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

**MATTHEW-018. THE FIFTH BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."*

*Matthew 5:7*

The divine simplicity of the Beatitudes covers a divine depth, both in regard to the single precepts and to the sequence of the whole. I have already pointed out that the first of the series Is to be regarded as the root and germ of all the subsequent ones. If for a moment we set it aside and consider only the fruits which are successively developed from it, we shall see that the remaining members of the sequence are arranged in pairs, of which each contains, first, a characteristic more inward and relating to the deep things of individual religion; and, second, a characteristic which has its field of action in our relations to men. For example, the mourners and the meek are paired. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness and the merciful are paired. The pure in heart and the peacemakers are paired.

Now that sequence can scarcely be accidental. It is the application in detail of the great principle which our Lord endorsed in its Old Testament form when He said that the first great commandment, the love of God, had a companion consequent on and like unto it, the love of our neighbour. Religion without beneficence, and beneficence without religion, are equally maimed. The one is a root without fruit, and the other a fruit without a root. The selectest emotions, the lowliest faith, the loftiest aspirations, the deepest consciousness of one's own unworthiness--these priceless elements of personal religion--are of little worth unless there are inseparably linked with them meekness, mercifulness, and peacemaking. What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. If any Christian people have neglected the service of man for the worship of God, they are flying in the face of Christ's teaching. If any antagonists of Christianity attack it on the ground that it fosters such neglect, they mistake the system that they criticise, and are judging it by the imperfect practice of the disciples instead of by the perfect precepts of the Master.

So, then, here we have a characteristic lodged in the very heart of this series of Beatitudes which refers wholly to our demeanour to one another. My remarks now will, therefore, be of a very homely, commonplace, and practical kind.

**I. Note the characteristic on which our Lord here pours out His blessing--Mercy.**

Now, like all the other members of this sequence, with the exception, perhaps, of the last, this quality refers to disposition much rather than to action. Conduct is included, of course; but conduct only secondarily. Jesus Christ always puts conduct second, as all wise and great teachers do. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. That is the keynote of all noble morality. And none has ever carried it out more thoroughly than has the morality of the Gospel. It is a poor translation and limitation of this great word which puts in the foreground merely merciful actions. The mercifulness of my text is, first and foremost, a certain habitual way of looking at and feeling towards men, especially to men in suffering and need, and most especially to men who have proved themselves bad and blameworthy. It is implied that a rigid retribution would lead to severer methods of judgment and of action.

Therefore the first characteristic of the merciful man is that he is merciful in his judgments; not making the worst of people, no Devil's Advocate in his estimates of his fellows; but, endlessly, and, as the world calls it, foolishly and incredibly, gentle in his censures, and ever ready to take the charitable--which is generally the truer--construction of acts and motives. That is a very threadbare thought, brother, but the way to invest commonplace with startling power is to bring it into immediate connection with our own life and conduct. And if you will try to walk by this threadbare commonplace for a week, I am mistaken if you do not find out that it has teeth to bite and a firm grip to lay upon you. Threadbare truth is not effete until it is obeyed, and when we try to obey it, it ceases to be commonplace.

Again, I may remind you that this mercifulness, which is primarily an inward emotion, and a way, as I said, of thinking of, and of looking at, unworthy people, must necessarily, of course, find its manifestation in our outward conduct. And there will be, what I need not dilate upon, a readiness to help, to give, to forgive not only offences against society and morality, but offences against ourselves.

I need not dwell longer upon this first part of my subject. I wished mainly to emphasise that to begin with action, in our understanding of mercifulness, is a mistake; and that we must clear our hearts of antipathies, and antagonisms, and cynical suspicions, if we would inherit the blessings of our text.

Before I go further, I would point out the connection between this incumbent duty of mercifulness and the preceding virtue of meekness. It is hard enough to bear the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes, without one spot of red in the cheek, one perturbation or flush of anger in the heart; and to do that might task us all to the utmost. But that is not all that Christ's ethics require of us. It is not sufficient to exercise the passive virtue of meekness; there must be the active one of mercifulness. And to call for that is to lay an additional weight upon our consciences, and to strain and stretch still further the obligation under which we come. We have not done what the worst men and our most malicious enemies have a right to receive from us when we say, with the cowardly insincerity of the world, I can forgive but I cannot forget. That is no forgiveness, and that is no mercifulness It is not enough to stand still, unresisting. There must be a hand of helpfulness stretched out, and a gush of pity and mercifulness in the heart, if we are to do what our Master has done for us all, and what our Master requires us to do for one another. Mercifulness is the active side of the passive meekness.

Further, in a word, I would note here another thing, and that is--what a sad, stern, true view of the condition of men in the world results from noticing that the only three qualities in regard to our relation to them which Christ sets in this sevenfold tiara of diamonds are meekness in the face of hatred and injustice; mercifulness in the face of weakness and wickedness; peacemaking in the face of hostility and wrangling. What a world in which we have to live, where the crowning graces are those which presuppose such vices as do these! Ah! dear friends, as sheep in the midst of wolves is true to-day. And the one conquering power is patient gentleness, which recompenses all evil with good, and is the sole means of transforming and thus overcoming it.

People talk a great deal, and a good deal of it very insincerely, about their admiration for these precepts gathered together in this chapter. If they would try to live them for a fortnight, they would perhaps pause a little longer than some of them do before they said, as do people that detest the theology of the New Testament, The Sermon on the Mount is my religion. Is it? It does not look very like it. At all events, if it is, it is a religion behind which practice most wofully limps.

**II. Let me ask you to look at what I have already in part referred to--the place in this series which Mercifulness holds.**

Now, of course, I know, and nothing that I say now is to be taken for a moment as questioning or underestimating it, that, altogether apart from religion, there is interwoven into the structure of human nature that sentiment of mercifulness which our Lord here crowns with His benediction. But it is not that natural, instinctive sentiment--which is partially unreliable, and has little power apart from the reinforcement of higher thoughts to carry itself consistently through life--that our Lord is here speaking about; but it is a mercifulness which is more than an instinct, more than a sentiment, more than the natural answer of the human heart to the sight of compassion and distress, which is, in fact, the product of all that has preceded it in this linked chain of characteristics and their blessings.

And so I ask you to recall these. Poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness--these are the springs that feed the flow of this river; and if it be not fed from them, but from the surface-waters of human sentiment and instinct, it will dry up long before it has availed to refresh barren places, and to cool thirsty lips. And note also the preceding promises, theirs is the kingdom of heaven; they shall be comforted; they shall inherit the earth; they shall be filled. These are experiences which, again, are another collection of the head-waters of this stream.

That is to say, the true, lasting, reliable, conquering mercifulness has a double source. The consciousness of our own weakness, the sadness that creeps over the heart when it makes the discovery of its own sin, the bowed submission primarily to the will of God, and secondarily to the antagonisms which, in subservience to that will, we may meet in life, and the yearning desire for a fuller righteousness and a more lustrous purity in our own lives and characters--these are the experiences which will make a man gentle in his judgment of his brother, and full of melting charity in all his dealings with him. If I know how dark my own nature is, how prone to uncommitted evils, how little I have to thank myself for the virtues that I have practised, which are largely due to my exemption from temptation and to my opportunities, and how little I have in my own self that I can venture to bring to the stern judgment which I am tempted to apply to other people, then the words of censure will falter on my tongue, and the bitter construction of my brother's conduct and character will be muffled in silence. Except as to open outbreakings, said one of the very saintliest of men, I want nothing of what Judas and Cain had. If we feel this, we shall ask ourselves, Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? and the condemnation of others will stick in our throats when we try to utter it.

And, on the other hand, if I, through these paths of self-knowledge, and lowly estimate of self, and penitent confession of sin, and flexibility of will to God, and yearning, as for my highest food and good, after a righteousness which I feel I do not possess, have come into the position in which my poverty is, by His gift, made rich, and the tears are wiped away from off my face by His gracious hand, and a full possession of large blessings bestowed on my humble will, and the righteousness for which I long imparted to me, shall I not have learned how divine a thing it is to give to the unworthy, and so be impelled to communicate what I have already received? Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love as Christ also hath loved us. They only are deeply, through and through, universally and always merciful who have received mercy. The light is reflected at the same angle as it falls, and the only way by which there can come from our faces and lives a glory that shall lighten many dark hearts, and make sunshine in many a shady place, is that these hearts shall have turned full to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance, and so have received of the Lord that which also they deliver unto men.

And so, brethren, there are two plain, practical exhortations from these thoughts. One is, let us Christian people learn the fruits of God's mercy, and be sure of this, that our own mercifulness in regard to men is an accurate measure of the amount of the divine mercy which we have received. The other is, let all of us learn the root of man's mercy to men. There is plenty, of a sort, of philanthropy and beneficent and benevolent work and feeling to-day, entirely apart from all perception of, and all faith in, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in so far as the individuals who exercise that beneficence are concerned. I, for my part, am narrow enough to believe that the streams of non-Christian charitableness, which run in our land and in other lands to-day, have been fed from Christ's fountain, though the supply has come underground, and bursts into light apparently unconnected with its source. If there had been no New Testament there would have been very little of the beneficence which flouts the New Testament to-day. Historically, it is the great truths, which we conveniently summarise as being evangelical Christianity, that have been mother to the new charity that, since Christ, has been breathed over the world. I, for my part, believe that if you strike out the doctrine of universal sinfulness, if you cover over the Cross of Christ, if you do not find in it the manifestation of a God who is endlessly merciful to the most unworthy, you have destroyed the basis on which true and operative benevolence will rest. So then, dear brethren, let us all seek to get a humbler and a truer conception of what we ourselves are, and a loftier and truer faith of what God in Christ is; and then to remember that if we have these, we are bound to, and we shall, show that we have them, by making that which is the anchor of our hope the pattern of our lives.

**III. Lastly, notice the requital, They shall obtain mercy.**

Now, it is a wretched weakening of that great thought to suppose that it means that if A. is merciful to B., B. will be merciful to A. That is sometimes true, and sometimes it is not. It does not so very much matter whether it is true or not; that is not what Jesus Christ means. All these Beatitudes are God's gifts, and this is God's gift too. It is His mercy which the merciful man obtains.

But you say: Have you not just been telling us that this sense and experience of God's mercy must precede my mercy, and now you say that my mercy must precede God's? No; I do not say that it must precede it; I do say that my mercifulness is, as it were, lodged between the segments of a golden circle, and has on one side the experience of the divine mercy which quickens mine by thankfulness and imitation; on the other side, the larger experience of the divine mercy which follows upon my walking after the example of my Lord.

This is only one case of the broad general principle, to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath. Salvation is no such irreversible gift as that once bestowed a man can go on anyhow and it will continue; but it is given in such a fashion as that, for its retention, and still more for its increase, there must be a certain line of feeling and of action.

Our Lord does not mean to say, of course, that this one isolated member of a series carries with it the whole power of bringing down upon a man the blessings which are only due to the combination of the whole series, but that it stands as one of that linked band which shall receive the blessing from on high. And the blessing here is stated in accordance with the particular Grace in question, according to that great law of retaliation which brings life unto life and death unto death.

No man who, having received the mercy of God, lives harsh, hard, self-absorbed, implacable, and uncommunicative, will keep that mercy in any vivid consciousness or to any blessed issue. The servant took his fellow-servant by the throat, and said, Pay me that thou owest, and his master said, Deliver him to the tormentors until he pay the uttermost farthing. You receive your salvation as a free gift; you keep it by feelings and conduct correspondent to the gift.

Though benevolence which has an eye to self is no benevolence, it is perfectly legitimate, and indeed absolutely necessary, that whilst the motive for mercifulness is mercy received, the encouragement to mercifulness should be mercy still to be given. Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us; and when you think of your own unworthiness, and of the great gifts which a gracious God has given, let these impel you to move amongst men as copies of God, and be sure that you deepen your spiritual life, not only by meditation and by faith, but by practical work, and by showing towards all men mercy like the mercy which God has bestowed upon you.