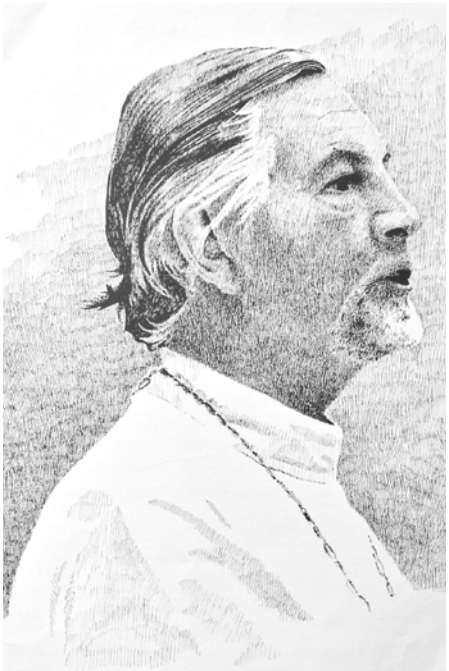
Talks on the Beatitudes

Alexander Schmemann
Translated by Inga Leonova

(Note: The Wheel *here begins publication of talks given in Russian on Radio Liberty by Father Alexander Schmemann. Audio recordings of these translated talks are forthcoming from SVS Press.)*

Translator's Preface

Father Alexander Schmemann's Radio Liberty talks represent a unique body of contemporary catechetical work. He gave these weekly homilies almost every Sunday from March of 1953 until his death in 1983. From the United States he was addressing listeners on the other side of the world, in a country governed by militant atheism. Father Alexander never literally encountered his audience—in fact, he never set foot in the Soviet Union. Yet he became a household voice in the homes of people he never met, offering the prisoners of a cruel and deceitful utopia a window into reality and truth.



Drawing by Alexis Vinogradov.

This utopia was something that Father Alexander had to wrestle with as part of his catechetical talks. He was speaking to an audience that was not completely devoid of religion. On the contrary, they were reared in the ideology of Communism, a materialistic cult complete with its own idols, creeds, rituals, and eschatology. This explains why many of his talks were structured around juxtapositions and dichotomies. He was not only proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, but also exposing the lie of the ideological system in which his listeners were ensnared. And he knew that it was essential for him to point out that the lie was not only political, but existential—that it was at odds with the Divine order and purpose of creation and the truth experienced in the person of Christ. Insight into how Father Alexander structured his *Radio Liberty* talks may be found in his journal entry from May 11, 1977:

But the whole logic of our time (including that of the anti-Communists) is infused with the unconscious conviction that the devil is stronger than God, that one can destroy evil only with evil, even if it is called anti-evil. [...] How understandable and needful becomes Christ's

silence about all the things that so passionately interest us: Government, religion, history, even morality. He always talks to me and about me—only that is of interest to Him. But in me, for Him, is the whole world, the whole of life, the whole of history. Therefore He saves me, not Russia, not the government, nothing else. So that any fight, any 'anti-' always has and carries in it the most awful 'spiritual' defeat...

Within this framework of thinking, the Sermon on the Mount becomes central to the understanding of what constitutes the encounter of "Christ and the human 'I.'" In his series of talks on the Beatitudes, Father Alexander uses the Sermon on the Mount to establish the outline of Christian anthropology. In its center is the human being as the image of God. Defining what constitutes that image is what defines humans as they were created by God in an act of love for communion with Him and the world. For Father Alexander, the Beatitudes present the perfect vehicle for outlining this anthropology, because the person described in the Beatitudes is the image of Christ, the true Adam. Christ tells His followers: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," and He tells them what it means to be perfect, to be Christ-like, to be people of the Kingdom of Heaven rather than people of the kingdom of this world. The person in the Beatitudes does not behave, but rather *is*—which creates a sharp contrast to what risks becoming a pseudo-Christianity as oppressive as secular materialism.

What becomes very clear to those who listen to Father Alexander's broadcasts or who read the transcripts is something that is especially poignant for the challenges that the Church faces in the modern world, especially the challenge of moralism. Within the Soviet context, "moral conduct" became the final goal for the collective. For Father Alexander the new person arises from the commandments of the Beatitudes.

This new person is defined not by a learned behavior, but by a true transformation of the self brought about by *metanoia* (repentance). This true transformation is possible only by the grace of God and only for one whose spirit is "broken and contrite" (Ps. 50). It reveals a person who seeks to restore the undefiled image of God and who is not merely a "civilized animal."

For Father Alexander's listeners in the Soviet Union this distinction must have been utterly earth-shattering, contrary to all the principles of their society. It is no less earth-shattering for us today, when the challenges of the encounter with Christ are being replaced in our conscience by the challenges of "Christian moralism."

The "new person" that emerges from these talks is the resurrected Adam, called by Christ the New Adam to the new life in the Spirit, free from "the shadow of the Law." The joy of this new life lived here and now permeates all of Father Alexander's writings and, indeed, his very person, which emerges from them. The brevity of the talks on the Beatitudes, necessitated by the radio format, brings the delivery of this message into such a focused form that it leaves the reader feeling momentarily blinded as if by a flash of light. —*IL*

"Blessed Are Those Who Mourn"

(Note: This is the second talk in the series. The first recording is missing.)

In my last broadcast, I spoke about the first Beatitude: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matt. 5:3). I tried to explain what kind of poverty is being spoken about, namely the kind of internal freedom from everything that habitually enslaves a human being, making him inwardly blind and deaf to what is crucial—to the very essence of human life, to its authentic content.

The first Beatitude is reinforced by the second: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted* (Matt. 5:4). Again, we are astonished by the paradoxical nature of this statement, which goes against everything we are used to seeing in life, against how we are used to measuring and valuing life. *Those who mourn...* But isn't mourning—and therefore grief, sorrow, discontent, tragedy—isn't it something negative? Isn't it natural for a person to strive for calm and joy, and to remove from his life everything that may cause mourning? Therefore it is again necessary to try to think about and to listen to what stands behind these words and what anti-religious propaganda, in its superficial "exposure" of the Gospel, cannot comprehend. This propaganda insists, just as with the first Beatitude about the poor, that Christianity is not only not indifferent to human grief and suffering, but even considers them useful, since they help people to transfer all their aspirations to another world, the world beyond the grave, and calmly to bear all the evil, inequality, injustice, and so forth of this world. And to support this interpretation of Christianity, anti-religious propaganda often quotes the second Beatitude.

But of course this Beatitude speaks about something completely different, something diametrically opposed to the cheap statements of anti-religious propaganda. What does it speak of, then? To answer this question, we have to go back to where we started our analysis of the first Beatitude—to the twofold perception of the human person in the Christian understanding. A person stands in it, on the one hand, as one completely immersed in life, in pursuit of success, and on the other as a pauper, and therefore open to what is deepest and most important, beautiful, and pure. On one hand, he is a slave, on the other, a free person; on the one hand, enslaved by "the lust of the world" (1 John 2:17), on the other, owning nothing and having everything (2 Cor. 6:10).

And the same dichotomy continues and grows even deeper here in the second Beatitude. We can put it this way: the higher a person rises spiritually, the less vulnerable he is to the base and crude happiness that satisfies so many. In other words, the mourning and sorrow spoken of in this Beatitude is that very "high sorrow" that is known to every great poet, every creator, everyone who has even once plunged deeper and gazed higher, has broken through the noise and bustle, has understood the paucity and vanity of everything offered to him by life.

And just as true humanity begins with internal liberation from everything undeserving of our complete surrender, it also begins with this exalted longing, with mourning. Christ's preaching begins with the call: *Repent*—presuming, first and foremost, an internal

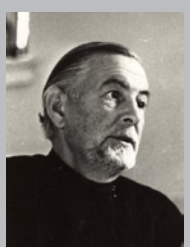
conversion, the ability to see the world and life anew. This beginning inevitably leads to a profound and spiritual sorrow. For, in the world governed by fear and suffering, it is that which is most cheap, crude, and superficial that wins attention, and a person who has even mildly perceived the distant, the profound, and the exalted—a person, as the poet says, "having inhaled the heavenly deeps"[1]—cannot help being a person who mourns. And he cannot be consoled by the triumphant speech about glory and achievements, about victories on multiple "fronts," or by the promises of the next glorious human anthill, comfortable but suffocating in its own boredom and mediocrity.

But Christ says: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*. The entire Gospel is filled not just with the promise of forthcoming joy. It shines with the joy that has already come, that is possible now. Where is that joy? First of all in the knowledge that the evil, vulgar face of the world is not its real face, but a caricature, a perversion, and not the last truth about it. Let us take two images, two portraits. One stares at us from every wall, from all the newspapers and posters, imposed upon us as the real image of a man—full of himself, content with his small and pitiful happiness, satisfied with his truncated ideology and not bemoaning it.

And some would like for us all to be like that—identically sprightly, striding in step to the clatter of a marching band. Yet here is another image: of the one whom for decades now they have been trying to erase from our memory and consciousness. *My soul is sorrowful even unto death* (Matt. 26:38), he says, and drops of sweat fall from his face like drops of blood. There he is on the cross, abandoned by all, but judging no one, betraying no one, forgetting no one. An amazing face on which many generations have been gazing intently, carried by him to an entirely other dimension of life!

And so we ask ourselves: which of these images contains the truth about the world and man? And we answer without hesitation: the second! And this knowledge, this certainty, is the first consolation in the midth of our tears, the first joy that, in the words of Christ himself, *no one will take from you* (John 16:22). Yet this joy cannot be achieved, this consolation cannot be received, until a person laments over his own condition and that of the world, until, in other words, he looks deep into himself, "inhales the heavenly deeps," and does not become astonished by what passes for truth by the creators and peddlers of pseudo-happiness. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* ✠

[1] From the poem by Alexander Blok, "The grey wisp of fire's smoke…" (1909).



The Rt. Rev. Alexander Schmemann was an Orthodox theologian who played a central role in founding the Orthodox Church in America. He was a graduate of St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. He was Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary from 1962 to 1983, and also taught at Columbia University, New York University, and Union Theological Seminary.