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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

BY CANON J. B. LANCELOT, M.A.

PEOPLE talk of it without always knowing much about it or even where to find it, and, now and then, make their (assumed) observance of it an excuse for neglecting the obligations of fellowship. Let us then ask—and try to answer—a few questions about it.

(a) *Is it not the sum total of Christianity?*

No, far from it. He who preached it died, yet is, we believe, alive now and for evermore. We, His present-day disciples, are to live in Him—"in" is a very significant little word—and to endure, as one day to see His face. Our religion is thus a personal loyalty, a response, the best we can make, to His great promise, Lo, I am with you alway. But we pay serious heed to the Sermon, for it revealed His mind, and we are to observe all things that He commanded.

(b) *But there is no theology in it, is there?*

Lots of it, for the Preacher never seems to regard the good life as even possible apart from God. We are to love our enemies in order that we may be His sons, to be perfect because He is, to dispense with anxiety because He is aware of our needs. Recognition of God, His being, His presence, His mercy, His judgment seat—in other words, religion, theology—permeate it from beginning to end. The Preacher himself speaks with an authoritativeness and a confidence which make us want to stop and ask Him, Who then art *Thou*? How dare He revise Moses? is what, I fancy, the rabbis wanted to know.

(c) *Was it not a popular Sermon?*

Yes, in the best sense, in that it taught what the ordinary man ought to know and believe to his soul's health. But the meaning is by no means always on the surface: you must take time and think. Popular preaching to-day is often bad preaching—shallow, noisy, or, worst of all, amusing. There is nothing like that here. The language is simple, the style direct and clear, but the Preacher is always grave. He says much about everyday things like poverty and treasure and anger and rain and clothes, but the question that He seems all the time to want me to ask myself is just this, What does God think about you? That is the preaching that people need, but it is never likely to be popular.

(d) *His was not then a "sweet Galilean gospel"?*

Not at all. His words are words of grace, but they are often formidable enough. His warnings about inward darkness and the broad way and the working of iniquity and the crash of the builder's

house simply frighten me! True, there are rewards offered, of a kind, but who wants them? Only saints will value them, and suppose you are not one?

(e) *Do you really mean to say that the Sermon is difficult?*

Yes, I do: what is the meaning, for instance, of the first verse? Who are "the poor in spirit," and what is "the kingdom of heaven"? The former I should declare to be men of religious and unworldly temper, whose prayer is that they may be allowed to travel through life by that safe passage, as Baxter calls it, of peaceable holiness: the latter, the totality of Christian privilege and blessing, tasted here, enjoyed to the full hereafter. But this, surely, is a large subject, calling not for a paragraph but for a treatise.

(f) *Don't you think that the Sermon really makes any reading of the Old Testament unnecessary?*

No, I don't: the Old Testament stands behind it and provides (amongst other things) what might otherwise seem to be lacking in it, namely, examples of the more active and masculine type of virtue. Thanks to the Sermon, unselfishness, mercifulness, patience, and such like, have now come to their own, but the manly and heroic elements cannot be allowed to pass out of the Christian ideal. To be good you must still be brave. "His fearlessness" was the reply given by someone who was asked what struck him most in the life and ministry of Christ. So the Old Testament is full of great stories and great lessons: we read them still as "written for our learning" and admire the great qualities they inculcate.

(g) *And yet, blessed are the meek?*

Yes, for who honours the upstart and the bully, or even the man who expects to get worthy and lasting results without pains or trouble? For the best things you must be prepared to wait. The highest requirement of a statesman is patience, said William Pitt.

(h) *Is there, really, comfort for the mourners?*

Yes, though some of them are of all men most to be pitied. What they need (for one thing) is faith in a Providence with a large and comprehensive plan: otherwise they may think the world a meaningless blunder. Besides, human nature is what it is, and it is only through sorrow that many of us ever learn anything of real value. Even pain of body has its uses, for it calls attention to something wrong. We see indeed "through a glass darkly," though light falls for Christ's disciple from the remembrance that "in all their affliction He was afflicted." But He too had a "joy that was set before Him." Easter is the Day!

(i) *"Ye are the salt of the earth": is it true?*

Yes, for though there are many admirable people doing their utmost to keep the earth sweet without making use of Christ's Name, yet they are the heirs of a Christian tradition and owe more

to it than they are ready to confess. But take out of the lives of most of us all that we owe to Christian teachers and Christian saints, and how little that is worth having would be left ! To the steadying influence of good Christian people in times of social difficulty and disorder I am sure we owe much—how much we may have yet to learn, should their numbers be seriously reduced and their influence weakened by the defection of those well-to-do classes which have most to lose from anarchy and strife, yet apparently are unaware of the debt they owe to the moral authority and example of quite humble folk.

(j) *Was not our Lord's treatment of the Ten Commandments rather drastic ?*

Yes, but it looks more drastic than it really is because they all forbid. The young ruler who had kept them was told to go and do something for someone, and not merely to refrain from doing harm. It was a great lesson, and marks a real turning point in our conception of social duty. But the Ten are important all the same. A regiment of recruits without discipline would be a dangerous mob. Rules first, then principles : Moses first, then Christ. But Moses had his place.

(k) *In view of His treatment of the sixth commandment can anger ever be right ?*

Yes, it may be, but it is always perilous. " Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger "—the little word translated *without a cause* has almost certainly no business to be there, but was inserted by scribes who apparently thought His statement too sweeping. There are times, a good man once said, when I do well to be angry, but I have mistaken the times. It is difficult to be angry and yet sin not, but we may not rule out anger altogether.

(l) *" Swear not at all " : how then are oaths justifiable ?*

The thirty-ninth Article of our Church allows a man to take an oath in a cause of faith and charity, and on the requirement of a magistrate : it seems to be rendered necessary by the evil that exists in the world. But a good man should not need an oath to keep him truthful. In social life, said Mrs. Thrale, a thousand variations may occur unless one is perpetually watching. Well, madam, replied Dr. Johnson, and you ought to be perpetually watching.

(m) *What about other impossible commands as, e.g., resist not evil, love your enemies ?*

They are to be used as tests and observed as principles rather than obeyed as rules. As they stand, there is scarcely an evil they would not encourage, and, human nature being what it is, society would fall to pieces, and life for many become unbearable. But how different the spirit in them from that revealed in the following : Why do you not turn your cheek to the smiter ? Because meekness is not my way, and I mean to give always as good as I get. Why not surrender your cloak ? Because what is mine is my own, and

I mean to stick to it. Why not go the second mile? Because I am not a fool and no man shall "put upon" me if I can help it.—Yet to be laughed at for a fool may be the one service you can render to Christ's cause. Probably we all need a much more uneasy conscience about such commands. Because we deem them utopian we are in danger of neglecting them altogether, but they do mean something.

(n) *What then about war?*

To wage it may, on occasion, and in the last resort, be the duty of a nation even predominantly Christian, just as a good Christian father is bound to defend his children, and locks his door every night. It is, alas, a rude world still, and force remains the final tribunal. But no Christian man will *want* to wage war. The fear is that such men may be too few or too weak to modify the national policy, or, in a crisis, to restrain the passions of their fellow countrymen. All said and done, what the world needs is a *Church*, loyal to the spirit of its Master's teaching, and truly, tolerantly, and humanely Catholic, i.e. embracing all the nations.

(o) "*Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.*" "*Enter into thine inner chamber.*" "*Anoint thy head, that thou be not seen of men to fast.*"

*Is then charity to be unorganised, subscription lists to be forbidden, prayer to be only in private, people always to go about as though dressed for a wedding?*

No, publicity in charity is sometimes necessary, if only to provoke others to generous giving; attendance at public prayer is a duty, if only to confess Christ before men; a serious demeanour and sense of the gravity of life is incumbent upon all. The command *Let your light shine before men* is not really abrogated. But He does hint that there is a danger about success, and popular recognition, and every man's good word; so that a Christian disciple may be driven to ask himself, Am I getting all my reward now? Is there anything left for me to receive on "that day" at the hands of Christ?—as Dr. Newman is said to have asked when he was made a Cardinal. There is such a thing as playing to the gallery and thirsting for the breath of popular applause. But there is also such a thing as doing good by stealth, and the best portion of a good man's life is, as Wordsworth puts it, "His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love." Many who remain unknown here and now will come to be rewarded in that day when, as our Lord reminds us more than once, "the first shall be last, and the last first."

(p) "*Thy Father which seeth in secret shall recompense thee*"—*Is this sound? Should not the right thing be done without thought of reward?*

Note, in answer, first, that human nature is such that it readily responds to such stimulus. In moments of weakness the thought of

recompense adjusts the balance. In particular it makes a special appeal to the young, till higher motives come in, and a fuller conception of duty, though we all recognise that to some child-natures prizes may do harm by encouraging a fatal spirit of self-satisfaction. But in most cases the recompense of a gift in return for some special effort or service does real good, just as words of gratitude and encouragement are usually far more effective than incessant nagging. The disciple is not above his master, and even of Christ our Lord it is written that "for the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross."

But note also that the reward is God-given. It will therefore be consistent with His character, and really good for us to have ; such, I must add, as we are actually qualified to enjoy. Other-worldliness does harm only if that other world be conceived on the materialists' lines, and it is not so conceived in the Sermon on the Mount, or anywhere else in the New Testament. There the bliss of heaven is not carnal but spiritual : "they shall be comforted," "they shall see God," "they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." Nothing selfish or degrading in that ! What attraction has it for the worldly-minded ? I do not doubt that God has things in store for us which pass man's understanding : is there a danger of our thinking of them too much ? No, we cannot think of them enough, provided we try to think of them aright. And of heaven itself it is good to pray, as it is of to-day's duty—

"Dismiss me not Thy service, Lord,  
But train me for Thy Will :  
And I will ask for no reward  
Except to serve Thee still."

(q) "*After this manner pray ye*" : *is then the Lord's Prayer to be the only one we use ?*

No, it is not designed to tie us, but to teach us. You may use your own words, or some form of words which masters of the devotional life have used and written, provided that all is done in the spirit of this Prayer, and for the sake of those objects which it teaches us that we can safely receive or a Heavenly Father wisely bestow. Such a treasury of prayers we possess in our Prayer Book, a book, be it noted, "of Common Prayer," that is, of prayers for joint and public use. Even for private prayer I cannot give better advice than that you should learn some of the Collects by heart and use them. They wear well. They are widely applicable. They cover the circumstances of most men's lives. What better prayer, e.g. amidst professional or business anxieties or before a directors' meeting than that appointed for the First Sunday after Epiphany—"that we may both perceive and know what things we ought to do" ; or, before a long journey by land or sea, than that for the Second Sunday in Lent—"that we may be defended from all adversities that may happen" ; or that other, from the Communion Office, about "the changes and chances of this mortal life" ?

(r) "*Take no thought for the morrow.*" *Need I then work for a living?*

Yes, you must, and capital itself, a product of work and thrift and prudence, will probably be necessary if work is to be found for you. A great business that is to benefit many can hardly live from hand to mouth: it must have reserves, or perish in the evil day. Our Lord's words must be taken, not as subversive of fundamental conditions on this planet, but as indicating *the spirit* in which we are to try and live. This they do in a way calculated almost to irritate, and therefore to make us think. But they do mean something. Thus in respect of work He seems to say to us—Do it with tranquil and grateful mind. Do not, if you can help it, overwork. "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." If you have it, be thankful for the joy of congenial work—work, that is to say, which suits your physical, intellectual, and temperamental outfit. What you are in body and mind you are by God's gift—it is no merit or purchase of your own: be grateful if it is met and balanced and satisfied in daily life by appropriate duty. But over-anxiety about the means of life is a slighting of God's care, and a subtle form of mammon worship; it begins with what we call prudent foresight, but it may end by making money itself the real aim, and that is fatal. A man may even himself be quite unaware of the change of purpose.

Or again, in respect of food and raiment—Cultivate simplicity of life. Eschew luxury. Flee extravagance. "Solomon in all his glory" was a great fool, and a burden to his subjects: he taxed them in order to deck himself and his capital with pomp and magnificence, and the end was poverty of soul and vexation of spirit. After all, why fret yourself about a thousand things that you do not really need? Your true wants are few. Try to keep them so. "Deliver me," says Thomas à Kempis, "from the things I cannot do without."

(s) "*Judge not*": *what then about the Assizes?*

This, surely, that for the safeguarding of life and society toleration must have its limits. The gentlest creature alive may be stirred into a flame of indignation against what is impious or cruel. Is there to be forgiveness to an assassin exulting in his crime, or mercy for the successful assailant of innocence, or the unrepentant thief who has robbed a widow of her livelihood? Must I always give a soft answer to the casual acquaintance who with venomous tongue has just stabbed my absent friend and taken his character away? Nevertheless, do not be critical, He seems to say. Do not be always finding fault, or trying to put people right. Old people are, for the most part, exceedingly charitable: young people, on the other hand, are apt to be very downright in their opinions of their elders and of each other. They fail, often enough, to recognise and appreciate large and solid virtues, because of little tricks of speech or manner which amuse or offend them. Learn then to see things, little faults, little mistakes, without mentioning them. See things, yet do not let them spoil your appreciation of what may

be in truth a noble character and a loving heart. And, remember, we are none of us perfect.

(t) "*Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine*": *is there meaning in this?*

Yes, for in the face of malignant hostility or swinish contempt for things of high spiritual value, the preacher of the Gospel will sometimes be driven to hold his peace. The grace of Christ is limitless, yet, for all its bounty, there is a sense in which it cannot be given but must be sought. The merchantman in the parable is represented as paying a heavy price for his pearl—all he had; it was worth it, for it meant peace to his soul. A Roman governor who appeared willing to learn our Lord Himself undertook to teach: to the same Pilate when he had outraged truth by scourging the King of Truth He answered not a word.

(u) "*Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them.*" *Is this always possible?*

No, not the very same things but similar things, done in the same spirit. Gifts, for instance, between man and man, can never be quite equalised, for circumstances are different, and one is poor and another wealthy. But courtesies can be mutual, and treatment fair, and regard for another's position or difficulties freely rendered. Use no man as a mere tool, our Lord would say, as a great philosopher has said since: feel for him rather as a person. Put yourself in his place. How would you, the master, enjoy this little speech if it were made to you? How would you, the servant, like it, if you were thus left in the lurch by your mistress?

(v) "*Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye unto them.*" *Is not this enough, without religion and Church?*

It is certainly a great deal, but is there much hope of it apart from religion? Read as a whole, the Sermon on the Mount knows little or nothing of benevolence and brotherly love apart from God: the threads of a persistent and highly ethical theism are woven into its texture throughout. "It is all right if you are good," we are told continually. But is it so easy to be good, even on our own poor level? No, we need for it every ounce of help that we can get, and deliberately to go without the support and stimulus that the Church and the "blessed company of all faithful people" should be able to give, may be not less than perilous. It is sad that so many in these days are prepared to take the risk: they are living really on a kind of inherited spiritual capital which is bound sooner or later to give out.

(w) "*Not every one that saith unto Me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" *Why?*

Because this is the language of a demonstrative but shallow piety, or perhaps of poor, vague, sentimental admiration. But actions are the real test, and not feelings. These have their place.



We may wish often that our own were stronger. But a warm and sensitive heart is no substitute for active goodness. High aims and good inclinations are praiseworthy always, but they do not, of necessity, go very far, and where the will is feeble, and a deep sincerity of conviction is wanting, they may only be precursors of failure and sorrow. So in the following verse even warm-hearted and zealous workers are warned. These have preached the faith, and can even point to results in Christ's cause. But "I never knew you" says the Judge: "depart from Me." Strange, is it not, that (as Dean Church once said) men should sometimes be so deaf to the severity of Jesus Christ!

(x) He "*taught as one having authority*": *is authority tolerable?*

Sometimes not: nevertheless we are dependent on it for much in our early years, and even all through life. Its function is not so much to dictate as to commend, and if we are wise we listen. Here we are struck by the fact that there are no quotations, no dependence on this rabbi or on that, no modesty such as mortal man might display in dealing with such high matters (as e.g., I think, I hope, I believe) but directness and simplicity such as to convince us that He is speaking of that which is perfectly clear to His vision. All through there is no doubt, no hesitation, but simple, lucid, authoritative eloquence, which goes straight home to men's minds and consciences. And, as we believe, it was confirmed by results in act and deed. "Only say the word," begged the centurion: a soldier himself he knew how much could be effected by the word of one who had the right to utter it.

(y) *Does not the Sermon present us with an impossible ideal?*

No, it has become actual once: to enforce it, therefore, is not the hopeless task it would have been had we not possessed the Life of the Preacher himself as its embodiment. Does He say, for instance, "Be ye perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect"? The command is no unreal one, for we look at once to Himself: He, we believe, is the sum total of the Father's perfections. Does He say, "Blessed are the pure in heart"? Then is He thrice blessed—

"A son that never did amiss,  
That never shamed His mother's kiss  
Nor crossed her fondest prayer."

Does He bid us "Take no thought"? No life was ever so complete as His in its detachment from material things or "so serenely cradled" in the bosom of the Father. The real sermon, we may almost venture to say, is Himself. "We beheld his glory," writes a disciple in the name of all the rest. The verdict it was of a long and intimate experience. It is the same with ourselves, taught as we are (we believe) by that Spirit who still "takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us." His word is arresting alike in its wisdom and in its power: His signs challenge the attention

and are in very truth messages in themselves: then, over and above these, there is the wonder of His character. But take them as they should be taken, one perfect whole, and there is nothing else like it—no such guidance, no equally telling witness for God and the things of God, no other ideal of like winsomeness and chaste and impressive beauty towards which we can direct lives. We yield to its sway. In the realm of duty and moral thoughtfulness He becomes the Master. "Thou art the Truth," we exclaim, or, like the disciple we kneel and worship—"My Lord and my God."

(z) *But this is theology?*

It is, but it brings before us a subject of constantly recurring interest to Christian believers—whence came Jesus Christ? The age-long doctrine of the Church is one of Incarnation. The Word, which from the beginning was with God, *became flesh and dwelt among us*: so we heard on Christmas morning: nor does St. John's doctrine differ from that of St. Paul in *Philippians* or of the unknown author of *Hebrews*. As the Nicene Creed has it, *He came down from heaven*. The so-called Athanasian warns us against explanations which in olden times were found to be either misleading or inadequate, and taken thus, that Creed is exceedingly valuable, though (it must be owned) its stately sentences do not seem to give the average hearer much positive guidance towards a Being "full of grace and truth." For that we turn to the Gospels, the witness of the Apostles, and the words of Christ Himself.

THE CASE FOR FAITH HEALING. By J. D. Beresford. *George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.* 5s. net.

The reader who desires to follow the argument which that well-known writer, J. D. Beresford, adduces in support of his thesis will have to give close attention to it. This book is not a novel. Discussing the question on philosophical lines the writer lays many lines of reasoning under contribution. He teaches that spirit is the only reality. God is immanent and transcendent. Faith and love are essential. The Preface by Dr. H. R. L. Shepard commends the book as "thought-provoking." Doubtless it will receive the attention of many readers.

In *Sheltering Arms* (Oliphants, Ltd., Is.) Mrs. Barter Snow gives a number of useful Biblical Studies which should find many readers.