

FRAGMENT OF A LETTER

TO A FRIEND ON THE

SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

BY SIR CHARLES BRENTON.

(A few slight alterations have been made.)

THERE is, I conceive, an exception to the grand general rule that we ought to seek to exercise our ministry (especially in the way of preaching) exactly as our Lord did in the days of His flesh. I am a Christian, and therefore believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus. If I did not, I should be an infidel, whatever some may think to the contrary. But if Jesus was God, all His actions, preaching included, were exquisitely and infinitely perfect. It follows as a simple and necessary conclusion, from the admitted fact of our Lord's deity, that He was the best preacher that ever was. But now mark a fallacy by which, as it seems to me, many even spiritual minds have been entangled. They seem to reason as follows:—What is the best preaching? Answer—The preaching of the fullest and freest grace. Therefore in the only sermon of our Lord, which we have given us at length, as He was the best preacher, we have the best sermon; in other words, an exposition of the fullest and freest grace of the gospel. Hence they at once fix upon the Sermon on the Mount (so called by men rather than by God) as if it necessarily contained a very full gospel, which I may

reverently say I believe the Lord Jesus in His divine and perfect wisdom *never intended it should*.

Instead of writing in a more formal and didactic style, I will mention one or two ways in which I sometimes try to illustrate this doctrine. I sometimes say, Compare the last verses of Matt. vii. with the first few verses of Matt. viii. There is more gospel in the short account of the leper and his cleansing than in the whole Sermon on the Mount. What was the *effect* of the Sermon on the Mount? "And it came to pass when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (viii. 28, 29.) Are we told that the hearers were converted? No. That they were convinced? No. (Some of them most probably had been convinced and converted before, but this hardly appears to have been the case with the mass.) Again, did the Lord tell the poor leper to pluck out his right eye, to cut off his right hand, or force his way through the strait gate? All this he would probably *have to do* afterwards, but doubtless the grand change was the passing from guilt to righteousness, from death to life, which I believe the cleansing of a leper symbolizes.

Let me present my view of the Sermon on the Mount in another form. Imagine a sinner on his deathbed, with a newly-awakened conscience. Two well-intentioned clergymen come to visit him one after the other. One, knowing that we must be saved by the gospel and not by the law, and that the gospel is contained in the New Testament, that the Lord Jesus never did and never could teach error, begins reading the fifth of Matthew and goes on to the end of the tenth verse. The other reads the

Ten Commandments. Would the so-called beatitudes give the poor dying sinner one particle more of comfort than the Ten Commandments? I trow not. In other words, where in these beatitudes and where in the whole Sermon on the Mount do I find redemption, justification, or acceptance? Some, I am aware, might say, It is not fair to propose stopping at the tenth verse: go on to the end. I do find, I admit, something of gospel relationship in God being called Father, but *not how to get into that relationship*.* And is it at all easier to make ourselves meek, merciful, pure in heart, &c., than to keep the Ten Commandments? Some objectors, perhaps, will say, You are trying to set the teaching of the man Paul against, and even above, the teaching of the Lord Jesus. I reply, the man Paul, looked at apart from his inspiration, was a sinful creature like myself; but he was a vessel, a channel, a pen used to communicate truth, "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth." In other words, Paul was the instrument by which the Spirit of Christ—i.e., *Christ Himself* by His Spirit—spoke. The comparison I would make is not between Christ and Paul, (which would border on blasphemy,) but between the humbled One in the days of His flesh, when He had a baptism to be baptized with and was sorely straitened till it was accomplished, when He had many things to say, but His disciples could not bear them, on the one hand; and on the other, the same Holy One exalted, sending *His* Spirit, and by that Spirit preaching

* Matt. v. 44, 45 will hardly be urged as an exception to this by any intelligent Christian. Nor is chap. vii. 7 really an exception, save in a very indirect sense. An injunction to ask for undefined good is one thing, (however gracious or divine,) the preaching of immediate and complete salvation, through faith in a finished sacrifice, is another.

His gospel, much more fully than He in His infinite wisdom saw fit to preach it in what is popularly called the Sermon on the Mount. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that where this principle is not admitted, at least not the substance of it, there is a lurking infidelity as to the *full* inspiration of the Epistles of the New Testament. If the Epistle to the Romans, for instance, is not divine, I would tear it out of the Bible and throw it into the fire. If it is the word of God, I may call it the preaching of Christ; i.e., not merely the preaching of which Christ is the subject, but that of which Christ is the *Author*, and thank God for a fuller gospel than that preached before our Lord's ascension.

On this ground I regret the extensive circulation of some tracts, containing indeed much that is excellent, where, instead of presenting the attractive grace of the gospel, the writers seem to be driving sinners through the strait gate by threats and legal exhortations. "Get on, you sluggards, do you not know it is your own fault if you are lost?" Some truth in this, but little grace. It seems to me that that beautiful legend that Keble applies in the *Christian Year*, in his hymn for Ash Wednesday, to the Church of England, would be more fitly applied to God's grace in the gospel. That grace does not threaten, or curse, or condemn. It bares its breast of love and *wins* us.

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