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

**MATTHEW-015. THE SECOND BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."*

*Matthew 5:4*

An ordinary superficial view of these so-called Beatitudes is that they are simply a collection of unrelated sayings. But they are a great deal more than that. There is a vital connection and progress in them. The jewels are not flung down in a heap; they are wreathed into a chain, which whosoever wears shall have an ornament of grace about his neck. They are an outgrowth from a common root; stages in the evolution of Christian character.

Now, I tried to show in the former sermon how the root of them all is the poverty of spirit which is spoken of in the preceding verse; and how it really does lie at the foundation of the highest type of human character, and in its very self is sure of possessing the Kingdom of Heaven. And now I turn to the second of these Beatitudes. Like all the others, it is a paradox, for it starts from a wholly different conception from the common one, of what is man's chief good. If the aims which usually engross us are really the true aims of life, then there is no meaning in this saying of our Lord, for then it had been better not to sorrow at all than to sorrow and be comforted. But if the true purpose for which we are all gifted with this solemn gift of life is that we may become imitators of God as dear children, then there are few things for which men should be more thankful than the sacred sorrow, than which there are few instruments more powerful for creating the type of character which we are set here to make our own. All lofty, dignified, serious thinkers and poets (who for the most of men are the best teachers) had spoken this same thought as well as Christ. But He speaks it with a difference all His own, which deepens incalculably its solemnity, and sets the truth of the otherwise sentimental saying, which flies often in the face of human nature, upon immovable foundations.

Let me ask you, then, to look with me, in the simplest possible way, at the two thoughts of our text, as to who are the mourners that are blessed, and as to what is the consolation that they receive.

**I. The mourners who are blessed.**

Blessed are they that mourn. Ah! that is not a universal bliss. All mourners are not blessed. It would be good news, indeed, to a world so full of miseries that men sometimes think it were better not to be, and holding so many wrecked and broken hearts, if every sorrow had its benediction. But just as we saw in the preceding discourse that the poverty which Christ pronounced blessed is not mere straitness of circumstances, or lack of material wealth, so here the sorrow, round the head of which He casts this halo of glory, is not that which springs from the mere alteration of external circumstances, or from any natural causes. The influence of the first saying runs through all the Beatitudes, and since it is the poor in spirit who are there pronounced happy, so here we must go far deeper than mere outward condition, in order to find the ground of the benediction pronounced. Let us be sure, to begin with, of this, that no condition, be it of wealth or woe, is absolutely and necessarily good, but that the seat of all true blessedness lies within, in the disposition which rightly meets the conditions which God sends.

So I would say, first, that the mourners whom Christ pronounces blessed are those who are poor in spirit. The mourning is the emotion which follows upon that poverty. The one is the recognition of the true estimate of our own characters and failings; the other is the feeling that follows upon that recognition. The one is the prophet's clear-sighted I am a man of unclean lips; the other is the same prophet's contemporaneous wail, Woe is me, for I am undone!

And surely, brethren, if you and I have ever had anything like a glimpse of what we really are, and have brought ourselves into the light of God's face, and have pondered upon our characters and our doings in that--not fierce but all-searching, light that flashes from Him, there can be no attitude, no disposition, more becoming the best, the purest, the noblest of us, than that Woe is me, for I am undone!

Oh, dear friends, if--not as a theological term, but as a clinging, personal fact--we realise what sin against God is, what must necessarily come from it, what aggravations His gentleness, His graciousness, His constant beneficence cause, how facilely we do the evil thing and then wipe our lips and say, We have done no harm, we should be more familiar than we are with the depths of this experience of mourning for sin.

I cannot too strongly urge upon you my own conviction--it may be worth little, but I am bound to speak it--that there are few things which the so-called Christianity of this day needs more than an intenser realisation of the fact, and the gravity of the fact, of personal sinfulness. There lies the root of the shallowness of so much that calls itself Christianity in the world to-day. It is the source of almost all the evils under which the Church is groaning. And sure I am that if millions of the people that complacently put themselves down in the census as Christians could but once see themselves as they are, and connect their conduct with God's thought about it, they would get shocks that would sober them. And sure I am that if they do not thus see themselves here and now, they will one day get shocks that will stupefy them. And so, dear friends, I urge upon you, as I would upon myself, as the foundation and first step towards all the sunny heights of God-likeness and blessedness, to go down, down deep into the hidden corners, and see how, like the elders of Israel whom the prophet beheld in the dark chamber, we worship creeping things, abominable things, lustful things, in the recesses within. And then we shall possess more of that poverty of spirit, and the conscious recognition of our own true character will merge into the mourning which is altogether blessed.

Now, note, again, how such sorrow will refine and ennoble character. How different our claims upon other men would be if we possessed this sober, saddened estimate of what we really are! How our petulance, and arrogance, and insisting upon what is due to us of respect and homage and deference would all disappear! How much more rigid would be our guard upon ourselves, our own emotions, our own inclinations and tastes! How much more lenient would be our judgment of the openly and confessedly naughty ones, who have gone a little further in act, but not an inch further in essence, than we have done! How different our attitude to our fellows; and how lowly our attitude to God! Such sorrow would sober us, would deliver us from our lusting after the gauds of earth, would make us serious and reflective, would bring us to that sad, wise valour which is the conquering characteristic of humanity.

There is nothing more contemptible than the lives which, for want of this self-knowledge, foam away in idle mirth, and effervesce in what the world calls high spirits.

There is no music in the life

That sounds with idiot laughter solely,

There's not a string attuned to mirth

But has its chords in melancholy.

So said one whose reputation in English literature is mainly that of a humorist. He had learned that the only noble humanity is that in which the fountains of laughter and of tears lie so close together that their waters intermingle. I beseech you not to confound the laughter of fools, which is the crackling of thorns under the pot, with the true, solemn, ennobling gladness which lives along with this sorrow of my text.

Further, such mourning infused into the sorrow that comes from external disasters will make it blessed too. As I have said, there is nothing in any condition of life which necessarily and universally makes it blessed. Though poets and moralists and Christian people have talked a great deal, and beautifully and truly, about the sanctifying and sweetening influences of calamity, do not let us forget that there are perhaps as many people made worse by their sorrows as are made better by them. There is such a thing as being made sullen, hard, selfish, negligent of duty, resentful against God, hopeless, by the pressure of our calamities. Blessed be God, there is such a thing as being drawn to Him by them! Then they, too, come within the sweep of this benediction of the Master, and outward distress is glorified into the sorrow which is blessed. A drop or two of this tincture, the mourning which comes from poverty of spirit, slipped into the cup of affliction, clears and sweetens the waters, and makes them a tonic bitter. Brethren, if our outward losses and disappointments and pains help us to apprehend, and are accepted by us in the remembrance of, our own unworthiness, then these, too, are God's sweet gifts to us.

One word more. This mourning is perfectly compatible with, and indeed is experienced in its purest form only along with, the highest and purest joy. I have been speaking about the indispensable necessity of such sadness for all noble life. But let us remember, on the other hand, that no one has so much reason to be glad as he has who, in poverty of spirit, has clasped and possesses the wealth of the Kingdom. And if a man, side by side with this profound and saddened sense of his own sinfulness, has not a hold of the higher thing--Christ's righteousness given to penitence and faith--then his knowledge of his own unworthiness is still too shallow to inherit a benediction. There is no reason why, side by side in the Christian heart, there should not lie--there is every reason why there should lie--these two emotions, not mutually discrepant and contradictory, but capable of being blended together--the mourning which is blessed, and the joy which is unspeakable and full of glory.

**II. And now a word or two with regard to the consolation which such mourning is sure to receive.**

It is not true, whatever sentimentalists may say, that all sorrow is comforted and therefore blessed. It may be forgotten. Pain may sting less; men may betake themselves to trivial, or false, unworthy, low alleviations, and fancy that they are comforted when they are only diverted. But the sorrow meant in my text necessarily ensures for every man who possesses it the consolation which follows. That consolation is both present and future.

As for the present, the mourning which is based, as our text bases it, on poverty of spirit, will certainly bring after it the consolation of forgiveness arid of cleansing. Christ's gentle hand laid upon us, to cause our guilt to pass away, and the inveterate habits of inclination towards evil to melt out of our nature, is His answer to His child's cry, Woe is me, for I am undone! And anything is more probable than that Christ, hearing a man thus complain of himself before Him, should fail to send His swift answer.

Ah, brethren! you will never know how deep and ineffably precious are the consolations which Christ can give, unless you have learned despair of self, and have come helpless, hopeless, and yet confident, to that great Lord. Make your hearts empty, and He will fill them; recognise your desperate condition, and He will lift you up. The deeper down we go into the depths, the surer is the rebound and the higher the soaring to the zenith. It is they who have poverty of spirit, and mourning based upon it, and only they, who pass into the sweetest, sacredest, secretest recesses of Christ's heart, and there find all-sufficient consolation.

In like manner, that consolation will come in its noblest and most sufficing form to those who take their outward sorrows and link them with this sense of their own ill-desert. Oh, dear friends, if I am speaking to any one who to-day has a burdened heart, let such be sure of this, that the way to consolation lies through submission; and that the way to submission lies through recognition of our own sin. If we will only lie still, let Him strike home, and bless the rod, the rod will blossom and bear fruit. The water of the cataract would not flash into rainbow tints against the sunshine, unless it had been dashed into spray against black rocks. And if we will but say with good old Dr. Watts,

When His strokes are felt,

His strokes are fewer than our crimes,

And lighter than our guilt,'

it will not be hard to bow down and say, Thy will be done, and with submission consolation will be ours.

Is there anything to say about that future consolation? Very little, for we know very little. But God Himself shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. The hope of that consolation is itself consolation, and the hope becomes all the more bright when we know and measure the depths of our own evil. Earth needs to be darkened in order that the magic, ethereal beauty of the glow in the western heavens may be truly seen. The sorrow of earth is the background on which the light of heaven is painted.

So, dear friends, be sure of this, that the one thing which ought to move a man to sadness is his own character. For all other causes of grief are instruments for good. And be sure of this, too, that the one thing which can ensure consolation adequate to the grief is bringing the grief to the Lord Christ and asking Him to deal with it. His first word of ministry ran parallel with these two Beatitudes. When He spoke them He began with poverty of spirit, and passed to mourning and consolation, and when He opened His lips in the synagogue of Nazareth He began with, The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the poor, to give unto them that mourn in Zion a diadem for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.