



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND LENTEN DISCIPLESHIP

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FR. AMBROSE BENNETT

In St. Matthew's gospel, we are constantly aware of the disputes between Jesus and his opponents in Israel, and especially of the controversies with the Pharisees. Up to a point, these accounts are the record of an argument within the House of Israel and among the Pharisees themselves. We should beware of caricaturing the Pharisees as cardboard villains or religious hypocrites: for, in fact, the Pharisees were themselves quite self-critical. The Pharisee rabbis used to say that there were seven different kinds of Pharisee, and only those who kept the Law of Moses out of true love of God were genuine.

Remember that Jesus himself sided with the Pharisees about the resurrection of the dead and about prayer and fasting and almsgiving. St. Mark records a famous exchange when a Pharisee scribe asked Jesus

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Rabbi; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mk 12.28-34).

So if there was so much common ground between Jesus and the Pharisees, what was the reason for the dispute? Well, there is nothing so bitter as a family quarrel that escalates: it is precisely the closeness of the bonds that makes the conflict so bitter.

One who has understood this very well is a Jewish scholar named Rabbi Jacob Neusner. Rabbi Neusner wrote a book called *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, in which he imagines himself as a first-century Pharisee rabbi and engages Jesus in a respectful argument. In reflecting on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and on Jesus' emphatic statement that he had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Mt 5.17), Neusner concludes with a question and an answer:

“What did Jesus leave out [in his explanation of the Law]? Nothing. Then what *did* he add? Himself.”

Yes, that is the stumbling-block, Jesus himself.



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When Christ tells the rich young man to give up everything and to follow him (Mt 11.28-30)—

when Christ says that we must put him above family and all natural bonds—

when Christ dares to say, “Moses said this, but I tell you something greater,

then it is clear that Christ is presenting himself as one equal to God, as one who is one with the Father in a unique sense. And Jesus does make that explicit, saying, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14.9).

This, then, is the point of our Savior’s Sermon on the Mount. It is not a reduction of faith to some sort of utopian moralism or pacifism; it is not a political platform, and it does not offer a pat solution to the social problems of that age or of any age. Rather, our Lord’s words are a call to discipleship, even at great cost: “for I tell you, unless your righteousness *exceeds that of the Pharisees*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5.19). Jesus tells the Pharisees that they “neglected the weightier matters of the Law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, *without neglecting the others*” (Mt 23.23). Christ tells his hearers *to offer their sacrifice at the altar* but to be reconciled first, so that the offering will be acceptable.

I fear that a great many people have heard Jesus’ prophetic rebuke of the Pharisees for their errors and for their self-righteousness and have missed the essential purpose of our Lord’s sharp words. He was not condemning their love of God’s Law but calling them to follow him and in this way to enter more deeply into the spirit of the Law. Above all, to follow Christ entails self-denial and the acceptance of his Cross as ours. For some reason, a great many Catholics got hold of the notion that the Second Vatican Council had ushered in an era of approval of worldliness, as if openness to the world—as such—were of any value at all. In particular, it seems that the term “People of God” in reference to the Church has led many to think that the Church had decided to conform to the Spirit of the Age, and that the Cross and self-denial had no place in the modern mentality. Well, I simply don’t know what Bible they were reading: the term “People of God” originally belongs to Israel, and to say that the Church is the Pilgrim People of God recalls Israel’s forty-year wanderings in the wilderness. That period in Israel’s history was one of sin and punishment and privation—not of comfortable conformism. And yet, for all that, Israel remained always a people of hope, trusting in the Lord’s promise of a land and a home. That, too, is the attitude of Christ’s Pilgrim Church in this world: as the Second Vatican Council said, the Church must follow the path of penance and purification in this world, until we at last enter into the promised Kingdom. This is the meaning of the term “People of God”; this, too, is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount.

In other words, the Sermon on the Mount tells us that there is no cheap grace. And what is cheap grace? Isn’t grace, by definition, a pure gift of God, freely given and un-earned?



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Indeed it is. It was the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who himself laid down his life for Christ, who explained what he meant by criticizing the notion of cheap grace. Bonhoeffer described cheap grace as follows:

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47).

Now Bonhoeffer was much drawn to the monastic life and spent long periods at the Benedictine abbey of Ettal in Germany. This was surprising for a number of reasons. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran, and Luther had bitterly attacked the monks and their vocation. Yet Bonhoeffer saw something in the monastic vocation that blesses the whole Church, for a monk is one who seeks to follow Christ unreservedly in a vowed and consecrated community. It is in this sense that the Church has infallibly taught the greater perfection of celibacy and religious vows as means to the holiness to which all Christians are called. Precisely by being an icon of discipleship, the monastic life enriches the whole Body of Christ and every true Christian vocation within it.

For this is the paradox of the Christian life: grace is freely given and yet costs us everything, for the grace of Christ requires of us the surrender of our very selves.