indirectly by our solution of them. III. Questions which deal with the subject-matter. It is not my purpose to treat of the first two with any fulness in

the present paper. I shall only touch upon them mainly with the object of safeguarding myself in dealing with the third. For critical questions so closely connect themselves with every part of Holy Scripture, that we can never safely ignore them.

I. Before speaking of the first set of questions, I should like to make one preliminary remark, obvious in principle, but very frequently ignored

in practice, especially in dealing with this particular subject. We cannot even understand the questions that arise, far less make any attempt to answer them, until we have first made ourselves acquainted with the facts. In this case the facts are such as should be familiar to every student of the New Testament. They are these—(1) In St. Matthew there is a long discourse contained in chapters v.–vii., described as uttered by our Lord to His disciples on a mountain, “And seeing the multitudes, He went up into the mountain: and when He had sat down, His disciples came unto Him: and He opened His mouth, and taught them” (ver. 1). But at the close of the discourse (vii. 28, 29), words are used which show that part, if not the whole, of this discourse was uttered in the hearing of the multitudes. “And it came to pass, when Jesus ended these words, the multitude were astonished at His teaching: for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” The next verse mentions His descent from the mountain. This discourse, as found in St. Matthew, is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. (2) In St. Luke vi. 20–49, we find a discourse which, except for a few additional verses, may be fairly called a shorter recension of the Sermon on the Mount. The additions in St. Luke are vers. 24–26, most of ver. 38 and ver. 45. (3) The two recensions differ considerably in language. Thus in St. Luke the four woes in vers. 24–26, corresponding to the four beatitudes preceding these, take the place of four of the eight beatitudes of St. Matthew. Again, St. Luke has “Blessed are the poor.” St. Matthew, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” (4) There seems to be something like a difference of aim in the two discourses. In St. Matthew, after the beatitudes and introductory exhortations (vers. 3–16), we have a carefully arranged and systematic discourse on the text, “Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil.” This is worked out by instituting a comparison in different ways between the old law and the new law. This comparison is directly made in chap. v., but seems suggested also in chaps. vi. and vii. In St. Luke we have, after the beatitudes and woes, only those parts of St. Matthew’s discourse which deal with the principles of Christian morality, illustrated by a short collection of parables. (5) The discourse of St. Luke is said to have been uttered after the

descent from the mountain (where He had spent the whole night in prayer, and appointed His twelve apostles), ἐπὶ τόπου πεδινού, “on a level place.” Hence it has been sometimes called by way of distinction “the Sermon on the Plain.” (6) There is a considerable difference in the position which the discourse occupies in St. Matthew and St. Luke. In St. Matthew it is quite at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry in Galilee. In St. Luke it is placed after several events which follow the sermon in St. Matthew. (7) Several short portions, generally single verses or parts of verses, of the Sermon on the Mount are found scattered in different chapters of St. Luke, but especially in the middle section of his Gospel (ix. 51–xviii. 14), in which he differs so widely from St. Matthew and St. Mark that it seems mainly to have been derived from some one or more independent collections of parables, etc. (8) In St. Mark there is no sermon, but only a mention of the great gathering of the crowds from all parts, which in both St. Matthew and St. Luke is said to have preceded it (cf. Mark iii. 7, 8 with Matt. iv. 25; Luke vi. 17). (9) In St. John there is no discourse which, either by its contents or position in the narrative, can be identified with either recension.

These are the facts out of which the first group of questions arise. They may be arranged thus:—A. Which form of the discourse, if either, represents the original sermon? (a) Did St. Luke curtail the longer discourse of St. Matthew, because he did not wish to repeat what he was going to say in other parts of his Gospel? or (b) did St. Matthew combine the discourse of St. Luke with sayings gathered from other sources (oral or otherwise) in the same way that he collects well-known groups of parables and miracles? or (c) are these two sermons independent expansions of an original discourse which was possibly even shorter than the Sermon on the Plain? or (d) are they both fragments of a much larger collection of sayings, such as τὰ λόγια mentioned by Papias (quoted in Eusebius iii. 39) as the work of St. Matthew. B. When was the sermon delivered? (a) At the beginning of our Lord’s Galilean ministry, as St. Matthew puts it, or (b) immediately after the appointment of the twelve apostles as we find it in St. Luke?

C. Where was the sermon delivered? (a) On the mountain top, as St. Matthew seems to say, or (b) on a plain or level place below the mountain

according to St. Luke? or (c) is it possible to combine or reconcile the statements of these two evangelists? There are some, *e.g.*, who hold that in the longer form of St. Matthew it was addressed to our Lord's disciples on the mountain, and in the shorter form of St. Luke to the multitudes on a plain below. There are others who think that the sermon in one form or another was uttered once on a level place upon the mountain but not at the summit, where our Lord had first appointed the twelve.

I think this summary of questions, with hints at the different ways in which they have been answered, may prove useful to those who wish to study this subject for themselves. We must now turn our attention to the second group of questions which arise out of them.

II. These questions are of a wider and more serious nature, inasmuch as they deal in various ways with the accuracy of the gospel narrative. A. If these two sermons are in any sense two forms or recensions of the same, they cannot both represent the *ipsissima verba* of our Lord. How then can we be sure that we have our Lord's actual language in other cases where the same test cannot be applied? Does this not rather seem to show that they aimed at giving the general sense rather than the exact words? We can easily understand, *e.g.*, an early preacher so repeating the beatitudes as to give them in what may be called a negative as well as a positive form; especially when by doing so he would be making a more exact parallel between the blessings and cursings of the old law and the blessings and cursings of the new law. Such a modification of Christ's language might arise in course of time quite unconsciously, when we remember how often a so striking portion of our Lord's teaching must have been repeated to catechumens. We have a parallel case in the very singular variations of the Lord's Prayer.

Similar questions arise as to (a) time and (b) place. How far, *e.g.*, is it likely that any attempt was made in the earliest forms of gospel teaching to give the exact order of events and discourses? or how far was the order, as it now appears in our several Gospels, merely the result of attempts to give as complete or as characteristic summaries of our Lord's acts and teaching as was practically possible? We cannot shrink from such questions out of a mistaken feeling of reverence, if we wish to make our comparative study of the Gospels

really intelligent. At first we may be shocked by the bare suggestion of such inaccuracies; but if we think a little, the ultimate gain is greater than the loss. Because, so far as discrepancies imply independence, so far they give us the evidence of two witnesses instead of one. A strong objection on the part of sceptics is that the Synoptic Gospels are so much alike, that they have only the evidential value of one document in support of their contents. Such discrepancies as those in the two recensions of the Sermon on the Mount show that this objection cannot be admitted without considerable modifications. Besides, the discrepancies in our Synoptic Gospels are often of a kind to suggest the limits beyond which a divergence from our Lord's words is improbable. Thus they go far to establish the *substantial accuracy* of the gospel records. And lastly, the two versions of a certain passage sometimes show us unmistakably the original saying from which they diverged. *E.g.*, we may be almost certain that our Lord's words were originally "Blessed are the poor," where the Aramaic word represented by "poor" was somewhat ambiguous. St. Luke understood it as meaning "without earthly riches." This he shows by the addition of the words "woe unto you who are rich" (vi. 24). But others, like St. Matthew, understood it in an ethical sense. He therefore added the words τῷ πνεύματι, making it "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*." Similarly, St. Luke explains the very difficult expression of St. Matthew and St. Mark, τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως, "the abomination of *desolation*" (St. Matt. xxiv. 15; St. Mark xiii. 14) as the desolation brought on Jerusalem by the Roman armies. "But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her *desolation* is at hand" (St. Luke xxi. 20).

III. Let us now turn our attention to the third class of questions, those which arise out of the contents of the Sermon on the Mount. In the present paper I wish to speak of one only, connected with the doctrine of non-resistance. To what extent ought we to accept our Lord's teaching literally, as a principle of practical conduct? or how far may we regard it as the language of Oriental hyperbole, or of mere metaphor? The passages in which this doctrine is enunciated are St. Matt. v. 38-48, vii. 1, 2; St. Luke vi. 27-38. It is just one of those cases in which the divergence in the two evangelists implies a considerable degree of independence, and so, as I said above,

affords a strong evidence of the substantial accuracy of the report; but it will be convenient to take the language of one evangelist. In St. Matthew the crucial words are, "Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, Resist not [him that is] evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and to him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away."

Now the common way of speaking about such a passage is to say that our Lord's directions must be understood in the spirit, and not in the letter. On the other hand, it is well known that the Quakers have, more or less consistently, maintained that we should take the words in their literal sense. The stoutest advocate of this view in modern times is the Russian novelist, Count Tolstoi. He considers that all appeals to legal tribunals, all attempts to resist crime by punishment, all wars, even of a defensive kind, are contrary to the teaching of Christ, and therefore wrong. He believes that this high Christian morality is so far a natural instinct of man, that if any nation were to adopt in its entirety the principle of non-resistance, crime and wars would rapidly diminish, and that nation would, by the sheer force of its moral strength, become the greatest nation in the world. This view is worked out in considerable length in a treatise called *What I Believe*, translated from the Russian by Popoff (Elliot Stock, 1885). In it he shows, in an interesting way, how he gradually became convinced of the truth of this literal interpretation of Christ's teaching. We have a characteristic example of his method in the beginning of the fourth chapter. In commenting on Matt. v. 38, 39, he says, "Christ means, you have been taught to consider it right and rational to protect yourselves against evil by violence, to pluck out an eye for an eye, to institute courts of law for the punishment of criminals, to have a police, an army, to defend you against the attacks of an enemy; but I say to you, do no violence to any man, take no part in violence, never do evil to any man, not even to those whom you call your enemies."

Now is there no *via media* between these extreme methods of interpretation? If we refuse to accept

the principles of Count Tolstoi, must we therefore fall back upon an interpretation which, while calling itself the spirit as opposed to the letter, practically too often tolerates principles of selfishness diametrically opposed to Christ's teaching? What then is the serious objection, apart from all selfish considerations, to Tolstoi's view? It is that *as the world, even the so-called Christian world, is constituted*, we believe it altogether impracticable. The whole point really turns upon the words italicised. If all nations were convinced, and all individuals were convinced, that these principles were right, the case might be very different. It would not be necessary that all should be perfect, but that all should recognise and feel the full force of the Christian principle.

We are already beginning to practise the principle in the case of smaller bodies of Christians. In the family, for example, we frequently do so, and to some extent in the school. We are beginning to realise that moral influence (ought we not to say rather Christian influence?) has, when it can be brought to bear, a greater and more lasting power than violence. There is many a Christian family where, as children get beyond the early stages of childhood, the only form of punishment is the displeasure of the parent, or the disgust of other members of the family towards the wrong-doer.

Now we can easily imagine the same principle extended to a larger social unit—the village, for example, where everybody knows a good deal about everybody else. A country clergyman told me the other day that one night he had a whole bed of onions completely stripped. "What did you do?" I asked. "I suppose you took means to find out the culprit and prosecuted him." "No, I told my villagers that I had no intention of prosecuting him. I knew that by so doing I should get their sympathy on my side, and they would make him thoroughly ashamed of himself." The clergyman was right, and he had no more trouble of the kind again. "But this would not have answered," you will say, "had not the thief been a villager, because public opinion could not have been brought to bear on him in the same way." This is certainly one great difficulty in extending the principle beyond a comparatively small unit.

But at present there is an infinitely more serious difficulty—the generally low condition of Christian

morality. It may or may not be lower than it has been in past ages. This is not very easy to judge. But it is very certain that it is very far below the standard of the New Testament, and what our best religious instincts feel to be right. This lower condition of morality acts in two ways. In the first place, it weakens the proper force of public opinion itself; in the second place, its force, such as it is, is less felt by the offender, and he is consequently less easily put to shame. If there was on both sides a true sense of Christian morality, the power of public opinion would be almost infinite. Suppose, for example, that a lie in any form was recognised as a thoroughly un-Christian act among all classes of society, what an immense effect this would have in the cause of truth! And the same is true of those numberless little offences against Christianity which are now regarded as venial.

We see, then, that there is an actual tendency towards carrying out literally the principle of non-resistance, and that it might be possible to extend this principle to a much larger extent. If we agree in this, we may be prepared to admit that Christ's teaching, in its literal interpretation, is an ideal towards which we ought to aim as a practical rule of life, even though *present conditions* make it impossible as yet to carry it out with perfect consistency. To admit this would be an enormous gain in the cause of Christian morality.

But we may still ask whether this *ideal* view of Christ's teaching is what Christ Himself meant. Very probably it was not. It is always dangerous to interpret Scripture otherwise than literally, when the literal sense is possible. For if possible, it is most likely to be the true sense. Now it is quite clear from the Gospels that our Lord intended to found a great Family, whose acting principle was to be brotherly love. Its members were to work for each other's good only. In such a society it was quite possible to carry out in their literalness our Lord's directions. There were to be no punishments for offences of one brother against another. The brothers were to be forgiven as often as they offended. "Seven times a day"—"seventy times seven." Only if one obstinately refused to accept this principle he was to be excluded from the Family (St. Matt. xviii. 17). Such a Family began among the immediate band of our Lord's disciples. But even then there was a Judas Iscariot. It was tried on a large scale in the early Church of Jerusalem; but how soon do

we find an Ananias? and then the party quarrels of Hebrews and Grecians? and finally the springing up of a church of paupers? In one sense "the social experiment" of the Jerusalem Church must be pronounced a failure. Human nature was not ripe enough to bear the temptations of the higher Christian life. And yet the apostles were right in attempting it. Those early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles give us, if but for a short space, a glorious vision of a Heavenly Brotherhood, for which the world is better.

Christ Himself had foretold the impossibility of a pure Church actuated entirely by the Christian principle. There would be evil mingled with the good, tares with the wheat, bad fish among the good. No system of excommunication would prove a sufficient or even a just remedy. But there is nothing in this to imply that they should not aim at realising eventually the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount in all its fulness.

The truth thus seems to be that what Christ intended to be the actual rule of the Christian life, and was for a time literally carried out, proved *for awhile* to be impossible. To the Christian Church it became an ideal, not a merely visionary Utopia, but a goal towards which they should aim. To us it is still in this sense an ideal, but an ideal towards which we have been making a steady advance. I have already noticed the growing power of moral influence in the smaller units of social life. We see other signs of this advance in our way of regarding, and our methods of inflicting, punishment. Punishment is coming to be generally regarded, not as an act of vengeance on the part of society for wrongs inflicted upon it (this was but a refinement of the eye for an eye principle), but partly as an act of self-defence against crime, partly as a means of ultimately benefiting the culprit. The methods taken for reforming juvenile offenders, especially those undertaken by different philanthropic societies, show what importance is being attached to this last point. Another sign of the same advance is the increasing tendency to unite for various purposes. Combination is the cry of the age, individualism is proportionately on the wane.

It is true of course that the purposes for which men unite are not always religious or philanthropic. They may be even anti-religious. But the tendency is at least a healthy sign. It shows that one of the most important principles of Christianity is

being more and more recognised, the advantage of working together for a common end. It may be objected that the aims for which men unite are often ultimately selfish, as when men work together to keep up the price of wages. But even so, collective indirect selfishness is far better than individual direct selfishness, because it is really far less selfish. It necessarily takes in the thought of the good of others as well as self, and the larger the body the more room for unselfishness. It is clearly the wisdom of Christians to do what they can to Christianise these efforts.

So far the present seems tending, even though indirectly, towards the principles of Christianity. But the outlook is not in all respects bright. It cannot be too clearly recognised that the religion of the Sermon on the Mount cannot become even approximately the religion of the nation, until men are convinced of the two great religious facts, dogmas if you like to call them so, which underlie

the Sermon on the Mount, the common Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of all mankind. These two must go together. Without them there will be the constant danger of lapsing back into selfishness. When a man has gained all his private ends by working with others, he will work for himself when he finds he can gain greater advantage, or he may try to combine both. Like Ananias, outwardly he may work with the community, secretly he may work for himself. In other words, in order that combination may be a religious success, men must individually accept the first principles of Christianity. But this is not realised by the politician of the day. They must learn by education and experience that personal unselfishness and gentleness are no signs of weakness, but forces of Christian character, which are capable of attracting and controlling men, and bringing them under the law of Christ.

Requests and Replies.

Can any of your readers tell me what *bdellium* (Gen. ii. 12; Num. xi. 7) really is? Is it pearl, the cotton plant, an odorous resin, or a soluble gum? Sir J. D. Hooker says "it is perhaps the fragrant amber gum found in the sands of Arabia and Nubia." If so, can it be seen or bought in London, and what is its name in modern *Materia Medica*? It is peculiarly interesting as the earliest recorded raw material of commerce.—J. F. H.

I am afraid I cannot throw much light on the subject, where nearly all is conjecture.

If *בדליח* is identical with the Latin *bdellium*, then we know what it is, viz. the gum of the Palmyra palm, *Borassus flabelliformis* (L.), the gum of which is found in the sand in desert districts of Arabia and North-East Africa. But I am inclined to think myself that this gum may have been produced by an earlier and probably extinct species. It is very like amber and sweet scented, and much valued in the East. I have seen it exported from the Red Sea for London, but I really do not know its commercial name.

I prefer myself the rendering *pearls* for *בדליח*, but I do not like to dogmatise.

H. B. TRISTRAM.

The College, Durham.

Which Grammar and Dictionary are to be recommended to a beginner in Arabic? Is Dr. G. Lansing's Dictionary one of the best?—J. R.

I am in the habit of recommending to beginners in Arabic the grammar of Socin (Williams & Norgate), and the dictionary of Steingass. I am unacquainted with Dr. Lansing's dictionary.

D. S. MARGOLIOUTH.

Oxford.

What is the proper meaning of the word "seed" in Matt. xiii. 31? Should it be received as meaning "The Word," or "Christ, the living Word," or "the Sons of God"—the children of the kingdom? Can it be interpreted in more than one way?—L. W. R.

The student of our Lord's words must constantly feel how difficult it is to limit the *application* of them, and to say "these words mean this and not that"; but it is possible to fix the primary meaning of them, and to say, "they mean primarily this, and only by secondary application that." If we attempt this in the present case, we seem to have three clues to guide us.