

# Talks on the Beatitudes

Alexander Schmemmann

Translated by Inga Leonova



## “Blessed are the meek”

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth* (Matt. 5:5)—This is the third Beatitude.

The Beatitudes, as we have already discussed in previous talks, constitute the very core of Christ’s teaching about man and his life, and therefore the core of Christian morality. To understand them means to enter into the inner world of Christian faith, and that is precisely what the official anti-religious propaganda refuses to do, consciously and maliciously. It always talks about faith, religion, Christianity as if from the outside, whereas everything external in religion—organization, rituals and even

dogmas—can only be understood from the inside, i.e., in how it relates to something that is the foremost, ultimate vision of life.

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*—again we have before us words that may seem unclear, mysterious. First of all, why is *meekness* chosen among the many moral and spiritual human qualities? We are not told “blessed are the humble,” or “blessed are the loving,” or “the compassionate,” although we know that love, humility, and compassion are central to Christian teaching. And secondly, what does it mean to *inherit* the earth?

It is best to respond to these questions by looking at the opposite: what is contrary to meekness. I have already mentioned that the Beatitudes, the way they are recorded in the Gospels, are not simply enumerating various virtues as independent and absolute values by themselves. They paint the concrete, living image of a human person, presenting not a program, but an inner inspiration for his life; not a moral code of rules and regulations, but life as it is lived, or at least wants be lived by one who follows Christ. In a certain ultimate and profound way it is the description, the revealing of the inner world of Christ himself. And since Christian faith be-

gins with Christ, with being inspired by his image, his person, and consists of following Christ, so the Beatitudes turn out to be, in a way, his self-revelation. In another part of the Gospel Christ says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find peace for your souls." (cf. Matt. 11:28–29). Thus meekness becomes the primary self-definition of Christ Himself. How is it expressed in his life, then, and what does it oppose?

We know from the Gospel that throughout his life, throughout his brief ministry in the world, Christ encountered malice, misunderstanding, indifference; that he spent his time among people who passionately demanded something from him or just as passionately hated and persecuted him. And in this light perhaps the most amazing thing in Christ's life, in his words, in his relationship to the whirlwind of passions surrounding him at all times is that he remained free of this whirlwind, that he never submitted to it inwardly, never said or did anything in what is known as "the spirit of the moment."

And if today, almost two thousand years later, we read the Gospel with the same joy, and it always sounds new to us, always contemporary, always speaks to us and for us, isn't that a sign that it opens to us the eternal meaning and eternal truth? And yet there is nothing abstract in the Gospel. It is not a philosophy, it is not a systematic exposition of moral foundations, principles, norms—it is the story of one man, of his daily meetings and conversations with people who, according to the Gos-

pel, "pressed round him" (cf. Luke 8:42). So isn't meekness, first and foremost, an inner freedom from passions, from the complete submerging into the moment, and yet a freedom that does not stem from indifference or from a sense of one's superiority, since Christ, unlike other teachers and philosophers, does not call for abandoning all this bustle and crowdedness, for the giving up of all human toils and submerging oneself in solitary meditation. There are thousands of teachings that call for inner peace through the complete abandonment of everything—thousands—but this is not the teaching of Christ: he is always with people, always involved in their affairs, their cares and needs, their joy and grief, but at the same time he is always and everywhere the center of the world, and his very presence brings light. This is what meekness is, for the word meekness has no meaning outside of aliving and concrete relationship with others. One cannot be meek in solitude, because *meekness* is a way and mode of reaction to the behavior of the other, and not some independent quality.

If we ponder our life, we shall see how much it is determined from the *outside*—by the way other people relate to us: their words, their behavior, even their appearance. Another step, and we shall see that we live in a kind of a vicious circle where we depend on each other, but depend *externally*, meaning not so much that we live and communicate as we react to each other instead of meeting at some deep level. But we don't meet there precisely because nothing of what is the best and the most important reaches us, and our entire life becomes a perpetual reaction. Yet *blessed are the*

*meek* means that blessed are those who are capable of living not by reaction, but by a deep, free, loving relationship with the other, seeing in him not the manifestation of his person, but the person himself, seeking not to overpower him, not to defend oneself from him, but to commune with him. Blessed are those who, knowing this and seeking this, are prepared to bear the external, accidental, transient for the sake of the essential, for the sake of the eternal in man. It is they, by the word of Christ, who inherit the earth, having overcome in themselves all things temporary, transient.

The meaning of the third Beatitude is that he who lives life fully, who truly possesses it and therefore inherits it is the one who does not react to life but puts his entire faith, love, and hope into life. *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matt. 5:3) – this is the beatitude of the freedom and openness of a human being. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted* (Matt. 5:4) – this is the commandment that compels us to not be satisfied by anything in the world except the most pure, the most genuine, the most heavenly. *Blessed are the meek ...*—blessed are those who approach all of life deeply, with love and patience.

## **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”**

The fourth Beatitude is: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:6) Here, just as in the first three Beatitudes, the most fundamental, supremely important Chris-

tian teaching on man is revealed to us. All of the Beatitudes speak of man in his constant yearning for the greater. But in none of them is this yearning expressed with such clarity as in this one: blessed, for it is primeval in man, is the thirst and hunger for the truth. Let us ponder these remarkable words from the point of view of their content and substance as well as from the point of view of how Christian teaching and Christian morality are interpreted by the enemies of Christianity.

There is nothing more readily apparent in a man than hunger and thirst. He can be defined as a hungry being, and it is not accidental to habitually speak of “daily bread” as the main subject of human concerns. Yet unlike materialism, Christianity in its approach to man does not stop at physical bread, understanding hunger and thirst as incomparably broader, as the manifestation of our innermost essence. To thirst and hunger means to yearn for that most essential thing without which it is impossible to live. Man dies without material food, but Christianity says that he still possesses the hunger for the highest, the spiritual. Just as he cannot live without food and it is in his nature to desire it with his entire being, so he cannot live without the truth, and therefore the thirst and hunger for the truth define him just as much as his physical thirst and hunger do. Thus let us remember that man, according to the Christian teaching about him, is a creature thirsting for the truth.

What, then, is this truth without which, as without bread, authentic human life does not and cannot exist? When speaking of “truth,” the

Russian language distinguishes the notions of *istina* and *pravda* which are often conflated in other languages.<sup>1</sup> When speaking of *istina* people usually mean the knowledge of the ultimate essence of things and phenomena. Seeking *istina* is one of the highest callings of men, and it is directly commanded by Christianity. “Seek, and you shall find” (Matt. 7:7; Lk 11:9), says Christ, and also, “You will know the truth [*istina*], and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Yet the knowledge of *istina* alone is insufficient just as faith alone is insufficient, since the Apostle says, “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). *Istina*, like faith, needs to become life itself, it needs, in other words, to become *pravda*.

*Pravda* is *istina* which is alive and incarnate in human life. The search for *istina* must by necessity lead to the search for *pravda*, and this recalls the gallery of images that we are familiar with from the great works of Russian literature—all those strange people seeking *pravda*, dreaming of it, living by its bright and joyful vision. “Many of us wander the world, looking for *pravda*,” says Turgenev’s “Kassian from Krasivaya Mecha,” and he is not alone. This faith in *pravda* embodied, *pravda* of life in love and spiritual freedom is present in the works of nearly all Russian writers; it shines from their pages and has long been one of the principal qualities of Russian literature. *Pravda* is always more than just the law and morality. The word *pravda* is of the same root as *pravednost’* (righteousness), and righteousness, in its turn, presupposes immeasurably more than adherence to the law and moral rules. Righteousness is the embodiment in life of the bright ideal of

humanity, of love and compassion, of a humble readiness for a sacrifice. All of this is inexpressible in judicial and moral categories since it presupposes not a formal correctness of life but its fullness as communion in God. To live by the truth, to live righteously, is the eternal dream of man. This truth is opposed by untruth, that is, the basic lie about man that distorts his internal vision and relationships with his human brothers and sisters.

And so Christianity says that the yearning for truth contains the principal quality of man—that thirst, that hunger that make him truly, completely human. How far removed this is from the caricature of Christianity that is offered to us by the official antireligious propaganda! It maintains that Christianity calls for making peace with the untruth, that in its teaching on endurance and reward beyond the grave it supposedly teaches us to indifferently accept evil, injustice, and the cruelty of earthly life. But this caricature, this malicious lie, can’t stand up against the fourth Beatitude—the eternal expression of Christian maximalism which brought into the world, into history, into human conscience that vision of truth, that hunger and thirst which never again died in men. And even in the times when the majority of Christians in their complacency and spiritual self-conceit were forgot it, this Beatitude was always giving birth to the “madmen”—prophets, fools for Christ, or such inconspicuous righteous men as Turgenev’s “Kassian from Krasivaya Mecha,” who have turned their entire lives into a ceaseless pursuit of truth.

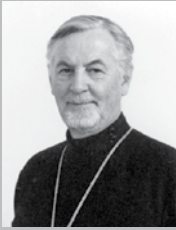
The Christian teaching, like any other, should be judged by the intent, by

<sup>1</sup> In English, both words are translated as “truth.” However, in Russian the distinction is fundamental. In dictionary terms, *istina* expresses objective reality and *pravda* becomes its subjective manifestation.

<sup>2</sup> “But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:13)

the ideal that it brings into the world, by the requirement that it places on man. And this requirement is to hunger and thirst after righteousness in all its fullness. “New heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells,” (cf. 2 Peter 3:13) <sup>2</sup>—this is the promise of Christ, and this makes every Christian a responsible bearer and servant of the truth. “Blessed

are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:1–5). Thus the true image of man, his true design slowly opens up in the Beatitudes. ✽



*The Rt. Rev. Alexander Schmemmann* was an Orthodox theologian who played a central role in founding the Orthodox Church in America. He was a graduate of St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. He was Dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary from 1962 to 1983, and also taught at Columbia University, New York University, and Union Theological Seminary.

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#### POETRY DESK

## Autumn Evening: God’s House

Jane E. Brown

he thought it was just another  
of his cast-off nail trimmings  
got away

it turned out to be  
the moon



*Illustrations by  
Anastasia Semash*