

# THE FIRST BEATITUDE.

NO. 3156

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DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,

AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON,

IN THE YEAR 1873.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” — Matthew 5:3.*

In the year 1873, Mr. Spurgeon delivered what he called “a series of sententious homilies” on the Beatitudes. After an introductory discourse upon the Sermon on the mount and the Beatitudes as a whole, he intended to preach upon each one separately; but either illness or some other special reason prevented him from fully carrying out this purpose. There are, however, eight Sermons upon the Beatitudes, three of which have already been published in the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, — No. 422, “*The Peacemaker*;” No. 2,103, “*The Hunger and Thirst which are Blessed*;” and No. 3,3065, “*The Third Beatitude*;” — the other five will now be issued in successive weeks, and will form the Monthly Sermon Part for August, price Fivepence. Mr. Spurgeon’s Exposition of each of the Beatitudes and of the whole Sermon on the Mount also appears in The Gospel of the Kingdom (now sold at 3s.6d.), the volume upon which he was at work at Mentone up to a little while before his “home-call.”

BEARING in mind the object of our Savior’s discourse, which was to describe the saved, and not to declare the plan of salvation, we now come to consider the first of the Beatitudes:-

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

A ladder, if it is to be of any use, must have its first step near the ground, or feeble climbers will never be able to mount. It would have been a grievous discouragement to struggling faith if the first blessing had been given to the pure in heart; to that excellence the young beginner makes no claim, while to poverty of spirit he can reach without going beyond his line. Had the Savior said, "Blessed are the rich in grace," he would have spoken a great truth, but very few of us could have derived consolation therefrom. Our Divine Instructor begins at the beginning, with the very A B C of experience, and so enables the babes in grace to learn of him; had he commenced with higher attainments, he must have left the little ones behind. A gigantic step at the bottom of these sacred stairs would have effectually prevented many from essaying to ascend; but, tempted by the lowly step, which bears the inscription "Blessed are the poor in spirit," thousands are encouraged to attempt the heavenly way.

It is worthy of grateful note that *this gospel blessing reaches down to the exact spot where the law leaves us when it has done for us the very best within its power or design.* The utmost the law can accomplish for our fallen humanity is to lay bare our spiritual poverty, and convince us of it. It cannot by any possibility enrich a man: its greatest, service is to tear away from him, his fancied wealth of self-righteousness, show him his overwhelming indebtedness to God, and bow him to the earth in self-despair. Like Moses, it leads away from Goshen, conducts into the wilderness, and brings to the verge of an impassable stream, but it can do no more; Joshua Jesus is needed to divide the Jordan, and conduct into the promised land. The law rends the goodly Babylonish garment of our imaginary merits into ten pieces, and proves our wedge of gold to be mere dross, and thus it leaves us, "naked, and poor, and miserable." To this point Jesus descends; his full line of blessing comes up to the verge, of destruction, rescues the lost, and enriches the poor. The gospel is as full as it is free.

This first Beatitude, though thus placed at a suitably low point, where it may be reached by those who are in the earliest stages of grace, is however none the less rich in blessing. The same word is used in the same sense at the beginning as at the end of the chain of Beatitudes, the poor in spirit, are as truly and emphatically blessed as the meek, or the peacemakers. No hint is given as to lower degree, or inferior measure; but, on the contrary, the very highest benison, which is used in the tenth verse as the gathering up of all the seven Beatitudes, is ascribed to the first and lowest order of the

blessed: "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What more is said even of the co-heirs with prophets and martyrs? What more indeed could be said than this? The poor in spirit are lifted from the dunghill, and set, not among hired servants in the field, but among princes in the kingdom. Blessed is that soul-poverty of which the Lord himself utters such good things. He sets much store by that which the world holds in small esteem, for his judgement is the reverse of the foolish verdict of the proud. As Watson well observes, "How poor are they that think themselves rich! How rich are they that see themselves to be poor! I call it *the jewel of poverty*. There be some paradoxes in religion which the world cannot understand; for a man to become a fool that he may be wise to save his life by losing it, and to be made rich by being poor. Yet this poverty is to be striven for more than riches; under these rags is hid cloth of gold, and out of this carcase cometh honey."

The cause for placing this Beatitude first is found in the fact that *it is first as a matter of experience*; it is essential to the succeeding characters, underlies each one of them, and is the soil in which alone they can be produced. No man ever mourns before God until he is poor in spirit, neither does he become meek towards others till he has humble views of himself; hungering and thirsting after righteousness are not possible to those who have high views of their own excellence, and mercy to those who offend is a grace too! difficult for those who are unconscious of their own spiritual need. Poverty in spirit is the porch of the temple of blessedness. As a wise man never thinks of building up the walls of his house till he has first digged out the foundation, so no person skillful in divine things will hope to see any of the higher virtues where poverty of spirit is absent. Till we are emptied of self we cannot be filled with God; stripping must be wrought upon us before we can be clothed with the righteousness which is from heaven. Christ is never precious till we are poor in spirit, we must see our own wants before we can perceive his wealth; pride blinds the eyes, and sincere humility must open them, or the beauties of Jesus will be for ever hidden from us. The strait gate is not wide enough to allow that man to enter who is great in his own esteem; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a man conceited of his own spiritual riches to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Hence it is clear that the character described in connection with the first Beatitude is essential to the production of those which follow after; and unless a man possesses it, he may look in vain for favor at the hands of the

Lord. The proud are cursed, their pride alone secures them the curse, and shuts them out from divine regard: "The proud he knoweth afar off." The lowly in heart, are blessed for to them and to their prayers Jehovah ever has a tender regard.

It is worthy of double mention that *this first blessing is given rather to the absence than to the presence of praiseworthy qualities*; it is a blessing, not upon the man who is distinguished for this virtue or remarkable for that excellence, but upon him whose chief characteristic is that he confesses his own sad deficiencies. This is intentional, in order that grace may be all the more manifestly seen to be grace indeed, casting its eye first, not upon purity, but, upon poverty; not upon shewers of mercy, but upon needers of mercy; not upon those who are called the children of God, but upon those who cry, "We are not worthy to be called thy sons." God wants nothing of us except, our wants, and these furnish him with room to display his bounty when he supplies them freely. It is from the worse and not from the better side of fallen man that the Lord wins glory for himself. Not what I have, but what I have not, is the first point of contact, between my soul and God. The good may bring their goodness, but he declares that "there is none righteous, no, not one;" the pious may offer their ceremonies, but he taketh no delight in all their oblations; the wise may present their inventions, but he counts their wisdom to be folly; but when the poor in spirit come to him with their utter destitution and distress he accepts them at once; yea, he bows the heavens to bless them, and opens the storehouses of the covenant to satisfy them. As the surgeon seeks for the sick, and as the alms-giver looks after the poor, even so the Savior seeks out, such as need him, and upon them he exercises his divine office. Let every needy sinner drink comfort from this well.

Nor ought we to forget that this lowest note upon the octave of Beatitude, this keynote of the whole music gives forth a certain sound as to the spirituality of the Christian dispensation. Its first blessing is allotted to a characteristic, not of the outer, but of the inner man; to a state of soul, and not to a posture of body; to the poor in spirit, and not to the exact in ritual. That word spirit is one of the watchwords of the gospel dispensation. Garments, genuflections, rituals, oblations, and the like are ignored, and the Lord's eye of favor rests only upon hearts broken and spirits humbled before him. Even mental endowments are, left in the cold shade, and the spirit is made to lead the van; the soul, the true man, is regarded, and all beside left as of comparatively little worth. This teaches us to mind, above

all things, those matters which concern our spirits. We must not be satisfied with external religion. If, in any ordinance, our spirit does not come into contact with the great Father of spirits, we must not rest satisfied. Everything about our religion which is not heart-work must be unsatisfactory to us. As men cannot live upon the chaff and the bran, but need the flour of the wheat, so do we need something more than the form of godliness and the letter of truth, we require the secret meaning, the ingrafting of the Word into our spirit, the bringing of the truth of God into our inmost soul: all short of this is short of the blessing. The highest grade of outward religiousness is unblest, but the very lowest form of spiritual grace is endowed with the kingdom of heaven. Better to be spiritual, even though our highest attainment is to be poor in spirit, than to remain carnal, even though in that carnality we should want of perfection in the flesh. The least in grace is higher than the greatest in nature. Poverty of spirit in the publican was better than fullness of external excellence in the Pharisee. As the weakest and poorest man is nobler than the strongest of all the beasts of the field, so is the meanest spiritual man more precious in the sight of the Lord than the most eminent of the self-sufficient children of men. The smallest diamond is worth more than the largest pebble, the lowest degree of grace excels the loftiest attainment of nature. What sayest thou to this, beloved friend? Are you spiritual? At least, are you enough so to be poor in spirit? Does there exist for you a spiritual realm, or are you locked up in the narrow region of things seen and heard? If the Holy Spirit has broken a door for thee into the spiritual and unseen, then thou art blessed, even though thine only perception as yet be the painful discovery that thou art poor in spirit. Jesus on the mount blesses thee, and blessed thou art.

Drawing still nearer to our text, we observe, first, that **THE PERSON DESCRIBED HAS DISCOVERED A FACT**, he has ascertained his own spiritual poverty; and, secondly, **BY A FACT HE IS COMFORTED**, for he possesses “the kingdom of heaven.”

**I.** The fact which he has ascertained is an old truth, for the man always was spiritually poor. From his birth he was a pauper, and at his best estate he is only a mendicant. “Naked, and poor, and miserable” is a fair summary of man’s condition by nature. He lies covered with sores at the gates of mercy, having nothing of his own but sin, unable to dig and unwilling to beg, and therefore perishing in a penury of the direst kind.

*This truth is also universal*, for all men, are by nature thus poor. In a clan, or a family, there will usually be at least, one person of substance, and in the poorest nation there will be some few possessors of wealth; but, alas for our humanity! its whole store of excellence is spent, and its riches are utterly gone. Among us all, there remains no remnant of good; the oil is spent from the cruse, and the meal is exhausted from the barrel, and a famine is upon us, direr than that which desolated Samaria of old. We owe ten thousand talents, and have nothing wherewith to pay; even so much as a single penny of goodness we cannot find in all the treasures of the nations.

*This fact is deeply humiliating*/A man may have no money, and yet it may involve no fault, and therefore no shame; but our estate of poverty has this sting in it, that it is moral and spiritual, and sinks us in blame and sin. To be poor in holiness, truth, faith, and love to God, is disgraceful to us. Often does the poor man hide his face as one greatly ashamed; far more cause have we to do so who have spent our living riotously, wasted our Father's substance, and brought ourselves to want and dishonor. Descriptions of our state which describe us as miserable are not complete unless they also declare us to be guilty; true, we are objects of pity, but much more of censure. A poor man may be none the less worthy of esteem because of the meanness of his apparel, and the scantiness of his provision; but spiritual poverty means fault, blameworthiness, shame, and sin. He who is poor in spirit is therefore a humbled man, and is on the way to be numbered with those that mourn, of whom the second benediction says that "they shall be comforted."

*The fact discovered by the blessed one in the text is but little known*; the mass of mankind are utterly ignorant upon the matter. Though the truth as to man's lost condition is daily taught in our streets, yet few understand it; they are not anxious to know the meaning of a statement so uncomfortable, so alarming; and the bulk of those who are aware of the doctrine, and acknowledge that it is Scriptural, yet do not believe it, but, put it out of their thoughts, and practically ignore it. "We see," is the universal boast of the world's blind men. So far from realising that they are destitute, the sons of men are in their own esteem so richly endowed that they thank God that, they are not as other men. No slavery is so degrading as that which makes a man content with his servility; the poverty which never aspires, but is content to continue in its rags and filth, is poverty of the deepest dye, and such is the spiritual condition of mankind.

*Wherever the truth as to our condition is truly known, it has been spiritually revealed.* We may say of every one who knows his soul poverty, “Blessed art thou, Simon, son of Jonas, for flesh and blood hath not, revealed this unto thee.” To be spiritually poor is the condition of all men; to be poor in spirit, or to know our spiritual poverty, is an attainment specially granted to the called and chosen. An omnipotent hand created us out of nothing, and the like omnipotence is needed to bring us to feel that we are nothing. We can never be saved unless we are made alive by infinite power, nor can we be made alive at all unless that self same power shall first slay us. It is amazing how much is needed to strip a man, and lay him in his true place. One would think that so penniless a beggar must be aware of his penury; but he is not, and never will be, unless the eternal God shall convince him of it. Our imaginary goodness is more, hard to conquer than our actual sin. Man can sooner be cured of his sicknesses than be made to forego his bouts of health. Human weakness is a small obstacle to salvation compared with human strength; there lies the work and the difficulty. Hence it is a sign of grace to know one’s need of grace. He has some light in his soul who knows and feels that he is in darkness. The Lord himself has wrought a work of grace, upon the spirit which is poor and needy, and trembles at his Word; and it is such a work that it bears within. It the promise, yea, the assurance of salvation; for the poor in spirit already possess the kingdom of heaven, and none have that but those who have eternal life.

One thing is certainly true, of the man whose spirit knows its own poverty, he is in possession of one truth at least; whereas, before, he breathed the atmosphere of falsehood, and knew nothing which he ought to know. However painful the result of poverty of spirit may be, it is the result of truth; and a foundation of truth being laid, other truth will be added, and the man will abide in the truth. All that others think they know concerning their own spiritual excellence is but a lie, and to be rich in lies is to be awfully poor. Carnal security, natural merit, and self-confidence, however much of false peace they may produce, are only forms of falsehood, deceiving the soul; but when a man finds out that he is by nature and practice “lost”, he is no longer utterly a pauper as to truth, he possesses one precious thing at any rate, one coin minted by truth is in his hand. For my own part, my constant prayer is that I may know the worst of my case, whatever the knowledge may cost me. I know that an accurate estimate of my own heart can never be, otherwise than lowering to my self-esteem; but

God forbid that I should be spared the humiliation which springs from the truth! The sweet apples of self-esteem are deadly poison; who, would wish to be destroyed thereby? The bitter fruits of self-knowledge are always healthful, especially if washed down with the waters of repentance, and sweetened with a draught from the wells of salvation, he who loves his own soul will not despise them. Blessed, according to our text, is the poor cast-down one who knows his lost condition, and is suitably impressed thereby; he is but a beginner in Wisdom's school, yet he is a disciple, and his Master encourages him with a benediction, yea, he pronounces him one of those to whom the kingdom of heaven is given.

*The position into which a clear knowledge of this one truth has brought the soul is one peculiarly advantageous for obtaining every gospel blessing.* Poverty of spirit empties a man, and so makes him ready to be filled; it exposes his wounds to the oil and wine of the good Physician; it lays the guilty sinner at the gate of mercy, or among those dying ones around the pool of Bethesda to whom Jesus is wont to come. Such a man opens his mouth, and the Lord fills it; he hungers, and the Lord satisfies him with good things. Above all other evils we have most cause to dread our own fullness; the greatest unfitness for Christ is our own imaginary fitness. When we are utterly undone, we are near to being enriched with the riches of grace. Out of ourselves is next door to being in Christ. Where we end, mercy begins; or rather, mercy has begun, and mercy has already done much for us when we are at the end of our merit, our power, our wisdom, and our hope. The deeper the destitution the better;-

*“Tis perfect poverty alone  
That sets the soul at large;  
While we can call one mite our own  
We get no full discharge.”*

Should the heart be distressed because it cannot even sufficiently feel its own need, so much the better; the poverty of spirit is just so much the greater, and the appeal to free grace all the more powerful. If the want of a broken heart be felt, we may come to Jesus *for* a broken heart, if we cannot come *with* a broken heart. If no kind or degree of good be perceptible, this also is but a clear proof of utter poverty, and in that condition we may dare to believe in the Lord Jesus. Though we are nothing, Christ is all. All that we need to begin with we must find in him, just as surely as we must look for our ultimate perfecting to the selfsame source.

A man may be so misled as to make a merit out of his sense of sin, and may dream of coming to Jesus clothed in a fitness of despair and unbelief; this is, however, the very reverse of the conduct of one who is poor in spirit, for he is poor in feelings as well as in everything else, and dares no more commend himself on account of his humblings and despairings than on account of his sins themselves. He thinks himself to be a hardhearted sinner as he acknowledges the deep repentance which his offenses call for; he fears that he is a stranger to that saved quickening which makes the conscience tender, and he dreads lest he should in any measure be a hypocrite in the desires which he perceives to be in his soul; in fact, he does not dare to think himself to be any other than poor, grievously poor, in whatever light he may be viewed in his relation to God and his righteous law. He hears of the humiliations of true, penitents, and wishes he had them; he reads the descriptions of repentance given in the Word of God, and prays that he may realize them, but he sees, nothing in himself upon which he can put his finger, and say, "This at least is good. In me there dwells at least some one good thing." He is poor in spirit, and from him all boasting is cut off, once for all. It is better to be in this condition than falsely to account, one's self a saint, and sit in the chief places of the synagogue, yea, it is so sweetly safe a position to occupy, that he who, is fullest of faith in God, and joy in the Holy Ghost finds it add to his peace to retain a full consciousness of the poverty of his natural state, and to let it run parallel with his persuasion of security and blessedness in Christ Jesus. Lord, keep me low; empty me more and more; lay me in the dust, let me be dead and buried as to all that is of self; then shall Jesus live in me, and reign in me, and be truly my All-in-all!

It may seem to some to be a small matter to be poor in spirit; let such persons remember that *our Lord so places this gracious condition of heart that it is the foundation-stone of the celestial ascent of Beatitudes*; and who can deny that the steps which rise from it are beyond measure sublime? It is something inexpressibly desirable to be poor in spirit if this be the road to purity of heart, and to the godlike character of the peacemaker. Who would not lay his head on Jacob's stone to enjoy Jacobs dream? Who would scorn the staff with which in poverty he crossed the Jordan if he might but see the kingdom of heaven opened as the patriarch did? Welcome the poverty of Israel if it be a part of the conditions upon which we shall receive the blessing of Israel's God. Instead of despising the poor in spirit, we shall do well to regard them as possessing the dawn of

spiritual life, the germ of all the graces, the initiative of perfection, the evidence of blessedness.

**II.** Having spoken thus much upon the character of those who are poor in spirit as being formed by the knowledge of a fact, we have now to note that **IT IS BY A FACT THAT THEY ARE CHEERED AND RENDERED BLESSED:** for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It is not a promise as to the future, but a declaration as to the present; not theirs *shall be*, but “theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” This truth is clearly revealed in many Scriptures by necessary inference; for, first, *the King of the heavenly kingdom is constantly represented as reigning over the poor.* David says, in the seventy-second Psalm, “He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy... He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall-save the souls of the needy.” As his virgin mother sang, “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away.” Those who enlist beneath the banner of the Son of David are like those who of old came to; the son of Jesse in the cave of Adullam, “Every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one, that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them.” “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.” His title was “a Friend of publicans and sinners.” “Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor,” and it is therefore meet, that the poor should be gathered unto him. Since Jesus has chose in the poor in spirit, to be his subjects, and said, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,” we see how true it is that they are blessed.

*The rule of the Kingdom is such as only the poor in spirit will endure.* To them it is an easy yoke from which they have no wish to be released; to give God all the glory is no burden to them, to cease from self is no hard command. The place of lowliness suits them, the service of humiliation they count an honor; they can say with the psalmist (Psalm cxxxii. 2), “Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.” Self-denial and humility, which are main duties of Christ’s kingdom, are easy only to those who are poor in spirit. A humble mind loves humble duties, and is willing to kiss the least flower which grows in the Valley of Humiliation; but to others a fair show in the flesh is a great attraction, and self-exaltation the main object of life.

Our Savior's declaration, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven," is an iron rule which shuts out all but the poor in spirit; but, at the same time, it is a gate of pearl which admits all who are of that character.

*The privileges of the Kingdom are such as only the spiritually poor will value;* to others, they are as pearls cast before swine. The self-righteous care nothing for pardon, though it cost the Redeemer his life's blood; they have no care for regeneration, though it be the greatest work of the Holy Spirit; and they set no store by sanctification, though it is the Father himself who has made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. Evidently the blessings of the covenant were meant for the poor in spirit; there is not one of them which would be valued by the Pharisee. A robe of righteousness implies our nakedness; manna from heaven implies the lack of earthly bread. Salvation is vanity if men are in no danger, and mercy a mockery if they be not sinful. The charter of the Church is written upon the supposition that it is formed of the poor and needy, and is without meaning if it be not so. Poverty of spirit opens the eyes to see the preciousness of covenant blessings. As an old Puritan says, "He that is poor in spirit is a Christ-admirer; he hath high thoughts of Christ, he sets a high value and appreciation upon Christ, he hides himself in Christ's wounds, he bathes himself in his blood, he wraps himself in his robe; he sees a spiritual dearth and famine at home, but he looks out to Christ, and cries, 'Lord, show me thyself, and it sufficeth.'" Now, inasmuch as the Lord has made nothing in vain, since we find that the privileges of the gospel kingdom are only suitable to the poor in spirit, we may rest assured that for such they were prepared, and to such they belong.

Moreover, *it is clear that only those who are poor in spirit do actually reign as kings unto God.* The crown of this kingdom will not fit every head; in fact, it fits the brow of none but the poor in spirit. No proud man reigns, he is the slave of his boastings, the serf of his own loftiness. The ambitious worldling grasps after a kingdom, but he does not possess one, the humble in heart are content and in that contentment they are made to reign. High spirits have no rest; only the lowly heart has peace. To know one's self is the way to self-conquest, and self-conquest is the grandest of all victories. The world looks out for a lofty, ambitious, stern self-sufficient man, and says he bears himself like a king and yet in very truth, the real kings among their fellows are meek and lowly like the Lord of all, and in

their unconsciousness of self lies the secret of their power. The kings among mankind, the happiest, the most powerful, the most honorable, will one day be seen to be not the Alexanders, Caesars, and Napoleons, but the men akin to him who washed the disciples' feet, those who in quietness lived for God and their fellow-men, unostentatious because conscious of their failures, unselfish because self was held in low esteem, humble and devout because their own spiritual poverty drove them out of themselves, and led them to rest alone upon the Lord. The time shall come when glitter and gewgaw will go for what they are worth, and then shall the poor in spirit be seen to have had the kingdom.

*The dominion awarded by this Beatitude to the poor in spirit is no common one;* it is the kingdom of heaven, a heavenly dominion, far excelling anything which can be obtained this side the stars. An ungodly world may reckon the poor in spirit to be contemptible, but God writes them down among his peers and princes; and his judgement is true, and far more to be esteemed than the opinions of men or even of angels. Only as we are poor in spirit have we any evidence that heaven is ours; but having that mark of blessedness, all things are ours, whether things present or things to come. To the poor in spirit belong all the security, honor, and happiness which the gospel kingdom, is calculated to give upon earth; even here below, they may eat of its dainties without question, and revel in its delights without fear. Theirs also are the things not seen as yet, reserved for future revelation, theirs the second advent, theirs the glory, theirs the fifth great monarchy, theirs the resurrection, theirs the beatific vision, theirs the eternal ecstasy. "Poor in spirit;" the words sound as if they described the owners of nothing, and yet they describe the inheritors of all things. Happy poverty! Millionaires sink into insignificance, the treasure of the Indies evaporate in smoke, while to the poor in spirit remains a boundless, endless, faultless kingdom, which renders them blessed in the esteem of him who is God over all, blessed for ever. And all this is for the present life in which they mourn, and need to be comforted, hunger and thirst, and need to be filled; all this is for them while yet they are persecuted for righteousness' sake; what then must be their blessedness when they shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father, and in them shall be fulfilled the promise of their Master and Lord, "to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne"?

## EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

### *MATTHEW 5:31-42.*

*(Continued from Sermon No. 3,155.)*

**31, 32.** *It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.*

This time our King quotes and condemns a permissive enactment of the Jewish State. Men were wont to bid their wives “begone,” and a hasty word was thought sufficient as an act of divorce. Moses insisted upon “*a writing of divorcement*,” that angry passions might have time to cool and that the separation, if it must come, might be performed with deliberation and legal formality. The requirement of a writing was to a certain degree a check upon an evil habit, which was so engrained in the people that to refuse it altogether would have been useless, and would only have created another crime. The law of Moses went as far as it could practically be enforced; it was because of the hardness of their hearts that divorce was tolerated; it was never approved.

But our Lord is more heroic in his legislation. He forbids divorce except for the one crime of infidelity to the marriage-vow. She who commits adultery does by that act and deed in effect sunder the marriage-bond, and it ought then to be formally recognised by the State as being sundered; but for nothing else should a man be divorced from his wife. Marriage is for life, and cannot be loosed, except by the one great crime which severs its bond, whichever of the two is guilty of it. Our Lord would never have tolerated the wicked laws of certain of the American States, which allow married men and women to separate on the merest pretext. A woman divorced for any cause but adultery, and marrying again, is committing adultery before God, whatever the laws of man may call it. This is very plain and positive; and thus a sanctity is given to marriage which human legislation ought not to violate. Let us not be among those who take up novel ideas of wedlock, and seek to deform the marriage laws under the pretense of reforming them. Our Lord knows better than our modern social

reformers. We had better let the laws of God alone, for we shall never discover any better.

**33-37.** *Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither of heaven; for it is God's throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.*

False swearing was forbidden of old, but every kind of swearing is forbidden now by the word of our Lord Jesus. He mentions several forms of oath, and forbids them all, and then prescribes simple forms of affirmation or denial, as all that his followers should employ.

Notwithstanding much that may be advanced to the contrary, there is no evading the plain sense of this passage, that every sort of oath, however solemn or true, is forbidden to a follower of Jesus. Whether in court of law, or out of it the rule is, "Swear not at all." Yet, in this Christian country we have swearing everywhere, and especially among law-makers. Our legislators begin their official existence by swearing. By those who obey the law of the Savior's kingdom, all swearing is set aside, that the simple word of affirmation or denial, calmly repeated, may remain as a sufficient bond of truth. A bad man cannot be believed on his oath, and a good man speaks the truth without an oath; to what purpose is the superfluous custom of legal swearing preserved? Christians should not yield to an evil custom, however great the pressure put upon them; but they should abide by the plain and unmistakable command of their Lord and King.

**38.** *Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:*

The law of an eye for an eye, as administered in the proper courts of law was founded in justice, and worked far more equitably than the more modern system of fines; for that method allows rich men to offend with comparative impunity, But when the *lex talionis* came to be the rule of daily life, it fostered revenge, and our Savior would not tolerate it as a principle carried out by individuals. Good law in court may be very bad custom in common society. He spoke against what had become a proverb

and was heard and said among the people, “*Ye have heard that it hath been said.*”

Our loving King would have private dealings ruled by the spirit of love and not by the rule of law.

**39. *But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.***

Non-resistance and forbearance are to be the rule among Christians. They are to endure personal ill-usage without coming to blows. They are to be as the anvil when bad men are the hammers, and thus they are to overcome by patient forgiveness. The rule of the judgement-seat is not for common life; but the rule of the cross and the all-enduring Sufferer is for us all. Yet how many regard all this as fanatical, utopian, and even cowardly! The Lord, our King, would have us bear and forbear, and conquer by mighty patience. Can we do it? How are we the servants of Christ if we have not his spirit?

**40. *And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.***

Let him have all he asks, and more. Better lose a suit of cloth than be drawn into a suit in law. The courts of our Lord’s day were vicious, and his disciples were advised to suffer wrong sooner than appeal to them. Our own courts often furnish the surest method of solving a difficulty by authority, and we have known them resorted to with the view of preventing strife. Yet even in a country where justice can be had, We are not to resort to law for every personal wrong. We should rather endure to be put upon than be for ever crying out, “I’ll bring an action.”

At times this very rule of self-sacrifice may require us to take steps in the way of legal appeal, to stop injuries which would fall heavily upon others; but we ought often to forego our own advantage, yea, always when the main motive would be a proud desire for self-vindication.

Lord, give me a patient spirit, so that I may not seek to avenge myself, even when I might righteously do so!

**41. *And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.***

Governments in those days demanded forced service through their petty officers. Christians were to be of a yielding temper, and bear a double

exaction rather than provoke ill words and anger. We ought not to evade taxation, but stand ready to render to Caesar his due. "Yield" is our watchword. To stand up against force is not exactly our part; we may leave that to others. How few believe the long-suffering, non-resistant doctrines of our King!

**42. *Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.***

Be generous. A miser is no follower of Jesus. Discretion is to be used in our giving, lest we encourage idleness and beggary; but the general rule is, "*Give to him that asketh thee.*" Sometimes a loan may be more useful than a gift, do not refuse it to those who will make right use of it. These precepts are not meant for fools, they are set before us as our general rule; but each rule is balanced by other Scriptural commands, and there is the teaching of a philanthropic common-sense to guide us. Our spirit is to be one of readiness to help the needy by gift or loan, and we are not exceedingly likely to err by excess in this direction; hence the boldness of the command.