

DELIGHT IN THE LAW OF GOD

*Sermons on the Beatitudes and
the Commandments of God*



Protopresbyter James Thornton

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the Commandments of God**

by
Protopresbyter James Thornton

“For I delight in the law of God....”
—Romans 7:22



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Church: A Concise History*

CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgements	II
------------------------------	----

Twelve Sermons on the Beatitudes

SERMON ONE	13
Introduction	
SERMON TWO	18
"Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit"	
SERMON THREE	24
"Blessed Are They That Mourn"	
SERMON FOUR	29
"Blessed Are the Meek"	
SERMON FIVE	34
"Blessed Are They Which Do Hunger and Thirst After Righteousness"	
SERMON SIX	39
"Blessed Are the Merciful"	
SERMON SEVEN	44
"Blessed Are the Pure in Heart"	
SERMON EIGHT	49
"Blessed Are the Peacemakers"	
SERMON NINE	54
"Blessed Are They Which Are Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake"	
SERMON TEN	60
"Blessed Are Ye, When Men Shall Revile You, and Persecute You, and Shall Say All Manner of Evil Against You Falsely, for My Sake"	

SERMON ELEVEN	66
The Beatitudes in the Gospel of Saint Luke	

SERMON TWELVE	71
Summation	

Twelve Sermons on the Commandments of God

SERMON ONE	76
“I Am the Lord Thy God.... Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me”	

SERMON TWO	82
“Thou Shalt Not Make Unto Thee Any Graven Image”	

SERMON THREE	88
“Thou Shalt Not Take the Name of the Lord Thy God in Vain”	

SERMON FOUR	93
“Remember the Sabbath Day, to Keep It Holy”	

SERMON FIVE	98
“Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother”	

SERMON SIX	103
“Thou Shalt Not Kill”	

SERMON SEVEN	108
“Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery”	

SERMON EIGHT	114
“Thou Shalt Not Steal”	

SERMON NINE	119
“Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Thy Neighbour”	

SERMON TEN	123
“Thou Shalt Not Covet...Any Thing That Is Thy Neighbour’s”	

SERMON ELEVEN	128
“Thou Shalt Love the Lord Thy God with All Thy Heart, and with All Thy Soul, and with All Thy Mind”	
SERMON TWELVE	133
“Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself”	
Index of Names	137

To my beloved Godsons
Gregory Buls, Seraphim Kohanyi, and Jerome Seidl

*May our merciful Lord Jesus Christ, through
the intercessions of His Most-Holy Mother,
the Theotokos, and of all the Saints, guide
and protect them and their loved ones.*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present volume of sermons on the Beatitudes of Christ and the Commandments of God was suggested to me by my Brother in Christ, Father Martin Person, when we served together at the English Divine Liturgy at the Protection of the Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Church in Los Angeles, California. The first of these sermons was delivered on Sunday, August 1, 2005 (Old Style), the Feast of the Procession of the Precious and Life-giving Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and continued through Sunday, January 16, 2006 (Old Style), the Feast of the Veneration of the Precious Chains of Saint Peter the Apostle.

It occurred to us that many Orthodox Christians are inadequately familiar with the fundamental teachings of Christ, particularly as set forth in His imperishable Beatitudes. This is unquestionably true, despite the fact that the Beatitudes comprise the Third Antiphon of the Divine Liturgy, which is chanted, with appointed verses, by the choir on most of the Sundays of the liturgical year.

Contemporary Orthodox Christians are likewise unfamiliar with the full meaning and import of the Ten Commandments, and the Two Commandments of Christ, even if they know, or have often read or heard, the texts. Nonetheless, the Beatitudes and the Commandments (and the Beatitudes *are* Commandments, as the Fathers remind us) are the *most essential* of the essential teachings of Christianity, since they establish for us the basis and means for beginning the journey to eternal life and union with God.

It is no exaggeration to say that countless Orthodox Christians in our time conduct their lives in woeful ignorance of these essential teachings. They—large numbers of them at any rate—have been seduced by the relative prosperity of our times and by the promise of the false prophets and apostles of materialism, that the acquisition and enjoyment of money and material goods, along with technological progress, will save them, that is, will give them true happiness and security throughout their lives. This counterfeit promise, this spiritual sickness, the bane of the previous two centuries in both its

socialist and mercenary individualist configurations, and the cause of endless misery to mankind, still consumes the minds of men in these beginning years of the twenty-first century, turning them away from vital spiritual concerns. The promise, of course, is as hollow now as it was when it was contrived so long ago by the Evil One.

The antidote to this evil is the same today as it has been throughout the ages: *Christ!* Christ, Whose yoke is light and burden easy,¹ shows us the way to a measure of happiness and security in this life—albeit imperfect, in this fallen world—and then to perfect happiness and security in the life to come. May we strive to accept His yoke, to take on His burden. May we strive to “keep these truths in [our] hearts,”² as our own Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908) instructs us.

I wish to thank my wife, Presbytera Elizabeth, for her patience in listening to each of these sermons and her helpful comments. I am indebted to the Reverend Father Martin Person for his initial suggestion on preparing this series. I wish also to thank the Most Reverend Dr. Chrysostomos, Archbishop of Etna, and Mrs. Christina Seidl, both of whom read these sermons, as each was completed, and offered advice and constant encouragement. I extend my appreciation also to the Very Reverend Archimandrite Akakios, the Reverend Hieromonk Gregory, and the Reverend Hieromonk Patapios for their assistance in proofreading and completing the annotations and the index. Last of all, but definitely not least of all, I am boundlessly grateful to my many spiritual sons and daughters. Their assistance in heartening me by their kindnesses and love, and most especially by their prayers, has been, and remains, of inestimable benefit to me in carrying out my Priestly ministry.

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¹ Saint Matthew 11:30.

² St. John of Kronstadt, *Ten Homilies on the Beatitudes*, trans. N. Kizenko-Frugier (Albany, NY: Cornerstone Editions/La Pierre Angulaire, 2003), p. 21.

The Beatitudes

SERMON ONE

Introduction

We begin this week a survey of the Beatitudes of Christ, a central part of our Lord and Savior's sublime Sermon on the Mount, as recorded principally by Saint Matthew the Apostle († *ca.* 60) in his Holy Gospel.¹

The English word "beatitude" comes from the Latin "*beatus*," which word means "blessed" or "happy." In the original Greek, from which the Latin translation comes, the words are "*μακάριοι*" ("*makáριοι*") or "*μακάριος*" ("*makários*") the meaning conveyed by those words being the same as the Latin, that is, "blessed" or "happy." Consequently, a beatitude is a pronouncement or declaration of blessedness that proceeds or flows forth from particular virtues and from the generosity of God. And blessedness itself indicates that someone or something is pleasing to God and therefore sacred or holy, and thus set apart from the things of the mundane world. "Holiness" and "blessedness" are, in this context, synonyms. It must be said too that the word "blessedness" is synonymous with "contentment," "joy," "happiness," and "comfort," all of these to be understood in the spiritual and not the worldly or material sense.

The literary form known to us as a beatitude appears also in many places in the Old Testament. For example, we read in the Book of Psalms: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the impious";² "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him";³ and "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."⁴ One is blessed because one is faithful to God and to His law and shuns evil; one is

¹ St. Matthew 5:3–12.

² Psalm 1:1.

³ Psalm 2:13.

⁴ Psalm 32:12.

INDEX OF NAMES

- Adam the First-Created, Saint, 21, 49,
115, 119
- Akakios, Archimandrite, 12
- Alexandra the Tsarina-Martyr, Saint,
63–64
- Ambrose of Milan, Saint, 19, 30, 45,
67, 69
- Anthony the Great, Saint, 22
- Barber, Samuel, 124
- Basil the Great, Saint, 118
- Buls, Gregory, 10
- Christ, the Lord Jesus, 10–13, 16–22,
24–27, 29–39, 41–44, 47–55,
60–64, 66–76, 78, 80, 83–87, 89, 91,
94–96, 101, 105–106, 110, 117, 120,
122, 124, 127–131, 133–135
- Chrysostomos of Etna, Archbishop,
4–5, 12
- Cyprian of Carthage, Saint, 15–16
- Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, Metro-
politan, 4
- Cyril of Alexandria, Saint, 37, 67, 69,
70, 127
- Dorotheos of Gaza, Saint, 122, 136
- Durant, Ariel, 108, 111
- Durant, Will, 108, 111
- Elias the Just, Saint, 104
- Florovsky, Protopresbyter Georges
Vasilievich, 56–57
- Gregory, Hieromonk, 12
- Gregory of Nyssa, Saint, 47, 50–51, 58,
61–62, 64, 73, 112
- Gregory of Sinai, Saint, 20
- Gregory Palamas, Saint, 101
- Gregory the Dialogist, Saint, 33
- Hesychios of Sinai, Saint, 48, 107
- Isaiah the Prophet, Saint, 20
- James the Brother of the Lord, Saint,
61, 126
- Jerome of Bethlehem, Saint, 40, 42,
50, 128
- John Chrysostomos, Saint, 18, 20–22,
26–27, 30–31, 36–37, 39, 44, 51, 56,
60, 62, 72, 74, 95, 110–111, 121–122,
131, 134
- John III the Merciful, Saint, 104
- John of Damascus, Saint, 84–85
- John of Kronstadt, Saint, 12, 16–17, 51,
53–54, 57, 63, 74–75, 135
- John of San Francisco, Saint, 21, 63
- John the Theologian, Saint, 106,
131–132
- Justinian the Great, Saint, 88–89
- Kohanyi, Seraphim, 10
- Lazarus the Four-Days-Dead, Saint, 25
- Luke the Evangelist, Saint, 66–68, 70
- Mary, Blessed Ever-Virgin *Theotokos*,
10, 83–84, 86–88
- Matthew the Evangelist, Saint, 13,
67–70, 128–129
- Maximos the Confessor, Saint, 130
- Moses of Sketis, Saint, 80
- Moses the God-Seer, Saint, 76, 82
- Napoléon I of France, Emperor, 94
- Nektarios of Aegina, Saint, 63, 92

Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Saint, 117
Nisbet, Robert Alexander, 109

Patapios, Hieromonk, 12
Paul the Apostle, Saint, 26, 32, 44–45,
61, 99, 112, 115, 117, 120, 125–126, 132
Person, Father Martin, 11–12
Peter the Apostle, Saint, 61
Philaret of New York, Saint, 49,
98–99, 101, 103, 134, 136
Pickford, Mary, 124

Seidl, Christina, 12
Seidl, Jerome, 10
Seraphim of Sarov, Saint, 47

Stalin, Joseph, 60
Stephen the Protomartyr, Saint, 61

Tamara of Georgia, Saint, 104
Theodore of Edessa, Saint, 131
Theodore the Studite, Saint, 84
Theophylaktos of Ohrid, Saint, 26, 54,
60, 97, 130
Thornton, Presbyter Elizabeth, 5, 12
Thornton, Protopresbyter James, 5
Tikhon of Zadonsk, Saint, 45

Vladimir the Equal-to-the-Apostles,
Saint, 104

“...[M]any Orthodox Christians are inadequately familiar with the fundamental teachings of Christ, particularly as set forth in His imperishable Beatitudes. This is unquestionably true, despite the fact that the Beatitudes comprise the Third Antiphon of the Divine Liturgy, which is chanted, with appointed verses, by the choir on most of the Sundays of the liturgical year. Contemporary Orthodox Christians are likewise unfamiliar with the full meaning and import of the Ten Commandments, and the Two Commandments of Christ, even if they know, or have often read or heard, the texts. Nonetheless, the Beatitudes and the Commandments (and the Beatitudes *are* Commandments, as the Fathers remind us) are the *most essential* of the essential teachings of Christianity, since they establish for us the basis and means for beginning the journey to eternal life and union with God.”



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