



Eberhard Arnold

Salt and Light

Living the Sermon
on the Mount

Foreword by Jürgen Moltmann

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WE HAVE LISTENED to the Sermon on the Mount and perhaps have understood it. But who has heard it aright? Jesus gives the answer at the end (Matt. 7:24–29). He does not allow his hearers to go away and make of his sayings what they will, picking and choosing from them whatever they find helpful and testing them to see if they work. He does not give them free rein to misuse his word with their mercenary hands, but gives it to them on condition that it retains exclusive power over them.

Humanly speaking, we could understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience, not interpreting it or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his word. He does not mean that it is to be discussed as an ideal; he really means us to get on with it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

To the Reader

Salt and Light became a book many years after Eberhard Arnold's death. Its chapters were compiled and translated by members of the Bruderhof communities from articles, talks, and lectures from the years 1915–1935. Arnold grappled with the Sermon on the Mount his whole adult life. His relentless faithfulness to its demands bore practical fruit in a community movement that is still thriving today. Although Arnold was addressing a Germany in political and social ferment, his words are not bound to time and place. They direct us out of our bankruptcy to a new, revolutionary way.

Contents

ix *Foreword*

xiii *Introduction*

xxi *The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)*

1 Not a New Law

3 Becoming True Men and Women

9 Salt and Light

17 Happiness

23 The Nature of the New Justice

33 “But I Say to You...”

37 Away from Compromise and Shadow

43 Against Bloodshed and Violence

51 The Better Righteousness

55 God or Mammon

59 The Fight Against Mammon

73 Mammon and the Living God

- 99** The Decision
- 111** Resistance by Surrender
- 121** The Spirit of Life Overcomes
- 131** Present Experience, Future Kingdom
- 143** The Joyful News of the Kingdom

Foreword

THIS BOOK OPENS with the question, “How do we respond to the Sermon on the Mount?” – a question that must be asked by each new generation. Each generation must find its own answer to the call of Jesus. Yet throughout the centuries there is a fellowship of those who face the powerful challenge of the Sermon on the Mount without reservation, ready for unconditional discipleship. Among those who speak to us today are the Waldensians and Hussites, the Baptizers and the Hutterites, the Mennonites and Quakers, and now Eberhard Arnold of the Bruderhof. On the way of Jesus, however, intervals of time lose their meaning; brothers and sisters of earlier days speak to us as if they were present today – which they are, if we listen to them and through their voices hear the voice of Jesus.

As I was reading Arnold’s vision of the Sermon on the Mount and imagining the first Bruderhof – a lonely, impoverished little settlement in the Rhön hills – I was suddenly struck by the inseparable connection between Jesus’ words and unconditional discipleship, between discipleship and the communal life of the Twelve, between the life of brotherly love and the expectation of God’s kingdom on earth. These things must never be separated.

Arnold shows us that the Sermon on the Mount is not a new moral law but a proclamation, a witness to

the power of the coming kingdom and true life. The Beatitudes come before Jesus' new commandments. Before laying the yoke of discipleship upon us, Jesus fills our hearts with the powers of God's spirit. Arnold shows us that following these commandments consistently is neither an ideal nor an ordeal, but a matter of course in the community of Jesus. In the community of Jesus, life becomes clear, simple, decisive, and unequivocal. Gone are the many doubts and compromises, the many half-truths and the half-heartedness. We can only love God with our whole heart and strength; we can follow Jesus only with undivided dedication—otherwise we are not following him at all.

Arnold shows us further that discipleship and community life belong together: they cannot be separated. It is from community life that we draw the strength for discipleship and courage to face the inevitable opposition. In discipleship we find our brothers and sisters of the communal life. The Bruderhof community proves that. I ask myself what the state churches, still trying to lead a Christian life, can learn from such consistently Christian communities. First of all we have to lay down our old prejudices and heretic-hunting. The closely related Mennonite and Hutterite groups have never—neither in the past nor today—been fanatic enthusiasts or narrow sectarians, but genuine Christian communities. True, their existence represents a criticism of the life of Christians

in the established churches. The answer will be to begin learning from them. So I have been asking myself, how can the established institutional church become a living, communal church? How can our church parishes become communities of faith and of life? I believe that this is the way into the future, and I see more and more people going in that direction. We are not looking for the self-righteous Christian sect that despises the world, but for the open church of the coming kingdom of God. This church is open and welcomes everyone, like the Bruderhof does. It is open to the poor, the handicapped, and the rejected, who find a refuge and new hope there because they find Jesus.

Arnold places much emphasis on the realism of Christian hope: Christians do not hope for salvation for their souls in the hereafter, but pray, as Jesus bids us: "Thy kingdom come!" Arnold has often called this coming kingdom "God's future state." Like the New Testament, he speaks of "the heavenly city" and "the heavenly polit-euma." He speaks of the kingdom that is to come to earth in political terms. That is very important to me: if I pray for the advent of this kingdom, I cannot abandon the earth to wars and ecological destruction and to those who hope for security by threatening such disasters. If I pray for the coming of God's kingdom, I cannot stand by while the environment and my fellow creatures are being annihilated through the progress of civilization and nuclear

power stations. Praying for the coming of God's kingdom calls for a decisive resistance to the destruction of the earth. In his hope Arnold was as earthly, physical, and holistic as Christoph Blumhardt was.

Arnold once called the Bruderhof "a seed of God's kingdom." During the Nazi years this seed "died" like the buried grain of seed the apostles speak of. But it has also borne – and is bearing – rich fruits, not the least of which is hope. The Bruderhofs, like all faith-based communities and fellowships, are lights of hope in an age that sometimes looks very dark. May they no longer remain "hidden under a bushel," but be heeded more and more by the rest of us.

*Jürgen Moltmann
Tübingen, Germany*

Introduction

THOUGH LITTLE IS known about him today, Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935) was widely sought after during his lifetime as a public speaker, lecturer, and publisher in his native Germany. During and after his studies at Breslau, Halle, and Erlangen (where he received his doctorate in 1909), he was active in the student revival movement then sweeping those towns and became secretary of the German Christian Student Union. In 1916 he became literary director of the Furche Publishing House in Berlin, and editor of its monthly periodical.

Like thousands of young Germans in the 1920s, Eberhard and his wife Emmy were disillusioned by the failure of the establishment – especially the churches – to provide answers to the problems of society in the turbulent years following World War I. In their seeking, they were influenced by the German Youth Movement (in which Eberhard was a nationally-known participant), the German pastor Johann Christoph Blumhardt and his son Christoph Friedrich, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, and, most significantly, the early Christians.

Eberhard has described this time of serious seeking in this way:

I would like to tell about my personal seeking. A group of young people often gathered around me, and I tried by

means of Bible studies and talks to lead people to Jesus. But after a while this was no longer enough. I found myself in a very difficult situation, and I was deeply unhappy. I began to recognize the needs of people in a deeper way: the need of their bodies and souls, their material and social need, their humiliation, exploitation, and enslavement. I recognized the tremendous power of mammon, discord, hate, and violence, and saw the hard boot of the oppressor upon the neck of the oppressed. If a person has not experienced these things, he might think such words an exaggeration – but these are the facts.

Then, from 1913 to 1917, I sought painfully for a deep understanding of the truth. I recognized more and more that personal dedication to people's souls was not all that Jesus asked – that it did not fully express the being of God. I felt that I was not fulfilling God's will by approaching people with a purely personal Christianity and concerning myself with individuals so that they, like myself, might come to this personal Christianity. During those four years I went through a hard struggle. I searched not only in the old writings, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and other scriptures, but I also wanted to get to know the life of the working classes – the oppressed humanity of the present social order – and to share in their life. I wanted to find a way that corresponded to the way of Jesus, of Francis of Assisi, and also the way of the prophets.

The Sermon on the Mount

M A T T H E W 5 - 7

SEEING THE CROWDS, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

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

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

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 sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer

good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your

Not a New Law

CHAPTER ONE

HOW DO WE RESPOND to the Sermon on the Mount? The Sermon on the Mount is the first step on the way of discipleship, and it is of decisive importance to me that our church consider this deeply. If we fully grasp the Sermon on the Mount and believe it, then nothing can frighten us – neither our own self-recognition, nor financial threats, nor our personal weakness.

The dedication demanded in the Sermon on the Mount is not a new law or moral teaching. Instead it is forgiveness. Its vital element is the light and warmth of the Holy Spirit. Here is Christ: the essence of salt, and the strength of the tree that bears good fruit. The Sermon on the Mount shows us the character of a community, which shines like a light for the whole world.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a high-tension moralism, but we must grasp it as the revelation of God's real power in human life. If we take our surrender to God seriously and allow him to enter our lives as light, as the only energy which makes new life possible, then we will be able to live the new life.

If we see the Sermon on the Mount as five new commandments, as the Tolstoyans do, we will fall right into a trap. For in his book *My Religion*, Leo Tolstoy lists the

commandments of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount as five new laws: peacefulness with others, sexual purity and marital faithfulness, the refusal to swear oaths, non-resistance to evil, and love for one's enemies. But Jesus shows us that the clarity and demands of the old laws are not weakened by his coming into the world; instead they are infinitely sharpened. Moreover, these are only five examples – there could be five hundred or five thousand – revealing the powerful effect of God's work in Christ.

His righteousness, his justice, is better than anything scholars or theologians could offer. It is something absolutely different, and it does not depend on moral intentions and good ideas. The righteousness of the law can be fulfilled only through a new, organic way of living, through a life from God that flares up like light and sears and purifies like salt. It is like a flame that shines, like the sap that pulses through a tree. It is life!

■ Spoken on October 27, 1935, at the Rhön Bruderhof.

Becoming True Men and Women

CHAPTER TWO

IT HAS BEEN SAID that we should become truly human and dedicate ourselves to all people. This true humanity is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ and his Sermon on the Mount. For this we must have the love that exists among children, for with them love rules without any special purpose.

If we can feel what it means to become truly human and to find the right attitude of serving all who suffer; if we can become united about what Jesus said and how he lived, and agree that his nature was clearly revealed in the Sermon on the Mount; if we can recognize that the child-like spirit of love is all we need – then we will know the spirit that leads to such a life, and we will feel very close to one another.

When I read the Sermon on the Mount at the end of the war, decisive things, impossible to express in a few words, became clear to me. It would be much better to read the Sermon on the Mount itself. However, I would like to recount what impressed and influenced me so decisively that I still think about it night and day.

The justice and goodness and social love that Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount are quite different

from the moral teaching, piety, and dogmatism of theologians and moralists. This is why Jesus speaks of the tree, the salt, the light, and the city. He is speaking of God and his spirit.

Jesus says, “Beware of the Pharisees and theologians: beware of the false moralists when their deeds do not correspond to their words. By the fruit the tree is known.” When Jesus speaks of the salt, he says to those who are of his spirit, “You are the salt of the earth!” What does Jesus mean by salt? Jesus is talking about the nature or essence of something. You may not want to hear about God; but think of the intrinsic nature, the essence, of the only thing that can save the world. It is an elixir, but certainly not an elixir of the devil. This is the salt of the earth, the element that can transform the earth’s total corruption and ruin and bring about its rebirth.

What is this element? Jesus describes it in the first sentences of his Sermon on the Mount, after which he immediately talks about salt. His first words tell us what we will be like when we have the spirit of Jesus Christ, how we will be when we belong to God’s kingdom and his future. These words must burn in our hearts and become alive, for the heart is what Jesus speaks about.

Blessed are those who have heart. Blessed are those who love, who build up unity everywhere. Blessed are those who stand with the poor; blessed are those who

themselves are poor as beggars. Blessed are those who know themselves as beggars before the Spirit. Blessed are those who are so poor that they hunger and thirst. Blessed are those who feel this hunger and thirst for justice, for the justice of the heart, of love, for the establishment of peace in unity. For they are the people who carry the pain of the world on their hearts, who carry the suffering of the world in their innermost being. They do not think of themselves, for their whole heart is turned toward others.

Yet they are the people who are misunderstood and persecuted because they love justice and do not take part in injustice. This is why they are the salt of the earth. They do not take part in the injustice of mammon. They have no wealth, no savings account, nothing in the bank, nothing invested in houses or land; they have nowhere to go when need comes to them. Jesus tells us not to gather riches on this earth, but to gather the fortune found in love. Let your whole fortune be love, so that wherever you go hearts will open to you. You will be met with hatred because you bring justice, and you will be persecuted and hounded to death for not taking part in injustice. But you will be received with great love in huts which are open for you, and you will be taken in because you bring love.

This is your treasure and your wealth. It will free you of all care. You will be close to nature. You will live with the flowers and the birds, and you will not worry about

your clothes or food. You will be one with the birds that find their food, and in harmony with the flowers that are clothed more beautifully than any vain men or women.

This is the new character of salt; this is light. Light makes everything bright and clear. The light meant here is not a cold light. It is the glowing light of hearth and lamp, the light that shines from a ring of torches or that streams from the windows of houses where community is alive. It is the light of truth that exists in love, and the love that rejoices in truth, justice, and purity. It is not the sultry, gloomy love of emotional passion; this brings injustice. It is the love that lightens up faith, that brings clarity to everything. Light is like salt because salt consumes itself, just as a candle burns itself down.

In the Sermon on the Mount, which is a proclamation of love, Jesus speaks of adultery, which can also consist of thoughts and feelings of the heart. Adultery breaks a relationship of faithfulness, truthfulness, and responsible love. But light and salt overcome such things. The same is true when people swear oaths and make vows in order to be believed. Jesus says, “Just by this you prove that no one can believe you. Say simply yes or no. Be completely true.”

People think they should love their friends, who show love to them. But Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” This means that you can never kill anyone. You can never hurt or kill souls, for you must live in absolute love. This love will become so complete that you cannot go to law against

another. If someone wants to take your cloak, take off your jacket and give that as well. If someone demands of you one hour's work, give two. It must be like this with everything. Your life will have a kind of perfection, although you will not be a saint. The perfection will consist in this: you will be very weak and you will make many mistakes; you will be awkward, for you will be poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for justice. You will not be perfect, but you will love. This is the gate and the way. Whatever you desire for yourself, wish the same for others. If you expect something from people, give the same to them.

There is nothing greater than love. There is nothing more holy than love. There is nothing more true than love, nothing more real. So let us hand our lives over to love and seal the bond of love.

■ Spoken at the Rhön Bruderhof, September 22, 1935, in response to visitors' questions.

