**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-017. THE FOURTH BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

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

*Matthew 5:6*

Two preliminary remarks will give us the point of view from which I desire to consider these words now. First, we have seen, in previous sermons, that these paradoxes of the Christian life which we call the Beatitudes are a linked chain, or, rather, an outgrowth from a common root. Each presupposes all the preceding. Now, of course, it is a mistake to expect uniformity in the process of building up character, and stages which are separable and successive in thought may be simultaneous and coalesce in fact. But none the less is our Lord here outlining successive stages in the growth of a true Christian life. I shall have more to say about the place in the series which this Beatitude holds, but for the present I simply ask you to remember that it has a background and set of previous experiences, out of which it springs, and that we shall not understand the depth of Christ's meaning if we isolate it from these and regard it as standing alone.

Then, another consideration is the remarkable divergence in this Beatitude from the others. The meek, the merciful, the pure in heart the peacemakers, have all attained to certain characteristics. But this is not a benediction pronounced upon those who have attained to righteousness, but upon those who long after it. Desire, which has reached such a pitch as to be comparable to the physical craving of a hungry man for food or to the imperious thirst of parched throats, seems a strange kind of blessedness; but it is better to long for a higher--though it be unattained--good than to be content with a lower which is possessed. Better to climb, though the summit be far and the path be steep, than to browse amongst the herds in the fat valleys. Aspiration is blessedness when it is worthily directed. Let us, then, look at these two points of this Beatitude; this divine hunger of the soul, and its satisfaction which is sure.

**I. Note, then, the hunger which is blessed.**

Now righteousness has come to be a kind of theological term which people use without attaching any very distinct meaning to it. And it would be little improvement to substitute for righteousness the abstraction of moral conformity to the will of God. Suppose we try to turn the words of my text into modern English, and instead of saying, Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness, say, Blessed are the men and women that long more than for anything else to be good. Does not that sound a little more near our daily lives than the well-worn and threadbare word of my text? Righteousness is neither more nor less than in spirit a will submitted to God, and in conduct the practice of whatsoever things are noble and lovely and of good report.

The production of such a character, the aiming after the perfection of spirit and of conduct, is the highest aim that a man can set before him. There are plenty of other hungers of the soul that are legitimate. There are many of them that are bracing and ennobling and elevating. It is impossible not to hunger for the supply of physical necessities. It is good to long for love, for wisdom. It is better to long most to be good men and women. For what are we here for? To enjoy? To work? To know? Yes! But it is not conduct, and it is still less thought, and it is least of all enjoyment, in any of its forms, which is the purpose of life, and ought to be our aim here upon earth. We are here to learn to be; and the cultivation and production of characters that lie parallel with the will of God is the Omega of all our life in the flesh. All these other things, even the highest of them, the yearning desire

To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,

Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,'

ought to be subordinate to this further purpose of being good men and women. All these are scaffolding; the building is a character conformed to God's will and assimilated to Christ's likeness.

That commends itself as a statement of man's chief end to all reasonable and thoughtful men in their deepest and truest moments. And so, whilst we must let our desires go out on the lower levels, and seek to draw to ourselves the various gifts that are necessary for the various phases and sides of our being, here is one that a man's own conscience tells him should stand clearly supreme and dominant--the hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Still further, notice how this desire, on which our Lord pronounces His benediction, comes in a series. I know that all men have latent, and sometimes partially and fragmentarily operative in their lives and manifest on the surface, sporadic desires after goodness. The existence of these draws the line between man and devil. And there is no soul on earth which has not sometimes felt the longing to be better than it is, to its own consciousness, to-day. But the yearning which our Lord blesses comes after, and is the result of, the previous characteristics which He has described. There must be the poverty of spirit which recognises our own insufficiency and unworthiness; or, to put it into simpler words, we must know ourselves to be sinners. There must be the mourning which follows upon that revelation of ourselves; the penitence which does not wash away sin, but which makes us capable of receiving forgiveness. There must be the comfort which comes from pardon received; and there must be the yielding of ourselves to the Supreme Will, which is the true root of all meekness, in the face of antagonism from creatures and of opposition from circumstances. When thus a man's self-conceit is beaten out of him, and he knows how far he is from the possession of any real, deep righteousness of his own; and when, further, his heart has glowed with the consciousness of forgiveness; and when, further, his will has bowed itself before the Father in heaven, then there will spring in his heart a hungering and thirsting, deeper far and far more certain of fruition, than ever can be realised in another heart, a stranger to such experiences. Brethren, if we are ever to possess the righteousness which is itself blessed, it must be because we have the hunger and the thirst which are sharpened and accentuated by profound discovery of our own evil, lowly penitence before God, and glad assurance of free and full forgiveness.

Then note, still further, how that which is pronounced blessed is not the realisation of a desire, but the desire itself. And that is so, not only because, as I said, all noble aspiration is good, fulfilled or unfulfilled, and aim is of more importance than achievement, and what a man strongly wishes is often the revelation of his deepest self, and the prophecy of what he will be; but Christ puts the desire for a certain quality here as in line with the possession of a number of other qualities attained, because He would hint to us that such a righteousness as shall satisfy the immortal hunger and thirst of our souls is one to be received in answer to longing, and not to be manufactured by our own efforts.

It is a gift; and the condition of receiving the gift is to wish it honestly, earnestly, deeply, continually. The Psalmist had a glimpse of the same truth when he crowned his description of the man who was fit to ascend the hill of the Lord, and to stand in His holy place, with, he shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

Of course, in saying that the first step towards the possession of this divinely bestowed and divinely blessed righteousness is not effort but longing, I do not forget that the retention of it, and the working of it into our characters, and out in our conduct, must be the result of our own continual diligence. But it is effort based on faith; and it is mainly, as I believe, the effort to keep open the line of communication between us and God, the great Giver, which ensures our possession of this gift of God. Dear friends, the righteousness that avails for us is not of our making, but of God's giving, through Jesus Christ.

So, before I pass to the other thoughts of my text, may I pause here for a moment? Blessed are they that hunger and thirst--think of the picture that that suggests--the ravenous desire of a starving man, the almost fierce longing of a parched throat. Is that a picture of the intensity, of the depth, of our desires to be good? Do we professing Christian men and women long to be delivered from our evils and to be clothed in righteousness, with an honesty and an earnestness and a continuity of longing which would make such words as these of my text anything else, if applied to us, than the bitterest irony? Oh, one looks out over the Christian Church, and one looks--which is more to the purpose--into one's own heart, and contrasts the tepid, the lazy, the occasional, and, I am afraid, the only half-sincere wishes to be better, with the unmistakable earnestness and reality of our longings to be rich, or wise, or prosperous, or famous, or happy in our domestic relationships, and the like. Alas! alas! that the whole current of the great river of so many professing Christians desires runs towards earth and creatures, and the tiniest little trickle is taken off, like a lade for a mill, from the great stream, and directed towards higher things. It is hunger and thirst after righteousness that is blessed. You and I can tell whether our desires deserve such a name as that.

**II. And now, secondly, the satisfying of this divine hunger of the soul.**

They shall be filled, says our Lord. Now all these promises appended to the Beatitudes have a double reference--to the certainty of the present, and to the perfection of the future. That there is such a double reference may be made very obvious if we notice that the first of the promises, which includes them all, and of which the others are but aspects and phases, is cast into the present tense, whilst the remainder stand in the future. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, not shall be--they shall be comforted, they shall inherit the earth, and so on. So, then, we are warranted, indeed we are obliged, to regard this great promise in the text as having two epochs of fulfilment--one partially here upon earth, one complete hereafter. And these two differ, not in kind, but in degree.

So then, with regard even to the present, they shall be filled. Should not that be a gospel to the seeking spirit of man, who knows so well what it is to be crucified with the pangs of a vain desire, and to set his heart upon that which never comes into his hands? There is one region in which nothing is so impossible as that any desire should be in vain, or any wish should be unfulfilled, and it is the region into which Christ points us in these great words of my text. Turn away from earth, where fulfilled desires and unfulfilled are often equally disappointed ones. Turn away from the questionable satisfactions which come to those whose hearts go out in longing for love, wisdom, wealth, transitory felicity; and be sure of this, that the one longing which never will be disappointed, nor, when answered, will prove to have given us but ashes instead of bread, is the longing to be like God and like Christ. That desire alone is sure to be fulfilled, and, being fulfilled, is sure to be blessed.

It is not true that all desires after righteousness are fulfilled. Those which spring up, as I have said, in men's hearts sporadically, and apart from the background of the experiences of my text, are not always, not often, even partially accomplished. There are in every land, no doubt, souls that thirst after righteousness, as they are able to discern it. And we are sure of this, that no such effort and longing passes unnoticed by Him who hears the young ravens when they cry, and is not deaf to the prayer of men who long to be good. But the experience of the bulk of us, apart from Jesus Christ, is the things that I would not, these I do, and the things that I would, these I do not. The hunger and thirst after righteousness, imperfect as they are, which are felt at intervals by all men, do not avail to break the awful continuity of their conduct as evil in the sight of God and of their own consciences. And so, just because every man knows something of the sting of this desire after righteousness, which yet remains for the most part unfulfilled, the world is full of sadness. Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? comes to be the expression of the noblest amongst us. Then this great Gospel comes to us, and the Nazarene confidently fronts a world dimly conscious of its need, and sometimes miserable because it is bad, and says: Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters... . Come to Me, and drink.

What right had He to stand thus and promise that every desire after goodness should be fulfilled in Him? He had the right, because He Himself had the power and the purpose to fulfil it. For this is the very heart of His Gospel: that He will give to every one who asks it that spirit of life which was His own, and which shall make us free from the law of sin and death.

Thus, dear friends, we have to be content to take the place of recipients, and to accept, not to work out for ourselves, this righteousness for which, more or less feebly, and all of us too feebly, we do sometimes long. Oh, believe me, away from Him you will never receive into your characters a goodness that will satisfy yourselves. Siberian prisoners sometimes break their chains and escape for some distance. They are generally taken back and again shut up in their captivity. If we are able, as we are in some measure, to break the bondage of evil in ourselves, we are not able to complete our emancipation by any skill, effort, or act of ours. We must be content to receive the blessing. There is no loom of earth which can weave, and no needle that man's hands can use which can stitch together, the pure garment that befits a soul. We must be content to take the robe of righteousness which Jesus Christ has wrought, and to strip off, by His help, the ancient self, splashed with the filth of the world, and spotted by the flesh: and to put on the new man, which Christ, and Christ alone, bestows.

As for the future fulfilment of this promise--desire will live in heaven, desire will dilate the spirit, the dilated spirit will be capable of fuller gifts of God-likeness, and increased capacity will ensure increased reception. Thus, through eternity, in blessed alternation, we shall experience the desire that brings new gifts and the satisfying that produces new desires.

Dear friends, all that I have been trying to say in this sermon is gathered up into the one word--that I may be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.