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

**LUKE-023**. **GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*

*Luke 7:28*

We were speaking in a preceding sermon about the elements of true greatness, as represented in the life and character of John the Baptist. As we remarked then, our Lord poured unstinted eulogium upon the head of John, in the audience of the people, at the very moment when he showed himself weakest. None born of womenwas, in Christ's eyes, greater than John the Baptist. The eulogium, authoritative as it was, was immediately followed by a depreciation as authoritative, from Christ's lips: The least in the kingdom is greater than he. Greatness depends, not on character, but on position. The contrast that is drawn is between being in and being out of the kingdom; and this man, great as he was among them that are born of women, stood but upon the threshold; therefore, and only therefore, and in that respect, was he less than the leastwho was safely within it.

Now, there are two things in these great words of our Lord to notice by way of introduction. One is the calm assumption which He makes of authority to marshal men, to stand above the greatest of them, and to allocate their places, because He knows all about them; and the other is the equally calm and strange assumption of authority which He makes, in declaring that the least within the kingdom is greater than the greatest without. For the kingdom is embodied in Him, its King, and He claimed to have opened the door of entrance into it. The kingdom of God, or of heaven--an old Jewish idea--means, whatever else it means, an order of things in which the will of God is supreme. Jesus Christ says, I have come to make that real reign of God, in the hearts of men, possible and actual. So He presents Himself in these words as infinitely higher than the greatest within, or the greatest without the kingdom, and as being Himself the sovereign arbiter of men's claims to greatness. Greater than the greatest is He, the King; for if to be barely across the threshold stamps dignity upon a man, what shall we say of the conception of His own dignity which He formed who declared that He sat on the throne of that kingdom, and was its Monarch?

**I. The first thought that I suggest is the greatness of the little ones in the kingdom.**

As I have said, our Lord puts the whole emphasis of His classification on men's position. Inside all are great, greater than any that are outside. The least in the one order is greater than the greatest in the other. So, then, the question comes, How does a man step across that threshold? Our Lord evidently means the expression to be synonymous with His true disciples. We may avail ourselves, in considering how men come to be in the kingdom, of His own words. Once He said that unless we received it as little children, we should never be within it. There the blending of the two metaphors adds force and completeness to the thought. The kingdom is without us, and is offered to us; we must receive it as a gift, and it must come into us before we can be in it. The point of comparison between the recipients of the kingdom and little children does not lie in any sentimental illusions about the innocence of childhood, but in its dependence, in its absence of pretension, in its sense of clinging helplessness, in its instinctive trust. All these things in the child are natural, spontaneous, unreflecting, and therefore of no value. You and I have to think ourselves back to them, and to work ourselves back to them, and to fight ourselves back to them, and to strip off their opposites which gather round us in the course of our busy, effortful life. Then they become worth infinitely more than their instinctive analogues in the infant. The man's absence of pretension and consciousness of helplessness and dependent trust are beautiful and great, and through them the kingdom of God, with all its lights and glories, pours into his heart, and he himself steps into it, and becomes a true servant and subject of the King.

Then there is another word of the Master's, equally illuminative, as to how we pass into the kingdom, when He spoke to the somewhat patronising Pharisee that came to talk to Him by night, and condescended to give the young Rabbi a certificate of approval from the Sanhedrim, We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God. Christ's answer was, in effect, Knowing will not serve your turn. There is something more than that wanted: "Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."So, another condition of entering the kingdom--that is, of coming for myself into the attitude of lowly, glad submission to God's will--is the reception into our natures of a new life-principle, so that we are not only, like the men whom Christ compared with John, born of women, but by a higher birth are made partakers of a higher life, and born of the Spirit of God. These are the conditions--on our side the reception with humility, helplessness, dependent trust like those of children, on God's side the imparting, in answer to that dependence and trust, of a higher principle of life--these are the conditions on which we can pass out of the realm of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

This being so, then we have next to consider the greatness that belongs to the least of those who thus have crossed the threshold, and have come to exercise joyous submission to the will of God. The highest dignity of human nature, the loftiest nobility of which it is capable, is to submit to God's will. Man's chief end is to glorify God. There is nothing that leads life to such sovereign power as when we lay all our will at His feet, and say, Break, bend, mould, fashion it as Thou wilt. We are in a higher position when we are in God's hand. His tools and the pawns on His board, than we are when we are seeking to govern our lives at our pleasure. Dignity comes from submission, and they who keep God's commandments are the aristocracy of the world.

Then, further, there comes the thought that the greatness that belongs to the least of the little ones within the kingdom springs from their closer relation to the Saviour, whose work they more clearly know and more fully appropriate. It is often said that the Sunday-school child who can repeat the great text, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life, stands far above prophet, righteous man, and John himself. This is not exactly true, for knowledge of the truth is not what introduces into the kingdom; but it is true that the weakest, the humblest, the most ignorant amongst us, who grasps that truth of the God-sent Son whose death is the world's life, and who lives, therefore, nestling close to Jesus Christ, walks in a light far brighter than the twilight that shone upon the Baptist, or the yet dimmer rays that reached prophets and righteous men of old. It is not a question of character; it is a question of position. True greatness is regulated, by closeness to Jesus Christ, and by apprehension and appropriation of His work to myself. The dwarf on the shoulders of the giant sees further than the giant; and the least in the kingdom, being nearer to Jesus Christ than the men of old could ever be, because possessing the fuller revelation of God in Him, is greater than the greatest without. They who possess, even in germ, that new life-principle which comes in the measure of a man's faith in Christ, thereby are lifted above saints and martyrs and prophets of old. The humblest Christian grasps a fuller Christ, and therein possesses a fuller spiritual life, than did the ancient heroes of the faith. Christ's classification here says nothing about individual character. It says nothing about the question as to the possession of true religion or of spiritual life by the ancient saints, but it simply declares that because we have a completer revelation, we therefore, grasping that revelation, are in a more blessed position, God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. The lowest in a higher order is higher than the highest in a lower order. As the geologist digs down through the strata, and, as he marks the introduction of new types, declares that the lowest specimen of the mammalia is higher than the highest preceding of the reptiles or of the birds, so Christ says, He that is lowest in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Brethren! these thoughts should stimulate and should rebuke us that having so much we make so little use of it. We know God more fully, and have mightier motives to serve Him, and larger spiritual helps in serving Him than had any of the mighty men of old. We have a fuller revelation than Abraham had; have we a tithe of his faith? We have a mightier Captain of the Lord's host with us than stood before Joshua; have we any of his courage? We have a tenderer and fuller revelation of the Father than had psalmists of old; are our aspirations greater after God, whom we know so much better, than were theirs in the twilight of revelation? A savage with a shell and a knife of bone will make delicate carvings that put our workers, with their modern tools, to shame. A Hindoo, weaving in a shed, with bamboos for its walls and palm leaves for its roof, and a rude loom, the same as his ancestors used three thousand years ago, will turn out muslins that Lancashire machinery cannot rival. We are exalted in position, let us see to it that Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the saints, do not put us to shame, lest the greatest should become the guiltiest, and exaltation to heaven should lead to dejection to hell.

**II. Notice the littleness of the great ones in the kingdom.**

Our Lord here recognises the fact that there will be varieties of position, that there will be an outer and an inner court in the Temple, and an aristocracy in the kingdom. In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but of wood and of clay. When a man passes into the territory, it still remains an open question how far into the blessed depths of the land he will penetrate. Or, to put away the figure, if as Christian people we have laid hold of Jesus Christ, and in Him have received the kingdom and the new life-power, there still remains the question, how much and how faithfully we shall utilise the gifts, and what place in the earthly experience and manifestation of His kingdom we shall occupy. There are great and small within it.

So it comes to be a very important question for us all, how we may not merely be content, as so many of us are, with having scraped inside and just got both feet across the boundary line, but may become great in the kingdom. Let me answer that question in three sentences. The little ones in Christ's kingdom become great by the continual exercise of the same things which admitted them there at first. If greatness depends on position in reference to Jesus Christ, the closer we come to Him and the more we keep ourselves in loving touch and fellowship with Him, the greater in the kingdom we shall be. Again, the little ones in Christ's kingdom become great by self-forgetting service. He that will be great among you, let him be your minister. Self-regard dwarfs a man, self-oblivion magnifies him. If ever you come across, even in the walks of daily life, traces in people of thinking much of themselves, and of living mainly for themselves, down go these men in your estimation at once. Whether you have a beam of the same sort in your own eye or not, you can see the mote in theirs, and you lower your appreciation of them immediately. It is the same in Christ's kingdom, only in an infinitely loftier fashion. There, to become small is to become great. Again, the little ones in Christ's kingdom become great, not only by cleaving close to the Source of all greatness, and deriving thence a higher dignity by the suppression and crucifixion of self-esteem and self-regard, but by continual obedience to their Lord's commandment. As He said on the Sermon on the Mount, Whoso shall do and teach one of the least of these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. The higher we are, the more we are bound to punctilious obedience to the smallest injunction. The more we are obedient to the lightest of His commandments, the greater we become. Thus the least in the kingdom may become the greatest there, if only, cleaving close to Christ, he forgets himself, and lives for others, and does the Father's will.

**III. Lastly, I travel for a moment beyond my text, and note the perfect greatness of all in the perfected kingdom.**

The very notion of a kingdom of God established in reality, however imperfectly here on earth, demands that somewhere, and some time, and somehow, there should be an adequate, a universal and an eternal manifestation and establishment of it. If, here and now, dotted about over the world, there are men who, with much hindrance and many breaks in their obedience, are still the subjects of that realm, and trying to do the will of God, unless we are reduced to utter bewilderment intellectually, there must be a region in which that will shall be perfectly done, shall be continually done, shall be universally done. The obedience that we render to Him, just because it is broken by so much rebellion, slackened by so much indifference, hindered by so many clogs, hampered by so many limitations, points, by its attainments and its imperfections alike, to a region where the clogs and limitations and interruptions shall have all vanished, and the will of the Lord shall be the life and the light thereof.

So there rises up before us the fair prospect of that heavenly kingdom, in which all that here is interrupted and thwarted tendency shall have become realised effect.

That state must necessarily be a state of continual advance. For if greatness consists in apprehension and appropriation of Christ and His work, there are no limits to the possible expansion and assimilation of a human heart to Him, and the wealth of His glory is absolutely boundless. An infinite Christ to be assimilated, and an indefinite capacity of assimilation in us, make the guarantee that eternity shall see the growing progress of the subjects of the kingdom, in resemblance to the King.

If there is this endless progress, which is the only notion of heaven that clothes with joy and peace the awful thought of unending existence, then there will be degrees there too, and the old distinction of leastand greatestin the kingdom will subsist to the end. The army marches onwards, but they are not all abreast. They that are in front do not intercept any of the blessings or of the light that come to the rearmost files; and they that are behind are advancing and envy not those who lead the march.

Only let us remember, brother, that the distinction of least and great in the kingdom, in its imperfect forms on earth, is carried onwards into the kingdom in its perfect form into heaven. The highest point of our attainment here is the starting-point of our progress yonder. An entrance shall be ministered; it may be ministered abundantly, or we may be saved yet so as by fire. Let us see to it that, being least in our own eyes, we belong to the greatest in the kingdom. And that we may, let us hold fast by the Source of all greatness, Christ Himself, and so we shall be launched on a career of growing greatness, through the ages of eternity. To be joined to Him is greatness, however small the world may think us. To be separate from Him is to be small, though the hosannas of the world may misname us great.