

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

### CHAPTER 1

#### What Did Jesus Teach?

JESUS Christ is easily the most important figure that has ever appeared in the history of mankind. It makes no difference how you may regard him, you will have to concede that. This is true whether you choose to call him God or man; and, if man, whether you choose to consider him as the world's greatest Prophet and Teacher, or merely as a well-intentioned fanatic who came to grief, and failure, and ruin, after a short and stormy public career. However you regard him, the fact will remain that the life and death of Jesus, and the teachings attributed to him have influenced the course of human history more than those of any other man who has ever lived; more than Alexander, or Caesar, or Charlemagne, or Napoleon, or Washington. More people's lives are influenced by his doctrines, or at least by the doctrines attributed to him today; more books are written and read and bought concerning him; more speeches are made (call them sermons) concerning him; than concerning all the other names mentioned put together.

To have been the religious inspiration of the whole European race throughout the two millenniums during which that race has dominated and molded, the destinies of the entire world, culturally and socially, as well as politically, and through the period in which the whole of the earth's surface was finally discovered and occupied, and in its broad outlines shaped by civilization; this alone entitles him to the premier position in world importance.

There can hardly, therefore, be a more important undertaking than to

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

inquire into the question of what Jesus really did stand for.

What did Jesus teach? What did he really wish us to believe and to do?

What were the objects that he really had at heart? And how far did he actually succeed in accomplishing these objects in his life and in his death? How far has the religion or movement called Christianity, as it has existed for the last nineteen centuries, really expressed or represented his ideas? How far does the Christianity of today present his message to the world? If he should come back now, what would he say of the self-styled Christian nations in general, and of the Christian churches in particular—of the Anglicans, the Baptists, the Catholics, the Greek Orthodox, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Quakers, the Salvationists, the Seventh Day Adventists, or the Unitarians; to cite them alphabetically? What did Jesus teach?

This is the question which I have set myself to answer in this book. I propose to show that the message which Jesus brought has a unique value because it is the Truth, and the only perfect statement of the Truth of the nature of God and of man, and of life, and of the world; and of the relationships which exist between them. And far more than this, we shall find that his teaching is not a mere abstract account of the universe, which would be of very little more than academic interest; but that it constitutes a practical method for the development of the soul and for the shaping of our lives and destinies into the things that we really wish them to be.

Jesus explains to us what the nature of God is, and what our own nature is; tells us the meaning of life and of death; shows us why we make

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

mistakes; why we yield to temptation; why we become sick, and impoverished, and old; and, most important of all, he tells us how all these evils may be overcome, and how we may bring health, happiness, and true prosperity into our lives, and into the lives of others, if they really wish for them, too.

The first thing that we have to realize is a fact of fundamental importance, because it means breaking away from all the ordinary prepossessions of orthodoxy. The plain fact is that Jesus taught no theology whatever. His teaching is entirely spiritual or metaphysical. Historical Christianity, unfortunately, has largely concerned itself with theological and doctrinal questions which, strange to say, have no part

7

whatever in the Gospel teaching. It will startle many good people to learn that all the doctrines and theologies of the churches are human inventions built up by their authors out of their own mentalities, and foisted upon the Bible from the outside; but such is the case. There is absolutely no system of theology or doctrine to be found in the Bible; it simply is not there. Worthy people who felt the need of some intellectual explanation of life, and also believed that the Bible was a revelation of God to man, drew the natural conclusion that the one must be within the other; and then, more or less unconsciously, proceeded to manufacture the thing that they wished to find. They did not have the spiritual or metaphysical key. They were not upon what is called the Spiritual Basis, and consequently they sought a purely intellectual or three-dimensional explanation of life—and there can be no such explanation.

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

The actual explanation of man's life lies in just the fact that he is essentially spiritual and eternal, and that this world, and the life that we know intellectually, is, so to speak, but a cross section of the full truth concerning him and a cross section of anything—from a machine to a horse—never can furnish even a partial explanation of the whole. Glimpsing one tiny corner of the universe, and that with only half-opened eyes, and working from an exclusively anthropocentric and geocentric point of view, men built up absurd and very horrible fables about a limited and man-like God who conducted his universe very much as a rather ignorant and barbarous prince might conduct the affairs of a small Oriental kingdom. All sorts of human weaknesses, such as vanity, fickleness, and spite, were attributed to this being. Then a farfetched and very inconsistent legend was built up concerning original sin, vicarious blood atonement, infinite punishment for finite transgressions; and, in certain cases, an unutterably horrible doctrine of predestination to eternal torment, or eternal bliss, was added. Now, no such theory as this is taught in the Bible. If it were the object of the Bible to teach it, it would be clearly stated in a straightforward manner in some chapter or other; but it is not.

8

The "Plan of Salvation" which figured so prominently in the evangelical sermons and divinity books of a past generation is as completely unknown to the Bible as it is to the Koran. There never was any such arrangement in the universe, and the Bible does not teach it at all. What has happened is that certain obscure texts from Genesis, a few phrases

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

taken here and there from Paul's letters, and one or two isolated verses from other parts of the Scriptures, have been taken out and pieced together by divines, to produce the kind of teaching which it seemed to them ought to have been found in the Bible. Jesus knows nothing of all this. He is indeed anything but a Pollyanna, as they say, or cheap optimist. He warns us, not once but often, that obstinacy in sin can bring very, very severe punishment in its train, and that a man who parts with the integrity of his soul—even though he gain the whole world—is a tragic fool. But he teaches that we are only punished for—and actually punished by—our own mistakes; and he teaches that every man or woman, no matter how steeped in evil and uncleanness, has always direct access to an all-loving, all-powerful Father-God, who will forgive him, and supply His own strength to him to enable him to find himself again; and unto seventy times seven, if need be.

Jesus has been sadly misunderstood and misrepresented in other directions too. For instance, there is no warrant whatever in his teaching for the setting up of any form of Ecclesiasticism, of any hierarchy of officials or system or ritual. He did not authorize any such thing, and, in fact, the whole tone of his mentality is definitely anti-ecclesiastical. All through his public life he was at war with the ecclesiastics and other religious officials of his own country. They first hindered, and then persecuted him, with a perfectly sound instinct of self-preservation—they felt instinctively that the Truth, as he taught it, was the beginning of the end for them—and they finally had him put to death. Their pretensions to authority as the representatives of God, he ignored

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

completely; and for their ritual and their ceremonies he evinced only impatience and contempt.

9

It seems that human nature is very prone to believe what it wants to believe, rather than to incur the labor of really searching the Scriptures with an open mind. Perfectly sincere men, for example, have appointed themselves Christian leaders, with the most imposing and pretentious titles, and then clothed themselves in elaborate and gorgeous vestments the better to impress the people, in spite of the fact that their Master, in the plainest language, strictly charged his followers that they must do nothing of the kind. "But be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:8). And he denounced the Pharisees as hypocrites because "they love the chief seats," and "bind heavy burdens, grievous to be borne," with all sorts of rules and regulations.

Jesus, as we shall discover later on, made a special point of discouraging the laying of emphasis upon outer observances; and, indeed, upon hard-and-fast rules and regulations of every kind. What he insisted upon was a certain spirit in one's conduct, and he was careful to teach principles only, knowing that when the spirit is right, details will take care of themselves; and that, in fact, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," as was so obviously seen in the sad example of the Pharisees. Yet, in spite of this, the history of orthodox Christianity is largely made up of attempts to enforce all sorts of external observances upon the people. A striking case in illustration of this is the Puritan attempt to enforce the

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

Old Testament Sabbath upon Christians, although the Sabbath law was a purely Hebrew ordinance, and the ferocious penalties involved in neglecting it applied exclusively to the desecration of Saturday; and in spite of the fact that Jesus particularly discouraged superstitious Sabbath observance, saying that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, and making a point of doing anything that he wanted to do upon that day. He clearly indicates throughout his teaching that the time has come when man must make each and every day a spiritual Sabbath by knowing and doing all things in a spiritual light.

10

It is obvious that even if the Hebrew Sabbath were binding upon Christians, then, since they do not observe it in keeping Sunday, they will still incur all the consequences of Sabbath breaking.

Many modern Christians do, however, realize that there is no system of theology in the Bible unless one likes to put it there deliberately, and they have practically given up theology altogether; but they still cling to Christianity because they feel intuitively that it is the Truth. There is really no logical justification for their attitude, since they do not possess the Spiritual Key which alone makes the teaching of Jesus intelligible, and so they endeavor to rationalize their attitude in various ways. This is the dilemma of the man who has neither the blind faith of orthodoxy nor the spiritual interpretation of Scientific Christianity to support him. He has not a leg to stand on that does not belong to the old-fashioned Unitarian. If he does not reject miracles altogether, he is at least very uneasy about them. They embarrass him, and he wishes they were not in

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

the Bible at all, and would be glad in his heart to be well rid of them. A "Life of Jesus" recently published by a well-known clergyman clearly illustrates how false this position is. In this book he concedes that Jesus may have healed some people, or helped them to heal themselves, but he draws the line there. He explains away into nothingness all the other miracles. They were the usual fantastic legends that center about all great historical figures, he thinks. On the lake, for instance, the disciples were thoroughly frightened, until they thought of Jesus, and the thought of him calmed their fears. This was subsequently exaggerated into an absurd tale that he had come to them in person walking upon the water. Another time, it appears, he reformed a sinner, raising him out of a grave of sin, and this was expanded, years and years afterwards, into a ridiculous legend that he had really revived a dead man. Again, Jesus prayed fervently one night, so that he looked most radiantly happy, and Peter, who had fallen asleep, woke up with a start; and years afterward he told some confused story about believing that he saw Moses there—so much for the Transfiguration. And so forth. And so forth.

11

Now, one must extend every sympathy to the special pleadings of a man enthralled by the beauty and mystery of the Gospels, but who, in the absence of the Spiritual Key, seems to find his common sense and all the scientific knowledge of mankind flouted by much that these Gospels contain. But this simply will not do. If the miracles did not happen, the rest of the Gospel story loses all real significance. If Jesus did not believe them to be possible, and undertake to perform them—never, it is



# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

true, for the sake of display, but still constantly and repeatedly—if he did not believe and teach many things in flat contradiction to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalistic philosophy, then the Gospel message is chaotic, contradictory, and devoid of all significance. We cannot ride away from the dilemma by saying that Jesus was not interested in the current beliefs and superstitions of his time; that he took them more or less for granted passively; because what really interested him was character. This is a feeble argument, because character must include both an intelligent and a vital all-round reaction to life. Character must include some definite beliefs and convictions concerning things that really matter.

But the miracles did happen. All the deeds related of Jesus in the four Gospels did happen, and many others too, "the which, if they should be written, every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." Jesus himself justified what people thought to be a strange and wonderful teaching by the works he was able to do; and he went further and said, referring to those who study and practice his teaching: "The works that I do, ye shall do, and greater works."

Now what, after all, is a miracle? Those who deny the possibility of miracles on the ground that the universe is a perfect system of law and order, to the operation of which there can be no exceptions, are perfectly right. But the explanation is that the world of which we are normally aware, and with whose laws alone most people are acquainted, is only a fragment of the whole universe as it really is; and that there is such a

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

thing as appealing from a lower to a higher law—from a lesser to a  
12

greater expression. Now the appeal from the lower to the higher law is not really a breach of law, for the possibility of such an appeal is part of the major constitution of the universe, and, therefore, in the sense of a real breach of law, miracles are impossible. Yet, in the sense that all the ordinary rules and limitations of the physical plane can be set aside or overridden by an understanding which has risen above them, miracles, in the colloquial sense of the word, can and do happen.

Let us suppose, for the sake of example, that on a certain Monday, your affairs are in such a condition that, humanly speaking, certain consequences are sure to follow before the end of the week. These may be legal consequences, perhaps of a very unpleasant nature following upon some decision of the courts; or they may be certain physical consequences in the human body. A competent physician may decide that a perilous operation will be absolutely necessary, or he may even feel it his duty to say that there is no chance for the recovery of the patient. Now, if someone can raise his consciousness above the limitations of the physical plane in connection with the matter—and this is only a scientific description of what is commonly called prayer—then the conditions on that plane will change, and, in some utterly unforeseen and normally impossible manner, the legal tragedy will melt away, and to the advantage, be it noted, of all parties to the case; or the patient will be healed instead of having to undergo the operation, or of having to die. In other words, miracles, in the popular sense of the word, can and do

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

happen as the result of prayer. Prayer does change things. Prayer does make things happen quite otherwise than they would have happened had the prayer not been made. It makes no difference at all what sort of difficulty you may be in. It does not matter what the causes may have been that led up to it. Enough prayer will get you out of your difficulty if only you will be persistent enough in your appeal to God.

Prayer, however, is both a science and an art; and it was to the teaching of this science and this art that Jesus devoted the greater part of his ministry. The Gospel miracles happened because Jesus had the spiritual  
13

understanding that gave him greater power in prayer than anyone else before or since.

One other attempt to interpret the Gospels must be taken into consideration. Tolstoy endeavored to put forward the Sermon on the Mount as a practical guide to life, taking its precepts literally, at their face value, and ignoring the spiritual interpretation of which he was unaware, and excluding the Plane of Spirit in which he did not believe. Discarding the whole of the Bible except the four Gospels, and discounting all miracles, he made a heroic but futile attempt to combine Christianity and materialism; and, of course, he failed. His real place in history turns out to be not that of the founder of a new religious movement, but that of the man whose practical anarchism, promulgated with all the fire of genius, paved the way for the Bolshevik Revolution, even as Rousseau had cleared the road for the French Revolution.

It is the Spiritual Key that unlocks the mystery of the Bible teaching in

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

general, and of the Gospels in particular. It is the Spiritual Key that explains the miracles and shows that they were performed in order to prove to us that we too can perform miracles, and thereby overcome sin, sickness, and limitation. With this key we can afford to discard verbal inspiration and all superstitious literalism, and yet understand that the Bible really is the most precious and most authentic of all man's possessions.

Externally, the Bible is a collection of inspired documents written by men of all kinds, in all sorts of circumstances, and over hundreds of years of time. The documents, as we have them, are seldom originals, but redactions and compilations of older fragments; and the names of the actual writers are seldom known for certain. This, however, does not affect the spiritual purpose of the Bible in the slightest degree; it is in fact quite immaterial. The book, as we have it, is an inexhaustible reservoir, of Spiritual Truth, compiled under Divine inspiration, and the actual route by which it reached its present form does not matter. The name of the writer of any particular chapter is really of no more importance than would be the name of his amanuensis, if he employed one. Divine Wisdom is the author; and that is all that concerns us. What is called the Higher Criticism concerns itself exclusively with externals, completely missing the spiritual content of the Scriptures, and from the spiritual point of view is of no importance.

History, biography, lyrical and other poetic forms are various mediums through which the spiritual message is given in the Bible; and, above all, the parable is used to convey spiritual and metaphysical truth. In some

## What Did Jesus Teach?

### Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

cases, what was never intended to be more than a parable was, at one time, taken for literal statement of fact; and this often made the Bible seem to teach things which are opposed to common sense. The story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden is a case in point. Rightly understood, this is perhaps the most wonderful parable of all; it was never intended by its author to be taken for history, but literal-minded people did so take it, with all sorts of absurd consequences.

The Spiritual Key to the Bible rescues us from all these difficulties, dilemmas, and seeming inconsistencies. It saves us from the false positions of Ritualism, Evangelicalism, and what is called Liberalism alike, because it gives us the Truth. And the Truth turns out to be nothing less than the amazing but undeniable fact that the whole outer world—whether it be the physical body, the common things of life, the winds and the rain, the clouds, the earth itself—is amenable to man's thought, and that he has dominion over it when he knows it. The outer world, far from being the prison of circumstances that it is commonly supposed to be, has actually no character whatsoever of its own, either good or bad. It has only the character that we give to it by our own thinking, it is naturally plastic to our thought, and this is so, whether we know it or not, and whether we wish it or not.

All day long the thoughts that occupy your mind, your Secret Place, as Jesus calls it, are molding your destiny for good or evil; in fact, the truth is that the whole of our life's experience is but the outer expression of inner thought.

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

Now we can choose the sort of thoughts that we entertain. It will be a little difficult to break a bad habit of thought, but it can be done. We can choose how we shall think—in point of fact, we always do choose—and therefore our lives are just the result of the kind of thoughts we have chosen to hold; and therefore they are of our own ordering; and therefore there is perfect justice in the universe. No suffering for another man's original sin, but the reaping of a harvest that we ourselves have sown. We have free will, but our free will lies in our choice of thought.

This is in essence what Jesus taught. It is, as we shall see, the underlying message of the whole Bible; but it is not expressed with equal clearness throughout. In the earlier portion of the book it shines through but dimly on the whole, as the light from a heavily shrouded lamp; but, as time goes on, veil after veil is removed, and the light shines ever stronger and stronger, until, in the teaching of Jesus Christ, it pours forth clear and unimpeded. Truth never changes, but what we have to deal with on this plane is man's apprehension of the Truth, and, throughout historical time, this has been steadily and continuously improving. In fact, what we call progress is but the outer expression corresponding to mankind's continuously improving idea of God.

Jesus Christ summed up this Truth, taught it completely and thoroughly, and, above all, demonstrated it in his own person. Most of us now can glimpse intellectually the idea of what it must mean in its fullness, and much that must inevitably follow from a competent understanding of it. But what we can demonstrate is a very different matter. To accept the Truth is the great first step, but not until we have proved it in doing is it

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

ours. Jesus proved everything that he taught, even to the overcoming of death in what we call the Resurrection. For reasons which I cannot discuss here it happens that every time you overcome a difficulty by prayer, you help the whole of the human race, past, present, and future, in a general way; and you help it to overcome that special kind of difficulty in particular. Jesus, by surmounting every sort of limitation to which mankind is subject, and in particular by overcoming death, per-  
16

formed a work of unique and incalculable value to the race, and is therefore justly entitled the Savior of the world.

At what he deemed an opportune moment in his public ministry, he decided to sum up the whole reaching in a series of lectures extending probably over several days, and speaking probably two or three times a day. This arrangement has been compared by someone, and not inaptly, to a kind of summer school, as we have such things today.

He took this opportunity to summarize the message, to dot the i's and cross the t's, so to say. A number of those present naturally took notes, and, later on, these notes were edited into what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. The authors of the four Gospels each selected the material for his monograph in accordance with his own purpose; and it is Matthew who gives us the most complete and carefully arranged version of the address. His setting forth of the Sermon on the Mount is an almost perfect codification of the Jesus Christ religion, and I have therefore chosen it as the text for this book. It covers the essentials. It is practical and personal. It is definite, specific, and yet widely illuminating. Once

# What Did Jesus Teach?

## Chapter from Sermon on the Mount

Emmet Foxx

the true meaning of the instructions has been grasped, it is only necessary to begin putting them faithfully into practice to get immediate results. The magnitude and extent of these results will depend solely upon the sincerity and thoroughness with which they are applied. This is a matter which each individual has to settle for himself. "No man can save his brother's soul, or pay his brother's debt." We can and should help one another on special occasions, but in the long run each must learn to do his own work, and "sin" no more, lest a worse thing befall him.

If you really do wish to alter your life, if you really do wish to change yourself—to become a different person altogether in the sight of God and man—if you really do want health and peace of mind, and spiritual development, then Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, has clearly shown you how it is to be done. The task is not an easy one, but we know that it can be accomplished, because there are those who have done it—but the

17

price must be paid, and the price is the actual carrying out of these principles in every corner of your life, and in every daily transaction, whether you wish to or not, and more particularly where you would much rather not.

If you are prepared to pay that price, to break really and truly with the old man, and start upon the creation of the new one, then the study of the great Sermon will indeed be to you the Mountain of Liberation.

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