

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:23-25; 5:1-4, RSV

Leo Tolstoy died in a railway station at Astapovo, Russia. Wealthy and famous he had abandoned his family and estate to bring his life into conformity with a revelation of God's will he had received. What was this revelation? He had been reading Matthew 5:39 when the words "Resist not evil" flashed insight into his mind that totally transformed his way of thinking and living. This is how he describes the moment:

Suddenly, for the first time, I understood the exact and simple meaning of those words; I understood that Jesus said exactly what he meant. Immediately—not that I saw anything new; only the veil that had hidden the truth from me fell away, and the truth was revealed in all its significance... These words, "Resist not evil or the evil man," understood in their direct significance, were to me truly the key that opened all the rest. And I began to be astonished that I could have miscomprehended words so clear and precise. Christ must have said what He said. We may declare the universal practise of such a rule is very difficult; we may deny that he who follows it will find unhappiness; we may say with the unbelievers that it is stupid, that Christ was a dreamer, an idealist who propounded impracticable maxims which His disciples followed out of sheer stupidity; but it is impossible not to admit that Christ expressed in a manner at once clear and precise what He wished to say; that is, that according to His doctrine a man must not resist evil, and, consequently, that whoever adopts His doctrine cannot resist evil. And yet neither believers nor unbelievers will admit this simple and clear interpretation of Christ's words. ("My Religion" in *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi*, 1899, quoted in Harvey K. McArthur's *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1960, p. 107.)

That is how the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, abandoned his literary ambitions and became a moralist, social reformer and an interpreter of the Sermon on the Mount who believed that **all** of its demands were to be interpreted literally and absolutely. That was how he heard Jesus' call to discipleship.

For his radical, unorthodox views, he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church in 1901. The extreme views and life-style he adopted caused a break also with his family. He was a man deeply serious about the spiritual life. He came to believe in communal living and shared all he had with the poor.

Wherever he looked the Sermon on the Mount condemned and judged what human beings did. War was evil and serving in the military was also—it violated Christ's command to love your enemies; the courts were evil because instead of forgiving those who had sinned, they punished them; the church was evil because it made the center of religion its dogmas and creeds, instead of Jesus' radical ethics in the Sermon on the Mount.

Many in his own day and since have violently disagreed with him. They say: Jesus never intended we should actually live by the Sermon on the Mount, only that it should be held up as an ideal toward which we move. The whole sermon is full of impossibilities. It is not a code of how to act in the world, but only illustrations of how love ought to act and would act if it did not have to compromise with an evil world.

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Because of its uncompromising nature, you have to wrestle with the Sermon on the Mount until you spiritually sweat. It is an unbelievably difficult series of demands. No matter what we feel, think or do, the Sermon seems to judge us as failures. Our very best is woefully inadequate.

It is probably true that some of you have never even thought about the Sermon—some few perhaps never even read it in Matthew chapters 5-7. Some, quite surprisingly, are not even sure they know what it means to make a commitment to Christ. They are cultural Christians, or cultural Seventh-day Adventists, who have grown up in the church and find their friends and interests here. But they have never really heard nor taken seriously the radical nature of Jesus' demands. They may have only a superficial attachment to the church.

They have never heard the call to discipleship. They have heard the call to church membership in church school; they have heard the call to support the church financially; they have heard the call to attend church regularly; they have heard all kinds of calls. But they have never heard the call to discipleship. If you want to hear it, you must listen to the Sermon on the Mount.

It is also true that those who have paid attention to it down through history have come up with surprisingly different versions of what they have heard.

Martin Luther wanted the Sermon to be relevant and valid for all Christians but did not want to go to the extremes of groups like the Anabaptists, who, he said,

go too far to the right when they "teach miserable stuff" like it is wrong to own private property, to swear, to hold office as a ruler or judge, to protest or defend oneself, to stay with wife and children. (Quoted in Warren S. Kissinger's *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, N.J., p. 21, from *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Concordia: St. Louis, 1956, pp. 1-6.)

Luther's approach was different. He taught the doctrine of two kingdoms—God and the world. One is the personal life of Christians and the other is their public, official life. The Sermon on the Mount applies only to our personal dealings, not to anything else.

Thus when a Christian goes to war or when he sits on a judge's bench, punishing his neighbor, or when he registers an official complaint, he is not doing this as a Christian, but as a soldier or a judge or a lawyer. At the same time he keeps a Christian heart. He does not intend anyone harm, and it grieves him that his neighbor must suffer grief. So he lives simultaneously as a Christian toward everyone, personally suffering all sorts of things in the world, and as a secular person, maintaining, using and performing all the functions required by the law of his territory or city, by civil law, and by domestic law. (*Ibid.*, p. 113.)

In opposition to Tolstoy, then, Luther is arguing that we can be Christians and still maintain our loyalty to the state, participate in military service, etc.

Therefore it is not the absolute demands, but the demands with some intelligent modifications that we need. It is a more "common sense" approach. For example, Luther paraphrased Matt. 5:42a to read, "Give to him who begs of you, but not what he asks for." (McArthur, p. 108.)

If we agree some modification is called for, which demands do we modify? And how do we know that our "common sense" is truly in line, with the intentions of Jesus?

Perhaps the whole thing is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, exaggerated, a hyperbole. I mean, it cannot be someone should cut off his hand if it causes him to sin or take out his eye if he can't stop lusting with it. On this view Jesus would use exaggeration this way in order to illustrate the principles, but not to teach that the specific action was required. Christ wants to sound extreme, uncompromising. He wants to be impractical so that the principle will shine with greater luster.

As early as the first centuries of Christian theology, however, warnings came against sweeping away the radical nature of Jesus' demands with this kind of explanation. On the other hand, supporting the idea he is only after general principles may lessen the extreme, radical nature of Christ's ethics. Behavior is how our principles come to life!

Roman Catholics often take what is called the "double standards" view. Some of the teachings of the Gospel are essential for salvation; they must be obeyed. Other teachings, called "counsels" are essential only for perfection and are a more certain way of insuring salvation. Those who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are in this latter group. The rich young ruler is supposed to be a good illustration of this approach. Jesus said, "Obey the commandments if you would have eternal life." But if you would be **perfect**, go and sell what you have and give to the poor. There are other views as well.

You can see the problem. You can see the inevitable difference it can make to you and to the church as a whole if you take an absolutist or modification or general principles view. What does it **mean** to be a disciple?

Seventh-day Adventists do not have a generally accepted position. Part of that is due to the fact that we do not entirely agree on the nature and possibility of moral perfection in this world. These are some of the issues we will have to discuss in the coming weeks.

Almost all of us can agree that the Sermon on the Mount is searching and powerful. Our consciences are aroused to much greater obligations than we have ever felt before. We look at Jesus and his words and at our own performance and we are dissatisfied. We look at what is happening in our homes, in our hearts, in our professions, in our work, in our church, in our schools, in our sports, in our nation, in our culture and we cannot help but be dissatisfied. After all Jesus insists on no anger, no hatred, no desire to retaliate, that the heart must be wholly pure. (Ibid, 7, p. 163.) Clearly if we choose to live by the insights and principles of the Sermon, we would inevitably become a constant ferment in our society.

I suspect that if we took the Sermon seriously, Adventists could not practice medicine in all respects as the AMA urges doctors to do, nor could we be as oblivious to the obvious wrongs in our dealings with one another within the church as we have been, nor could we fudge as much as we do on what it means to be honest and above board with each other and with the so-called "world" at large, nor would our educational institutions remain precisely as they are now—the list goes on and on. The sermon judges the quality and holiness of all we participate in, all we do, all we are!

In Plato's *Republic* one of the characters, Glaucon, insists that most men are virtuous not because they

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

love virtue but because society rewards them. What would happen, he asks, if a man had a ring which made him completely invisible to everyone, that he could do either the most evil or the most noble deeds without being detected or punished? Which deeds would he do? Elsewhere Plato asks, Does he need applause to be a moral man? If so is he not then an actor performing on the stage? He is not truly virtuous.

We are to do good not because we want approval or reward from men but because it is the will of God who is love.

The teachings of Jesus are so radical, so difficult, so disturbing. How can we live this way? How can we get any harmony between ourselves and the world as it is if we refuse to compromise? In a sinful world, is the Christian ethical ideal practical? possible?

When a woman is married to a sociopath who alternates between extreme violence and sweet lovey-dovey and is also an alcoholic, and the woman comes to the point after years of struggling that she can no longer cope with these situations, is the collapse of that marriage a violation of Jesus' ethics in the Sermon on the Mount? Does God really expect us in this world where these things happen to live above all of that?

Some people would indicate that Jesus did not really mean that. All we have are ideas and general principles but Jesus expects us to apply them in the particular situations with which we have to deal. One example that one writer used to show that Jesus himself was not absolutely consistent on this was the way Jesus dealt with money. There is a lot said about money in the Bible and in the Sermon on the Mount about our attitudes toward possessions.

Look at the way Jesus in his ministry applied the principle to various situations. He told the rich young ruler to give **all** to the poor. What did he praise Zaccheus for giving? Half of that. In a parable illustrating how we should be compassionate one toward another, Jesus praises someone who loans money, interest free and unworried about repayment of the debt. It is not half of his possessions but a loan to help his neighbor.

The point that is made with this understanding is that the Sermon on the Mount is not supposed to be the new law, just a bunch of new requirements to replace the Mosaic Law. No, the Sermon on the Mount is supposed to move away from legal regulations and insist on God's love and God's freedom being applied in every situation. That's not a situation ethic because what God wills is decisive; that can't be set aside. But how do you apply God's will? That is always the problem.

If we would hear the Sermon we must listen carefully. The Sermon on the Mount is not an E. F. Hutton commercial where if you just whisper it everybody stops to listen to catch the next sentence. If anything, the Sermon on the Mount forces people to put cotton in their ears so they won't hear it. These days nobody wants to listen to it and to its wisdom. By God's grace we shall in the coming weeks.