

Are the Beatitudes Law or Gospel?

The Sermon on the Mount, of which the Beatitudes are a part, is without doubt the most widely known discourse of Jesus. And not only is it better known than many other parts of the Bible, but it has also been, and still is, much admired. Even many who lay claim to no deep religious conviction have spoken of it in terms of highest praise. Aye, there have actually been those who wished to take this sermon and discard all the rest of the Bible. But it certainly is not in accordance with the will of Him who has given *all* Scripture that we should be so impressed with the beauty of a small part of it as to neglect all the rest. We are not to tear a few leaves out of the Bible and run away with them. "*All Scrip-*

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ture is given by inspiration of God and *is profitable.*" Just as our body requires a variety of food, — no man can live on his favorite dish alone, — just so our soul should have well-balanced rations and should be allowed to enjoy the variety which God has provided.

But it does remain true that some parts of Scripture are far more important than others. The fifteenth chapter of Luke is more important for us to-day than the sixth chapter of First Chronicles, and the third chapter of Romans is far more valuable to the Church than the register of the genealogy found in the seventh chapter of Nehemiah. Even so, after all is said, it remains true that the Sermon on the Mount is an exceedingly precious gem of the entire Bible. Faithful teachers of the Church have recognized this and have devoted some of their best efforts to pointing out the rich treasures of this incomparable sermon of our divine Master. Luther devoted an entire series of sermons to these chapters of St. Matthew and expresses his gratification at the publication of just these sermons of his.¹⁾ In the introduction to these sermons he forewarns all not to allow false teachers to pervert for them the precious words of the Sermon on the Mount. Romanists have led the way in corrupting these chapters by their doctrine of "evangelical counsels." That error has been abundantly refuted.²⁾ Then there are many who insist that the explanation of the Moral Law which Jesus gives in this sermon is a brief summary and the very essence of all His teachings. That makes of Jesus a second Moses, a mere preacher of God's Law, and robs Him of His Gospel glory. Such teaching takes from the Christian the most precious treasure of all, the best that Jesus taught. It is true, Jesus also taught the Law. But while the Law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

However, even among faithful and orthodox teachers of Biblical truth there has not been an entire agreement on the question whether the Sermon on the Mount contains any Gospel at all. Some have insisted that this entire discourse of our Savior cannot be understood unless we constantly keep in mind that it is all Law and nothing but Law and that there is not one word of Gospel in it. Those who have defended this view seem to have felt that they ought to refute the false teachers who taught that, when Jesus in this sermon explains the spirituality of the Law, He shows us how we are to become His followers and how we are to obtain

1) St. Louis Ed., VII, 346.

2) Walther, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 79 sq.

eternal life. In order to refute such false doctrine, faithful teachers have said: In this sermon Jesus is not teaching His people how to obtain forgiveness of sin and how to become partakers of God's grace, but here, in this place, Jesus is telling *those who are Christians* how they ought to live. He is teaching them a righteousness of life which is in every way superior to the righteousness which His disciples saw the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes practise. And it is certainly true that much of this sermon is Law. Even when in the 20th verse of the fifth chapter He declares: "I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven," He teaches the pure Law of the New Testament and condemns the righteousness of the Pharisee as no righteousness at all, because there was in their righteousness no true love of God, no true trust in God, no true fear of God; for all that these scribes and Pharisees did was done from pride and in order to be seen of men and to obtain praise from men,³⁾ whereas God wants childlike trust, fear, and love in the heart. He wants spiritual righteousness, which seeks God's glory and our neighbor's welfare.

But after we have admitted this, must we not ask again, Did Jesus actually preach an entire sermon without one word of Gospel? Is there in this whole Sermon on the Mount no word of consolation, no word of comfort, for those in distress? Did Jesus in this entire sermon do no more than explain the Law of Moses, the Moral Law? Faithful teachers of our Church have denied this and have pointed out that in this sermon also Jesus comforts with sweet words those who are troubled because of their sin, because of persecution, because of tribulations. Luther, for instance, in commenting upon the first words of this Sermon on the Mount, declares: "That is a fine, sweet, friendly beginning of His teaching and preaching; for He does not tear along like Moses or a teacher of the Law, commanding, threatening, and frightening, but in a most friendly manner He utters cheering promises, which beckon and invite."⁴⁾ And again, later on, he writes: "How friendly, how sweet is this sermon for the Christians who are His disciples!"⁵⁾

If Luther was right in asserting of these Beatitudes that they are "sweet" and "friendly," "comforting" and "consoling," then he certainly does not agree with those who insist that they are Law,

3) Matt. 23, 5—7; John 5, 44.

4) St. Louis Ed., VII, 355.

5) *Ib.*, 356.

threatening punishment and condemning the transgressors of the Law.

The writer of this article agrees with Luther that these Beatitudes are precious, friendly, consoling, and comforting words of the Lord Jesus, and therefore Gospel.⁶⁾

There are two reasons for taking this position. First, all the arguments which are urged in favor of thinking that the Beatitudes are Law fail to convince; and secondly, there are good and irrefutable reasons for confidently believing that the Beatitudes are Gospel. Let us first examine the arguments that have been mentioned in support of the view that this first part of the Sermon on the Mount is also Law.

One argument which has been urged for this view is the following: "If all the other statements of the Sermon on the Mount are Law and not Gospel, then the Beatitudes also, which are a part of this sermon, must be Law and not Gospel." Where is the logician that would approve such logic? Need we do more than state the argument? It refutes itself. What preacher would allow any one to argue thus concerning a sermon of his: A part of your sermon was Law, consequently it must all have been Law.

Then one has said that in Luke 6 there is a parallel passage of the record of these chapters of Matthew and that this parallel is Law and that therefore also the record of Matthew must be Law. But this again is merely an *argumentum in circulo*; for it is stating as a fact that which is to be proved, namely, that the Beatitudes in Luke are Law and not Gospel. We do not deny that in Luke 6 there is Law, even as a part of this sermon as Matthew reports it is Law, but we claim that the Beatitudes which are found in Luke 6 are Gospel, even as here. Read again Luke 6, 20—23 and tell me, Is Jesus there not comforting His disciples with consoling and sweet words?

Still another argument has been advanced. It has been said that in v. 17 of Matt. 5 there is mentioned the occasion which moved Jesus to preach this whole sermon, namely, to show that it would be a misunderstanding of His teaching of the Law if one maintained that He had come to destroy the Law and the prophets, for He had not come to destroy, but to fulfil the Law and the prophets, and that therefore, because Jesus wanted to explain His attitude to the Law, the entire sermon on the Mount must be Law and

6) Calov, in his *Biblia Illustrata*, writes: "*Christus hic non moralium doctorem agit, cum beatitudinem explicat, sed evangelicæ beatitudinis veram rationem tradit.*"

not Gospel. But again we fail to see the cogency of the argument. Could not Jesus do what Paul did — show that the preaching of the Gospel does not make void the Law? Does not Paul in Rom. 3—5 preach the Gospel, and does he not then turn to show that by such Gospel-preaching he is not making void the Law?

Again, it has been argued that the very words of the Beatitudes show that they are Law and not Gospel, since Jesus in them does not teach the unconverted how they are to become disciples and to receive forgiveness of sin, but that He is showing the converted how to live a life truly pleasing to God. But those who urge this fail to distinguish between the Beatitudes and the other part of this Sermon on the Mount. Above all, however, they overlook the key-word of the Beatitude: *μακάριοι*, *beati*, blessed. That is the word which has given them their name, *Beatitudes*.

But in order to refute this position, we must now discuss thetically the true meaning and content of these Beatitudes.

By way of introduction we would remind the reader that there are two ways of preaching the Gospel: one is to tell man of forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and then to invite him to accept this precious gift; the other is to assure a Christian that he has, and even now possesses, the forgiveness of his sin. We practise both of these in our churches. We proclaim to the masses that God's favor is not to be obtained by our own works, we tell them of all that Christ did for us, that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, and we invite them to believe this and to rejoice in the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world. That is Gospel-preaching. But we also tell the Christians that *they are even now in possession of the forgiveness of their sins and of the grace of God*, that they have eternal life and are the beloved children of God. *That is also Gospel*. When Christians confess their sins and ask God to have mercy upon them for Jesus' sake, we grant them absolution. That is Gospel. That is nothing but the sweetest Gospel. And that is exactly what Jesus is preaching here when He says to His disciples, "Blessed are ye."⁷ He pronounces to them the absolution of God, He opens the door of

⁷) Although Jesus in these first Beatitudes in Matthew does not say, *μακάριοι ἔστε*, but *μακάριοι οἱ*, yet later on, v. 11, He does say, "Blessed are ye," *μακάριοι ἔστε*. And in Luke 20 He expressly uses the second person, saying *μακάριοι ἔστε ὅταν κτλ*. This shows that in the Beatitudes He was directly addressing His disciples, believers, and assuring them of the grace of God, with all that this grace includes. This could never have been done on the basis of the Law, for these believers whom He was addressing had not fulfilled the Law of God.

heaven, He assures them that they have forgiveness, that they are in possession of God's grace, and that heaven is awaiting them. That one word *μακάριοι* is God's absolution, it makes every one of these Beatitudes such an absolution, and therefore the Beatitudes are Gospel-preaching. An absolution based upon a partial fulfilment of the Law is false and wicked, and an absolution based upon the perfect fulfilment of the Law carries no comfort to sinful men. The only absolution that can console sinful men is an entirely unconditional absolution.

But does not Jesus here call those blessed who do His will and are His obedient disciples? Does He not base their blessedness upon their poverty of spirit, their meekness, their patience? Consider the following:—

When our pastors grant absolution, they also speak words which have seemed to some to involve certain conditions; for our pastors pronounce absolution to those only who confess that they repent of their sins, believe in Jesus Christ, and sincerely purpose, by the assistance of God the Holy Ghost, henceforth to amend their sinful lives. By requesting such a confession from those to whom they wish to pronounce forgiveness, they do not make the absolution conditional, but they describe the spiritual condition of those who accept the grace of God. All men who do not repent of their sins, who do not believe in Christ, who have not the earnest purpose of amending their lives,—all such do not and cannot accept forgiveness of sins; for remission of sins can be accepted by true faith alone. Therefore, although the forgiveness of sins has also been gained for the unbeliever and is also in general offered even to unbelievers, it is not, and cannot be, accepted by those who remain in unbelief. Just as the best food may be offered to one who cannot and will not swallow, and even may be urged upon him, yet if he does not take and swallow it, he does not receive the benefit of it. The offer of the food is not made conditional upon his swallowing,—it is made without any condition whatsoever,—but if he does not take it and ingest it, he will not receive any benefit from it; in fact, he does not accept it. The words, therefore, which to some seem to be a condition of the absolution which our pastors offer, are in reality a description of the one who actually does accept the forgiveness. All this holds good of the absolution granted in these Beatitudes. Jesus, in the second part of every Beatitude, does not state the condition upon which He pronounces the "*Blessed*," but He *describes those* who have the grace and blessing of God through faith. The first part of each Beatitude

is an absolution. The second part is a description of the person who has received and enjoys this absolution.

As to the first of these two statements, no one can deny that the word *μακάριοι*, as used by Jesus in this place, secures to those who are so addressed all the blessings of the Gospel and all the wondrous, rich temporal and eternal fruits of this Gospel. By this word *blessed* Jesus bestows upon every one of whom it is affirmed the grace and mercy of God and all that is included in God's favor, of which St. Paul writes: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" Rom. 8, 32.

But now as to the second part. Is the second part of each one of these Beatitudes actually a description of those who receive this absolution and possess it? Let us see.

In the first Beatitude the blessed are described as "poor in spirit." Is that not a description of a penitent sinner? Is that not the very same thing to which our pastors refer when before pronouncing absolution they ask, Do you heartily repent of your sins? In the second one they are described as "they that mourn." Is that not a description of a true Christian? No one can accept forgiveness but they who are of a contrite heart, who *mourn* over their sins. In the next verse they are described as "meek." That is the description of the Christian who has surrendered himself to God, who knows that he dare not come before God with any claim, but must cast himself upon God's mercy, praying God to be merciful to him, a sinner. In the sixth verse they are described as "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." This has often been restricted to a hunger and thirst after one's own personal righteousness, but why restrict it so? The text does not force us to do it. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are those who wish to be righteous in the sight of God and also truly righteous in themselves, and this is the hunger and thirst which we find in all Christians. They long for forgiveness, and they long for sanctification. These two need not be separated. In the fifth and sixth petitions of the Lord's Prayer they are united. These two petitions show that this twofold hunger and thirst are inseparably joined in the Christian. No Christian on earth dare stop praying the Fifth Petition, nor dare he omit the Sixth Petition.⁸⁾

8) Calov prefers to restrict this hunger and thirst to the desire for forgiveness: "*commodissime intelligitur imputata justitia.*" Bengel, in his *Gnomon*, writes of this hunger and thirst: "*Qui sentiunt, se per se non habere justitiam, qua se Deo hominibusque probent, eamque vehementer desiderant.*"

The seventh verse describes the *blessed* as "merciful." This represents the Christian as he prays the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, asking for forgiveness and willing to forgive his neighbor. One who has obtained mercy is also merciful. We also do not pronounce absolution to one who will not forgive his neighbor. If this seems to some to be going too far, let such a one remember Ps. 32, 2: "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity and in whose spirit there is no guile." Is this Law, or is it Gospel? Is not this phrase, "in whose spirit there is no guile," a description of the recipient of God's absolution? And if it is, why not apply the same method of interpretation to these Beatitudes?

In the following verse Christians are described as "pure in heart." Is it right to exclude from this the purification wrought by the blood of Jesus Christ? If it referred to the pure in heart who, in their own character, are pure from all sin, then this eighth verse would certainly not be a friendly, kind, merciful teaching, such as Luther declares Christ to be giving His disciples in these Beatitudes, but would be the pronouncement of the curse eternal upon all mankind; for who can say that he is pure in his heart? Who will find a clean one among the unclean? Prov. 20, 29; Job 14, 4.⁹) This eighth verse of Matt. 5 is certainly not to be placed on a parallel with that answer of the Lord's to the lawyer to whom Jesus said: "This do, and thou shalt live," and "Go and do likewise." Luke 19, 28. 37. Here, in these Beatitudes, Jesus is not dealing with the proud Pharisees, but is comforting His believers. He calls them blessed people, because, though their sins were as crimson, they are now as wool. Is. 1, 18. In the ninth verse the Christians are described as "peacemakers." That is just another part of their quality of being merciful. They have made peace with God and daily make their peace with God, and so they also make peace with their fellow-men. This is a fruit of their faith, a fruit which begins to show itself as soon as they have accepted the peace of God through Jesus Christ. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth verses of this chapter He pronounces them blessed because they are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and He tells them that this will happen to all His believers. Who would call this rich comfort a part of the Law? ¹⁰) It is one common

9) Calov writes: "*Nulla est cordis purificatio sine fide. NAM PER FIDEM PURIFICANTUR CORDA NOSTRA. Act. XV, 9.*"

10) Quenstedt asks: "*Quis unquam credit afflictiones, quas patimur ab alio, esse nostra bona opera?*" (*Loc. de Bon. Op.*, sect. II. XVII.)

experience which all believers must undergo — they are all persecuted. To comfort such persecuted Christians and to assure them of God's mercy and grace is certainly not the province of the Law, but of the Gospel.

Nor is this manner of pronouncing absolution restricted to the Beatitudes. St. Paul pronounces the same kind of absolution to believers when he writes: "And in nothing terrified by your adversaries; which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God." Phil. 1, 28. He tells them that the persecution by adversaries is to be a token to the Christian of his salvation. When a Christian is persecuted for righteousness' sake, he is to hear Jesus Himself pronouncing to him the absolution of the Beatitudes.

In Ps. 32 we read: "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity and in whose spirit there is no guile." This is certainly Gospel, and yet here also he is assured of forgiveness "in whose spirit there is no guile." This additional description of the recipient of grace does not change these comforting words from Gospel into Law. Indeed, David, in the Psalms, frequently calls upon God to be merciful to him and requests absolution, urging his faith and its fruit, imperfect though it be, *as a mark* of one who accepts God's mercy and appreciates it. David says, Ps. 86, 1, 2: "Bow down Thine ear, O Lord, hear me; for I am poor and needy. Preserve my soul; for I am holy (חָסִיד). O Thou, my God, save Thy servant that trusteth in Thee." In this 86th Psalm, David is not asking for mercy on the basis of his own personal, perfect obedience of the Law, but he is asking for mercy as a child of God, who, with a penitent and believing heart, accepts, and is ever ready to accept, God's forgiveness and grace. There are many more such prayers of David in the Psalms. Ps. 26, 1—3; 7, 8; 18, 20. Even in Ps. 51, where David certainly confesses his sin with great contrition and humility, he urges upon God the broken spirit and the broken and contrite heart, which are the sacrifices which God will not despise. Just so Elizabeth calls the Virgin Mary blessed. "And blessed is she that believed." Luke 1, 45. In these words Mary is not assured of God's blessing upon the basis of perfect obedience, but she is described as a believer. In the Magnificat, v. 50, Mary declares: "And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation." Here also she pronounces all those blessed and possessors of God's mercy who fear the Lord. She certainly does not mean all those who perfectly

obey the First Commandment; she is rather describing those who accept God's mercy.

Holy Scripture is full of such Gospel assurances in which the recipient is described. All of these are not Law, but Gospel. Whoever teaches that they are Law robs the Christian of much of the sweetest Gospel comfort.

We know that it has also been said that these Beatitudes are neither Law nor Gospel, but merely descriptive portions of Holy Writ. He who claims this must, in order to be consistent, declare that such words of Jesus as Luke 6, 24—26 are neither Law nor Gospel, but merely description. We never heard of one who would do that. When Jesus pronounces a curse, He is not only uttering a description, but such a curse is Law; and when He pronounces one blessed and a child of God and in possession of God's grace, He is not only giving a description, but He is also bestowing God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus does not only show us a picture; He actually bestows upon us that which His words express.

No, we are not forced to say that Jesus preached His longest sermon without one word of Gospel. Nor shall we admit that He comforted His disciples with the Law; for these Beatitudes are what Luther designates them, "sweet, consoling words." S.