

## **The Sermon on the Mount** **[278]**

### **Usual Preparation Prayer.**

**First Prelude: The History:** For the history, Matthew tells us that great crowds were following Jesus, from “Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan . . . [and] when he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him,” and He began to teach them. Thus begins the Sermon on the Mount.

**Second Prelude: The Composition of Place:** Here, in our imaginations, we can consider the mountain, with the crowd that had gathered. Biblical scholars tell us that it was “a hill of Galilee,” probably about 500 feet high (more like a hill) on the western shore of Lake Tiberias above Tabgha about 8 miles from Tiberias and 2 from Capharnaum. Jesus probably gave the Sermon, not from the top of the mount, but on a level place on the southwest slope.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the hill was in a central location, easily accessible by all. The scenery could hardly be better: in front, you have the calm waters of Lake Tiberias, in the back, mountains, on the right, towards the south, a low plane and further away Mt. Thabor, surrounded by shorter mountains. To the left, towards the north, the great Mt. Hermon, covered with snow, and, at the base of the hill of the Beatitudes, flower-covered fields.<sup>2</sup>

**Third Prelude: Petition:** Here the petition will be is to ask for light to know intimately my Divine King Who has become a Man for me, and grace to love Him and follow Him in poverty, suffering, and humiliations; in particular, we can ask for the grace to live our lives in accord with the Sermon on the Mount.

At [278] Ignatius gives three short points:

### **First Point**

He proposes the eight beatitudes to His beloved disciples apart: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . the meek . . . the merciful . . . they that mourn . . . they that hunger . . . the peace-makers . . . those that suffer persecution.”

### **Second Point**

He exhorts them to use their talents, “So let your light shine before men in order that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ricciota, *Life of Christ*, n. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Oraa, *Ejercicios Espirituales*, 391.

### **Third Point**

He shows Himself not a transgressor of the Law but a fulfiller. He explains the commandments not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to swear falsely, and commands us to love our enemies: “I say, love your enemies, do good to them that hate you.”

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As with some of the other contemplations we have considered, Ignatius doesn't give a very detailed contemplation. He gives only the basic steps and then reminds us to follow the same model as we did before: to *see* the people, then to *hear* the people, then to *examine what they are doing*, each time gathering some fruit for my life.

As we have done for the other contemplations, we can consider, first, a little of the historical background and a general introduction, and then, second, some elements to help us contemplate and consider Christ so as to imitate Him better. Tonight we will consider only the prologue, as it were, the Beatitudes, and then, tomorrow, we will consider the remainder of the text. I know we have seen these in our talks on Christian maturity, but we will see this in a different light than we have during the talks.

“Saint Matthew dedicates 107 verses to the Sermon on the Mount. . . . As a sort of introduction, in the Beatitudes, Jesus lays out a rule of ideal perfection that includes the essential conditions under which a person can obtain citizenship in His kingdom, the conditions that should be practiced by all those in the Kingdom. . . . This is a fruitful and easy contemplation,” says one commentator, “just lay them out devoutly and simply, and remind yourself of how Jesus Christ Himself lived them out!”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the *Catechism* tells us how essential this preaching is. At 1716 and following, we read: The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching. They take up the promises made to the chosen people since Abraham. The Beatitudes fulfill the promises by ordering them no longer merely to the possession of a territory, but to the Kingdom of heaven. . . . The Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness. This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it. . . . The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude. This vocation is addressed to each individual personally, but also to the Church as a whole, the new people made up of those who have accepted the promise and live from it in faith.”

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<sup>3</sup> Oraa, 389-390.

So, if we are really to follow Christ, if we really want to be under His standard, and to give ourselves entirely in His service, we must live out the Beatitudes. There is no way around it *at all*. Our happiness is to be found there, and no where else.

In 393, Saint Augustine wrote his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. In this work, he begins with the weighty proclamation that “anyone who piously and earnestly ponders the Sermon on the Mount — as we read in the Gospel according to Matthew — I believe he will find therein... the perfect standard of the Christian Life.” Indeed, we can follow his commentary in Sermon 53, and add our own comments occasionally.

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven:** To be poor in spirit is not to be materially impoverished, but to be humble. St. Augustine explains that “whoever is puffed up is not poor in spirit.” The poor in spirit are not weak; they are strong enough to be detached from the material riches of this world. The kingdom of heaven is on high but as is said in Mathew 23:12, “he that humbles himself shall be exalted.” St. Leo the Great further elucidates the maxim: “blessed, therefore, is poverty which is not possessed with a love of temporal things, and does not seek to be increased with the riches of the world, but is eager to amass heavenly possessions.” As we mentioned earlier, the Greeks had two words for *poor*; there is the word *penes*. “*Penes* describes a man who has to work for his living; it is defined by the Greeks as describing the man who is *autodiakonos*, that is, the man who serves his own needs with his own hands. It describes the working man, the man who has nothing superfluous, the man who is not rich, but who is not destitute either. But, it is not *penes* that is used in this beatitude, it is *ptochos*, which describes absolute and abject poverty. It is connected with the root *ptossein*, which means to crouch or to cower; and it describes the poverty which is beaten to its knees. As it has been said, *penes* describes the man who has nothing superfluous; *ptochos* describes the man who has nothing at all. So this beatitude becomes even more surprising. Blessed is the man who is abjectly and completely poverty-stricken. Blessed is the man who is absolutely destitute.”<sup>4</sup>

**“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”** The Greek word for meek has a twofold meaning at once as strong as iron, yet as gentle as a feather. “In our modern English idiom the word meek is hardly one of the honorable words of life. Nowadays it carries with it an idea of spinelessness, and subservience, and mean-spiritedness. It paints the picture of a submissive and ineffective creature. But it so happens that the word meek--in Greek *praus*--was one of the great Greek ethical words.” It was the balance between being angry all the time, and never getting angry at all. “But, the word *praus* has a second standard Greek usage. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Barclay’s commentary on this text.

the regular word for an animal which has been domesticated, which has been trained to obey the word of command, which has learned to answer to the reins. It is the word for an animal which has learned to accept control.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus describes meekness as being “wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” St. Francis de Sales further elucidates meekness when he says “there is nothing as strong as true meekness, there is nothing as gentle as true strength.” One who is truly meek will possess the earth, “if you are not meek, [the earth] will possess you.” St. Augustine notes that the earth refers to the heavenly kingdom and in another sense, self-possession ordered to Christ that unifies and integrates a community of souls.

**Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted:** “It is first of all to be noted about this beatitude that the Greek word for to mourn, used here, is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. It is the word which is used for mourning for the dead, for the passionate lament for one who was loved. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is the word which is used of Jacob’s grief when he believed that Joseph, his son, was dead. It is defined as the kind of grief which takes such a hold on a man that it cannot be hid. It is not only the sorrow which brings an ache to the heart; it is the sorrow which brings the unrestrainable tears to the eyes. Here then indeed is an amazing kind of bliss: Blessed is the man who mourns like one mourning for the dead.”<sup>6</sup>

St. Augustine cautions us against an improper understanding of mourning. Jesus does not bless every form of sorrow. Despair is sorrow without hope. Self-pity is a most dangerous form of mourning. Mourning is the expression of inner discontent, of the gap between desire and satisfaction, in other words for suffering. We are to mourn for our sins and the sins of others. Our “true consolation will be that which gives comfort that will never be lost.” “Christianity begins with a sense of sin. Blessed is the man who is intensely sorry for his sin, the man who is heart-broken for what his sin has done to God and to Jesus Christ, the man who sees the Cross and who is appalled by the havoc wrought by sin.

It is the man who has that experience who will indeed be comforted; for that experience is what we call penitence, and the broken and the contrite heart God will never despise. The way to the joy of forgiveness is through the desperate sorrow of the broken heart.”<sup>7</sup>

**Blessed are those who thirst and hunger for justice, for they shall be satisfied.**

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Barclay’s commentary.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

“The fact is that very few of us in modern conditions of life know what it is to be really hungry or really thirsty. In the ancient world it was very different. A working man's wage was the equivalent of three pence a day, and, even making every allowance for the difference in the purchasing power of money, no man ever got fat on that wage. A working man in Palestine ate meat only once a week, and in Palestine the working man and the day laborer were never far from the border-line of real hunger and actual starvation.

It was still more so in the case of thirst. It was not possible for the vast majority of people to turn a tap and find the clear, cold water pouring into their house. A man might be on a journey, and in the midst of it the hot wind which brought the sand-storm might begin to blow. There was nothing for him to do but to wrap his head in his cloak and turn his back to the wind, and wait, while the swirling sand filled his nostrils and his throat until he was likely to suffocate, and until he was parched with an imperious thirst. In the conditions of modern western life there is no parallel at all to that.

So, then, the hunger which this beatitude describes is no genteel hunger which could be satisfied with a mid-morning snack; the thirst of which it speaks is no thirst which could be slaked with a cup of coffee or an iced drink. It is the hunger of the man who is starving for food, and the thirst of the man who will die unless he drinks.

Since that is so this beatitude is in reality a question and a challenge. In effect it demands. ‘How much do you want goodness? Do you want it as much as a starving man wants food, and as much as a man dying of thirst wants water?’ How intense is our desire for goodness?”<sup>8</sup>

If we hunger for the things of this world we will end in starvation. We ought to hunger for justice, the Bread of Life who is Christ. He tells us in John 6:41, “I am the bread that has come down from heaven.” We ought to thirst for the living water of which our Lord said “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.” St. Augustine advises us to “pant after the drink of the thirsty as well, for with Thee is the fountain of Life.” Christ being the all-encompassing truth and justice is our food and drink, we ought to hunger and thirst for Him.

**Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.** St. Augustine reminds us here of the truth that we are beggars at God’s door and someone is begging from us. He entreats us to remember that “as you treat your beggar, so will God treat his.” He exhorts: “Out of your own fullness fill an empty man, so that your own

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

emptiness may be filled from the fullness of God.” To him that shows mercy, mercy will be shown. The holy appeal to show mercy is well illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Remember, too, that this mercy is extended, not only to us, but also to those who hurt us. Fr. Hardon writes: “But, as now almost two thousand years of the Church’s commentators have pointed out, the promise, ‘they shall obtain mercy,’ is not only mercy for ourselves. By our being merciful toward others who can be very offensive to us, that too, but also, we obtain mercy for the very ones who are offensive, who hurt us. . . . In other words, it is not only that mercy is promised to us because we are merciful, but mercy is promised to those toward whom we show mercy. We merit mercy for them and may well be, don’t forget this, it may well be, that our merciful forgiveness of those who have maybe cruelly betrayed us, even hated us, may be the condition that Christ attaches to giving these people His grace of merciful repentance. And that, of course, in one sentence is precisely what Jesus Christ did. He did not need to have His own sins forgiven. But, His mercy toward those who were so cruel toward Him, His mercy merited the mercy from His heavenly Father, for the very ones, who except for His mercy toward them, would not have obtained mercy from the heavenly Father to be saved themselves. More than any of us realize we hold the salvation of souls in the palms of our hands. We go on.”

**Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.** St. Augustine explains that “the eyes by which God is seen are within the heart.” As if he is speaking to our age he admonishes, “how foolish then are those who try to find God through the use of their bodily eyes!” We must walk by faith not by sight. The purification of our hearts is the true end of our love which will allow us to see God clearly. The brightness of the true light will not be able to be seen by the unclean sight: and that which is joy to minds that are clean, will be a punishment to those that are tarnished. St. Augustine explains, “A simple heart is a heart that is pure; and, just as the light which surrounds us cannot be seen except through eyes that are clear, so neither is God seen unless that through which He can be seen is pure.”

**Blessed are the peacemakers for they are the children of God.** St. Augustine clarifies that “where there is no contention, there is perfect peace. And because nothing can contend against God, the children of God are peacemakers.” The Peacemakers of God are the opposite of the peacemakers of the world, for the men of the world cry “peace peace when there is no peace.” St. Augustine explains that “man is unable to rule over the lower things unless he in turn submits to the rule of a higher being. And this is the peace promised on earth to men of good will.” God’s peace is only possible when everything is in its proper order and oriented to Him.

“Second, it must carefully be noted what the beatitude is saying. The blessing is on the peace-makers, not necessarily on the peace-lovers. It very often happens that if a man loves peace in the wrong way, he succeeds in making trouble and not peace. We may, for instance, allow a threatening and dangerous situation to develop, and our defense is that for peace’s sake we do not want to take any action. There is many a person who thinks that he is loving peace, when in fact he is piling up trouble for the future, because he refuses to face the situation and to take the action which the situation demands. The peace which the Bible calls blessed does not come from the evasion of issues; it comes from facing them, dealing with them, and conquering them. What this beatitude demands is not the passive acceptance of things because we are afraid of the trouble of doing anything about them, but the active facing of things, and the making of peace, even when the way to peace is through struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2000, Pope Saint John Paul the Great celebrated Mass on the Mount of the Beatitudes. He summarizes very well the point of the Beatitudes, and what our response should be:

“Not far from this very place, Jesus called his first disciples, as he calls you now. His call has always demanded a choice between the two voices competing for your hearts even now on this hill, the choice between good and evil, between life and death. Which voice will the young people of the twenty-first century choose to follow? To put your faith in Jesus means choosing to believe what he says, no matter how strange it may seem, and choosing to reject the claims of evil, no matter how sensible or attractive they may seem.

In the end, Jesus does not merely speak the Beatitudes. He lives the Beatitudes. He is the Beatitudes. Looking at him you will see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted. This is why he has the right to say, ‘Come, follow me!’ He does not say simply, ‘Do what I say’. He says, “Come, follow me!’ You hear his voice on this hill, and you believe what he says. But like the first disciples at the Sea of Galilee, you must leave your boats and nets behind, and that is never easy—especially when you face an uncertain future. To be good Christians may seem beyond your strength in today’s world. But Jesus does not stand by and leave you alone to face the challenge. He is always with you to transform your weakness into strength. Trust him when he says: ‘My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9)!

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Young people: answer the Lord with a heart that is willing and open! Willing and open, like the heart of the greatest daughter of Galilee, Mary, the Mother of Jesus. How did she respond? She said: 'I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word' (Lk 1:38)."

Jesus Christ doesn't simply preach the Beatitudes; He lives them, He is them. We can ask ourselves: how well do we imitate Him in living out the Beatitudes? Do we really embrace poverty of spirit; do we hunger and thirst for righteousness?

**[Colloquy]:** Ignatius tells us to end with the colloquy used for the Three Classes of Men, which is the same as the one used for Two Standards.

**Threefold Colloquy:**

A colloquy should be addressed to our Lady, asking her to obtain for me from her Son and Lord the grace to be received under His standard, first in the highest spiritual poverty, and should the Divine Majesty be pleased thereby, and deign to choose and accept me, even in actual poverty; secondly, in bearing insults and wrongs, thereby to imitate Him better, provided only I can suffer these without sin on the part of another, and without offense of the Divine Majesty. Then I will say the Hail Mary.

**Second Colloquy:** This will be to ask her Son to obtain the same favors for me from the Father. Then I will say, Soul of Christ.

**Third Colloquy:** This will be to beg the Father to grant me the same graces. Then I will say the Our Father.

**[157] Note:** It should be noted that when we feel an attachment opposed to actual poverty or a repugnance to it, when we are not indifferent to poverty and riches, it will be very helpful in order to overcome the inordinate attachment, even though corrupt nature rebel against it, to beg our Lord in the colloquies to choose us to serve Him in actual poverty. We should insist that we desire it, beg for it, plead for it, provided, of course, that it be for the service and praise of the Divine Goodness.