

**A Journey to the Kingdom Through Gandhi-ji's  
Sermon on the Mount  
by Shanti Jones, Ph.D.  
Certified Philosophical Counselor  
Taos, New Mexico, USA**

*"There is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth.  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"  
-Rudyard Kipling*

**Abstract**

In India, Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948) is officially considered the Father of the Nation. Under his leadership, India attained freedom from the British Empire through a thirty-year campaign based on complete nonviolence that ended with both sides allied in respect and friendship. That alone would secure his place in the history books, but not necessarily his place as a spiritual leader and teacher. This paper explores Gandhi's contribution to our spiritual understandings, focusing on those contained within the Sermon on the Mount, by which he was strongly influenced.

Many of us, East and West, would like to "grow up to be like the Mahatma one day," but in reality, we can't. He had a unique destiny, as do we. What we can do is to get closer to the essence of his life and teachings by delving more deeply into the two main spiritual texts which informed him - the Bhagavad Gita (Gita) and the Sermon on the Mount (Sermon). They help us to understand his "experiments with truth," as he called them, and to make similar enlightening experiments on our own.

Gandhi found there was no distinction between Hinduism, as represented in the Gita and the revelations of Jesus contained within the Sermon. He concluded that they came from the same source and he found the message of renunciation and living service in both. Because I am a Westerner, and because, to my knowledge, more has been written on the Gita's influence on Gandhi than on that of the Sermon on the Mount, this paper focuses on the teachings contained within the latter.

Gandhi was among the first religious pluralists. His conviction was that all the major religious traditions contain Truth. With this in mind, comparisons with holy texts from other traditions will be given.

Like Jesus, Gandhi gave us a glimpse of our evolutionary potential as human beings. Through his devotion to practicing the truths contained within the Sermon and the Gita, he showed us that the spiritual life is far from otherworldly. It means to live one's highest ideals, giving full expression to them in a life of selfless service. We will explore specifically how the Sermon on the Mount can help us to do just that.

**Key Words:** Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism, human flourishing, Jesus, Judaism, Hebrew Bible, Koran, Lectio Divina, Mahatma Gandhi, Sermon on the Mount, Torah.

**Introduction**

Students of modern Indian history and political thought have been largely concerned with Gandhi's role in the sequence of events which led to the making of modern India. But there are other, equally

important, stories to be told. Gandhi, a strong believer in spiritual growth, made contributions to religious thought that must be seriously considered.

Gandhi was not only a leader of men, he was a holy person, a sage. This is why he was given the reverential title, "Mahatma," meaning "great soul" or "venerable," a title reserved for a spiritually enlightened person who is regarded with loving respect.

Gandhi's own religious language was fed from many sources. Being from the multi-cultural coastal state of Gujarat, he was exposed to a variety of different religious beliefs, enabling him from a young age to accept the fact that the Supreme could be sought in diverse ways. He found all religions were concerned with doing good, while increasingly believing that only people who shared a transformed religious attitude to life would be able to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Gandhi's spiritual studies revolved around two holy texts, the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. He reflected on them throughout his life. When he came to the Sermon, his reaction was not that this was something new, but that surely there was no distinction between Hinduism, as represented in the Gita, and this "revelation of Christ." He concluded that both must come from the same source, finding the message of renunciation and living service in both (Easwaran, 1972).

Many mature people long in their heart to be, if not Gandhi himself, some kind of Gandhi clone who can serve God and man as he did. Regretfully, however hard we may try, we cannot be carbon copies of the Mahatma. He had his unique configuration, just as we have ours. What we can do, though, is to study the texts which most influenced his thinking, try our own experiments with truth, and receive light and direction through the words and ideas they contain.

This paper focuses primarily on the Sermon on the Mount, with the aim of helping the reader to better understand its teachings. It is a rich, profound text admitting of more than one level of interpretation. We can study it historically, as a moral teaching, or as a beautiful spiritual narrative describing the ideal life. Many great spiritual teachers agree it is the most perfect life model we have been given and the most faithful portrait of Jesus we possess. It could be described as a beginner's guide to the kingdom of heaven and a sampling of Jesus' greatest teachings. These are only a few of the reasons Gandhi found this testament to be of unsurpassed value.

If Gandhi revered this text, and if we revere Gandhi, it behooves us to delve more deeply into the Sermon than we might have considered doing before, which is what we are going to do here. In addition to attempting to understand Gandhi's religious thought in more detail, we will also examine what Jesus taught and stood for. Most of our time will be spent, however, on exploring the wealth of wisdom contained within the Sermon on the Mount, as Gandhi himself did every day for most of his life. As we do so, you will find that all of the indwelling sacred powers with which you need to be in tune if your life is to be touched by the healing influence of grace are contained within this practical manual for spiritual development.

There are many reasons to study the Sermon on the Mount. I hope by the end you will want to get more involved with it yourself and be inspired to live these teachings. You won't succeed in becoming another Gandhi. But like the Mahatma himself says, "in a gentle way, you will be able to shake your world."

## **Gandhi's Spiritual Life**

Anyone who has seen the Academy Award winning epic film, "Gandhi" will remember the scene in which, early in his adult life, our beloved Mahatma got thrown off the train in the middle of the night in South Africa simply for being "colored." That was a special violence caused by an injustice which struck him deeply. It violated his strong sense of what was due to himself, and to all other Indians.

He had to have had the same human reaction that we all experience in similar moments – to want to counter violence with violence. Due to his religious studies and practices, however, Gandhi was able, not only then, but also time and time again throughout his life, to overcome the brutality which assailed him. He must have felt rage in his heart whenever it occurred, but from the beginning he had the courage to entrust his cause to God. This enabled him to seek the good and to overcome evil, not only in himself but in all who offended him. In our beloved Mahatma, our "Bapu," it is so clear that kindness and meekness were, and are, the most powerful tools for any trial of injustice (Fisher, 1962).

Gandhi showed us the way out of the greatest problem of our age, that of the downward spiral of violence in every sphere of life. It threatens to drag civilization back into barbarism if we do not learn how to master it. He gave us a glimpse of our evolutionary potential as human beings and showed us that the spiritual life, far from being otherworldly, means living one's highest ideals and giving to others in selfless service (Chatterjee, 1983).

Gandhi's religious studies and practices were the core of his spiritual strength. If we want to be like him, we must ask ourselves what constituted these practices and studies so we can study and practice them ourselves. The following sections of this paper present a bird's eye view of Gandhi's religious studies, thoughts, and practices, focusing primarily on those which he drew upon from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Winde, 2018).

By his own reports, Gandhi relied equally on the Sermon on the Mount and the Bhagavad Gita. Since I am a Christian, and more has been written on the Gita's influence on Gandhi than that of the Sermon, and because even many of my Christian friends don't know much about the Sermon, I thought it would be helpful to all concerned, both East and West, to spend time understanding Gandhi's relationship to it. Later sections will be devoted to understanding the Sermon itself, to comparing it to other holy teachings, and to learning how to engage with a holy scripture in order to get the most from it.

## **Gandhi and the Sermon on the Mount**

When Gandhi was living in London going to law school, he became attracted to the Sermon on the Mount when a Christian friend introduced him to the Bible. It went straight to his heart. Not only that, but right away he found ready comparisons with the Bhagavad Gita, the holy text with which he was familiar since early childhood. In fact, he did not find any substantial difference between them.

"Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, give him your other cheek to slap as well. And, if a man takes your shirt, give him your coat, too," was a verse in the Sermon that particularly interested Gandhi. Two aspects of this verse especially affected him. The first was its message of non-retaliation and non-resistance to evil. The second was its mundane practicality. He thought the Sermon, or any other religious text for that matter, had no meaning whatsoever if it was not of vital use in everyday life and to every person.

When Gandhi read passages like, “Love your enemies. Pray for them that persecute you, in order that you might be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven,” he said he was simply overjoyed. In what could be called sutras in the Indian tradition, these condensed teachings taught him about faith and courage. They put into his heart an astounding hope, new and strong. It was in them that he found his own opinions confirmed (France, 2007).

Someone once asked Gandhi if he could tell them the secret of life in three words. “Yes!” he told them. “Renounce and enjoy!” Though seemingly simplistic on the surface, those three words summarize the central teaching of the Sermon and of all other holy texts: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven,” for example. What these words essentially mean is that in order to enjoy life, we cannot be selfishly attached to anything – money, possessions, power, prestige, even family and friends. The moment we are selfishly attached we become a prisoner.

We need no teachers to tell us that good fortune and joy will make us happy. But what we could never have discovered for ourselves is that poverty and suffering could be the most direct road to human happiness and flourishing, which can be equated with our experience of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Gandhi was a living exemplar of how this can happen.

The Sermon was very influential for Gandhi as he sought to understand true religion. He found in the Sermon the ingredients for it, which were not in doctrines and beliefs, but in ethical practices of truth and non-violence. Gandhi saw Jesus as part of the eternal ethical lineage. For him, Jesus was among the most illustrious teachers and prophets the world has seen. He did not have much interest in the historical Jesus or much else of the Bible. He often picked and discarded verses according to what suited his immediate hermeneutical concerns, integrating his reading of the Sermon into a broader view of ethics rooted in the Hindu Scriptures. In Gandhi’s hands, the Sermon became a site for rigorous ethical scrutiny (Subrahmanyam, 2017).

As you engage with study of the Sermon on the Mount, you might find that it is much like the search for gold. At first you will find a few shiny nuggets on the surface of things and be delighted with your good fortune. You might then suppose that this is to be the full extent of your find. If you bother to dig deeper, you will find rich veins of gold leading to vast mines of wealth. What had formerly seemed like Mammon now fades into insignificance beside this new treasure trove of riches.

Gandhi-ji once said that if he were washed up on a desert island, he could be content with having the Sermon on the Mount be his one source of inspiration. That should clue you into the fact that there are still more and richer strata available within the depths of the Sermon, just waiting for the touch of your spiritual perception, on and on to Infinity.

### **What did Jesus stand for?**

Based on the number of his followers throughout history and today, Jesus Christ is the most important figure that has ever appeared in the history of mankind. Regardless of how you regard him, the fact is 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. If we really want to understand the Sermon, we must inquire into the question of what Jesus really stood for.

Jesus' teachings have unique value because they are a perfect statement of the Truth. As was the case for Gandhi, our interest and focus here is not on the historical Jesus. Rather, we will center our attention on what Jesus taught, on what he wished us to believe and to do.

In the Sermon on the Mount, and in all other words Jesus himself spoke, one encounters not only the nature of God, of man, of life and of the world, but also the nature of the relationships which exist between them. One of the many reasons the Mahatma was so attracted to Jesus' teachings was because they are not a mere abstract account of the universe. Rather, they constitute a practical method for the development of the soul and for shaping our lives and destinies into the things we really wish them to be (Patte, 2004).

Jesus wanted all mankind to know that they can bring health, happiness, and true prosperity into their lives and into the lives of others. He gave them, and us, the keys to our highest flourishing. His teaching is entirely spiritual or metaphysical. Although much theology has sprung up around him, he himself taught none.

What Jesus insisted upon was a certain spirit in a person's conduct, in his or her intelligent and vital all-around reaction to life. Today we might call this the person's character, which must include some definite beliefs and convictions about things that really matter. Jesus' teachings, when followed, move one's character toward the Ultimate Reality, often called God.

Jesus was careful to teach principles only, knowing that when the Spirit is right, details take care of themselves. His statement that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life, is a lucid testament to that idea. He made it clear throughout his teachings that every person must make each and every day a spiritual Sabbath by knowing and doing all things in a spiritual light.

The thoughts that occupy the secret places of our minds mold our destiny, for good or evil. The whole of our life experience is but the outer expression of our inner thoughts. The good news is that we can choose the sort of thoughts we entertain. In point of fact, we always choose.

This is in essence what Jesus taught. If you do wish to alter your life for the better, to change yourself, to become a different person altogether in the sight of God and man; if you really do want health, peace of mind, and spiritual development, then the Sermon on the Mount will clearly show you, just as it showed Gandhi, how it is to be done. The task is not an easy one. We know it can be accomplished because there are those who have done it. Jesus began the tradition, and men like Gandhi-ji, Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela constitute our most recent examples.

As we see with all of these men, a price must be paid. The price is the actual carrying out of these principles in every corner of our lives, with every breath we take, and in every daily transaction. If one is prepared to pay that price, then the study of the Sermon on the Mount will indeed be for you, as it was for Gandhi. In the process, as Jesus and Gandhi proclaimed, you will obtain the great Mountain of Liberation, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Pearl of Great Price (Fox, 1934).

### **An Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount**

The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew, Chapters five through seven. Matthew is first book of the New Testament. It consists of a summary of Jesus' teaching about the paths leading to the kingdom of heaven. It is his central proclamation regarding his moral vision.

Great spiritual teachers from every major religious tradition have found the Sermon to contain the teaching of Christ in its perfection. Many of them proclaim the Sermon to be the most perfect ethical document we have.

Historically, the teachings found within the Sermon show evidence of a strong connection with Greek moral philosophy. Both exhibit a concern with a life that is satisfied and meaningful, and both center on virtue as the key to it. For Aristotle, for example, a life oriented towards virtue leads a person to happiness. For him, it was only through a lifelong, intentional pursuit of virtue that one could find true happiness and flourish. By way of contrast, happiness and flourishing as Jesus framed it included not only virtue, but also a relationship with God. The highest human flourishing, according to Jesus, is possible only when it is grounded in a relationship with God.

Virtue involves conformity of one's life and conduct to moral and ethical principles. It is practiced and developed wisdom learned over time. It includes not only who we are, but also who we can and should become. We must recognize and understand our emotions, we must use reason to help us to make the best decision, and then we must put what we decide into action. The process can be complicated and messy. There is no prescribed way. We often need help to navigate our way through what can seem like a maze. This is why it is essential to reflect upon the Sermon on the Mount, a roadmap for achieving the best life one could have, and then to put its teachings into action.

As the Sermon opens, Jesus has begun to preach, and large crowds of interested persons are coming to hear what he has to say. In this, his first official sermon, he calls on all those who wish to flourish, who wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, to hear and to follow the word of God, as he is proclaiming it. It consists of a series of discrete teachings, each of which alone could be the basis of a sermon, a sutra, a community study or a personal meditation. Every verse is a multi-faceted gem, and every line opens up to multiple levels of understanding. Jesus uses aphorisms, parables, and stories to deliver his ethical instructions and to reflect on existence, divine justice, and life's meaning. He teaches us what we ought to believe, to hope for, and to do in order to reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Sermon begins with what is known as the Beatitudes, which center on how to please God, not man. In the section that follows, Jesus encourages his followers to think of themselves as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt is a necessity of life, while light enables us to see. This means they must reimagine themselves as God's agents of redemption. When we become like salt or light, we become mediators of God's redeeming presence.

In the next section of the Sermon, Jesus tells us about the art of self-mastery. For example, it isn't enough not to kill; we must not even hate or harm anyone. We must reconcile ourselves to others with whom we are angry. We must put into check not only our lustful actions, but also our inner passions. Because they deny the existence of God, all feelings of separateness and exclusiveness are morally wrong. In all ways, we must strive to be perfect, as God is perfect.

In the Sermon, Jesus famously teaches us how to pray with what we now call "The Lord's Prayer." It is perhaps the best known prayer in the world. Many people repeat it every day of their lives. Both simple and profound, it gives in brief form the fundamental principles upon which a holy life must be based.

In the ensuing section of the Sermon, Jesus exhorts us to forgive others, and to lay up for ourselves our treasures in heaven. The more our faculty of discrimination between the eternal and the temporal is

cultivated, the more our heart will be with our treasure which is the kingdom of God. He also tells us not to worry about our basic needs – what we shall eat or drink for instance. Rather, we should fulfill our duties to God in the spirit of non-attachment and surrender.

As His Sermon comes to a close, Jesus puts forward warnings which support his major themes. He tells us that for those who wish to enter the kingdom of heaven, the gate is straight and the way is narrow. We must be righteous if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, God realization is not easy. But, when we follow the path Jesus has taught us, we will enjoy pearls of great price including illumination, selfless love, and compassion for all (Prabhavananda, 1962).

Many people have a mistaken impression that heaven is somewhere in outer space. Actually, heaven exists where God's will is done, where God rules rather than where the kings of the earth hold sway. Heaven is a place where life is as God wants it to be rather than as humanity has constructed it.

The Sermon can be understood as a summary description of the character of the true disciple. It encapsulates both the kind of person the disciple will be seen to be if he or she faithfully follows its teachings and, likewise, the kind of person the disciple will need to be if he or she is to rise to its demands and to persevere in the right and narrow path. As we know from his life story, Jesus asks nothing of us that he doesn't do himself. The fully human Jesus through his strong faith and grounding in his tradition, provides us with a guide for living. Through his words, and by his example, he also provides a guideline for assessing our actions.

The Sermon requires the reader to wrestle with its moral and ethical claims. Indeed, its high ethical standards have been one of the main reasons it has been such a perennial focus of interpretation for the Christian church, and even for those outside of it. It is a revealing litmus test for different theological views and for the sundry theories of morality and ethics that philosophers and religious leaders have continuously debated. In this way, it is consistent with the wide variety of other ancient literature that wrestles with human wisdom and with what makes for a virtuous and flourishing life (Pennington, 2017).

All the spiritual wisdom that Gandhi-ji and so many others have found within the Sermon should convince us that it has the power to speak to us more deeply than the innumerable current publications which clamor for our attention, here today and forgotten tomorrow. It is worth our while to take the time to study it.

Because I cannot do justice to the whole Sermon on the Mount – books with as many as 450 pages have been written on it – the next section of the paper focuses on the Beatitudes, which are the essence of Jesus teachings. I hope you will be inspired to reflect upon the entire Sermon in greater detail. However, it is good to know that if you truly understand even the first Beatitude, you have made a good beginning.

### **The Beatitudes**

*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.  
Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.  
Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you  
falsely, for My sake.  
Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad.*

“Beatitude” means “blessing,” but it also implies flourishing, happy, fortunate, or worthy of praise. Each beatitude is considered a blessing because if a person follows the teachings contained therein, he or she will flourish and be happy. Jesus shows a path leading to the happiness of God Himself, the ultimate blessing. Rather than being idealistic, the Beatitudes are bluntly realistic, insisting from the outset that we face up to the inevitable trials of life such as poverty, loss, and hunger (McNight, 2013).

The Beatitudes focus on the virtues of the inner person as opposed to outward behaviors. Jesus was interested in the spirit of the law, not the letter of it. Poverty of spirit, mournfulness, meekness, hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercy and peace, even joy in the midst of persecution are virtues for which external obedience never serves as a substitute. Those who make peace within and without, who show compassion and forgive others are blessed by God in ways that will result in their true and full flourishing.

The first Beatitude states that the poor in spirit are blessed. This may be a confusing statement for us today who think in terms of high self-esteem. For Jesus, poor in spirit meant that we have to purify ourselves so that our ego falls away. When this happens, we merge in the infinite to the eternal good of all.

Poor in spirit can be understood as a synonym for those people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride. They are people who recognize that they are the beneficiaries of the help of others and part of a system in which they are to “pay it forward” and to help those they can. They orient themselves to others and to God rather than toward their self-centered concerns. If we think of poor in spirit as those who recognize their dependence on others and others’ dependence on them, then we can already see how they are blessed. The essence of this beatitude is humility, the great virtue.

God is in the depths of the soul of each and every person. He is the Soul of all the souls. If our being is tainted with ego and has not become humble or poor in spirit, then God, who is in the depth of the soul, will not reveal himself. Fortunately, we can humble our egos through prayer and meditation.

There is a saying by Chaitanya, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian saint, that when one is humbler than a blade of grass before God, he is also formidable by the grace of God. He is like a tree which stands all the seasons, all the vicissitudes of life. He craves no honor for his ego, instead giving honor to each and every one, seeing the power of God in them. This is the person who is poor in spirit.

People always mourn over worldly losses, but how many feel that a day or a moment without God is a waste and even mourn for those lost moments? Essentially the mourning that is being talked about here is a mourning for God, for a loss that is irreplaceable, which is the Kingdom of Heaven. God in His infinite compassion will comfort those who mourn for a happy life in the realm of the senses. When they realize this mistake, and call upon God, He will comfort them. In the Gita, Lord Krishna assures us of the same thing. He says that even if a man is a miscreant, a vile sinner, if he makes a right decision, confesses and

repents, then whatever he might be in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of God he will never again be a sinner.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Meekness is often considered to be a weakness. Actually, only a very strong person can be meek. A man who flies into anger might seem powerful and frightening, but because he is a slave to his emotions, he is actually weak. But one who is slow to anger and has control over all his senses - this is the meek person of the Bible. He alone is the one who is spiritually strong.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” The Mahabharata tells us that Dharma, otherwise known as righteousness or the law of God, is that power which upholds and sustains the universe. Whenever people do not abide by this dharma, there is chaos. To walk the path of righteousness a person must annihilate the ego and eliminate all enjoyments in the plane of relativity. Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is considered to be the greatest righteousness. Ahimsa means that if a violent person tries to kill you, you must be prepared to suffer their wrongdoing in the hope that you will remove their evil tendency, and transform them into children of God.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” Only those who give and forgive will be given to and forgiven. These are the people whom Jesus calls merciful. Mercy and compassion are tests of spiritual realization. The more a person shows mercy and compassion to others, the more he or she is lifted up. Another way to say this is the more you give, the more you will be filled.

“Blessed are the Pure in Heart, for they shall see God.” One of the reasons we don’t see God is because we have impure minds or hearts. As soon as the mind and heart are purified, we are able to see God within everything and everywhere. Purity is also that state of absence of ego mentioned before. Just like a pure mirror reflects our faces clearly, a pure heart reflects the face of God. All blessings of God rush to one who is pure. If thoughts are pure, all the rest will follow. The end of all spiritual disciplines is purity. It is our greatest strength.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” God is “The peace that passes all understanding.” Peace is the smile of God over the soul. “How can any man be happy without peace?” is a central question asked in Bhagavad Gita. Real happiness comes from peace, and real peace comes from God. When you are with peace, you radiate peace wherever you go.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake also reside in the kingdom of heaven. This means that whoever, for God’s sake, forsakes all that comes along the way, and whoever never forsakes God and the Dharma for any worldly pleasure, will be eternal. Whoever for God’s sake forsakes any joy and stands with the formidable patience of a tree, giving shelter even to those who revile and persecute him, such a person Jesus calls blessed. The Kingdom of God will be his.

Both Jesus and Gandhi encouraged their followers to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to end all resentment and retaliation. They instructed us to forgive others their wrong-doings. They let us know that our goodness must exceed the evil that is in the world. We must win over evil by our goodness. We must not return evil for evil, but our response to evil must be one that is good.

How to respond to evil with goodness is always a challenge. Gandhi understood Jesus’ challenge of non-violence, non-retaliation and non-resistance to evil and doing good instead. He mirrored Jesus’ words

and instructed his followers that their non-cooperation with the British could be considered violent when they gave a blow for a blow. In the long run, he told them, this tactic would be ineffective. By their apparent cooperation, which in effect was complete non-co-operation, they would disarm evil which is, in fact, what they did.

Jesus tells us that the person with these virtues will inherit the earth. In case that sounds like a windfall, it is also important to remember that inheritance also involves responsibility. To fall heir to something means that we have been given something treasured. Our job is to be a good steward of that legacy. It is the meek, those who would not use the inheritance to reinforce their own already privileged position, whom God blesses (Levine, 2020).

### **Lectio Divina: A Contemplative Way to Read the Sermon**

Gandhi regularly read, studied and reflected upon the Sermon on the Mount. He strongly encouraged others to do the same. He knew from firsthand experience that when a person reads and hears the Sermon anew with fresh attention, he or she would be astonished, even frightened at times, by the realities it evoked and the demands it awakened. Through his own experiments with truth, he knew that disciplined engagement with the Sermon causes awakenings, even spiritual crises, as one experiences an honesty of oneself before God.

The task of any seeker of the truth is to open one's heart to the spiritual text one has decided to study, in this case, the Sermon on the Mount. It involves an intimate encounter with oneself. One must ask one's own questions, and then seek his or her own answers. The concern should be for one's own full understanding and clarity. The experience is far more than an intellectual achievement. It is a work of wisdom in which quality is preferred to quantity, depth to breadth, and which can lead the seeker to find insight (Lahav, 2016).

As was true for our beloved Gandhi-ji, wisdom is found to reside within the person who follows the practice of reading the Scripture. If we want to "be like Gandhi-ji," we must give our undivided attention to the task. Only then we will be able to build the foundation of our respective journeys on the twin pillars of spiritual authority: the authority of personal insight and the authority of the living, transmitted tradition. Progressively, the wisdom we gain from this endeavor illuminates and enriches every aspect of our "ordinary" lives.

There already exists a contemplative way of reading sacred texts that dates back to the early centuries of the Christian Church. It is called "Lectio Divina." It is a way of meditating upon the scriptures that leads the person deeper into God's word. To begin, you chose a text that you wish to meditate upon – in this case, some part of the Sermon on the Mount. Place yourself in a quiet environment, one in which you can quiet your thoughts and anxieties and acknowledge the presence of God. Then offer a prayer for inspiration and guidance.

Read the text you have chosen slowly and carefully. Take time to read it more than once. Savor it. See it as a gift to be received, not a problem to be dissected. Allow the spiritual effect of it to permeate you. Open yourself to the comfort and consolation it is possible to receive from it. When a word or phrase strikes you, stop and rest within it. Allow it to speak to you in a personal way by pondering the words in your heart. Reflect on what it means to you. You could also memorize the phrase, repeating it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your thoughts and desires throughout your days (Pinckaers, 1998).

Formulate a prayer as a response to what you have been contemplating. Make it a dialogue with God that comes from your heart. What do you want to say to God in response to His words? Enter into a loving conversation with Him.

The last step of this process involves further contemplation. Sit still with God, realizing that in this deep and profound relationship, words are not necessary. Read the passage for the last time. Ask God what He is calling from you. What is it that you need to consider, relinquish or take on as a result of what God is saying to you through this word or phrase? In the silence that follows, pray for the grace of the Spirit to plant the wisdom you have gained through this practice into your heart that it might inform all your days and ways (Pinckaers, 1998).

Reading sacred texts in this manner is an artistic activity of the heart. It is based on the belief that God is truly present in holy texts and that the reading of them allows God to speak to us. From the earliest accounts of monastic practice, this form of reading was considered essential to any deliberate spiritual life. As Gandhi pointed out, contemplative reading can have the effect of kindling in the reader compunction for past behavior that was less than beautiful or true. At the same time, it increases one's desire to seek the Kingdom of Heaven – a realm where all that is lovely and unspoiled may be found.

### **Cross-Religious Perspectives on the Sermon**

For Gandhi, the one common theme of the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, the Koran, and all other religious texts consisted in no one being greater than God. No one is equal to God. God alone is God. A person should worship only that Supreme God, and no one else. The person who does so is blessed. When it comes to God-realization, all religious texts have the power to help us reach God. The experience of realizing God is universal.

All religious texts are comprehensive presentations of what is known as the “Perennial Philosophy.” This philosophy crops up in every culture and every age and is characterized by three deep convictions, all of which are born out of the direct experience of human beings. The first conviction states that underlying everything in the phenomenal world is a changeless reality which most religions call God. Second, this changeless reality is present in every living creature and can be discovered by following rigorous disciplines which remove the layers of conditioning. Third, this discovery is the real goal of life. Whatever else we may accomplish, nothing will satisfy us until we realize God in our own consciousness.

This perennial philosophy is what Gandhi represents and what, as a spiritual teacher, he wanted to convey to his followers. For him, no culture or textual tradition had a monopoly on good ethics. In this section, we will take a look at four additional major religious traditions – Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, in order to better understand how he came to this conclusion.

### **Hinduism**

The Bhagavad Gita, India's best known scripture, is the first of two holy texts Gandhi relied upon for guidance all of his life. It is set on a battlefield that Gandhi says represents the human heart. The warrior-prince, Arjuna, who represents you and me, asks Sri Krishna, the Lord within, how one can recognize a person who is aware of God every moment of his life. Krishna tells him that the person who lives in wisdom sees himself in everything, and everything in himself. This wise person has renounced

every selfish desire and craving which can torment the human heart. Because he is not agitated by anything, he is free. Established within his meditation practice, he lives in a world of unparalleled peace.

As in the Sermon on the Mount, the main teaching of the Gita is that human beings have lost their balance due to their ego, the platform over which all desires manifest. The ego wants to satisfy the desires of the flesh, but the soul craves liberation from them because they are the root cause of its bondage. This bondage brings misery. In both traditions, Christian and Hindu, the highest human flourishing lies in the freedom from ego and desires and in devotion to God. Both inform us that our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world outside us, as in being able to remake ourselves on the highest model of human achievement we know of. Repeatedly, Sri Krishna admonishes Arjuna to take right action without regard to the fruit of action (Keshavadas, 1982).

### **Judaism**

The Sermon on the Mount presents Jesus as a new Moses who does not break with Jewish law, but rather who has come to fulfill it. Understanding some of the parallels between Jesus' message in the Sermon and those of the Hebrew Bible can help us to better appreciate from whence Jesus' wisdom sprung, as well as the perennial nature of that wisdom.

When Jesus proclaimed that those are blessed who know their need of God, are gentle of spirit, show mercy, and whose hearts are pure, he was not saying anything new. In the books of Jeremiah and the Psalms, we are told that those who trust in the Lord are blessed. In Isaiah, it is those who are humble and righteous. Those who failed to avoid anger, murder, lust, and adultery were mourned. Again, in the Psalms, we are told that the righteous shall inherit the earth and live in it forever. Righteousness is a word used often by Jesus.

In the Sermon, Jesus affirmed the on-going value of the law, as laid down by the Old Testament Prophets. The more familiarity one has with these earlier texts, the more one can appreciate the similarities between them and the Sermon. A disciple of God, whether Jewish or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, must learn to be humble, to check his or her anger, to refocus desires, and to forgive. And all disciples must come to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength (Levine, 2020).

### **Buddhism**

H.H. The Dalai Lama warns against homogenizing all the world's religions into one. At the same time, according to his experience, all the world's major religious traditions provide a common language and message upon which we can build a genuine understanding. For him, what really matters is not the scholarly or theological differences between Buddhism and Christianity, but rather the parallels between them.

In looking at the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, both offer direct teachings and practices which promote the life of purity and holy renunciation. They both speak of loving one's enemies, of the primacy of compassion, the practice of tolerance and of being impartial towards all. The simple fact that those who are willing to embark on a path and accept the hardships involved will reap the rewards of their commitment is well-known to both traditions. In one the benefits are called residing in the Kingdom of Heaven, in the other they are known as the Jewel in the Lotus or Pearl of Great Price.

The poor in spirit, whom Jesus identifies in the first of the Beatitudes, means exactly what Buddha was saying to Sariputra when he spoke to him about nothingness. Those who know that they are nothing, who know that there is no ego, are one with God. Between nothingness and God, there is no gap to be crossed. From one side it is nothingness, poverty of spirit. From the other side, it is the Kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes imply that if you act in a certain way – if you are humble, righteous, or forgiving, for example, then you will experience a certain result – you will be blessed and you will flourish. The Buddhists have a similar principle of causality which is known as karma. If you act in a certain way, you experience a certain effect – you will live in the Kingdom of Heaven. If you do not act in a certain way, then you will not experience this effect. This fundamental ethical message is inherent in all the major spiritual traditions, not just Buddhism and Christianity (H.H. Dalai Lama, 1996).

Both Buddha and Christ told their followers to lose if you want to gain and to gain if you want to lose. Possess if you want to become a beggar - dispossess if you want to become a king. Don't possess anything at all – not even yourself. That is what is meant by poor in spirit in both Buddhism and Christianity. For both, it is not a promise for the future, it is a simple statement of truth (Osho, 1977).

## **Islam**

The Koran is universally known as the sacred book of Islam, the religion of submission to the will of God. It is called the "Reading," because it is meant to be read out loud. It is also called the "Criterion," because it serves as a reminder and a clarification of God's word as spoken through His prophet, Muhammad (Cleary, T.,1993).

The word of God as spoken by Jesus is in harmony with the teachings of Muhammad. In fact, the Koran accepts those who followed the teachings of Jesus as the "People of the Book." If you take the time to read it, you will easily find many parallels with all the perennial philosophies, one being the distinction between human artifice and true faith (Cook, M., 2000).

Both Muhammad and Jesus tell us that those who follow the path of God will be blessed. Jesus talks about being poor in spirit. Muhammad tells his disciples to seek help from God with patient perseverance and prayer. It is hard to come to God unless one brings a lowly spirit. Jesus spoke of mourning as a spiritual state resulting from the recognition of our sins. Often in the Koran, Muhammad tells his followers that those people are blessed who, when afflicted with calamity say, "To God we belong, and to Him is our return." The meek are also addressed. Muhammad declares that a person should call on God with humility and in private, because God does not love those who trespass beyond their limits.

As did Jesus, Muhammad stresses the importance of "hungering and thirsting for righteousness." He advises his acolytes that righteousness consists in believing in God, the Last Day, and the Koran, and he instructs them to be steadfast in being charitable and firm, and to be patient in suffering and through all the kinds of panic that can ensue in this world. The importance of forgiveness is also spoken of by Muhammad. Similar to turning the other cheek, he encourages his disciples to forgive and to overlook, and he informs them that if any one of them is charitable rather than retaliatory in response to a wrong, it is an act of atonement for oneself.

As with all the other perennial philosophies, Muslims know that God can enter into the heart of every man. They call this egoless state "fana billah," or annihilation in God. The human soul is so filled with

love for God that the human ego is absent. All that is present and all that is expressed is God. When Jesus said, "I and the Father are One," he was clearly speaking from the state of "fana billah." The same can be said of Buddha, Krishna, and Gandhi, and all the other saints and prophets who have lived in our midst (Bell, D, 2014).

### **Gandhi as an exemplar of the Sermon on the Mount**

Now that we have studied the Sermon on the Mount in more detail, we can look a little more closely at Gandhi as our model of a way of living its message. "Blessed are the meek," the first Beatitude, comes to mind. The meekness of Gandhi was displayed in every confrontation, whether it was with the British, the Hindus, or the Muslims. He knew there was only one way to reach them. It was not by force, but by challenging them repeatedly, firmly and non-violently so they would be provoked in a way that would break the hardness of their hearts and cause the mercy and light of God to penetrate them. In this way, Gandhi's meekness overcame the violence of his adversaries.

The meekness of Gandhi was also displayed during the times he was in prison. There he went through assault, deprivation, betrayal, and failure. He experienced the darts of injustice relentlessly hurled against him. He knew the trials of suffering and injustice, and the anguish of sin. Through all of these, he demonstrated meekness. He willingly gave himself up for all, even those who condemned him. His refusal to fight back proved to everyone that he and his meekness were the lord of arguments and events. Out of his meekness, he came forth a conqueror.

Who are the meek, if not those who, like Gandhi, welcome into their hearts God's meekness and who try to practice it themselves? How many of our problems today would disappear or be solved in our families, communities, and in the world, if we knew how to address them calmly and kindly like Gandhi did?

Meekness wields tremendous psychological strength. Every time I watched Gandhi's meekness in the movie, portrayed by Ben Kingsley, I was amazed at its power. His meekness invariably and instantaneously lowered the level of aggression in whatever group he was in. It was indispensable in creating bonds of friendship with people who could have been his enemies, like Lord Mountbatten, as well as in forming true community with his fellow Indians in their non-violent fight for freedom.

Meekness was Gandhi's mainstay. It filled him with tact and delicacy and endowed him with sure strength. If meekness is the queen of virtues, Gandhi was one of her noblest servants. Like Gandhi, any person who follows the path of meekness can enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Sermon speaks about those who hunger for righteousness, reassuring us that they will be satisfied. We can hardly think of a better example of this than Gandhi-ji. It is said elsewhere in the Bible that where mercy and truth meet, that is where justice and peace will kiss. Gandhi, in his hunger for justice, and with his displays of mercy and truth, brought us all the kiss of peace.

The justice which Gandhi understood arose from a sense of righteousness, which has its source in God, who incites us to love. This justice proceeded from Gandhi's heart, prior to his actions, which flowed from feelings and thoughts in the form of love. Justice is a constant will to render to every man what is due to him. Gandhi's constant will in this regard meant that he had an open and firm personal attitude, which led him to recognize what was owed to the Other, and to procure it for him or her.

Gandhi, like Jesus, preferred to suffer injustice rather than commit it. To suffer injustice is painful in the extreme. Both Gandhi and Jesus suffered to the extreme. Ever true to his understanding, obtained from his beloved holy texts, he saw it as a greater misfortune to lose his love of justice than to suffer some material or physical loss, including the loss of his life.

Justice, as understood by Gandhi, was oriented towards others. It was rooted in his will and required his full concurrence. It called upon his generosity of spirit and his charity. He desired that his justice would create friendships among people, not only in their individual relationships, but also in the setting of political life.

There will always be works of justice to perform. We will always have in our midst the poor, who, as Gandhi showed us, yearn for justice. This is why we, like the Mahatma himself, should be poor beggars before God. Thus we, too, can live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

One more related virtue spoken about by Jesus in the Sermon and exemplified by the Mahatma in his life, is that of mercy. Like Jesus, Gandhi led his people with the chords of compassion and the bonds of love. Like Jesus, when he saw the masses before him, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Mercy connotes the feeling of pity at the sight of another's misery, the perception of an evil or anguish which moves us. In order to gain the upper hand and to practice mercy effectively, as Gandhi did, effort is always required.

The merciful man knows better than any how to discern the way to promote true justice. Many of us have watched or read about Gandhi's wise and generous application of mercy. He always found the best weapon for opening up the paths of divine justice and touching the heart of the offender. In his experiments with Truth, Gandhi discovered the mercy Jesus speaks about in the Sermon on the Mount. The mercy he discovered was so tender and delicate that while it dressed the wounds of many, it was, at the same time, strong and tempered as steel. It was this kind of mercy that the Mahatma applied when it came to fighting any hardness of heart (Pinckaers, 1998).

Gandhi loved Truth, or God, with all his heart mind and soul, and his neighbor as himself. He did this amidst the pressures, disturbances, ambiguities, and confusions of historic liberation struggles. If the function of religion, as man's response to ultimate Reality, is to transform human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, what we witnessed in him was the process of religion creatively incarnated in human life. His religious ideas were always incarnated in his actions.

Gandhi knew that people's behavior would not ultimately be changed by rules, laws, obligations, and prohibitions. He was more concerned about the quality of human behavior which would come from a change of heart. He stressed the potential of the individual to be transformed from within and believed that the transformed individual would in turn transform the community. For him the enemy was within. A person had to destroy his or her inner demons before society could be redeemed. This was the message of the Gita, the Sermon, and the Koran, and it was that message he used to transform himself and the world.

## **Conclusion**

The Sermon on the Mount was a new and concise statement of the best of prior Hebrew thought. Jesus addressed how to become the highest and most effective a person could be. What he said is entirely

consistent with the teachings of Bhavagad Gita as well as those of the Buddha and the Koran. Gandhi was the rare individual who dove deeply into and lived these teachings. These teachings are available to all of us, if only we would study and live them as the Mahatma did. Like Jesus, the Mahatma is our exemplar.

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