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

**MATTHEW-014. THE FIRST BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*Matthew 5:2*

Ye are not come unto the mount that burned with fire, nor unto the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of "awful" words. With such accompaniments the old law was promulgated, but here, in this Sermon on the Mount, as it is called, the laws of the Kingdom are proclaimed by the King Himself; and He does not lay them down with the sternness of those written on tables of stone. No rigid thou shalt compels, no iron thou shalt not forbids; but each precept is linked with a blessing, and every characteristic that is required is enforced by the thought that it contributes to our highest good. It fitted well Christ's character and the lips into which grace is poured, that He spake His laws under the guise of these Beatitudes.

This, the first of them, is dead in the teeth of flesh and sense, a paradox to the men who judge good and evil by things external and visible, but deeply, everlastingly, unconditionally, and inwardly true. All that the world commends and pats on the back, Christ condemns, and all that the world shrinks from and dreads, Christ bids us make our own, and assures us that in it we shall find our true blessing. The poor in spirit, they are the happy men.

The reason for the benediction is as foreign to law and earthly thoughts as is the benediction of which it is the reason--for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Poverty of spirit will not further earthly designs, nor be an instrument for what the world calls success and prosperity. But it will give us something better than earth, it will give us heaven. Do you think that that is better than earth, and should you be disposed to acquiesce in the benediction of those who may lose the world's gifts but are sure to have heaven's felicities?

Now, I think I shall best deal with these words by considering, most simply, the fundamental characteristic of a disciple of Jesus Christ, and the blessed issues of that character.

**I. First, then, the fundamental characteristic of Christ's disciples.**

Now it is to be noticed that Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which is much briefer than Matthew's, omits the words in spirit, and so seems at first sight to be an encomium and benediction upon the outward condition of earthly poverty. Matthew, on the other hand, says poor in spirit. And the difference between the two evangelists has given occasion to some to maintain that one or the other of them misunderstood Christ's meaning, and modified His expression either by omission or enlargement. But if you will notice another difference between the two forms of the saying in the two Gospels, you will, I think, find an explanation of the one already referred to; for Matthew's Beatitudes are general statements, Blessed are; and Luke's are addressed to the circle of the disciples, Blessed are ye. And if we duly consider that difference, we shall see that the general statement necessarily required the explanation which Matthew's version appends to it, in order to prevent the misunderstanding that our Lord was setting so much store by earthly conditions as to suppose that virtue and blessedness were uniformly attached to any of these. Jesus Christ was no vulgar demagogue flattering the poor and inveighing against the rich. Luke's ye poor shows at once that Christ was not speaking about all the poor in outward condition, but about a certain class of such. No doubt the bulk of His disciples were poor men who had been drawn or driven by their sense of need to open their hearts to Him. Outward poverty is a blessing if it drives men to God; it is not a blessing if, as is often the case, it drives men from Him; or if, as is still oftener the case, it leaves men negligent of Him. So that Matthew's enlargement is identical in meaning with Luke's condensed form, regard being had to the difference in the structure of the two Beatitudes.

And so we come just to this question--What is this poverty of spirit? I do not need to waste your time in saying what it is not. To me it seems to be a lowly and just estimate of ourselves, our character, our achievements, based upon a clear recognition of our own necessities, weaknesses, and sins.

The poor in spirit.--I wonder if it would be very reasonable for a moth that flits about the light, or a gnat that dances its hour in the sunbeam, to be proud because it had longer wings, or prettier markings on them, than some of its fellows? Is it much more reasonable for us to plume ourselves on, and set much store by, anything that we are or have done? Two or three plain questions, to which the answers are quite as plain, ought to rip up this swollen bladder of self-esteem which we are all apt to blow. What hast thou that thou hast not received? Where did you get it? How came you by it? How long is it going to last? Is it such a very big thing after all? You have written a book; you are clever as an operator, an experimenter; you are a successful student. You have made a pile of money; you have been prosperous in your earthly career, and can afford to look upon men that are failures and beneath you in social position with a smile of pity or of contempt, as the case may be. Well! I suppose the distance to the nearest fixed star is pretty much the same from the top of one ant-hill in a wood as from the top of the next one, though the one may be a foot higher than the other. I suppose that we have all come out of nothing, and are anything, simply because God is everything. If He were to withhold His upholding and inbreathing power from any of us for one moment, we should shrivel into nothingness like a piece of paper calcined in the fire, and go back into that vacuity out of which His fiat, and His fiat alone, called us. And yet here we are, setting great store, some of us, by our qualities or belongings, and thinking ever so much of ourselves because we possess them, and all the while we are but great emptinesses; and the things of which we are so proud are what God has poured into us.

You think that is all commonplace. Bring it into your lives, brethren; apply it to your estimate of yourselves, and your expectations from other people, and you will be delivered from a large part of the annoyances and the miseries of your present.

But the deepest reason for a habitual and fixed lowly opinion of ourselves lies in a sadder fact. We are not only recipient nothingnesses; we have something that is our own, and that is our will, and we have lifted it up against God. And if a man's position as a dependent creature should take all lofty looks and high spirit out of him, his condition as a sinful man before God should lay him flat on his face in the presence of that Majesty; and should make him put his hand on his lips and say, from behind the covering, Unclean! unclean! Oh, brethren, if we would only go down into the depths of our own hearts, every one of us would find there more than enough to make all self-complacency and self-conceit utterly impossible, as it ought to be, for us for ever. I have no wish, and God knows I have no need, to exaggerate about this matter; but we all know that if we were turned inside out, and every foul, creeping thing, and every blotch and spot upon these hearts of ours spread in the light, we could not face one another; we could scarcely face ourselves. If you or I were set, as they used to set criminals, up in a pillory with a board hanging round our necks, telling all the world what we were, and what we had done, there would be no need for rotten eggs to be flung at us; we should abhor ourselves. You know that is so. I know that it is so about myself, and heart answereth to heart as in a glass. And are we the people to perk ourselves up amongst our fellows, and say, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing? Do we not know that we are poor and miserable and blind and naked? Oh, brethren, the proud old saying of the Greeks, Know thyself, if it were followed out unflinchingly and honestly by the purest saint this side heaven, would result in this profound abnegation of all claims, in this poverty of spirit.

So little has the world been influenced by Christ's teaching that it uses poor-spirited creature as a term of opprobrium and depreciation. It ought to be the very opposite; for only the man who has been down into the dungeons of his own character, and has cried unto God out of the depths, will be able to make the house of his soul a fabric which may be a temple of God, and with its shining apex may pierce the clouds and seem almost to touch the heavens. A great poet has told us that the things which lead life to sovereign power are self-knowledge, self-reverence, and self-control. And in a noble sense it is true, but the deepest self-knowledge will lead to self-abhorrence rather than to self-reverence; and self-control is only possible when, knowing our own inability to cope with our own evil, we cast ourselves on that Lamb of God who beareth away the sin of the world, and ask Him to guide and to keep us. The right attitude for us is, He did not so much as lift up his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. And then, sweeter than angels voices fluttering down amid the blue, there will come that gracious word, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

**II. Turn, now, to the blessed issues of this characteristic.**

Christ does not say joyful, mirthful, glad. These are poor, vulgar words by the side of the depth and calmness and permanence which are involved in that great word blessed. It is far more than joy, which may be turbulent and is often impure. It is far deeper than any gladness which has its sources in the outer world, and it abides when joys have vanished, and all the song-birds of the spring are silent in the winter of the soul. Blessed are the poor ... for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The bulk of the remaining Beatitudes point onward to a future; this deals with the present. It does not say shall be, but is the Kingdom. It is an all-comprehensive promise, holding the succeeding ones within itself, for they are but diverse aspects--modified according to the necessities which they supply--of that one encyclopæ¤©a of blessings, the possession of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now the Kingdom of Heaven (or of God) is a state in which the will of God is absolutely and perfectly obeyed. It is capable of partial realisation here, and is sure of complete fulfilment hereafter. To the early hearers of these words the phrase would necessarily suggest the idea which bulked so large in prophecy and in Judaism, of the Messianic Kingdom; and we may well lay hold of that thought to suggest the first of the elements of this blessedness. That poverty of spirit is blessed because it is an indispensable condition of becoming Christ's men and subjects. I believe, dear friends, for my part, that the main reason why so many of us are not out-and-out Christian men and women, having entered really into that Kingdom which is obedience to God in Christ, is because we have a superficial knowledge, or no knowledge at all, of our own sinful condition, and of the gravity of that fact. Intellectually, I take it that an under-estimate of the universality and of the awfulness of sin has a great deal to do in shaping all the maimed, imperfect, partial views of Christ, His character and nature, which afflict the world. It is the mother of most of our heresies. And, practically, if you do not feel any burden, you do not care to hear about One who will carry it. If you have no sense of need, the message that there is a supply will fall perfectly ineffectual upon your ears. If you have not realised the truth that whatever else you may be, of which you might be proud--wise, clever, beautiful, accomplished, rich, prosperous--you have this to take all the self-conceit out of you, that you are a sinful man--if you have not realised that, it will be no gospel to you that Jesus Christ has died, the just for the unjust, and lives to cleanse us.

Brethren, there is only one way into the true and full possession of Christ's salvation, and that is through poverty of spirit. It is the narrow door, like the mere low slits in the wall which in ancient times were the access to some wealth-adorned palace or stately structure--narrow openings that a man had to stoop his lofty crest in order to enter. If you have never been down on your knees before God, feeling what a wicked man or woman you are, I doubt hugely whether you will ever stand with radiant face before God, and praise Him through eternity for His mercy to you. If you wish to have Christ for yours, you must begin, where He begins His Beatitudes, with poverty of spirit.

It is blessed because it invites the riches of God to come and make us wealthy. It draws towards itself communication of God's infinite self, with all His quickening and cleansing and humbling powers. Grace is attracted by the sense of need, just as the lifted finger of the lightning rod brings down fire from heaven. The heights are barren; it is in the valleys that rivers run, and flowers bloom. God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. If we desire to have Him, who is the one source of all blessedness, in our hearts, as a true possession, we must open the door for His entrance by poverty of spirit. Desire brings fulfilment; and they who know their wants, and only they, will truly long that they may be supplied.

This poverty of spirit is blessed because it is its own reward. All self-esteem and self-complacency are like a hedgehog, as some one has said, rolled up the wrong way, tormenting itself with its prickles. And the man that is always, or often, thinking how much above A, B, or C he is, and how much A, B, or C ought to offer of incense to him, is sure to get more cuffs than compliments, more enmity than affection; and will be sore all over with wounded vanities of all sorts. But if we have learned ourselves, and have departed from these lofty thoughts, then to be humble in spirit is to be wise, cheerful, contented, simple, restful in all circumstances. You remember John Bunyan's shepherd boy, down in the valley of humiliation. Heart's-ease grew there, and his song was, He that is low need fear no fall. If we have this true, deep-rooted poverty of spirit, we shall be below the tempest, which will go clean over our heads. The oaks catch the lightnings; the grass and the primroses are unscorched. The day of the Lord shall be upon all high things, and the loftiness of men shall be brought low.

So, dear brethren, blessedness is not to be found outside us. We need not ask who shall go up into the heavens, or who shall descend into the deep, to bring it. It is in thee, if at all. Christ teaches us that the sources of all true blessedness are within us; there or nowhere is Eden. If we have the tempers and dispositions set forth in these Beatitudes, condition matters but very little. If the source of all blessedness is within us, the first step to it all is poverty of spirit. Be ye clothed with humility. The Master girt Himself with the servant's towel, and His disciples are to copy Him who said: Take My yoke upon you... . I am meek and lowly in heart ... and ye shall find rest--and is not that blessedness?--ye shall find rest unto your souls.