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

**MATTHEW-013. THE NEW SINAI by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain: and when He was set, His disciples came unto Him: 2. And He opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. 5. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. 6. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. 7. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. 8. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. 9. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God, 10. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. 12. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. 13. Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be oast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. 14. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. 15. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. 16. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."*

*Matthew 5:1-16*

An unnamed mountain somewhere on the Sea of Galilee is the Sinai of the new covenant. The contrast between the savage desolation of the wilderness and the smiling beauty of the sunny slope near the haunts of men symbolises the contrast in the genius of the two codes, given from each. There God came down in majesty, and the cloud hid Him from the people's gaze; here Jesus sits amidst His followers, God with us. The King proclaims the fundamental laws of His kingdom, and reveals much of its nature by the fact that He begins by describing the characteristics of its subjects, as well as by the fact that the description is cast in the form of beatitudes.

We must leave unsettled the question as to the relation between the Sermon on the Mount and the shorter edition of part of it given by Luke, only pointing out that in this first part of Matthew's Gospel we are evidently presented with general summaries; as, for example, the summary of the Galilean ministry in the previous verses, and the grand procession of miracles which follows in chapters viii. and ix. It is therefore no violent supposition that here too the evangelist has brought together, as specimens of our Lord's preaching, words which were not all spoken at the same time. His description of the Galilean ministry in ch. 4:23, as teaching and healing, governs the arrangement of his materials from chapter 5. to the end of chapter 9. First comes the sermon, then the miracles follow.

The Beatitudes, as a whole, are a set of paradoxes to the mind of the flesh. They were meant to tear away the foolish illusions of the multitude as to the nature of the kingdom; and they must have disgusted and turned back many would-be sharers in it. They are like a dash of cold water on the fiery, impure enthusiasms which were eager for a kingdom of gross delights and vulgar conquest. And, no doubt, Jesus intended them to act like Gideon's test, and to sift out those whose appetite for carnal good was uppermost. But they were tests simply because they embodied everlasting truths as to the characters of His subjects. Our narrow space allows of only the most superficial treatment of these deep words.

**I. The foundation of all is laid in poverty of spirit.**

The word rendered poor does not only signify one in a condition of want, but rather one who is aware of the condition, and seeks relief. If we may refer to Latin words here, it is mendicus rather than pauper, a beggar rather than a poor man, who is meant. So that to be poor in spirit is to be in inmost reality conscious of need, of emptiness, of dependence on God, of demerit; the true estimate of self, as blind, evil, weak, is intended; the characteristic tone of feeling pointed to is self-abnegation, like that of the publican smiting his breast, or that of the disease-weakened, hunger-tortured prodigal, or that of the once self-righteous Paul, O wretched man that I am! People who do not like evangelical teaching sometimes say, Give me the Sermon on the Mount. So say I. Only let us take all of it; and if we do, we shall come, as we shall have frequent occasion to point out, in subsequent passages, to something uncommonly like the evangelical theology to which it is sometimes set up as antithetic. For Christ begins His portraiture of a citizen of the kingdom with the consciousness of want and sin. All the rest of the morality of the Sermon is founded on this. It is the root of all that is heavenly and divine in character. So this teaching is dead against the modern pagan doctrine of self-reliance, and really embodies the very principle for the supposed omission of which some folk like this Sermon; namely, that our proud self-confidence must be broken down before God can do any good with us, or we can enter His kingdom.

The promises attached to the Beatitudes are in each case the results which flow from the quality, rather than the rewards arbitrarily given for it. So here, the possession of the kingdom comes by consequence from poverty of spirit. Of course, such a kingdom as could be so inherited was the opposite of that which the narrow and fleshly nationalism of the Jews wanted, and these first words must have cooled many incipient disciples. The kingdom of heaven is the rule of God through Christ. It is present wherever wills bow to Him; it is future, as to complete realisation, in the heaven from which it comes, and to which, like its King, it belongs even while on earth. Obviously, its subjects can only be those who feel their dependence, and in poverty of spirit have cast off self-will and self-reliance. Theirs is the kingdom does not mean they shall rule, but of them shall be its subjects. True, they shall rule in the perfected form of it; but the first, and in a real sense the only, blessedness is to obey God; and that blessedness can only come when we have learned poverty of spirit, because we see ourselves as in need of all things.

**II. Each Beatitude springs from the preceding, and all twined together make an ornament of grace upon the neck, a chain of jewels.**

The second sounds a more violent paradox than even the first. Sorrowing is blessed. This, of course, cannot mean mere sorrow as such. That may or may not be a blessing. Grief makes men worse quite as often as it makes them better. Its waves often flow over us like the sea over marshes, leaving them as salt and barren as it found them. Nor is sorrow always sure of comfort. We must necessarily understand the word here so as to bring it into harmony with the context, and link it with the former Beatitude as flowing from it, as well as with the succeeding. The only intelligible explanation is that this sorrow arises from the contemplation of the same facts concerning self as lead to poverty of spirit, and is, in fact, the emotional side of the same disposition. He who takes the true measure of himself cannot but sorrow over the frightful gulf between what he should and might be and what he is, for he knows that there is more than misfortune or unavoidable creatural weakness at work. The grim reality of sin has to be reckoned in. Personal responsibility and guilt are facts. The soul that has once seen its own past as it is, and looked steadily down into the depths of its own being, cannot choose but mourn. Such contrition underlies all moral progress. The ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount puts these two, poverty of spirit and tears for sin, at the foundation. Do its admirers lay that fact to heart? This is Christ's account of discipleship. We have to creep through a narrow gate, which we shall not pass but on our knees and leaving all our treasures outside. But once through, we are in a great temple with far-reaching aisles and lofty roof. Such sorrow is sure of comfort. Other sorrow is not. The comfort it needs is the assurance of forgiveness and cleansing, and that assurance has never been sought from the King in vain. The comfort is filtered to us in drops here; it pours in a flood hereafter. Blessed the sorrow which leads to experience of the tender touch of the hand that wipes away tears from the face, and plucks evil from the heart! Blessed the mourning, which prepares for the festal garland and the oil of gladness and the robe of praise, instead of ashes on the head and sackcloth on the spirit!

**III. Meekness here seems to be considered principally as exercised to men, and it thus constitutes the first of the social virtues, which henceforward alternate with those having exclusive reference to God.**

It is the grace which opposes patient gentleness to hatred, injury, or antagonism. The prominence given to it in Christ's teaching is one of the peculiarities of Christian morals, and is a standing condemnation of much so-called Christianity. Pride and anger and self-assertion and retaliation flaunt in fine names, and are called manly virtues. Meekness is smiled at, or trampled on, and the men who exercise it are called Quakers and poor-spirited and chicken-hearted and the like. Social life among us is in flagrant contradiction of this Beatitude; and as for national life, all Christian nations agree that to apply Christ's precept to it would be absurd and suicidal. He said that the meek should inherit the earth; statesmen say that the only way to keep a country is to be armed to the teeth, and let no man insult its flag with impunity. There does not seem much room for a spirited foreign policy or for proper regard to one's own dignity inside this Beatitude, does there? But notice that this meekness naturally follows the preceding dispositions. He who knows himself and has learned the depth of his own evil will not be swift to blaze up at slights or wrongs. The true meekness is not mere natural disposition, but the direct outcome of poverty of spirit and the consequent sorrow. So, it is a test of their reality. Many a man will indulge in confessions of sin, and crackle up in sputtering heat of indignation at some slight or offence. If he does, his lowly words have had little meaning, and the benediction of these promises will come scantily to his heart.

Does Christ mean merely to say that meek men will acquire landed properly? Is there not a present inheritance of the earth by them, though they may not own a foot of it? They have the world who enjoy it, whom it helps nearer God, who see Him in it, to whom it is the field for service and the means for growing character. But in the future the kingdom of heaven will be a kingdom of the earth, and the meek saints shall reign with the King who is meek and lowly of heart.

**IV. Righteousness is conformity to the will of God, or moral perfection.**

Hunger and thirst are energetic metaphors for passionate desire, and imply that righteousness is the true nourishment of the Spirit. Every longing of a noble spirit is blessed. Aspiration after the unreached is the salt of all lofty life. It is better to be conscious of want than to be content. There are hungers which are all unblessed, greedy appetites for the swine's husks, which are misery when unsatisfied, and disgust when satiated. But we are meant to be righteous, and shall not in vain desire to be so. God never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them. Such longings prophesy their fruition.

Notice that this hunger follows the experience of the former Beatitudes. It is the issue of poverty of spirit and of that blessed sorrow. Observe, too, that the desire after, and not the possession or achievement of, righteousness is blessed. Is not this the first hint of the Christian teaching that we do not work out or win but receive it? God gives it. Our attitude towards that gift should be earnest longing. Such a blessed hungerer shall receive ... righteousness from the God of his salvation. The certainty that he will do so rests at last on the faithfulness of God, who cannot but respond to all desires which He inspires. They are premonitions of His purposes, like rosy clouds that run before the chariot of the sunrise. The desire to be righteous is already righteousness in heart and will, and reveals the true bent of the soul. Its realisation in life is a question of time. The progressive fulfilment here points to completeness in heaven, when we shall behold His face in righteousness, and be satisfied when we awake in His likeness.

**V. Again we have a grace which is exercised to men.**

Mercy is more than meekness. That implied opposition, and was largely negative. This does not regard the conduct of others at all, and is really love in exercise to the needy, especially the unworthy. It embraces pity, charitable forbearance, beneficence, and is revealed in acts, in words, in tears. It is blessed in itself. A life of selfishness is hell; a life of mercy is sweet with some savour of heaven. It is the consequence of mercy received from God. Poverty of spirit, sorrow, hunger after righteousness bring deep experiences of God's gentle forbearance and bestowing love, and will make us like Him in proportion as they are real. Our mercifulness, then, is a reflection from His. His ought to be the measure and pattern of ours in depth, scope, extent of self-sacrifice, and freeness of its gifts. A stringent requirement!

Our exercise of mercy is the condition of our receiving it. On the whole, the world gives us back, as a mirror does, the reflection of our own faces; and merciful men generally get what they give. But that is a law with many exceptions, and Jesus means more than that. Merciful men get mercy from God--not, of course, that we deserve mercy by being merciful. That is a contradiction in terms; for mercy is precisely that which we do not deserve. The place of mercy in this series shows that Jesus regarded it as the consequence, not the cause, of our experience of God's mercy. But He teaches over and over again that a hard, unmerciful heart forfeits the divine mercy. It does so, because such a disposition tends to obscure the very state of mind to which alone God's mercy can be given. Such a man must have forgotten his poverty and sorrow, his longings and their rich reward, and so must have, for the time, passed from the place where he can take in God's gift. A life inconsistent with Christian motives will rob a Christian of Christian privileges. The hand on his brother's throat destroys the servant's own forgiveness. He cannot be at once a rapacious creditor and a discharged bankrupt.

**VI. If detached from its connection, there is little blessedness in the next Beatitude.**

What is the use of telling us how happy purity of heart will make us? It only provokes the despairing question, And how am I to be pure? But when we set this word in its place here, it does bring hope. For it teaches that purity is the result of all that has gone before, and comes from that purifying which is the sure answer of God to our poverty, mourning, and longing. Such purity is plainly progressive, and as it increases, so does the vision of God grow. The more the glasses of the telescope are cleansed, the brighter does the great star shine to the gazer. No man hath seen God, nor can see Him, either amid the mists of earth or in the cloudless sky of heaven, if by seeing we mean perceiving by sense, or full, direct comprehension by spirit. But seeing Him is possible even now, if by it we understand the knowledge of His character, the assurance of His presence, the sense of communion with Him. Our earthly consciousness of God may become so clear, direct, real, and certain, that it deserves the name of vision. Such blessed intuition of Him is the prerogative of those whose hearts Christ has cleansed, and whose inward eye is therefore able to behold God, because it is like Him. Unless the eye were sunlike, how could it see the sun? We can blind ourselves to Him, by wallowing in filth. Impurity unfits for seeing purity. Swedenborg profoundly said that the wicked see only blackness where the sun is.

Like all these Beatitudes, this has a double fulfilment, as the kingdom has two stages of here and hereafter. Purity of heart is the condition of the vision of God in heaven. Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord. The sight makes us pure, and purity makes us see. Thus heaven will be a state of ever-increasing, reciprocally acting sight and holiness. Like Him because we see Him, we shall see Him more because we have assimilated what we see, as the sunshine opens the petals, and tints the flower with its own colours the more deeply, the wider it opens.

**VII. Once more we have the alternation of a grace exercised to men.**

If we give due weight to the order of these Beatitudes, we shall feel that Christ's peacemaker must be something more than a mere composer of men's quarrels. For he has to be trained by all the preceding experiences, and has to be emptied of self, penitent, hungering for and filled with righteousness, and therefore pure in heart as well as, in regard to men, meek and merciful, ere he can hope to fill this part. That apprenticeship deepens the conception of the peace which Christ's subjects are to diffuse. It is, first and chiefly, the peace which enters the soul that has traversed all these stages; that is to say, the Christian peacemaker is first to seek to bring about peace between men and God, by beseeching them to be reconciled to Him, and then afterwards, as a consequence of this, is to seek to diffuse through all human relations the blessed unity and amity which flow most surely from the common possession of the peace of God. Of course, the relation which the subjects of the true King bear to all wars and fightings, to all discord and strife, is not excluded, but is grounded on this deeper meaning. The centuries that have passed since the words were spoken, have not yet brought up the Christian conscience to the full perception of their meaning and obligation. Too many of us still believe that great doors and effectual can be blown open with gunpowder, and regard this Beatitude as a counsel of perfection, rather than as one of the fundamental laws of the kingdom.

The Christian who moves thus among men seeking to diffuse everywhere the peace with God which fills his own soul, and the peace with all men which they only who have the higher peace can preserve unbroken in their quiet, meek hearts, will be more or less recognised as God-like by men, and will have in his own heart the witness that he is called by God His child. He will bear visibly the image of his Father, and will hear the voice that speaks to him too as unto a son.

**VIII. The last Beatitude crowns all the paradoxes of the series with what sounds to flesh as a stark contradiction.**

The persecuted are blessed. The previous seven sayings have perfected the portraiture of what a child of the kingdom is to be. This appends a calm prophecy, which must have shattered many a rosy dream among the listeners, of what his reception by the world will certainly turn out. Jesus is not summoning men to dominion, honour, and victory; but to scorn and suffering. His own crown, He knew, was first to be twisted of thorns, and copies of it were to wound His followers brows. Yet even that fate was blessed; for to suffer for righteousness, which is to suffer for Him, brings elevation of spirit, a solemn joy, secret supplies of strength, and sweet intimacies of communion else unknown. The noble army of martyrs rose before His thoughts as He spoke; and now, eighteen hundred years after, heaven is crowded with those who by axe and stake and gibbet have entered there. The glory dies not, and the grief is past. They stoop from their thrones to witness to us that Christ is true, and that the light affliction has wrought an eternal weight of glory.