



Let Your Light Shine: The Sermon on the Mount in Epiphany*

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Almighty God, you sent your only Son as the Word of life for our eyes to see and our ears to hear. Help us to believe with joy what the Scriptures proclaim, through Christ our Lord. (*Collect for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany*)

The Gospel lessons for the fourth through the eighth Sundays after the Epiphany present a major selection from the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew. The following passages are thus proposed in series A of the ecumenical lectionary as focal to the ministry and witness of the church in the season:

Matthew 5:1-12, The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:13-20, The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:20-37, The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:38-48, The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 6:24-34, The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Other texts from Matthew also lie close at hand throughout Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and Lent commending careful study of the First Gospel to all Christians who seek to ground their preaching, teaching, pastoral care, witness, and

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service in the Scriptures of the church. The almost continuous reading of these weeks in Epiphany also provides a particularly rich occasion for the coherent usage of the Gospel in the interpretation and direction of the ministries of the people of God.

The awesome simplicity of these passages may, however, make their usage extremely difficult. The more carefully and seriously these words are taken, the more the interpreter will be confronted with their uncompromising urgency. Utopian idealists throughout the ages have recognized the radicality of these ethical precepts, and both Christians such as Tolstoy and non-Christians such as Klausner and Ghandi have advocated the programmatic implementation of the

precepts (at least some of them). The impossibility of achieving their complete observance has been much more obvious to others, perhaps especially those Christians who acknowledged that here the Lord Jesus was revealing the very will and dominion of God. It is not enough to adulate these words and embroider them on linen tapestries as glorious pinnacles of ethical reflections. If this Messiah and Lord has been correctly represented as disclosing both the standards and the judgments of God's rule, surely no approximate or less than perfect observance will be acceptable on its own merits, no matter how sincere or impressive the achievement.

Perhaps only a spiritual elite such as a special class of believers could aspire to such heights on behalf of the rest of us. Or perhaps the crushing reality of our imperfection is inescapably and inexorably laid upon us, and we are simply driven to despair by phrases and concepts which only illumine our lives to reveal their darkness.

Yet neither the historical setting nor the literary coherence of the Sermon on the Mount suggests such a grim purpose for Jesus' words. Matthew's allowance for divorce on the grounds of unchastity (5:32) may represent the beginning of the Church's extended process of spiritualizing, adapting, and otherwise moderating the radicality of Jesus' teaching. Luke's uncompromising benediction on "the poor" (6:20 versus "the poor in spirit" in Matt 5:3) and his inclusion of the corresponding woes (6:24-26) indicate that the severity of Jesus' declaration was well remembered. Nevertheless, the Sermon is first of all a revelation of hope and purpose and comfort, a disclosure of the kingdom for the faithful disciples of the Messiah. Jesus is remembered here as an interpreter of God's will which is revealed in the Torah as a blessing to Israel, not as a philosophical preacher of a Hellenistic ideal of perfection.

So also, Matthew's introduction and setting present this Sermon as the culmination of Jesus' first gracious ministry of healing, teaching, and proclamation in the synagogues. The beginning of Jesus' ministry has been marked by the formula, "From that time Jesus began to preach" (4:17; see 16:21), and the audience for the sermon has been carefully identified as the newly called disciples and the great crowds who followed him. These words are not understood or presented as a fierce indictment of all mortal flesh. This Sermon offers an ethics of discipleship, grounded in the authority and person of the Lord who speaks, and it is filled with the eschatological hope of the fulfillment of all that God intends as disclosed in Jesus.

These passages will certainly expose any naive self-confidence, and no

mere moralism will withstand the purging intensity of the revelation of God's will and purposes. Thus before rushing to the particulars of the texts in order to construct some ideal version of the Christian life, those charged with interpreting these texts within communities of faith will do well to bear at least two factors in mind in their consistent approach to each of the appointed passages: (1) how Christ the proclaimer is proclaimed in the sermon; and (2) how the Sermon unveils an eschatological truth concerning Jesus' disciples which only God can bring to perfection.

I. CHRIST THE PROCLAIMER IS PROCLAIMED

The Sermon on the Mount is not only a word from Jesus. It is about Jesus. Those who stand aloof from the Christian faith may be able to appreciate the brilliance and clarity of this many faceted jewel of ethical instruction, but they are not so likely to recognize that Jesus the

Messiah also embodies and fulfills what he teaches. Yet the Christian evangelist has transmitted this Sermon to us as part and parcel of his extended interpretation of the identity and role of the Lord Jesus in the saving purposes and dominion of God. Christian interpreters will therefore radicalize the claim and authority of these words to insist that it is Jesus who constitutes the good news in this Sermon. The vision of hope and transformation of the human situation which is displayed here is available only through faith in him.

The Sermon on the Mount is founded first of all on an enacted promise rather than a demand. This is not a program by which Jesus' followers will bring in the kingdom through rigorous observance of each new jot and tittle. Certain rabbis had taught, for example, that if all of Israel were to observe the Torah for only one day, the reign of the Messiah would begin. Such conditional logic (or theo-logic) is almost guaranteed to produce both an intensification of interpretation of the required conditions and a vigorous campaign for conformity by all the people or at least by a select few to represent the elect. Interpreting the message of the Sermon on the Mount apart from faith in the Messenger will also lead only to a similar enterprise.

The Sermon is primarily declarative, however, and clearly indicates that the reign of the Messiah does not await human initiatives. This is it, and Jesus is authorized and identified to announce and embody the present reality. Even the translators seem unable to resist moralistic interpretations when they construe the simple future tense of "you will be perfect" as the demand, "you *must* be perfect" (5:48, RSV). The focus of attention is first of all on the Proclaimer whose announcement and description of present and future realities is either verified or falsified in him. The hope and the claim of these words rest on the truth of Jesus' messiahship.

The Gospel according to Matthew conveys this message from beginning to end, which is why it deserves the title "gospel." Two brief examples must suffice: Jesus' rejoinder to the Pharisees at the end of chapter 22 and the final words of the risen Lord at the close of the gospel (28:16-20).

The structure of the story of this encounter with the Pharisees (and the Sadducees) in Matthew 22:15-45 had already been supplied in Mark, and the

most noteworthy feature of this structure for our purposes is the way in which leading and misleading questions about technicalities of the law are used first by Jesus to expose the questioners' insincerity, secondly to provide the genuine summary of the law in terms of love of God and love of neighbor, and thirdly to raise the crucial issue on which the discussion ultimately turns: "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?...If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?" Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus silenced the questioners in their fanciful casuistry, demonstrating how the Torah is properly to be interpreted. Mark and Luke suggest that such discussion left them not daring to ask him any more questions (Mark 12:34b; Luke 20:40), and they report that Jesus then proceeded with the discussion about the Christ (Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). But Matthew indicates that it was after Jesus turned the legal discussion to the demonstration of the Messiah's identity (22:41-45) that "no one was able to answer him a word" and "from that day did no one dare to ask him any more questions" (22:46). Thus Matthew's use of the tradition further underscores the centrality of the christological issue. The ultimate question in the interpretation of the Torah is the identity of the Messiah. The Proclaimer is the message within the proclamation.

Jesus' last words of commission to his disciples (Matt 24:16-20) also rest explicitly upon the assurance that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (v. 18). The making of disciples, baptizing, and teaching which the risen Jesus authorizes still involve the practice or observance of "all that I have commanded you," but this is not simply a new code of behavior to be followed in the absence of the Messiah. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20). The conclusion of the Gospel is the announcement of the continuing presence of the Messiah and Lord.

The starting point for Christian interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is therefore the good news of who this Jesus is who speaks. Separating the proclamation from the Proclaimer or abstracting a code of moral maxims from the whole vision of divine blessing and ultimate dominion will pervert the Sermon into being one more agenda. But just as the reading of these Gospel lessons belongs properly in the center of the worship of the believing community, so also they are rightly heard as doxology in which the reign of God and of the Messiah Jesus is disclosed in all of its splendor. Proclaiming the Proclaimer confirms the Sermon as good news to all who pray for the kingdom he announces and inaugurates.

All of these Epiphany lessons are thus filled with the light and joy of the revealed dominion of God. This is not a time for scolding or bitter remorse. Of course the light of the gospel will uncover the darkness of our lives with a clarity which will leave no cause for hope in ourselves. There is no use pretending that the recitation of this Sermon will cause us to be confident of what we have achieved for God. But the Proclaimer is the source of Christian hope, and he is disclosing the awesome and gracious order which he in fact inaugurated in his life and work. The celebration of the ministry of the Messiah may thus proceed as a remembrance of what has been accomplished by Jesus, an anticipation of the final disclosure of the kingdom of God, and a concrete description of the life and practices to which the disciples of this Messiah are commissioned.

II. YOU WILL BE PERFECTED

The observance of "all that I have commanded you" remains the proper concern of the Christian because it is the Messiah who speaks in these texts. Matthew's presentation of the Sermon points us to the Christ without neglecting what he said. Faith in the Proclaimer is the evangelical basis for obedience and for the final hope of perfect conformity to the precepts and standards of the kingdom. Jesus meant what he said.

The subject matter of the whole Sermon is best understood to be the interpretation of the Torah. This includes all that more recent Christian theologians discuss under the category of the "law," so that all that God has required of Israel and the rest of humanity in the observance of the laws, precepts, and commands is under consideration. Furthermore, all systems of justice and ethics lie within the purview of the Sermon. Those who argue that the Sermon on the Mount destroys all concepts of ethics or finally undermines the "law" of Israel have missed the point. Jesus is not about the task of the abolishment of the law and the prophets but he is pursuing their fulfillment (Matt 5:17).

But Torah is much more than "law," and no system of "ethics" will finally prove adequate to the Sermon. When it is understood that Torah is regarded to be the whole revelation of the will of God, then it is clear that the law of Moses is not itself in question. The interpretation of the

sacred revelation is the magisterial work of the Messiah. Like lawgiver, prophet, and the righteous teacher or interpreter of Qumran all combined into one, Jesus discerns what God had in mind all along in the law and the prophets.

The problem of language is profound in this discussion, and its greatest difficulty may lie in the realm of public discourse. In political discussions of pending legislation, “law” would almost never be equated with the will of God, and only a few television reporters would remember (or care to remember) that the first five books of Moses are spoken of as the law. Introducing the term Torah also has its difficulties of religious obscurantism. But if “the law” has frequently been relegated in Christian preaching to being only a foil for “the gospel,” public orders of “law” and justice have also taken their share of abuse from the kind of Christian rhetoric in which Jesus is presented as displacing any concept of law, whether ceremonial, covenantal, or civil.

Is Christ the end of the law? Certainly not, if that means that all traditions of justice, jurisprudence, and the administration of civil order are set aside. Christians whose vocations involve them in such public responsibilities certainly are not well served by careless assertions. So also, caricatures of “Jewish legalism” are not only often unfair and untruthful, but they probably miss the point of the Christian understanding of Jesus as the final embodiment and fulfillment of the will of God. The praise of the spontaneity of divine grace may also be improperly founded upon apocalyptic notions of divine disdain for all human traditions and institutions, and the life of the Christian may then be lauded as “religionless,” perhaps accompanied by a “contentless” ethic. The ultimacy of Christ does not depend upon the denigration of all ethical and legal systems and institutions, although all absolute claims on their behalf are challenged.

What is at dispute in the Sermon is Jesus’ interpretation of the Torah, i.e.,

the will of God, particularly with reference to himself as its fulfillment. Even the form of the Sermon is reminiscent of the aphorisms and discourses of the interpretation of the Torah in Jewish wisdom traditions. But now all concepts of a timeless law or immutable revelation or ideal order run aground on the authority of the Proclaimer. Neither laws which are purported to be unchangeable nor illusions of indifference to the rules and laws which order our lives will withstand this authority. A new factor has been introduced in the person of Jesus. So now the goodness of God’s Torah for Israel is reaffirmed, but the will of God in that Torah is finally revealed in Jesus’ interpretation of it. Thus the disciple is faithful to the will of God not simply by the meticulous observance of the precepts of Moses, but by hearing and following Jesus.

The deep interpretive rift which widens between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew’s gospel must be carefully assessed. Immediately after silencing their leading questions with his christological interpretation of the Scriptures (Matt 22:45; see above), Matthew’s text launches into an expanded polemic against religious observances and scrupulosity which is blind to the “weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith” (23:1-36; see v. 23). The use of legal technicalities to evade justice may continue to be an acceptable practice in courts of law, although it enrages most citizens and causes them to lose faith in the law. So also the bitter fury which is directed toward the established interpreters of the Torah is finally an appeal for grasping the full weight of God’s gracious will. Simply clinging to what has been said and heard is no

longer adequate when the Interpreter who is able to speak out of the authority of the coming kingdom is present to explicate the will of God.

This eschatological dimension of the Sermon is also central to its good news. All believers who grasp that Jesus is speaking “out of the future” may realize that his words offer a description of the reality of the kingdom and not merely a prescription for what would be desirable. Is this description also normative for the present? Absolutely, in the sense that the reality of God’s reign and will are already revealed. Nevertheless, that future reality comes into the clouded present as gift and invitation with no illusion that it can be simply achieved by sincerity of purpose or disciplined effort.

The declarations of the Sermon have been fruitfully compared to flashes of light out of the kingdom to come. A traveler groping through dangerous terrain in the dark of night may chart the way by the wind in the trees, the obscure glimmer of the stars behind the clouds, the memory of the way as it was described earlier, or the faint light of a lantern against the storm. But the brilliant flash of the lightning may illumine the path, the perils, and even the distant goal in the twinkling of an eye. Suddenly everything is clear, although the darkness quickly closes in again.

No compromise is possible, because this is not so much a program for behavior as a manifestation of reality. This epiphany or revelation comes only by divine initiative. It is not an extrapolation from human experience, but it is thoroughly sensible and practical and demonstrable. It is not so much an invisible truth which may only be apprehended by spiritual means as a hidden reality whose sudden disclosure resolves the enigma of the identity of the Christ and the Christian. The content and description of the Christian life are presented in

terms and characteristics which are thoroughly recognizable, so that it is even possible to identify distinctively Christian behaviors and commitments, although non-Christians may often be closer to the kingdom in practice. Still the declarations of the Sermon establish an eschatological canon according to which conformity to the will of God may be recognized.

Yet the kingdom is always a gift and not an achievement. The Sermon is a disclosure of the truth concerning Jesus and his disciples, a vision of the Christian life which only God can bring to perfection. Filled with a hope that is not born of human ambition or effort, this Sermon is an epiphany of the will of God, fulfilled and embodied in Jesus who proclaims and grants it to his followers out of the largess of the kingdom to come.

III. GLIMPSES OF THE GOOD LIFE

If a larger framework of interpretation is required for dealing with these passages from the Sermon on the Mount, it is also important to allow each text its own contribution. Rather than unburdening the whole with one study or sermon on the Sermon, as the sections above might suggest, the particularities of form and content of the assigned Gospel pericopes may fill the season with light and life. Perhaps a few passing comments on each of the passages may help stimulate further appropriation of the Sermon as it informs and directs the ministries of the people of God. In the brilliance of the bursts of light of one verse after another, our vision of our Lord, ourselves, and our world is dramatically transformed.

(A) Matthew 5:1-12 commences the Sermon with the Beatitudes. Their concise form sharpens the impression that this Jesus who “opened his mouth and taught them” is announcing a

truth which drives to the heart of the matter. There is no middle ground concerning these declarations. This does not seem to be a description of reality as generally experienced. Perhaps the clue lies in the word “blessed” and in the assurance of inclusion in the kingdom of heaven and of heavenly reward. Not that this is a spiritualized escape from reality. But this is the truth, the gospel truth, concerning divine favor and benefaction. Those who know this to be the case never again need to be intimidated by the wealthy, the eternally happy, the haughty, the satisfied, the cruel, the crafty, and the violent. Pursuing the righteousness of God’s reign and even being maligned for fidelity to this Messiah and his gracious rule are now possible because of him. The disciple has nothing to prove personally, for approval has already been granted by God through Christ. But now ultimate divine goodwill has been declared and displayed by the Proclaimer who has brought God’s future kingdom into present view.

(B) Matthew 5:13-20: And will the righteousness of Christian believers ever exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Putting them down will prove to be small comfort in any contest for number one in righteousness. Of course Matthew 23 is very harsh with them for missing the point, but those who become enmeshed in the trap of trying to outdo them should first read about all that they were doing and should be willing to credit their activity with at least equal sincerity to their own.

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No, this is about the savor of salt and the light of a lamp which are, endowed. The point is not that others may see our good works and glorify us, but that God may be properly praised for the zest and light which Christian disciples are given to bring into an often flat and darkened world. Let your light shine, for it is the light of the new day of the kingdom which is reflected in such joy and good works. It is Christ who has come to fulfill the law and who did so, and in the fulness of his righteousness the believer may even aspire to outdo all hard-bitten religionists who are so desperately trying to curry divine favor and keeping score and shaving points as if their very lives depended on it. Nonsense. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, believers may now dare to do good works without self-concern and to let the light of God’s salvation shine forth in their lives.

(C) Matthew 5:20-37 repeats the hard saying about the necessity of surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and the rest of the verses seem equally uncheerful. This section is filled with stringent contrasts directed toward a variety of legalistic accommodations to the Torah. It is certainly incorrect to assume that all of Pharisaism was infected with such a spirit of casuistry. On the other hand, all human attempts to deal with God whether in health crises, dangers, or prosperity will always be afflicted with a good measure of conditions, comparisons, and priorities in obedience as if we could appease, mollify, or curry favor according to the standards we have contrived. So these persistent words confront us with a dire diagnosis of our human condition so that we may no longer live out our days in the anxiety of trying to work out some arrangement and in the denial of the truth which we know in our hearts. Only the Proclaimer whose righteousness suffices for us and whose announcement of the kingdom has filled our lives with light and hope would dare to expose the deadly lie of our lives so baldly. The good news is close at hand in the rest of the Sermon and in the person of the Proclaimer.

(D) Matthew 5:38-48 continues the diagnosis, refusing to be impressed even by the kind

of retributive justice which brought some limits to endless blood feuds and retaliations (Matt 5:38-39). The measure of justice and righteousness is finally taken by the standard of mercy. This may seem to be a strange way to order a society, and it is probably not being advocated as public policy. The logic of such a system is completely dependent upon an astonishing vision of mercy which transforms one's entire perception of reality. Only those who have been forgiven much could ever grasp it. Only those who have been loved beyond all deserving could begin enacting such a program with a straight face. Which is not to say that such believers would not also be deeply interested in whatever systems or measures of justice the society as a whole would devise. The pursuit of fairness and good order is not undermined or denigrated, but the peculiar measure of Christian behavior is also marked out in away that others will recognize. Such amazing grace has been pronounced and enacted before in this world, and those who are disciples of this Jesus are hereby commissioned to pass it on. The last line of this passage must, therefore, be read as a goal and promise which the Lord Jesus bestows: "You [plural] will therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

(E) Matthew 6:24-34: This glimpse of the good life has caught the attention of anxious, stressed, compulsive, and fearful people throughout the ages. Even as general counsel to "take it easy" it would probably be medically sound for most people. But more is at stake than the commendation of a laid back lifestyle. The profound assurance of the heavenly Father's care is central to this counsel, and the quest of God's kingdom and righteousness indicate how these gentle words are related to the rest of the Sermon. In declaring and describing this undergirding reality of grace, Jesus has gone beyond exposing our desperate anxieties. The eschatological dominion of God has already been revealed, and neither depth of hell nor height of heaven can contain the extent of God's grace. "Do not be anxious" is thus not simply one more command which anxiety-ridden people may now struggle to achieve. The double bind of struggling to master such a command is well known by anyone who has endured medical treatment. But this is a declaration filled with a promise. The righteousness and kingdom of God are already disclosed and imparted in Jesus, and the invitation to trust is as secure as the authority of the Proclaimer himself.

RESOURCES

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